Everything Is Television

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A spooky convergence is happening in media. Everything that is not already television is turning into television. Three examples:
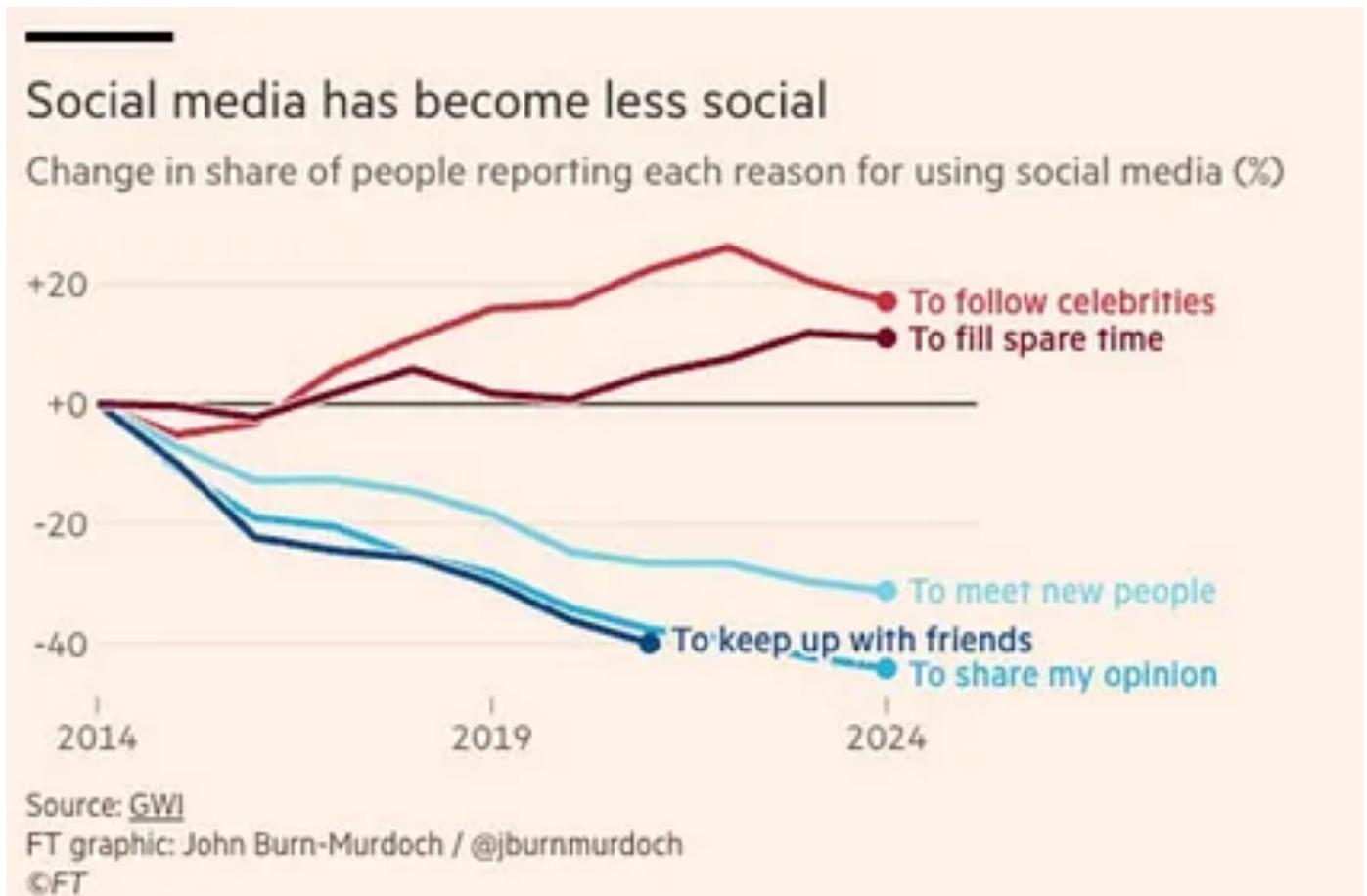
1.

You learn a lot about a company when its back is against the wall. This summer, we learned something important about Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram. In an antitrust case with the Federal Trade Commission, Meta filed a legal brief on August 6, in which it made a startling claim. Meta cannot possibly be a social media *monopoly*, Meta said, because it is not really a social media *company*.

Only a small share of time spent on its social-networking platforms is truly "social" networking—that is, time spent checking in with friends and family. More than 80 percent of time spent on Facebook and more than 90 percent of time spent on Instagram is spent watching videos, the company reported. Most of that time is spent watching content from creators whom the user does not know. From the [FTC filing](#):

> Today, only a fraction of time spent on Meta's services—7% on Instagram, 17% on Facebook—involves consuming content from online "friends" ("friend sharing"). A majority of time spent on both apps is watching videos, increasingly short-form videos that are "unconnected"—i.e., not from a friend or followed account—and recommended by AI-powered algorithms Meta developed as a direct competitive response to TikTok's rise, which stalled Meta's growth.

Social media has evolved from text to photo to video to streams of text, photo, and video, and finally, it seems to have reached a kind of settled end state, in which TikTok and Meta are trying to become the same thing: a screen showing hours and hours of video made by people we don't know. *Social media has turned into television.*

Social media has become less social

Change in share of people reporting each reason for using social media (%)

To follow celebrities
To fill spare time
To meet new people
To keep up with friends
To share my opinion

+20
+0
-20
-40

2014   2019   2024

Source: GWI
FT graphic: John Burn-Murdoch / @jburnmurdoch
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In the last decade, social media has become less about social networking and more about replacing or supplementing big-screen TV time with a smaller-screen medium that serves the same functions. [Source: John Burn-Murdoch at the FT]

2.

When I read the Meta filing, I had been thinking about something very different: the future of my podcast, *Plain*

English.

When podcasts got started, they were radio for the Internet. This really appealed to me when I started my show. I never watch the news on television, and I love listening to podcasts while I make coffee and go on walks, and I'd prefer to make the sort of media that I consume. Plus, as a host, I thought I wanted to have conversations focused on the substance of the words rather than on ancillary concerns about production value and lighting.

But the most successful podcasts these days are *all becoming YouTube shows*. Industry analysts say consumption of video podcasts is [growing twenty times faster than audio-only ones](), and more than half of the world's top shows now release video versions. YouTube has quietly become the most popular platform for podcasts, and it's not even close. On Spotify, the number of video podcasts has nearly tripled since 2023, and video podcasts are significantly outgrowing non-video podcasts. Does it really make sense to insist on an audio-only podcast in 2025? I do not think so. Reality is screaming loudly in my ear, and its message is clear: *Podcasts are turning into television.*

3.

In the last few weeks, Meta introduced a product called Vibes, and OpenAI announced Sora. Both are AI social

networks where users can watch endless videos generated by artificial intelligence. (For your amusement, or horror, or whatever, here is: [Sam Altman stealing GPUs at Target to make more AI](); [the O.J. Simpson trial as an amusement park ride](); and [Stephen Hawking entering a professional wrestling ring]().)

Some tech analysts predict that these tools will lead to an efflorescence of creativity. "Sora feels like enabling everyone to be a TikTok creator," the investor and tech analyst MG Siegler [wrote](). But the internet's history suggests that, if these products succeed, they will follow what Ben Thompson [calls]() the 90/9/1 rule: 90 percent of users consume, 9 percent remix and distribute, and just 1 percent actually create. In fact, as Scott Galloway has reported, 94 percent of YouTube views come from 4 percent of videos, and 89 percent of TikTok views come from 5 percent of videos. Even the architects of artificial intelligence, who imagine themselves on the path to creating the last invention, are busy building another infinite sequence of video made by people we don't know. *Even AI wants to be television.*

Too Much Flow

Whether the starting point is a student directory (Facebook), radio, or an AI image generator, the end point seems to be

the same: a river of short-form video. In mathematics, the word "attractor" describes a state toward which a dynamic system tends to evolve. To take a classic example: Drop a marble into a bowl, and it will trace several loops around the bowl's curves before settling to rest at the bottom. In the same way, water draining in a sink will ultimately form a spiral pattern around the drain. Complex systems often settle into recurring forms, if you give them enough time. Television seems to be the attractor of all media.

By "television," I am referring to something bigger than broadcast TV, the cable bundle, or Netflix. In his 1974 book *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, Raymond Williams wrote that "in all communications systems before [television], the essential items were discrete." That is, a book is bound and finite, existing on its own terms. A play is performed in a particular theater at a set hour. Williams argued that television shifted culture from discrete and bounded products to a continuous, streaming sequence of images and sounds, which he called "flow." When I say "everything is turning into television," what I mean is that disparate forms of media and entertainment are converging on one thing: *the continuous flow of episodic video.*

By Williams's definition, platforms like YouTube and TikTok are an even more perfect expression of television than old-fashioned television, itself. On NBC or HBO, one might tune

in to watch a show that feels particular and essential. On TikTok, by contrast, nothing is essential. Any one piece of content on TikTok is incidental, even inessential. The platform's allure is the infinitude promised by its algorithm. It is the flow, not the content, that is primary.

One implication of "everything is becoming television" is that there really is too much television—so much, in fact, that some TV is now made with the assumption that audiences are always already distracted and doing something else. Netflix producers reportedly instruct screenwriters to make plots as obvious as possible, to avoid confusing viewers who are half-watching—or quarter-watching, if that's a thing now —while they scroll through their phones. As the writer Will Tavlin [reported](#):

> Several screenwriters who've worked for the streamer told me a common note from company executives is "have this character announce what they're doing so that viewers who have this program on in the background can follow along." ("We spent a day together," Lohan tells her lover, James, in *Irish Wish*. "I admit it was a beautiful day filled with dramatic vistas and romantic rain, but that doesn't give you the right to question my life choices. Tomorrow I'm marrying Paul Kennedy." "Fine," he responds. "That will be the last you see of me because after this job is over I'm off to Bolivia to photograph an

endangered tree lizard.")

Among Netflix's 36,000 micro-genres, one is literally called "casual viewing." The label is reportedly reserved for sitcoms, soap operas, or movies that, as the Hollywood Reporter recently described the 2024 Jennifer Lopez film *Atlas*, are "made to half-watch while doing laundry." Critics who actually watch a great deal of streaming television for the purpose of appraising it these days are somewhat like children staring directly at the sun. You're not supposed to watch it! The whole point is that it's supposed to just *be there*, glowing, while you do something else. Perhaps a great deal of television is not meant to absorb our attention, at all, but rather to dab away at it, to soak up tiny droplets of our sensory experience while our focus dances across other screens. You might even say that much television is not even made to be watched at all. It is made to flow. The play button is the point.

Lonely, Mean, and Dumb

... and why does this matter? Fine question. And, perhaps, this is a good place for a confession. I like television. I follow some spectacular YouTube channels. I am not on Instagram or TikTok, but most of the people I know and love are on one or both. My beef is not with the entire medium of moving images. My concern is what happens when the grammar of

television rather suddenly conquers the entire media landscape.

In the last few weeks, I have been writing a lot about two big trends in American life that do not necessarily overlap. My work on the "Antisocial Century" traces the rise of solitude in American life and its effects on economics, politics, and society. My work on "the end of thinking" follows the decline of literacy and numeracy scores in the U.S. and the handoff from a culture of literacy to a culture of orality. Neither of these trends is exclusively caused by the logic of television colonizing all media. But both trends are significantly exacerbated by it.

Television's role in the rise of solitude cannot be overlooked. In *Bowling Alone*, the Harvard scholar Robert Putnam wrote that between 1965 and 1995, the typical adult gained six hours a week in leisure time. As I wrote, they could have used those additional 300 hours a year to learn a new skill, or participate in their community, or have more children. Instead, the typical American funneled almost all of this extra time into watching more TV. Television instantly changed America's interior decorating, relationships, and communities:

> In 1970, just 6 percent of sixth graders had a TV set in their bedroom; in 1999, that proportion had grown to 77 percent. Time diaries in the 1990s showed that husbands

and wives spent almost four times as many hours watching TV together as they spent talking to each other in a given week. People who said TV was their "primary form of entertainment" were less likely to engage in practically every social activity that Putnam counted: volunteering, churchgoing, attending dinner parties, picnicking, giving blood, even sending greeting cards.

When Putnam was writing *Bowling Alone*, many of his critics insisted that he was being histrionic about the decline of social capital in America because the Internet was going to solve all our problems. In his 1995 essay on the decline of reading and the rise of digital technology, Jonathan Franzen wrote that the decade's biggest tech boosters believed that the Internet would heal the wound that television had sliced into culture. "Digital technology, the argument goes, is good medicine for an ailing society," Franzen wrote. Summarizing the views of tech boosters, he continued:

TV has given us government by image; interactivity will return power to the people. TV has produced millions of uneducable children; computers will teach them. Top-down programming has isolated us; bottom-up networks will reunite us.

But digital media hasn't become the antidote to television. Digital media, empowered by the serum of algorithmic feeds, has become super-television: more images, more videos,

more isolation. Home-alone time has surged as our devices have become more bottomless feeds of video content. Rather than escape the solitude crisis that Putnam described in the 1990s, we now seem to be more on our own. (Not to mention: meaner and stupider, too.)

It would be rash to blame our berserk political moment entirely on short-form video, but it would be careless to forget that some people really did try to warn us that this was coming. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*[1], Neil Postman wrote that "each medium, like language itself, makes possible a unique mode of discourse by providing a new orientation for thought, for expression, for sensibility." Television speaks to us in a particular dialect, Postman argued. When everything turns into television, every form of communication starts to adopt television's values: immediacy, emotion, spectacle, brevity. In the glow of a local news program, or an outraged news feed, the viewer bathes in a vat of their own cortisol. When everything is urgent, nothing is truly important. Politics becomes theater. Science becomes storytelling. News becomes performance. The result, Postman warned, is a society that forgets how to think in paragraphs, and learns instead to think in scenes. [2]

Does that sound familiar? Look at today's political protagonists. The right-wing president is a reality-TV star. The most exciting new voice on the left is a straight-to-

camera savant. Mastering the grammar of television—especially short-form television—does not feel secondary to political success in America; it *is* political success in America.

In fact, that last sentence might be one word too long, and we could stand to lose the modifier *political*. Short-form video is indistinguishable from what today's youth consider the definition of American success. For five straight years, Gen Z has [told] pollsters that the thing they most want to be when they grow up is an "influencer."

When literally everything becomes television, what disappears is not something so broad as intelligence ([although that seems to be going, too]) but something harder to put into words, and even harder to prove the value of. It's something like inwardness. The capacity for solitude, for sustained attention, for meaning that penetrates inward rather than swipes away at the tip of a finger: These virtues feel out of step with a world where every medium is the same medium and everything in life converges to the value system of the same thing, which is television. I don't have the answers here. But we should figure it out soon. The marble is still spinning, but it is reaching the bottom of the bowl.

[1]

Believe me, I tried to keep old Postman out of this—he's over-exposed enough these days—but as I wrote, I could hear the ghostly *thump-thump-thump* of his posthumous fists knocking on the door of this essay, and I had to let him in.

2

Speaking of names I tried to keep out of this piece: I've been talking about *Orality and Literacy*, by the scholar Walter Ong, too much lately, but his insights serve us here. Ong wrote that the transition from oral societies to literate societies made possible more abstract thinking. Societies that write have many times the number of words as oral tribes. If literacy thickens the complexity of thought, a return to orality would amount to the great cortical thinning of society. Truth in such a civilization would be more about mnemonics, what is emotionally memorable, than empirics, what is true.