

Fahrenheit 451 and the Post-Truth Condition :Media, Distraction, and the Erosion of Truth

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Abstract:

Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* is usually read as a warning about government censorship, although viewing it through today's post-truth lens uncovers a much more unsettling truth: people willingly gave up critical thought long before the state started burning books. This paper explores how Bradbury foresaw our current media landscape, depicting a world where truth isn't destroyed by force, but drowned out by non-stop noise, shallow entertainment, and a desperate craving for emotional comfort. By looking closely at the immersive parlor walls and Captain Beatty's chilling justifications, the paper explores how a culture hooked on quick stimulation naturally grows to resent anything that requires effort or causes intellectual discomfort. Books weren't banned because they were full of lies; they were destroyed because they demanded patience, nuance, and a willingness to sit with hard questions. Ultimately, Bradbury's real warning isn't about an oppressive regime taking away our freedom, it's about what happens when we choose total distraction over actual understanding.

Keywords: Dystopia, Post-Truth, Media, Distraction

Introduction: Beyond Censorship

Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury, contextualising early Cold War anxieties, is usually analysed as a dystopian meditation on censorship and the authoritarian destruction of books. The novel has been interpreted as an allegory on ideological repression and has been linked to discussions of conformity relating McCarthyism. Firemen burning libraries and the spectacle that accompanies symbolises regimes fearful of dissent and their efforts to subvert and eliminate any resistance. Yet, such reading, risks limiting the bigger picture on

cultural insight. The society visualised by Bradbury doesn't just function on overt repression but consolidates itself through distraction, habituation, and pulling back from intellectual difficulty. Book burning, in this world, doesn't imply the collapse of truth but officialises a change pre-existing within human desire.

In the story, what is most unsettling, is not the fact that books are burnt, but rendered undesirable. Citizens trade forbidden knowledge for immediacy the screen provides and ease of emotions that are unchallenged. The novel implies that truth loses value long before its prohibition. Complexity and contradiction are unwelcomed and continuous attention to media and screens results in unstopped stimulation. As a result, the story doesn't just portray repression but a shift in consciousness altogether, where reflection symbolises discomfort.

This situation resonates with the contemporary post-truth condition which refers to the weakening of habits (patience, interpretive effort, ambiguity toleration, and the capability to deal with intellectual discomfort) that solidify public reasoning. In Bradbury's narrative, the society abounds in information but meaning reduces. Communication seems plentiful but sincere dialogue is hardly found. Accelerated information trumps deepness of meaning. The crisis is, therefore, not that of the lack of information, but of the fall of seriousness.

This cultural condition can be better understood by using the twentieth-century critiques of mass culture. Horkheimer and Adorno, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, write about the "culture industry", which is understood as a system of standardization of experience and of the transformation of leisure into a form of managed consumption. Under such conditions, entertainment is not simply a distraction, but moulds perception and is a subtle limiter on what can be thought. Similarly, Guy Debord, in *The Society of the Spectacle*, similarly claims social life becomes dominated by images, where representation begins to take place of lived reality. Similarly, in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman puts argues that public discourse becomes predominantly about entertainment increasingly and serious arguments take the form of performance and immediacy. Although arising out of different contexts, these ideas do help to explain the cultural logic that Bradbury anticipates: a world where stimulation has replaced reflection, and where participation is mostly superficial.

This paper argues that the events of *Fahrenheit 451* are an anticipation of the post-truth condition, not by its depiction of a regime that violently suppresses truth, but by exposing the cultural conditions in which truth suppression is almost unnecessary. The reading and analysis of parlor walls, combined with Captain Beatty's rhetoric helps demonstrate how engagement is replaced by distraction and how intellectual discomfort finds new meaning as a threat to the harmony of the society. Books are dangerous not because they disseminate falseness, but in lieu of memory preservation and their requirement of slowness and solitude to lock horns with the unknown. Bradbury's suggestion is ominous as the danger

to knowledge is not its prohibition but its displacement as the society replaces understanding by comfort.

The study uses qualitative and interpretive approach, wherein, *Fahrenheit 451* is read in terms of narrative structure, analysis of the characters and various representation patterns in their relation to the parlor walls, the rhetoric of Beatty, and representation of war. The study uses different theoretical frameworks to put the novel within, such as the concept of culture industry by Horkheimer and Adorno, Guy Debord's theory of the spectacle and the critique of media and entertainment driven discourse by Neil Postman. Subsequently, it discusses the effect on the value of knowledge by media saturation and distraction. Eventually, it argues that the narrative of Bradbury anticipates many dynamics now linked to the post-truth situation. Using this approach, the study analyses *Fahrenheit 451* as a reflection on the losing value of intellectual seriousness in a society overwhelmed by spectacle and emotional comfort.

Theoretical Framework

A reading, outside of traditional narrative, of *Fahrenheit 451*, needs a framework that has the potential to explain cultural environments that change consciousness even before a need for repression may arrive. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's critique of mass culture in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* helps with such an aforementioned framework. In the chapter "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception", they put forward that modern entertainment doesn't only provide diversion but organizes perception. Under such a culture industry, leisure transforms into a tool of social control and individuality exists like an illusion.

Horkheimer and Adorno posit that "amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work" (137). Entertainment, hence, becomes a soft form of the discipline of logicity. These cultural products are used as tools to eliminate mental effort, in turn, providing known patterns that resist reflection. Uniformity, in terms of structure, is replaced by seemingly true diversity. This analysis helps understand an important aspect of Bradbury's narrative. In *Fahrenheit 451*, the citizens are not terrorized into ignorance, they are gradually absorbed into a system of continuous stimulation. The parlor walls do not block thinking; they make it seem not necessary. Immersive entertainment replaces sensation for interpretation and immediacy for memory. As in the culture industry described by Horkheimer and Adorno, cultural production is the process of standardizing experience, while retaining the appearance of participation.

If Adorno's framework helps understand standardized consciousness, Guy Debord's analysis of spectacle deepens an account of mediation. As Debord argues, "The spectacle is not a collection of images, on the contrary, it is a social relation between men mediated by images" (4). Spectacle, therefore, does not surround social life simply, it reorganizes it

actively. Interpersonal relations are displaced to representation and participation becomes more observational rather than dialogic.

Bradbury's parlor walls illustrate this logic. Social interaction takes place over the screens, emotional engagement is focused on scripted performances and even war seems like a mostly broadcast announcement rather than something experienced. Conflict becomes atmospheric rather than lived. Within such a mediated environment, reality is displaced by image, and image gradually begins to take the place of deliberation.

Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* helps explain more clearly the consequences of this transformation. Postman notes the effect that public discourse as entertainment has on the structure of argument itself: "Americans no longer talk to each other, they entertain each other. They do not give ideas to each other, they give images. They do not argue with propositions; they argue with good looks, celebrities and commercials" (92-93). The replacement of premises by images doesn't just hint at a change of style, but to the bigger picture of how knowledge itself works. When persuasion uses appearance rather than reason, seriousness becomes trivial.

In such an environment, the contemporary discourse of post-truth makes sense. Lee McIntyre terms post-truth as "irreducibly normative," an expression of concern that the authority of truth itself is seen to be under threat (6). Post-truth, therefore, becomes a cultural moment when truth or factual accuracy cannot be provided a loyalty that is uncritical. When grouped together, these perspectives illuminate the cultural logic behind *Fahrenheit 451*.

Emotional Detachment and the Mechanization of Care

The dystopian society portrayed in *Fahrenheit 451* shows some of its nastiest aspects in moments which might normally evoke sympathy. When Montag comes home to find Mildred asleep next to an empty bottle of sleeping pills, the situation seems at first to be a medical emergency. Yet the response it elicits reveals the inhuman emotional detachment, that is the hallmark of this society. Instead of a physician, two technicians arrive and are carrying mechanical apparatus designed to pump Mildred's stomach and replace her blood (which is poisoned). The procedure is carried out with routine efficiency and stunning emotional indifference. One of the technicians comments that overdoses are so common that special machines have been made just to clean the blood of suicide victims (Bradbury 22-23).

The technicians act less like caregivers and more like operators of a malfunctioning device. They smoke, speak casually, and view the incident as something ordinary that is to be completed, rather than a life-threatening crisis. Human suffering has descended into technological routine. The episode therefore suggests a society in which emotion response has been displaced by procedural efficiency. The mechanized treatment of Mildred is part of a more general cultural context in which empathy itself becomes structurally unnecessary.

This indifference recalls Horkheimer and Adorno's insight that "the flood of detailed information and candy-floss entertainment simultaneously instructs and stultifies mankind" (xv), in which the human experience gets flattened into standardized processes and deeply affective responses become neutralized. This scene also mirrors what Michel Foucault describes as the subjection of the body to systems of power, in which "the body is directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it" (25), reducing the individual and their body to the level of an object of technical intervention, in lieu of being its subject of care.

In a technologically oriented world, this scene also sheds light on the isolation pervading it. As the technicians leave, Montag realises that this loneliness fills a society with people, but there is meaning to be found in relationships. Clarisse's household is the only exception as the family members keep talking and laughing late into the night. The crisis, therefore, is not informational but relational as communication increases but human connection goes downhill.

In this context, however, the episode exposes more than medical care's mechanisation. The cultural expectations of the past about the value of compassion, responsibility and care of the community is also being pointed towards. Impersonal technological systems process personal crises and restore a sense of functional order but neglect the underlying emotional distress. These crises do not require reflection and solidarity anymore. This is how the scene foresees the larger cultural logic of the post-truth condition where technological intervention doesn't just organise information but reshapes human experience itself.

Media Saturation, Ersatz Intimacy, and the Erosion of Cultural Memory

In the novel, the most acute anticipation of the post-truth condition emerges within the domestic parlor walls. On questioning Mildred about the interactive television program she keeps fixating on, she responds to Montag without hesitation: "That's my family" (Bradbury 65). The term "family", traditionally related to embodied intimacy, shared memory, and mutual obligation, is reduced to a scripted audio-visual performance. Not only is the conversation replaced, but belonging itself. This immersion is more apparent in Mildred's plans and enthusiasm for expanding the system. She eagerly proposes installing a fourth wall in the living room, although the room already has three massive television screens. Her excitement makes clear how enclosure by technology has become desirable rather than oppressive. Participation in this media environment is not felt as constraint, but comfort.

Mildred's being locked to the walls of the parlor is not imposed by visible coercion. It is voluntary and affective. Participation is, however, carefully managed. As she explains, the program is written with a missing segment so that she might provide a few lines of dialogue. This simulated interaction gives the impression of agency without being in control

of the narrative. The result resembles what Horkheimer and Adorno refer to as the logic of the culture industry whereby "the culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises...the promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory" (139). Mildred's participation serves exactly such a promise: she is invited to think that she is an element of the story, but her role is strictly predetermined and consequence-free. Entertainment, in such system, does not require interpretation; it calls for absorption.

The walls of the parlor are also a good example of what Debord calls the spectacle, wherein social relations become mediated more by images, and direct human interaction becomes substituted. As Debord notes, "when the real world changes into simple images, simple images become real beings and effective motivations of a hypnotic behavior...it can no longer be grasped directly" (para. 18), a condition which can be observed in Mildred's "family," which has more influence on her emotional investment than her marriage. Any attempts by Montag at having a proper conversation with her is met by impatience. On the contrary, the figures on the screen receive considerable loyalty and concern.

Intellectual seriousness, as a result, is eroded because of these conditions. Thought becomes structurally disadvantaged as it requires slowness and interiority. The distinction between information and entertainment, in such an environment, begins to collapse, recalling Postman's argument that "television is altering the meaning of 'being informed' by creating a species of information that might properly be called disinformation" (107). When discourse becomes entertainment, it just doesn't shape communication but the understanding of truth itself. Truth, here, doesn't need to be censored as it simply gets defeated by stimulation. This leads to the erosion of traditional cultural practices which helped preserve knowledge, memory, and collective understanding. Bradbury, thus, anticipates a condition where the authority of truth is not affected by direct suppression but through its displacement by immediate and emotionally satisfying forms of experience.

Continuous Stimulation and the Saturation of Attention

On one hand, if the parlor walls portray spectacle on a grand scale, the Seashell radios, on the other, reveal how deeply media penetrates into everyday life. Mildred is hardly seen without these tiny devices placed in her ears. In the story, they are described as "little Seashells, the thimble radios tamped tight," generating an "electronic ocean of sound, of music and talk and music and talk coming in"(Bradbury 20). This ocean metaphor suggests total immersion wherein Mildred doesn't simply hear the broadcast but inhabits it. This immersion is habitual as the Montag observes, "there had been no night in the last two years that Mildred had not swum that sea" (Bradbury 20). In such an environment, continuous sound eliminated silence and the time needed for reflection gradually disappears.

Communication itself begins to deteriorate under these conditions. Montag frequently attempts conversation, only to find that Mildred's attention remains divided between the physical world and the broadcast in her ears. In this sense, Bradbury's portrayal

of continuous stimulation anticipates what is now described as an “attention economy,” a cultural environment in which media systems compete relentlessly to capture and retain human focus. Continuous stimulation replaces reflection.

Captain Beatty later explicitly articulates on this transformation. He explains that cultural forms were simplified over time in response to the changing social conditions and mass media: “Books cut shorter...everything boils down to the gag, the snap ending” (Bradbury 72). Depth gives way to speed and condensation in lieu of contraction of attention spans. Beatty further posits that the same process overwhelms the mind itself, as media systems “whirl man’s mind around about so fast that the centrifuge flings off all unnecessary, time-wasting thought” (Bradbury 73). Subsequently, he insists that this transformation “did not come from the Government down, no censorship. Technology, mass exploitation, and minority pressure carried the trick” (Bradbury 76). His explanation helps solidify the idea that the prohibition of truth is preceded by its erosion. Instead, it emerges from a collective preference for simplicity, ease of emotions and speed. Lee McIntyre’s observation facilitates this dynamic: “our inherent cognitive biases make us ripe for manipulation and exploitation by those who have an agenda to push, especially if they can discredit all other sources of information” (61), hinting that these cultural simplifications also succeeds because of predispositions of the psyche.

The result is similar to the communicative environment Postman describes, where discourse takes the form of entertainment, when he notes that “the problem is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter but that all subject matter is presented as entertaining” (87). This logic extends beyond television to any media environment that is structured by affective engagement and continuous stimulation. The cultural practices which helped transmit memory, knowledge and reflection begin to weaken and sustained attention becomes hard to maintain.

Attention as Disruption: Clarisse and the Return of Cultural Memory

Clarisse McClellan represents a different radical way of relating to this world against a background of continuous media stimulation. She directs her attention outwards toward everyday experiences and ordinary details. She observes people walking slowly through the streets, and notices small things that others overlook. She tells Montag, “I like to smell things and look at things, and sometimes stay up all night walking and watch the sun rise” (Bradbury 14). Compared to the distracted consciousness shaped by the parlor walls and Seashell radios, her attentiveness stands in sharp contrast to it. In such a society, where technological distraction reigns supreme, such attention to things recalls older ways of living that is built on observation, conversation, and shared experience.

The most significant intervention by Clarisse comes in the form of a simple question. She asks Montag, “Are you happy?” (Bradbury 17) and interrupts the automatic rhythm of his life. Consequently, Montag is forced to reflect on his own condition. This reflection is

unsettling in a society built around distraction and emotional comfort. Her attentiveness and curiosity carry a quiet and subversive force. She doesn't directly challenge the system but encourages others to notice what they stopped observing. The novel suggests that the grip of spectacle depends on the suppression of reflective attention using the character of Clarisse. As a result, she acts as living reminder of cultural memory, thereby helping preserve forms of attention and human connection. Her resistance and rebellion lies in the recovery of attentive consciousness and in a return to presence, slowness, and perception among a culture that renders these things as insignificant.

Spectacle, War Narratives, and Emotional Numbness

The effects of media saturation become most visible in the gathering at Montag's home, where Mildred and her friends sit surrounded by the parlor walls. The room fills with a rapid succession of exaggerated images, violent cartoons, racing cars, and flashes of color that turn the domestic space into a site of continuous stimulation. The women respond with enthusiasm, laughing and shouting as the images unfold. Their attention is so completely absorbed that ordinary conversation becomes almost impossible. Bradbury thus presents a social environment in which entertainment does not simply accompany daily life but overwhelms it, so that "the entire life of societies in which modern conditions of production reign announces itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles" (Debord para. 1).

A similar dynamic appears in the televised manhunt for Montag. After he becomes a fugitive, the authorities broadcast the search using helicopters and the Mechanical Hound, turning the pursuit into public entertainment. The narration describes the event as "the big game, the hunt, the one-man carnival," suggesting that an act of state violence is reframed as spectacle (Bradbury 173). When Montag escapes, the authorities cannot admit failure. As Granger explains, the system must provide viewers with a satisfying conclusion because "the show's got to have a snap ending, quick!" (Bradbury 190). The broadcast therefore redirects the Mechanical Hound toward an unsuspecting pedestrian, presenting him as Montag in order to complete the narrative. In this way, Bradbury shows how spectacle replaces reality with a constructed version of events, allowing political authority to maintain control through images rather than truth.

The conversation that follows reveals the extent of emotional detachment produced by this environment. When the possibility of war arises, Mrs. Phelps remarks with unsettling calm that her husband will soon return because it will be "a quick war... over in forty-eight hours" (Bradbury 122), and adds that even if he dies she would simply remarry. War is no longer experienced as a lived reality but as something remote and inconsequential. Death appears distant and abstract, stripped of emotional weight. Family relationships are reduced in a similar way. Mrs. Bowles speaks of her children as burdens that can be placed in front of the parlor screens to keep them occupied. Human connection is steadily displaced by technological distraction. The women's discussion of the recent presidential election further highlights the erosion of political seriousness. Their choice of candidate is shaped not by

policies or arguments but by appearance and performance. One candidate looks more confident and attractive on screen, while the other seems awkward and difficult to follow. Political judgment is therefore shaped by visual impression rather than critical evaluation. Bradbury anticipates a communicative culture in which electoral decisions are driven less by reasoned debate than by spectacle and mediated personality.

The tension in the room reaches its peak when Montag reads Matthew Arnold's poem *Dover Beach*. The poem's reflection on uncertainty and the retreat of faith stands in sharp contrast to the artificial happiness of the parlor walls. As Montag reads, Mrs. Phelps suddenly begins to cry, unable to explain the source of her distress. Her reaction suggests that beneath the surface of constant entertainment lies a suppressed awareness of loss. This moment of emotional exposure is quickly followed by resistance. Mrs. Bowles responds with anger, insisting that poetry produces "tears... and awful feelings... and sickness" (Bradbury 131). Her reaction reveals not only discomfort with the poem but a deeper rejection of emotional depth itself. The image of the "Sea of Faith" by Arnold, suggesting the withdrawing from the world, hints at the spiritual emptiness of Bradbury's society. Literature helps disrupt this spectacle and briefly restores the ability to feel and reflect.

The moral numbness in spectacle culture is obvious when a group of teenagers attempt to run over Montag just for the sake of amusement. Violence, here, is not a moral violation but becomes a form of entertainment. This scenario reveals a society where empathy and ethical awareness collapse as a result of constant stimulation. Forces of danger and cruelty become sources of excitement, which Faber later reflects on. Observing this society that is absorbed in spectacle, he compares it to "one huge big blazing meteor that makes a pretty fire in space," observing how people "see only the blaze, the pretty fire" without recognising the destructive path beneath it (Bradbury 134). This captures Bradbury's warning that such culture may appear dynamic and vibrant while simultaneously moving towards its own moral and intellectual collapse. He also suggests that continuous stimulation makes possible the disappearance of cultural memory in the form of practices of reading, historical awareness and reflection.

The Cultural Logic of the Post-Truth Condition

When grouped together, these instances show how the dystopian society in *Fahrenheit 451* anticipates the dynamics of culture resonant with the post-truth condition. Truth does not vanish as a result of falsification in the system but gradually loses importance in relation to the spectacle, distraction and emotional comfort. When entertainment subsumes attention, the patience expect in critical judgment diminishes. In such an environment, events as consequential as war are considered a distant spectacle while traditions that help collective memory weaken. The theoretical perspectives discussed earlier clarify this transformation. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno explain how the culture industry promotes passive consumption. Guy Debord demonstrates how social relations become mediated through images, while Neil Postman shows how discourse shifts from argument to

performance. Read through these perspectives, Bradbury's novel emerges as a literary diagnosis of the cultural conditions under which truth loses authority.

Bradbury develops the intellectual dimension of this condition through Captain Beatty. Unlike passive consumers, Beatty is deeply familiar with literature, philosophy, and history, yet he deploys this knowledge to justify the destruction of books. His fragmented quotations and contradictory arguments create an illusion of intellectual authority while undermining coherent meaning. Beatty thus exemplifies a post-truth mode of discourse in which knowledge becomes a rhetorical instrument used to obscure rather than clarify reality.

A particularly revealing articulation of Bradbury's critique appears in Montag's conversation with Faber. The retired professor argues that the crisis lies not merely in the destruction of books but in the loss of conditions necessary for meaningful knowledge. He identifies three essentials: "quality of information," "leisure to digest it," and "the right to carry out actions based on what we learn" (Bradbury 110). In a media-saturated society dominated by parlor walls, these conditions erode. Information remains abundant, yet the time and attentiveness required to interpret it disappear. Bradbury thus anticipates a key feature of the post-truth condition: a cultural environment in which stimulation overwhelms reflection. The novel therefore does not portray the destruction of truth primarily through censorship. Instead, it reveals how a culture of constant stimulation renders truth slow, demanding, and socially inconvenient. The most serious threat to truth lies not in repression but in indifference, as sustained attention becomes increasingly difficult.

In the final moments of the novel, Bradbury presents the ultimate consequence of this condition. After the city is destroyed by bombardment, Granger reflects, "I wonder how many knew it was coming? I wonder how many were surprised?" (Bradbury 208). Although signs of war appear throughout the narrative, citizens remain unaware, absorbed in entertainment and superficial communication. Bradbury thus exposes how spectacle erodes the capacity to recognize reality until crisis becomes unavoidable.

The novel concludes with the image of the Phoenix. Granger explains that the bird "every few hundred years... built a pyre and burned himself up... and sprang out of the ashes" (Bradbury 208). Unlike the Phoenix, however, human beings possess memory and the ability to recognize their errors: "we know the damn silly thing we just did" (Bradbury 209). Bradbury's dystopia demonstrates the consequences of losing this awareness. In a society dominated by spectacle and the destruction of books, collective memory collapses, and societies repeat destructive patterns without recognition. By preserving literature, the book-people safeguard memory, suggesting that renewal becomes possible only through the recovery of historical consciousness.

Conclusion

The present study explores that *Fahrenheit 451* is not just a warning against censorship, but an in-depth reflection on how truth fades in significance in certain conditions. Often read as a narrative and critique of book burning, the author's more subtle concern lies in such a world where truth isn't considered important enough to be defended. Through the elements of immersion like the parlor walls, constant noise of the Seashell radios, and the emptiness in day to day interactions, Bradbury presents a society in which people rarely think, question, or reflect. The novel feels more like a known cultural pattern and less like a dystopia when read alongside theorists such as Theodor Adorno, Neil Postman, and Guy Debord. The suggestion Bradbury has for the society is that the truth will not always be suppressed violently but can simply become redundant and irrelevant. This makes *Fahrenheit 451* as enduring as it anticipates a world where conversation is replaced by entertainment and spectacle substitutes understanding. War, in such a culture, becomes background noise irrespective of its serious connotations.

The danger then, is not only the hiding of truth, but it is no longer sought. At the end of the day, Bradbury leaves the reader with a sobering yet urgent message: to preserve the truth we need more than just access to information. It takes time to think, the willingness to question and courage to be continuously attentive in a world that is constantly demanding distraction. Without these, there is a risk of confusing noise for knowledge and comfort for understanding.

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