

# An Economy of Distraction: Ray Bradbury's Vision of Technology in the Modern Age

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## Introduction

As the world has entered the modern age and technology has developed, society has adopted a guiding principle: consumers crave entertainment, and markets strive to meet that need by delivering specifically catered experiences assisted by technological advancements. This landscape is still in relative infancy; to authors, scholars, or academics fifty years ago, such a landscape would have seemed a fantastic dream. Yet for all that saw the potential in technology, such a world was not only within the realm of possibility, but also filled with distractions. Technology provides quick, digestible sensory experiences designed to create pleasure with little effort or thought required from the user and is designed to encourage indulgence in technological distraction. Perhaps no author was more aware of the dangers of technological overindulgence than celebrated science-fiction author Ray Bradbury; his major works were written well before the invention of the internet, streaming, or cellular devices, and yet one can see artifacts of the modern landscape in his writing. Bradbury's works have been lauded for their prophetic visions of the modern world and their deep, philosophical examinations of the relationship between humankind and technology. Bradbury's characters often struggle with a sense of detachment and frustration as they come to terms with the way that technology oversimplifies their lives, removing the need for active critical thinking and engagement with their surroundings. Bradbury's messages and

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themes regarding the dangers of overindulgence in technology, such as those in *Fahrenheit 451* and other works, remain increasingly applicable in the modern world.

### Technology in the Modern World

Technology is one of the defining elements of our modern world, and technological innovation often fuels a never-ending search for the next new device, some incredible replacement for whatever was relied on before it. The phenomenon of technological obsession is a common theme in Bradbury's stories, whose characters are often defined by their acceptance or rejection of technology's increasing encroachment into their lives. In examining *Fahrenheit 451*, Seán McCorry reflects that the novel "stages the decline of the liberal subject against a backdrop of technological acceleration and an increasingly destructive attitude to the nonhuman world."<sup>1</sup> The rapid rate of technological evolution, for all of its conveniences, has been the subject of debate, both among academics and laymen, as technology's inescapable nature can often fuel feelings of frustration and resentment towards the modern world.

Perhaps none has been more controversial than the field of entertainment technology. Film, television, and video games have evolved rapidly since their inception and in response to growing societal trends. Bradbury himself even worked within electronic media, and for many years was employed as a television writer. Many of his short stories were adapted for television audiences, often remaining faithful to the original messages of the stories, even while being broadcast using the very technology some of the stories caution against.

Bradbury's willingness to adapt his own work for television demonstrates a complexity in his views on technology. While the existence of multimedia technology provides a tremendous opportunity to disseminate his ideas, his stories often cast technology as a domineering and overwhelming force, cautioning against the misuse of technology as a tool of suppression, and against overindulgence which can lead to distraction. Abdol Hossein Joodaki cites this phenomenon in *Fahrenheit*, describing how "[t]he society of *Fahrenheit* tries to get rid of different ideas and opinions that separate people and create chaos and unhappiness. To guarantee happiness, authorities try to eradicate all causes for unhappiness."<sup>2</sup> Bradbury imagines a world in which the human tendency to adopt new technologies leads to excesses which allow for manipulation of independent thought, yet *Fahrenheit 451* focuses specifically on overreliance on technology to find satisfaction in everyday life. For Bradbury, technology represents a tool for dissemination of information and ideas, but one which is very easily corrupted due to humankind's inherent fascination with the pleasures it provides.

According to a study in June 2021 by the Leichtman Research Group, "82% of U.S. TV households have at least one Internet-connected TV device, including connected Smart TVs, stand-alone streaming devices (like Roku, Amazon Fire TV stick or set-top box, Chromecast, or Apple

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<sup>1</sup> Seán McCorry, "Literacy, Bêtise, and the Production of Species Difference in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*," *Extrapolation* 59, no. 1 (April 2018): 25.

<sup>2</sup> Abdol Hossein Joodaki, "Supervision Without Vision: Post-Foucauldian Surveillance in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*," *IUP Journal of English Studies* 10, no. 4 (December 2015): 7-18.

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TV), connected video game systems, and/or connected Blu-ray players.”<sup>3</sup> The number suggests that most Americans rely on electronic media for entertainment. The prevalence of internet-driven entertainment illustrates a fascinating point regarding entertainment media: the speed at which an innovation can become the norm. For example, the innovative streaming services Hulu and Netflix both began streaming in 2007; in a period of fifteen years, these companies came to dominate, overtaking more conventional competitors who had dominated entertainment for nearly a century.

### **Bradbury's Use of Setting and Implication in *Fahrenheit 451***

Bradbury's view of the dangers of technological overindulgence are perhaps most overt in *Fahrenheit 451*. This science-fiction novel tells the story of Guy Montag, a protagonist who lives in a world where books and reading have been banned by those in power, replaced by electronic forms of entertainment designed to mollify the population. Critics and scholars have been fascinated not only by the book's central themes and message, but also by its setting. Bill Nasson describes the novel like this: “In *Fahrenheit 451*, a work both cautionary and prophetic, Bradbury caught a contemporary whiff of McCarthyism and Stalinism and also anticipated the dangers of intrusive mass technology and imposed political correctness.”<sup>4</sup> A world in which information has been abridged, controlled, or even censored as a way of keeping the population from being exposed to “dangerous” ideas presents a stark vision of the future, and remains one of the most discussed elements of the work. The world created in *Fahrenheit 451* is at once familiar and fantastical: its dystopic setting shows trends taken to a startling extreme, revealing Bradbury's concern over government overreach and censorship through Montag's struggles with the empty and meaningless pleasures his world provides.

Yet perhaps the most striking aspect of the society portrayed in *Fahrenheit 451* is that citizens are willing participants in their own manipulation. The government in the novel is able to successfully attain power by taking advantage of citizens' desires for facts and information that are simple, digestible, and unchallenging. Striking parallels are apparent between the characters and technology portrayed in the novel and consumers of modern media. Bradbury's works and interviews regarding the question of technology offer speculation about the kinds of technological advances humankind might achieve, yet Bradbury was equally concerned about the effects technology could have on the individual. His works imagined a world in which electronic distractions serve to mollify the individual while access to information is strictly controlled and regulated. Bradbury understood that literacy, a skill long considered to be among the most vital aspects of human interaction, might be rendered obsolete by humankind's obsession with technological advancement.

The setting of *Fahrenheit 451* is, on the surface, a dystopian society where information is rigidly controlled. The nation's government, in an effort to create a malleable population, has limited access to ideas by determining the types of media available to the average person. The transition to this society from our own is explained by the character Captain Beatty in the first part of the book. Montag, the “fireman” whose job it is to incinerate books, has taken issue with the

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<sup>3</sup> “39% of Adults Watch Video via a Connected TV Device Daily,” Leichtman Research Group, June 4, 2021, <https://www.leichtmanresearch.com/39-of-adults-watch-video-via-a-connected-tv-device-daily/>.

<sup>4</sup> Bill Nasson, “*Fahrenheit 451* in the Era of 36°C,” *Safundi* 22, no. 3 (July 2021): 210–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17533171.2021.2013641>.

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callous way in which the firemen burn books containing information. To reassure him, Beatty explains the reasoning behind the firemen's creation: "The fact is we didn't get along well until photography came into its own. Then—motion pictures in the early twentieth century. Radio. Television. Things began to have *mass*."<sup>5</sup>

In this case, "mass" refers to the normalization of new forms of media. As time went on, much like the real world, more and more individuals gained access to televisions in their homes, and in turn began to rely on television increasingly for entertainment. The process of being entertained became largely standardized and ritualistic. One can see this ritualization demonstrated most clearly by Montag's wife, who bases her everyday schedule around the programming provided by the "parlor walls."

"Once, books appealed to a few people, here, there, everywhere. They could afford to be different. The world was roomy. But then the world got full of eyes and elbows and mouths. Double, triple, quadruple population. Films and radios, magazines, books levelled down to a sort of paste pudding norm."<sup>6</sup>

As Beatty points out, mass media by definition have to appeal to as broad an audience as possible. In the world of media, the goal is to create a product with universal appeal, a show which people of all demographics find appealing. Universal appeal, however, is virtually impossible when dealing with complex or controversial issues. In Beatty's eyes, books are comparatively more likely to challenge public perceptions or the status quo. Film and television, by contrast, are primarily interested in entertainment. Beatty continues,

"Classics cut to fit fifteen-minute radio shows, then cut again to fill a two-minute book column, winding up at last as a ten- or twelve-line dictionary resume. I exaggerate, of course. The dictionaries were for reference. But many were those whose sole knowledge of Hamlet [...] was a one-page digest in a book that claimed: 'now at least you can read all the classics; keep up with your neighbors.'"<sup>7</sup>

Building on the previous ideas of simplification, Beatty then explains that the average citizen became overwhelmed by the complexities of politics. Individuals sought not to have a deep and meaningful understanding of the world around them, but instead to have access to news headlines where information could be delivered quickly and easily. Information and entertainment became intertwined, with news media focusing on delivering information in a condensed, oversimplified way. In particular, Beatty's use of the phrase "time-wasting" is interesting when compared to modern society, which often places emphasis on efficiency above all else.

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<sup>5</sup> Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (New York: Del Rey Books, 1992), 52.

<sup>6</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 52.

<sup>7</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 53.

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### Technological Encroachment as a Theme in Bradbury's Works

*Fahrenheit 451* is one of Bradbury's strongest demonstrations of the dangers of overreliance on technology, as the world it creates endangers cognitive development. The behaviors described in *Fahrenheit 451* seem fantastical, yet the characters are trapped in a cycle of habit-forming behaviors designed to encourage constant interaction with a technological product. Such behaviors are especially worrying when applied to children during phases of cognitive development. In a 1988 interview, Bradbury asserted, "It's not going to do any good to land on Mars if we're stupid. And I want to save the future generation, I want to teach them to read when they're 5 and 6 and 7 years old. If we don't do that, we lose them forever."<sup>8</sup> The same addictive processes used to market applications to adults are also often targeted towards children, especially in the mobile gaming market. It is not uncommon for children to own cellular devices with access to the internet. A study performed by Common Sense Media in 2019 found that 53% of children own a smartphone by age eleven. The same study found that children aged 10-12 spent 84% of cellular usage on television, movies, or gaming.<sup>9</sup> The same screens that lined the walls in Montag's house are arguably now portable and carried in most pockets.

The ritualistic, even tribal, nature of technological overconsumption and its potential for distraction was also examined in Bradbury's 1951 short story, "The Pedestrian." In the story, Leonard Mead goes on an evening walk through a secluded and empty area of town. His fellow citizens have vacated the streets to watch a nightly television program. Bradbury places specific emphasis on the time of day, highlighting the way in which media consumption has become a uniform practice among the citizens: "'What is it now?' [Leonard] asked the houses, noticing his wrist watch. 'Eight-thirty P.M.? Time for a dozen assorted murders? A quiz? A revue? A comedian falling off the stage?'"<sup>10</sup>

Ultimately, Leonard is arrested by the police, and his failure to participate in the ritual of media consumption is labelled as "regressive behavior."<sup>11</sup> Jonathan R. Eller notes that "Bradbury felt that the pedestrian would be an early casualty of a totalitarian society—his pedestrian is intercepted by a robotic police vehicle and quietly eliminated; no one will even notice that he is gone."<sup>12</sup> Bradbury's story demonstrates a way in which technology can be used to mollify a population, serving as a tool of distraction that allows for individual behavior to be regulated. Rather than attempting to force the population to participate in specific behaviors, television viewing and mass media provide an entertaining distraction that empowers the totalitarian regime to carry out its agenda unimpeded.

The encroachment of technology into everyday life and the effects of its adoption are also examined in Bradbury's 1953 short story, "The Murderer," published the same year as *Fahrenheit 451*. The story centers around Albert Brock, a man who is overcome with feelings of frustration

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<sup>8</sup> "Ray Bradbury: 'It's Lack That Gives Us Inspiration,'" NPR, June 8, 2012, <https://www.npr.org/2012/06/08/154524695/ray-bradbury-its-lack-that-gives-us-inspiration>.

<sup>9</sup> "Media Use by Tweens and Teens 2019: Infographic," Common Sense Media, 2019, <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/Media-use-by-tweens-and-teens-2019-infographic>.

<sup>10</sup> Ray Bradbury, *The Pedestrian* (Glendale, CA: R.A. Squires, 1964).

<sup>11</sup> Bradbury, *The Pedestrian*.

<sup>12</sup> "Jonathan R. Eller on Ray Bradbury, 'first and foremost a teller of tales,'" Library of America, November 30, 2021, <https://www.loa.org/news-and-views/1895-jonathan-r-eller-on-ray-bradbury-first-and-foremost-a-teller-of-tales>.

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and anxiety caused by the constant presence of technology in everyday life. The “murderer” of the title refers to the fact that Albert, in a fit of rage, has taken it upon himself to lash out and physically destroy his technological devices after being driven to violence by the constant interaction expected of him by telecommunications. Prior to advancements in telecommunications, he found joy in privacy and opportunities for self-reflection. As in “The Pedestrian,” the technologies are presented as intoxicating conveniences, ways to engage with one another constantly: “What is there about such 'conveniences' that makes them so temptingly convenient? The average man thinks, Here I am, time on my hands, and there on my wrist is a wrist telephone, so why not just buzz old Joe up, eh?”<sup>13</sup>

Yet for Albert, the constant engagement serves not as a convenience, but rather a source of inescapable frustration. Constant engagement is a distraction rather than a benefit, and the devices rob him of his time and focus without serving a genuine purpose. The only device which he regrets destroying is the “insinkerator,” which served a function without requiring constant engagement: “I feel sorry for it now, a practical device indeed, which never said a word, purred like a sleepy lion most of the time, and digested our leftovers. I'll have it restored. Then I went in and shot the televisor, that insidious beast, that Medusa.”<sup>14</sup>

The comparison to the mythological Medusa is a clever descriptor, as those who gazed at the creature would turn to stone, as one who gazes at a television often does so in perfect stillness. The insinkerator's comparison to a friend or ally instead shows that its function is considered helpful by Albert, rather than malicious. When examining Bradbury's views of encroaching technology, it is important to note that he is aware of the potential conveniences it can provide. Often, the technologies which are portrayed in the most negative light are those which encourage ritualistic consumption or investment of time without serving a specific function other than to entertain.

### Bradbury on Entertainment and Consumerism

Bradbury has a tendency to portray technologically addicted populations as largely hedonistic, searching for whatever pleasure is available, yet it is technology that allows that drive to be fulfilled. In the field of industry, devices such as tractors make the act of plowing a field far more efficient, while large factories and automated assembly lines reduce the need for human input to the point of rendering the human element virtually irrelevant. Technology is a boon in that it reduces the time and effort required to complete tasks, yet Bradbury portrays a society in which, given all the time in the world to spend as one wishes, the citizens choose to indulge in hedonistic pursuits, preferring digestible, distracting entertainment over more challenging pursuits. Rather than developing the mind through reading or the study of academic subjects, Bradbury's citizens instead look for cheap, often mindless entertainment.

To Bradbury, such a society—one which prioritizes immediate gratification over all else, and is willing to discard complex or challenging thought if it requires an excessive investment of thought—is a society ripe for exploitation. An individual who is unwilling to be challenged by complex thoughts or ideas, is one who will inevitably be taken advantage of. Bradbury's unfortunate Leonard Mead, the victim of a totalitarian regime in “The Pedestrian,” is allowed to

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<sup>13</sup> Ray Bradbury, “The Murderer”, in *The Golden Apples of the Sun* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970).

<sup>14</sup> Bradbury, “The Murderer.”

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be arrested without resistance because the citizens have given in to the comfortable simplicities of a strictly regimented, television-focused life. The way in which malicious, totalitarian forces are able to take advantage of technological forms of entertainment is perhaps the most chilling suggestion of *Fahrenheit 451*. The way in which the firemen are able to operate not only without resistance, but with the support of the general populace, implies that individuals are often lulled into a state of mollification through excessive consumption of technological entertainment. The government of *Fahrenheit 451* is able to maintain near absolute power not through force, but by taking advantage of a manufactured need to be constantly entertained.<sup>15</sup>

Constant engagement with technology is a theme in Bradbury's work, perhaps best demonstrated through *Fahrenheit 451*'s "parlor wall" technology. Montag's wife, Mildred, is preparing for a program designed to incorporate the viewer: "They write the script with one part missing. It's a new idea. The homemaker, that's me, is the missing part. When it comes time for the missing lines, they all look out at me out of the three walls and I say the lines."<sup>16</sup>

The artificiality of the constructed scene is apparent to the viewer. The television program is constructed to allow for audience participation, yet there is a feeling of personal attachment to the proceedings. The characters on the walls look directly at the viewer, which creates a simulated feeling of interaction, even though the scene will continue regardless of viewer input. The illusion and interaction are fascinating, especially when one considers the ways in which modern technology emphasizes engagement. Being able to comment on a piece of media, for example, allows one to be an active participant in the entertainment process, rather than a passive viewer. It allows one to escape reality and engage with an artificial world.

Consumerism as a result of technological entertainment is often portrayed in a negative light in Bradbury's work, as noted by critics such as David Seed, who points out, "Millie and her friends are defined entirely by their role as consumers, whether of sedatives, soap-operas, or fast cars."<sup>17</sup> Seed continues by suggesting that the media in the novel induce a kind of narcosis, drawing the willing participants into a state of unmitigated cyclical consumption that asks for no level of serious thought or speculation, and in turn offers a metaphorical sedative, a way for one to simply turn off one's mind and be entertained. Why complicate life, after all, when technology can provide cheap and readily available dopamine-driven bursts of happiness? Yet the novel also demonstrates the home as a gilded cage; for all of their perceived wealth, for the devices and technological advances that have made their home into a technological paradise, that technology is used not for self-improvement, but for self-delusion.

"The Murderer" also serves as a scathing critique of consumerism, as individuals in the story are shown purchasing and relying on devices that, according to Albert, serve little to no functional purpose. Although the devices initially seem to provide a convenient way to communicate, ultimately Albert is frustrated to find that they require an investment of time and engagement while offering little in return. This phenomenon is demonstrated not only through Albert's reaction, but his wife's as well. When Albert attempts to turn the devices off to have peace

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<sup>15</sup> See also Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 155-56: "When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when, in short, a people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture-death is a clear possibility."

<sup>16</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 18.

<sup>17</sup> David Seed, "The Flight from the Good Life: *Fahrenheit 451* in the Context of Postwar American Dystopias," *Journal of American Studies* 28, no. 2 (1994): 225-40. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875800025470>.



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and quiet, his wife's inability to reach him leads her to assume that something terrible has happened. Bradbury demonstrates that often individuals grow reliant on new devices, changing their behavior to accommodate the new technology.

It is a fascinating phenomenon that the devices which offer the greatest opportunity for advances in scientific thought and education are often co-opted into the field of entertainment for the purpose of economic gain. The media of television and the internet empower humankind to access limitless knowledge, yet there still exists an underlying base instinct, a yearning for distraction. It would be folly to suggest that all forms of entertainment are harmful, and even Montag notes that entertainment devices might have their place when consumed in moderation; Bradbury himself would later adapt many of his short stories into television programs, which demonstrates perhaps an acknowledgment from Bradbury as to the potential of mass media to communicate ideas. Yet Bradbury's stories caution against the excesses of technology, the way in which we very often find comfort and solace through the enactment of fantasy.

### Technological Convenience vs. Oversimplification in News Media

Bradbury's stories often deal with the phenomenon of oversimplification, and the way in which technology and mass media often become forms of entertainment, in addition to providing news. The totalitarian regimes depicted in his dystopian stories are often shown as censoring any potentially harmful events while relying on tactics such as intimidation and violence to eliminate resistance. Yet the individuals in the story often discount the events going on around them due to what they deem excessive complexity. Mass media are demonstrated as incredibly powerful tools, as individuals in Bradbury's stories overwhelmingly prefer information which can be delivered in a quick, digestible fashion with little need for reflection on the implications. Individuals in stories such as "The Murderer" and *Fahrenheit 451* are often bombarded with news headlines in the form of entertaining soundbites which leave little room for critical thought.

We can see Bradbury's predictions reflected in modern news television, as well as YouTube (where news videos rarely last more than five minutes, and often deliver headlines or snippets of information meant to summarize an event) and Twitter (with its 140-character limit). According to a study by Pew Research Center in 2018, roughly 68% of adults in the US get news from social media, including 71% of registered Twitter users.<sup>18</sup> Such numbers suggest a paradigm shift in the consumption of news media, with people today relying more heavily on social media outlets than previously.

One cannot help but draw parallels to the types of news delivery that Beatty explains to Montag in *Fahrenheit 451*. In the story, news anchors deliver soundbites and news stories in brief snippets even as tickers list stories simultaneously at the bottom of the screen. Viewers are bombarded with information and opinions in tandem, and before one has time to digest the significance of the story he has just heard, the next story begins. The consumerization of the media represents a broader societal shift, as oversimplification represents a fundamental force in *Fahrenheit*, one which has empowered the gradual shift in social dynamics. As observed by critic Peter Sisario, "The mass media must keep watering down the intellectual level of its material as it

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<sup>18</sup> Elisa Shearer and Katerina Eva Matsa, "News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2018," Pew Research Center, September 8, 2018. <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2018/09/10/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2018/>.



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attempts to reach a larger and intellectually diversified audience. Bradbury takes this problem to an extreme to show the potential effects of such a course on our culture.”<sup>19</sup>

As Beatty continues his explanation to Montag, he explains the societal consequences of the shift: “School is shortened, discipline relaxed, philosophies, histories, languages dropped, English and spelling gradually neglected, finally almost completely ignored. Life is immediate, the job counts, pleasure lies all about after work. Why learn anything save pressing buttons, pulling switches, fitting nuts and bolts?”<sup>20</sup> Here Bradbury is highlighting the potential danger of adopting a philosophy of truncated entertainment as a necessary part of society. Individuals in the society portrayed have moved the process of shortening beyond entertainment. Education is portrayed as emphasizing a strictly utilitarian viewpoint, where individuals are trained only to the bare minimum necessary to perform the job or career selected. Understanding is something limited only to a practical sense; one learns only enough to be able to perform specific tasks, and deeper thought as to the reasoning behind the work is abandoned. Life is oversimplified, and any field which cannot demonstrate an immediate, measurable benefit is seen as unnecessary, and therefore rendered obsolete.

Yet the strict practicality comes at a price; the simplification of the citizens’ lives means that they are able to be easily led or manipulated by one who understands the mechanism of delivery. Once individuals grow accustomed to every facet of their lives being delivered in a compact, easily consumed manner, they in turn often neglect subjects which cannot deliver an immediate sense of satisfaction. Bradbury, however, warns against the shallow pleasure of electronic media, cautioning that true emotional fulfillment rarely comes from the types of media offered in the novel. Philosophy, history, language, and countless subjects all require an investment of time, effort, and thought in order to gain a modicum of understanding, but the complexities simultaneously yield rich, rewarding conclusions.

### Bradbury on Technology and Education

When one examines the field of education in the modern day, one notices trends that parallel the circumstances described by Captain Beatty; a continued push towards electronic education, and the gamification of deliverable objectives. Educational programs (many of which include educational video games and encourage gamification of curriculum) are designed for the purpose of imitating sources of electronic entertainment, as education often must compete with such entertainment. Students’ attention spans are affected by exposure to electronic media, as pastimes such as video games are often not designed for long-term engagement, but rather the rapid accumulation of rewards. Students who do not see an immediate, tangible manifestation of their educational process may become bored or discouraged, as they are not used to the long-term investment of time that many subjects require. Or, as captain Beatty puts it: “More sports for everyone, group spirit, fun, and you don’t have to think, eh? Organize and organize and superorganize super-super sports. More cartoons in books. More pictures. The mind drinks less and less. Impatience.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Peter Sisario, “A Study of the Allusions in Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*,” *The English Journal* 59, no. 2 (1970): 201–12, <https://doi.org/10.2307/811827>.

<sup>20</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 53.

<sup>21</sup> Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, 55.

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What is most striking about Beatty's description, aside from the parallels to modern society, is the transition from our world to the world depicted in *Fahrenheit 451*. The short attention spans of the population, the lack of information, the strictly regimented and controlled access to specific forms of entertainment reveal a cultural shift rather than a takeover. No malevolent force brainwashed the population into a specific school of thought through deception, but rather took advantage of broad societal trends as a method of securing power. As critic Rodney Smolla observes, "Censorship, *Fahrenheit 451* suggests, is often initiated by the populace first and then embraced by the government; it is then that censorship is at its most effective."<sup>22</sup> The government in *Fahrenheit 451* that outlawed books did so under the pretense of protecting the public good, and did so with popular support. Rather than shutting down access to information with force, those in power took advantage of a growing societal desire for quick and immediate sources of pleasure, manipulating that desire among the populace in order to gain control. Perhaps the most frightening aspect of Bradbury's world is not how ultimately oppressive it is, but that the citizens in the story gladly accepted the oppression in the pursuit of entertainment.

The effect of technology on children is also explored in great depth in Bradbury's 1950 short story "The Veldt," which imagines a world in which a family is living in a completely automated home. In the story, the house is able to take care of every need the family could have, including creating simulated environments for the family and children. As the story progresses, the viewer realizes that the family has become reliant on the house to the point that the parents feel the technology has subsumed their role as caregivers. The children use the house as a form of escapism, spending as much time as possible in a simulated African veldt. Upon attempting to disconnect the children from the house out of concern for their mental health, the children instead trap the parents within the virtual world.<sup>23</sup> "The Veldt" is a harrowing warning of the dangers of overreliance on technology, but also warns how difficult it can be to break one's addiction to the entertainment provided by it. Furthermore, in a modern world where virtual reality is ever more accessible, escaping into a virtual world is becoming even more of a possibility.

### Screens as a Symbol in Bradbury's Works

Screens are an important symbol in Bradbury's work, particularly in *Fahrenheit 451*, representing technological distraction and escapism. This prefigures our modern world, where screens are a constant presence. As well as television and computer screens, one now has access to multiple portable screens to carry at all times. Displays on smart refrigerators keep track of one's food and allow one to send grocery lists. Tiny screens are placed on watches or even eyeglasses, allowing constant access to the internet. Beyond the home, businesses use screens to display colorfully animated advertisements or curated images of their menu items. Grocery stores use touchscreen registers for quick purchases. And, of course, televisions are commonplace in restaurants, businesses, and waiting rooms.

The role technology plays in modern life is growing constantly and intruding into spaces where previously technology was unneeded. This normalization of screen culture is another fundamental paradigm shift. Even cars incorporate screens for the purposes of providing

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<sup>22</sup> Rodney A. Smolla, "Review: The Life of the Mind and a Life of Meaning: Reflections on *Fahrenheit 451*," *Michigan Law Review* 107, no. 6 (2009): 895–912.

<sup>23</sup> Ray Bradbury, *The Veldt* (Logan, IA: Perfection Learning, 1982).

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navigation and music, and self-driving smart-cars are currently in development which will address the chronic problem of distracted driving (a result of technological addiction). The similarities to Bradbury's work are undeniable, an evolution of the same trends Bradbury cautioned against decades before the smartphone seemed a possibility, leading to an economy of distraction where individuals are conditioned to expect constant engagement to instill a need for technological entertainment. That habit—that need for distraction—is a result of diminished attention spans and conditioning designed to promote addictive behaviors over time, a reality that Bradbury predicted with startling accuracy, and one that humankind continues to grapple with.

### Conclusion

Overreliance on technology is one of the most pressing issues in the modern world; technological innovation is a constant and rapidly moving force, and the deeper effects of technology consumption have led to discussion as to what constitutes healthy consumerism. In Bradbury's works, readers see a dystopic view of the future in which humankind's reliance on technology has led it to give up on its own autonomy. Simplification of complex thoughts and ideas in the name of pragmatic pursuits justifies turning off one's mind, indulging in virtual hedonism rather than seeking, even demanding, to be challenged intellectually. Technological innovation is itself a complex force; while technological advances have made life easier and allowed consumers more time to spend as they wish, technology has also been used to take advantage of our baser instincts, including the desire to be entertained.

Examining Ray Bradbury's warnings, both in his writings and in his interviews, helps one gain insight into the dangers of technology. As an author, he saw trends in our response to technological advancement that have only become more evident over time. Reading, writing, and critical thinking all have a value in modern society, and while it is a tempting prospect to simplify a subject so as to understand it more easily, much can be lost in the process of simplification. In order to grow, Bradbury argues, one must exercise all parts of the mind to awaken from the dream created by technological escapism—and to be willing to face new ideas that are challenging, frightening, or even controversial. To do otherwise is to give in to the economy of distraction, to allow oneself to be lulled into the narcosis created by technology. While technology is a boon to modern society, something to be celebrated for its innovations, one should be wary of discarding skills such as literacy, reading, or writing into the proverbial fire, for things that are burned away are lost forever.

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## THE NEW RAY BRADBURY REVIEW

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the role of technology in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* and a selection of his short stories (including "The Murderer" and "The Pedestrian") with an emphasis on Bradbury's views on overreliance on technology. Bradbury's views on technology are complex and multifaceted, and his works explore the philosophical questions raised by a dependence on an increasingly technological world. Bradbury's works caution against the dangerous repercussions of overuse of technology and the way in which individuals are often manipulated by it. The article examines the application of Bradbury's ideas in the modern world and his views on technology's effect on literacy and attention span, exploring Bradbury's views on individual autonomy, and common themes within his work including dystopia, paranoia, and technological overreach. The article also examines Bradbury's interviews and modern critical evaluations of the themes discussed, identifying commonalities within those themes. It seeks to evaluate the modern application of the ideas and themes discussed in Bradbury's stories, and how those themes have evolved and continue to be relevant as technology progresses.

**Keywords** Bradbury, Media, Literacy, Entertainment, Technology, Virtual, Fahrenheit 451, Dystopia, Attention Span