

Doomscrolling before the Smartphone: Media Saturation, Catastrophic News, and the Culture of Fear in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

Mandeep Kaur

Assistant Professor, Govt. College for Girls, Ludhiana

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Abstract— This paper analyzes Don DeLillo's *White Noise* using the modern notion of "doomscrolling," which is the repeated ingestion of unfavorable or frightening information in an attempt to comprehend, foresee, or manage danger. Even though DeLillo's book was written before cellphones and social media, its depictions of consumer culture, television, environmental disaster, and death dread provide a useful foundation for examining the psychological effects of constant information. Without actually portraying doomscrolling, the report contends that *White Noise* foresees zero significant aspects of digital crisis culture. The main episode, the Airborne Toxic Event, shows how rumors, official statements, scientific terminology, and media spectacle can entangle a material threat. This work examines repetition, mediated perception, uncertainty, and the need for assurance, drawing on postmodern critique, media ecology, and risk theory. It also takes into account the limitations of the analogy: the broadcast channels of the novel's historical period are not the same as modern platforms. In the end, *White Noise* makes the argument that while knowledge may be essential for reacting to danger, it may not be enough to eradicate dread. As a result, the book is still relevant to a digital society where looking for updates can turn into a constant struggle with uncertainty.

Introduction

Digital communication has transformed the pace at which people encounter public events. Almost at every turn there is conflict, natural devastation, political instability, disease and economic hardship. A person can move from one disturbing headline to another without reaching a natural stopping point. The contemporary term "doomscrolling" describes this repetitive engagement with negative or distressing information, often despite the anxiety it may produce. The practice raises questions not only about media use but also about attention, fear, and the human desire to make uncertain events intelligible. Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, published in 1985, offers a compelling literary text through which to explore these questions. The novel follows Jack Gladney, a professor of Hitler Studies, his family, and

their lives within a consumer society saturated by television, advertising, technical language, and commercial images. The narrative's central crisis occurs when a chemical accident produces the Airborne Toxic Event, forcing the community to confront a threat that is both materially real and difficult to assess. The characters depend on radio, television, and official explanations to understand what is happening, but the information available to them does not immediately resolve their fears.

Doomscrolling is not a literal activity in *White Noise*: the novel predates social media feeds and smartphones. Instead, it can be used as a contemporary interpretive lens for examining patterns that DeLillo represents, including repetitive information-seeking, the circulation of catastrophe, uncertainty about expertise, and

the persistence of death anxiety. This paper asks how *White Noise* anticipates the culture of doomscrolling by representing media saturation, catastrophic information, and technological anxiety. It argues that DeLillo portrays information as both necessary and insufficient: it can help people respond to danger, yet its continuous circulation can also intensify uncertainty and turn fear into an ordinary condition of everyday life.

Doomscrolling is generally understood as repeated consumption of predominantly negative or distressing information through digital media. It involves more than reading a single troubling report. Its distinctive pattern is the difficulty of disengaging from a stream of updates that promises explanation or reassurance but may instead produce further questions. For literary analysis, the practice can be approached through three features: repetition, anticipation, and unresolved anxiety. Repetition describes the return to new reports about danger; anticipation is the expectation that the next update may clarify the situation; unresolved anxiety occurs when information increases awareness of risk without producing certainty. These features are relevant to *White Noise* because DeLillo depicts media messages as a continuous part of ordinary experience. Television and radio do not simply report an independent world; they help shape the characters' understanding of it. A contemporary reader may recognize an analogous dynamic in digital feeds, where information about distant crises can become immediate, personal, and difficult to put aside. The analogy must nevertheless remain historically precise. Broadcast television is not identical to an algorithmically organized social platform, and DeLillo's characters do not engage in smartphone-based scrolling. The claim is therefore not that the novel depicts the same technology but that it dramatizes emotional and interpretive patterns that are recognizable in present-day information culture.

Review of literature

Indra Bahadur Tamata's *Treatment of Media Technology in The DELILLOS White Noise: A critique* study of media technology in the novel discusses television, visual data, radio, advertising, consumerism, alienation, and death anxiety. Tamata's work is relevant because it establishes media saturation as a central feature of the novel's fictional world.

Environmental criticism offers a second foundation. Mine Ömerali Uslu's "*Airborne Toxicity in Don DeLillo's White Noise*," reads the Airborne Toxic Event through ecocriticism, toxic discourse, risk, and the bodily consequences of environmental hazards. Uslu emphasizes the uncertainty and fear that follow the appearance of the fictional chemical Nyodene D. This analysis is important

because doomscrolling often concerns threats that are difficult for individuals to assess directly and for which they rely on mediated explanations.

Joseph M. Conte's discussion of DeLillo and the technological sublime describes the irony of a media ecology in which abundant archived, broadcast, and digital information fails to fully explain the Airborne Toxic Event. Paul Patton's earlier study of social media events, meanwhile, discusses the rumors, collective fear, and prophecies of doom surrounding the disaster in *White Noise*.

Shabahang and colleagues examine associations between doomscrolling, existential anxiety, and pessimism about human nature. Such research does not mean that all negative-news consumption causes anxiety, nor does it establish a universal response. It does, however, make the connection between repeated exposure to threatening information and existential uncertainty a useful topic for interdisciplinary inquiry.

Theoretical Framework: Postmodernism, Media Ecology, and Risk

The analysis draws on postmodern criticism, media ecology, and risk theory. Postmodernism provides a way of examining the instability between events and their representations. In *White Noise*, characters frequently understand their surroundings through media languages, advertisements, technical descriptions, and popular images. Information is abundant, but its abundance does not guarantee a stable or complete interpretation of reality. Media ecology, associated with Marshall McLuhan, examines how communication technologies shape perception and social experience. From this perspective, television in *White Noise* is more than a delivery system for messages. It helps organize the rhythm of everyday life and supplies categories through which the characters interpret the world. The comparison with digital feeds is useful so long as differences between broadcast media and contemporary platforms remain visible. Ulrich Beck's account of the risk society provides a further framework for reading the Airborne Toxic Event. Modern societies increasingly face hazards generated by technological and industrial systems, and without expert knowledge or institutional communication, these risks often remain difficult to perceive. The novel dramatizes this dependence on systems of explanation: the characters need information to respond to the toxic cloud, but the information does not immediately settle what the danger means for their bodies or future. Together, these approaches frame doomscrolling as a cultural condition shaped by mediated knowledge, repeated attention, and unresolved risk. They also prevent the analysis from treating anxiety as merely an individual weakness. Fear emerges within an information environment

where real hazards, uncertain interpretations, and competing messages are closely intertwined.

Media Saturation and the Repetition of Fear

Media saturation is one of the defining features of white noise. Television broadcasts and commercial messages enter the domestic environment and become part of the characters' ordinary routines. The media are not occasional interruptions to a fully independent reality; they are among the systems through which that reality is experienced. This feature resembles doomscrolling, in which the individual repeatedly encounters stories about crises and threats, often within the same stream as entertainment, advertising, and personal updates.

The title *White Noise* suggests a continuous background of sound that can make it difficult to distinguish significant signals from the surrounding flow. As a metaphor, it captures a culture in which the quantity of communication can overwhelm the work of interpretation. The issue is not simply that every message is false or trivial. Rather, continuous exposure can blur the distinction between urgent information and the ongoing noise of mediated life. The novel's famous episode involving the most photographed barn in America illustrates the influence of representation on perception. Murray's statement "No one sees the barn" (DeLillo 9) suggests that visitors do not encounter the site as an untouched object; their experience is shaped by its reputation and by the accumulated images associated with it. The episode is not directly about negative news, but it shows how repeated representation can transform the experience of a thing. Every concerning item in a digital feed might make the following one feel essential. If a new report seems to offer clarity, a user might keep checking, but the next update might add more ambiguity. At the level of media culture, *White Noise* foresees this paradox: information captures attention without necessarily leading to comprehension. Thus, DeLillo's book challenges readers to distinguish between the creation of a more correct understanding of events and just being exposed to more signals.

The Airborne Toxic Event as Catastrophic Information

This situation offers a strong analogy with doomscrolling. When people follow reports about an unfolding disaster, they may know that a serious event has occurred without knowing its full scale, duration, or implications. Updates may be essential, but they can also arrive before the available evidence is complete. The individual continues seeking information because the situation appears unfinished. The resulting anxiety is not necessarily irrational: it may arise from a real threat combined with limited knowledge. DeLillo's representation is powerful because the disaster is both material and mediated. The

toxic cloud is not merely a story on television; it poses a danger to bodies and the environment.

The changing accounts of symptoms and exposure demonstrate how difficult it can be to establish certainty during an emergency. Heinrich reports that the symptoms initially included "skin irritation and sweaty palms," but later reports add "nausea, vomiting, and shortness of breath" (DeLillo 111). The shift in the reported symptoms makes the news itself a source of uncertainty: each update appears to clarify the danger while also revising what the characters thought they knew. The novel therefore invites a nuanced interpretation of doomscrolling. It would be misleading to suggest that distressing news is inherently harmful or that people should avoid information during emergencies. Accurate information can protect lives. Repeated consumption becomes problematic when it detaches from useful action or when each new report is treated as a path to complete certainty. *White Noise* shows that real danger and the uncertainty surrounding its interpretation can reinforce one another, making information itself part of the experience of crisis.

Consumer Culture and the Economy of Attention

White Noise closely links media saturation to consumer culture. Advertisements, branded products, and commercial spaces shape the characters' sense of identity and their experience of everyday life. DeLillo's novel presents a society in which images and messages circulate as part of an economy of attention, influencing what people notice and how they assign significance. Digital platforms place news, entertainment, advertising, and personal communication within a shared environment. Emotionally powerful stories can compete for attention with other forms of content, and repeated engagement may make particular events seem continually present. The comparison with *White Noise* should not imply that every media organization deliberately promotes fear. Rather, it draws attention to how systems organized around visibility and engagement can privilege dramatic information. The barn episode again offers a useful analogy. Visitors and photographers contribute to the significance of the barn episode by giving it their accumulated attention. In doomscrolling, widely circulated images of catastrophe may likewise gain further visibility because people repeatedly view, share, and discuss them. Attention becomes part of the process through which events acquire cultural prominence.

Fear of death is central to *White Noise*. Jack Gladney's life is shaped by his awareness of mortality and by his desire to manage the vulnerability that this awareness produces. The novel repeatedly connects existential fear with the technological and consumer systems that promise

order, comfort, and control. Jack Gladney, a middle-aged lecturer at the College-on-the-Hill, narrates the novel. He leads Hitler Studies, a field he created one chilly morning in 1968. He resides with his spouse, Babette, and their children from their two "prior marriages" (DeLillo 4). Babette teaches as well. She is portrayed in the book as a kind and unselfish woman who has a peculiar fixation of death. The Gladney family in the made-up town of Blacksmith has four children: Wilder, Heinrich, Denise, and Steffie. Since Heinrich is known to be an antisocial teenager and Denise is especially worried about the family's health, each youngster in the home has different life goals. Jack's story introduces us to Murray Jay Siskind, another intriguing character in the book. One of the main characters in this book, he has astute scholarly insight into a wide range of topics, including consumerism, Elvis Presley, auto accidents, and pseudointellectual notions that influence societies through media and supermarkets.

Murray has relocated to Blacksmith, a small college town, after leading a convoluted life in the metropolis. His frustration and misunderstanding with cities and small villages are constantly sought for by readers; on the other hand, he makes an effort to confront his loneliness, dread of death, calamity, displacement, postmodern corruption, and reality vs. fabrication. In the book, the author mimics the same assertion. He attempts to depict a man who descends into the depths of the story, or rather his story, of his family, his job, and the moral shifts of others around him, which he himself was compelled to attend and participate in the eventual play of the real and the unreal. The novel *White Noise* foreshadows both the present and the future of societies. It is a succinct examination of the depths of humanity, the lack of engagement in "humanness," and the fundamentally technologically driven role of "make believe" in locations like supermarkets, barns, and Hollywood representations of realities that fail to explain what or which is harbouring humanity for the purpose of capitalistic advancement and estrangement. In 1936, Don DeLillo was born in the Bronx, New York. He is an Italian immigrant's son. In 1916, DeLillo's father arrived in the United States. His upbringing was "tough as hell" (William 55).

The majority of his notable earlier compositions, including *Americana*, *Underworld*, and *White Noise*, reflect the shadow of his life as both an immigrant and an American. It's a straightforward instance of abuse (DeLillo 79). As he explains it, Murray consistently attempts to incorporate the "cultural mandate" of television and supermarkets into his own "mandates." He is a figure who possesses both academic synergy and equal intelligence. Throughout the book, Murray's thoughts occasionally impact Jack. One of the most captivating, beautiful, and

reflective scenes in the book is when Jack and his wife Babette discuss their worries about dying one evening. DeLillo parodies the standard "love-kissy" scenes found in soap operas and classic romance novels. The novel's sombre subject of death also fosters the couple's affectionate bond. As Jack asks, "Who will die first?" both are troubled by one unsettling issue. In the book, death is a major theme. In one of the opening statements of a conversation about Hitler, he states, "All plots tend to move deathward," which is a notion that continues to stigmatize Jack's life. Plots are like this. schemes in children's games, terrorist schemes, romantic plots, political plots, and narrative plots. Every time we plot, we get closer to death. It is similar to a contract that both the plotters and the people who are the plot's targets must sign (DeLillo 30). He longs for a longer life and never wants to die like others. Jack describes his "reluctant-willingness" to alter his identity at the college's chancellor's recommendation. As the department head, he wants Jack to look as professional as possible at the college. To strengthen his identity, he also instructs Jack to adopt the name J.A.K. Gladney. Babette disapproves of the concept. According to her, the concept is somewhat ambiguous, which makes it "attention-getting in a cheap sense" (DeLillo 20). However, Jack continues to transform himself into something that "suits the job." In an attempt to "grow more" like Hitler, he begins donning large glasses. Murray and the Gladney family met at the grocery store the other day.

He indicates that he is interested in Babette and appears to like her. He also discusses his reasons for purchasing generic-labeled goods in lieu of the eye-catching, vibrant ones. Additionally, Jack observes that Murray presents a particular image to draw in ladies. Instead of becoming irritated by the exchange, he finds it amusing. As Jack continues to polish his armour in an effort to impress the attendees of a worldwide Hitler conference at the College on the Hill, his desire to develop his persona grows stronger. It would be embarrassing if he didn't speak German, as the director of the Hitler Studies department. One of Murray's neighbours, Howard Dunlop, begins teaching him. When Jack brings Murray to his house for dinner following the first session, he observes that every member of the family is working on various projects, with the exception of toddler Wilder, who is sitting by himself. The entire house is filled with noise, and Jack finds it difficult to keep his life apart from the family's cacophonous noises, which have all combined to become "white noises." The Airborne Toxic Event heightens this concern by linking the possibility of death to a specific, uncertain threat. Doomscrolling can similarly bring distant dangers into the immediate field of attention. News about illness, violence, war, or environmental destruction may concern events occurring elsewhere, yet repeated exposure can make

vulnerability feel constant and personally relevant. Seeking updates may be a person's way of gaining a sense of control over events that are otherwise uncontrollable.

DeLillo's novel reveals the limits of the desire to overcome mortality through information. Technical explanations and mediated messages may organize experience, but they cannot remove the fact of death. This makes the comparison with doomscrolling especially productive. The repeated search for updates can be understood as an attempt to gain certainty in a world where complete certainty is unattainable. *White Noise* asks whether the pursuit of knowledge can ever fully resolve the fear that motivates it.

Limits and Contemporary Relevance

White Noise remains relevant because it examines how media, technology, and uncertainty shape human experience. Nevertheless, a responsible comparison must acknowledge historical differences. Television broadcasting in the 1980s differs from contemporary social media in speed, personalization, interactivity, and algorithmic distribution. Doomscrolling also involves platform-specific habits that the novel cannot directly represent. These differences do not invalidate the comparison; they define its scope. The argument is that DeLillo anticipates certain cultural and emotional patterns associated with doomscrolling, not that he predicted smartphones or contemporary platform design. The novel shows that information can be necessary and informative while also becoming overwhelming. It depicts a situation in which media communication helps people recognize danger but does not guarantee that they can interpret or emotionally manage it.

The novel's contribution is ultimately critical rather than prescriptive. It does not offer a simple solution to information overload. Instead, it encourages readers to question the assumption that more information automatically produces greater understanding and to recognize the difference between staying informed and remaining trapped in a continuous cycle of apprehension.

CONCLUSION

Reading Don DeLillo's *White Noise* through the contemporary concept of doomscrolling reveals the continuing significance of the novel's critique of media saturation, catastrophic information, and technological anxiety. Although the novel predates smartphones and social media, its representation of broadcast media and the Airborne Toxic Event offer a useful framework for examining how information about danger shapes consciousness. The novel suggests that information does

not necessarily eliminate uncertainty. Media messages can help individuals understand their surroundings while also creating an atmosphere in which danger appears continuous and unresolved. The Airborne Toxic Event demonstrates how a material environmental threat becomes entangled with scientific explanation, public communication, and personal fear. Doomscrolling extends these concerns into the digital present. The repeated consumption of negative information can be understood as an effort to manage uncertainty by remaining continuously informed.

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