

Neil Postman



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Neil Postman



This presentation is based on the theories of Neil Postman (1931-2003), a communications theorist and a public intellectual extraordinaire. A more complete summary of his macro-social theories can be found in *Macrosociology: The Study of Sociocultural Systems*, by Frank W. Elwell. If you would like to receive a .pdf file of the chapter on Postman, please write me at felwell@rsu.edu and put Postman.pdf in the subject line.

Neil Postman



Postman's social theory returns again and again to the theme of technological change driving changes in structure and culture. He repeatedly asserts that irrespective of the intentions of the users (or the owners), technology always has unintended consequences, that these consequences are both positive and negative, and that these consequences are rarely evenly distributed throughout the society.

Frankenstein Syndrome



Postman calls this the “Frankenstein Syndrome” in which technology is developed for a limited and specific purpose. “But once the machine is built, we discover – sometimes to our horror, usually to our discomfort, always to our surprise – that it has ideas of its own” (1982/1994: 21).

Frankenstein Syndrome



Inevitably new technologies cause changes in institutional structures as well as ideas, ideologies, beliefs, and even habits of thought. This, Postman asserts, is generally true of technology; it is especially true of communications technologies.

Frankenstein Syndrome



For Postman, the prime movers in sociocultural change are technology and consequent changes of the division of labor; combined, these forces change social structures and ultimately the very character of the men and women who inhabit the society.

Disappearance of Childhood

In perhaps his most provocative book, *The Disappearance of Childhood*, Postman attempts to explain why the dividing line between childhood and adulthood is rapidly eroding in contemporary society, and why the social role of the child may well disappear in modern industrial society.

Disappearance of Childhood

His contribution to this topic, he points out, is not in documenting this erosion; many observers have remarked upon the disappearance in the past. Rather, his contribution is in explaining both the origin of childhood itself as well as the reasons for its decline. Specifically, Postman posits that both the rise of the social role of the child and its consequent decline is rooted in changes in communications technology (1982/1994, xii).

Rise of Childhood



The invention of the printing press and the spread of a print culture is the primary causal agent in the rise of childhood. Replacing print culture with an electronic medium in which imagery is the main conveyor of information is the primary agent in its decline (xii-xiii).

Rise of Childhood



In a world dominated by oral tradition, Postman states, there is not a sharp distinction between children and adults. In such a world, childhood ends at about the age of seven when the child has mastered speech. At the age of seven “the medieval child would have had access to almost all of the forms of behavior common to the culture” (15).

Rise of Childhood



Save for sex and war, medieval youth would fully partake in adult life, sharing in games, work, play, and stories. The culture did not have need or means of keeping information away from youth. There were few secrets between the generations, upon attaining the age of seven the youth fully entered the adult world.

Rise of Childhood



Because it was an oral culture, Postman asserts, there was no need to prolong the socialization process so that youth can master reading and esoteric knowledge beyond the immediate local culture; thus no need of educational institutions in which youth are segregated from adults and age graded so that they can master both reading and be gradually exposed to the harsher ways of the world; no well developed concept of shame because all have ready access to oral information.

Rise of Childhood



With the invention of the printing press in about 1450 and the spread of literacy, the “communication environment” rapidly changed. Literacy gradually became a great divide among people; to become literate was to become a fully functioning adult, to engage in a new world of facts, impressions, and opinions beyond the local milieu (28).

Rise of Childhood



More than this, Postman says, “typography was by no means a neutral conveyor of information.” Rather, printing changed the very organization and structure of thought. “The unyielding linearity of the printed book – the sequential nature of its sentence-by-sentence presentation, its paragraphing, its alphabetized indices, its standardized spelling and grammar” promoted “a structure of consciousness that closely parallels the structure of typography” (30 & 32).

Rise of Childhood



With the spread of literacy, young and old began to live in different worlds; one now had to achieve adulthood by mastering literacy and the habits of mind it promoted. To do this, Postman adds, required the development of institutions to provide this education, which makes the creation of childhood a necessity(36).

Rise of Childhood



The relationship between the spread of literacy, the development of schools, and the growing conception of childhood as a part of the life cycle is incontrovertible. Over the next few centuries adults took more and more formal control over the socialization of youth, setting forth more stringent criteria for the attainment of adulthood (39). The concept of childhood spreads with mass literacy and schooling and eventually reaches the lower classes as well.

Rise of Childhood



To facilitate this formal learning, youth were required to undergo the strict discipline of the schoolhouse, to sit quietly in neat rows, hands folded on the desk. “The capacity to control and overcome one’s nature became one of the defining characteristics of adulthood and therefore one of the essential purposes of education, for some, the essential purpose of education” (46-47).

Rise of Childhood



At the same time, the family gradually became organized around childhood and schooling, and both the family and school promoted the idea of discipline and restraint of bodily functions. Citing Elias, Postman adds that a clear distinction was drawn between private and public behavior. Shame and embarrassment became associated with sexual behavior as well as other biological functions.

Rise of Childhood



There developed a whole vocabulary of words deemed too sensitive for the ears of children. Adults “began to collect a rich content of secrets to be kept from the young: secrets about sexual relations, but also about money, violence, about illness, about death, about social relations” (48-49).

Rise of Childhood



This monopoly on the control of information and experience to the child was maintained by a print culture in which age graded exposure to more in-depth and complex information was carefully monitored and controlled by the family and by the school. This monopoly was easily maintained in that basic reading itself was difficult to master and literature dealing with adult themes and privileged knowledge was of sufficient complexity to deter children entry until they had undergone years of training in reading, vocabulary, and syntax (79).

Disappearance of Childhood

“The maintenance of childhood depended on the principles of managed information and sequential learning” (72). But with the advent of electronic information, particularly when television was introduced directly into the home, this monopoly crumbled.

Disappearance of Childhood

Television, Postman points out, is a visual medium that requires no training and is available to be viewed and understood by all. “In learning to interpret the meaning of images, we do not require lessons in grammar or spelling or logic or vocabulary. We require no analogue of the McGuffey Reader, no preparation, no prerequisite training. Watching television not only requires no skills but develops no skills” (79).

Disappearance of Childhood

The barriers between adulthood and childhood are eroded; there is no longer the possibility of segregating information from the young. All are exposed to the adult world – murder and mayhem, lust and titillation, greed and consumerism – through television melodrama and comedy, talk shows, game shows, news shows, “reality” shows, and commercials (80).

Disappearance of Childhood

These shows are running on hundreds of stations twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Most are competing for a wider audience and much of this competition consists of coming up with new and novel situations, information, and images to attract and hold that audience. Thus television constantly seeks to push the envelope by depicting all manner of human behavior, ideas, and lifestyles. Nothing is held back, all have access (82).

Disappearance of Childhood

And without secrets or any sense of shame, Postman adds, childhood must necessarily disappear. Groups are largely defined by the exclusivity of information and knowledge that their members share, Postman says, and adults no longer enjoy such exclusive knowledge (80).

Electronic Media



To say that television has significantly changed the socialization process of youth is also to make the claim that it has changed the meaning and form of adulthood as well. It is in *The Disappearance of Childhood* that Postman first broaches the themes of electronic media changing the character of adult intellectual and emotional capacities, emphasizing emotional responses to political candidates, consumer products, and social issues as opposed to rational interest, logic, reflection, and reason (50, 63, & 98).

Electronic Media



The electronic media reduces the complexity of any subject to simple slogans; politics becomes trivialized to personality and images. More generally Postman asks, “What is the effect on grown-ups of a culture dominated by pictures and stories? What is the effect of a medium that is entirely centered on the present, that has no capability of revealing the continuity of time? What is the effect of a medium that must abjure conceptual complexity and highlight personality? What is the effect of a medium that always asks for an immediate, emotional response?” (107).

Electronic Media



More generally still, Postman asks “What is the effect on an entire culture of a society that has given full reign to technological progress?” It is to provide answers to these questions that drives all of Postman’s writings (145-146).

The Medium and the Message

In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman continues to examine the effects of the new communications technology, though here he broadens his inquiry to include the entire culture. While he does not go so far as to adopt Marshall McLuhan's line that "the medium is the message," Postman strongly believes that the medium necessarily exerts strong influence on the messages it transmits.

The Medium and the Message

A medium, Postman explains, is to technology as the mind is to the brain. “A technology, in other words, is merely a machine. A medium is the social and intellectual environment a machine creates.” The form of public discourse, Postman argues, whether that form is primarily through the technology of the printed word (newspapers, pamphlets, and books) or electronic through radio or television, will have impact on the ideas that are expressed and received (Postman 1984, 84).

The Medium and the Message

“To say it, then, as plainly as I can, this book is an inquiry into and a lamentation about the most significant American cultural fact of the second half of the twentieth century: the decline of the Age of Typography and the ascendancy of the Age of Television. This change-over has dramatically and irreversibly shifted the content and meaning of public discourse, since two media so vastly different cannot accommodate the same ideas. As the influence of print wanes, the content of politics, religion, education, and anything else that comprises public business must change and be recast in terms that are most suitable to television” (8).

The Medium and the Message

Any medium of communication emphasizes certain ideas, ways of thinking, and outlooks. Dominant media therefore go a long way toward determining the content of the culture (9). Further, those ideas that are readily expressed through the dominant media soon become the dominant ideas within the culture itself (6).

The Medium and the Message

Any medium, Postman argues, determines the structure of discourse by demanding of the messenger certain kinds of content, as well as favoring certain traits of personality, exposition, and intelligence. In societies dominated by print, the demands on the communicator are of logical linear thought, with ideas building upon one another in logical sequence and order. In such cultures, ideas are debated and discussed, even in oral debate, consistent with the rules of logic in a thorough, comprehensive manner (27).

The Medium and the Message

The demands of those receiving the communication are equally exacting. First and foremost, the audience in a print culture must master basic literacy. They also had to acquire some familiarity with history, rhetoric, and philosophy to provide the context necessary for understanding complex communication. A second demand was of attention – 19th century audiences for political and religious speeches were often subjected (treated) to hours of speeches and debate. Speeches, Postman adds, that like their print counterpart, were often intricate and subtle requiring high levels of aural comprehension (45).

The Medium and the Message

Postman uses the Lincoln-Douglas debates for a Senate seat in Illinois as the 19th century ideal of this sophisticated discourse. He marvels at the rhetorical skills of both debaters, as well as the listening and comprehension skills of the audiences for these debates that lasted hours. The debates were full of historical, political, and literary references, demanding a high level of attention and concentration from the audience. More remarkably still, the audience did not even get to directly vote for these candidates, as a state's senators were selected by the state legislature at this time (1984, 45).

The Medium and the Message

Postman points to 18th and 19th century America as a prime example of such a print-based culture. In early America, the influence of the printed word was dominant not only because of the sheer quantity of printed matter – pamphlets, newspapers, books – but most especially because of their monopoly. This print culture produced habits of mind on the part of both leaders and broader publics, Postman asserts, that encouraged serious public discussion and debate of substantive issues.

The Medium and the Message

In general, both leaders and broader publics were also better able to manage such complex discussion and debate. A good line by Postman: “We might even say that America was founded by intellectuals, from which it has taken us two centuries and a communications revolution to recover” (41). In sum, a medium strongly influences the message it carries, and a print-based medium emphasizes exposition, logical coherence, sequential development, objectivity, and reflection (63).

Electronic Media



Toward the end of the 19th century, Postman claims, print-based culture began to pass, to be progressively replaced by electronic media. As a culture moves from an emphasis on print to one based on pictorial images presented directly into the home, Postman claims, its emphasis, ideas, and even truths pass from exposition to “show business” (1984, 63).

Electronic Media



Postman characterizes the dominant ideas and ways of thinking that are fostered by electronic communication as “dangerous nonsense” (16). As is readily apparent, Postman is no relativist in this matter. He views print as a superior medium for the exposition of complex ideas; he believes that it has a far “healthier influence” (27) on societies than when discourse is dominated by electronic media. Indeed, he believes “that we are getting sillier by the minute” (24).

Electronic Media



It begins, he claims, with the telegraph (65). With the coming of the telegraph, news begins to emphasize speed, quantity, novelty, and distance in reportage, often at the expense of relevance and coherence (67). Combined with the graphics revolution, photography, motion pictures, and then radio and television, the new electronic media present a world that is bordering on seeming chaos (70).

Electronic Media



Stories and headlines come from all parts of the globe, often isolated from any sort of coherent context or connection to the local (70). Postman characterizes this as a “peek-a-boo world” in which stories and images constantly vie for our attention and then are quickly forgotten (77). This new electronic media does not merely supplement the old print culture, but rather it tends to supplant it, in time becoming the “dominant means for construing, understanding, and testing reality” (74).

Electronic Media



Television, of course, carries this to the extreme, combining images, sound, immediacy, and bringing it directly into the home (78). “And most important of all, there is no subject of public interest – politics, news, education, religion, science, sports – that does not find its way to television. Which means that all public understanding of these subjects is shaped by the biases of television” (74).

Electronic Media



It is in the nature of the medium that it must suppress the content of ideas in order to accommodate the requirements of visual interest; that is to say, to accommodate the values of show business" (92). But the problem is not confined to television, for we have come to expect similar stimulation from all of our daily experiences – it is the standard by which we judge all interactions (87).

Electronic Media



It is through television that our culture comes to know itself, Postman claims, and how it depicts the world becomes the measure of all – onscreen and off. Just as print once determined the form of political, economic, and religious discourse, television now becomes the model (92).

Electronic Media



The demands upon the messenger whether on the tube or in person are similar – play to the widest possible audience, appeal to their emotions, and above all else, entertain (98). Image replaces reality; and manipulation and showmanship replaces leadership (97). People exposed to a constant diet of television – its so-called news, entertainment shows, commercials – are being socialized into a variety of expectations about reality.

Electronic Media



“For example, a person who has seen one million television commercials might well believe that all political problems have fast solutions through simple measures – or ought to. Or that complex language is not to be trusted, and that all problems lend themselves to theatrical expression. Or that argument is in bad taste, and leads only to an intolerable uncertainty” (131).

Television News



People exposed to a steady diet of news might believe that the world is a far more crime ridden and violent place than it really is, or that our social and political problems have no real connections between them. People exposed to a steady diet of sports and other entertainments may be raising their expectations about social life and its conduct that bears little resemblance to real life – black and white issues with few shades of gray, heroes and villains, and clear and unambiguous solutions to all problems.

Television News



The evidence presented by Postman for the trivializing of various American institutions by the entertainment requirements of television is overwhelming. Television news is introduced and often interspersed with music, each story typically introduced by an anchorman presenting one story after another with little context and few connections between them (102).

Newspapers



American newspapers and newsmagazines are adopting similar formats and features – shorter stories, a greater focus on novelty, imagery, and variety. The result is that Americans are among the most entertained and least informed people on the planet (106). Other institutions that have restructured themselves to accommodate the necessity to entertain the audience in like manner include religion, education, marketing, and politics and government.

Religion



“The first is that on television, religion, like everything else, is presented, quite simply and without apology, as an entertainment. Everything that makes religion an historic, profound and sacred human activity is stripped away; there is no ritual, no dogma, no tradition, no theology, and above all, no sense of spiritual transcendence. On these shows, the preacher is tops. God comes out as second banana” (117).

Education



The new electronic communications have profoundly affected education as well. By monopolizing their time and attention, television clearly affects reading habits of the young (141). More than this, however, by instilling in teachers and students the expectation that all teaching (and learning) must be entertaining, the age of electronics has seriously affected the classroom and eroded the self-discipline needed throughout the learning process (145-146).

Education



Students find it increasingly difficult to master complex material because they have not developed sufficient critical reading and thinking skills or the self-discipline needed to acquire these skills.

Capital



Capitalist enterprises seek to sell products not by informing potential customers of the benefits of their product, but rather by projecting ideal images to appeal to the hopes, dreams, fantasies, or fears of their potential customers (128). This is a far cry from early capitalism, Postman argues, in which both parties in economic exchange were well-informed and rational (126-127).

Politics



Politics plays a similar game. A candidate, writes Postman, does not simply offer up an image of himself. Rather, he (and his handlers) tries to craft and project an image that has been market-tested to appeal to an audience. The goal is to project this image in speeches and in debate, to sell the candidate through commercials, using similar imagery and emotional appeal as the techniques used to sell deodorant (134).

Politics



Candidates attempt to wrap themselves in the flag, project an image of optimism and confidence, honesty, good natured humor, and charm; one of the hot questions of the 2000 presidential race among journalists (and thus voters): “Which one of these men would you like to have a beer with?” In this one Bush won hands down in his two races as did Obama in his.

Technology & Culture



In his writings, Postman gradually broadens his inquiry on technology. First, he focuses on the impact of changes in communications technology on childhood. Then, he examines the impact of the new electronic communications on social discourse. Finally, he moves from a focus almost exclusively on communications technology to a broader view of the impact of technological change on the entire culture.

Technology & Culture



Throughout, however, Postman remains consistent in his view that ideas and ideologies are closely associated with the use of technology and that changes in technology necessarily produce changes in social structures, institutions, and cultural ideologies and beliefs. Postman believes that it is self-evident that 20th century technology has transformed sociocultural life in America.

Technology & Culture



From the industrialization of agriculture, the mass production of consumer goods, new modes of transportation and distribution, office machinery and the computer, and electronic communications – all have had dramatic impact on economic, political, and social life. All technologies have functions and dysfunctions, manifest and latent.

Technology & Culture



To date, the public has rarely examined potential technologies beyond their manifest functions, that is, what the inventor intended the machine to perform. In addition, Postman adds, the functions and dysfunctions (or the “benefits and deficits”) are not evenly distributed throughout the population. Some benefit far more than others from technological change; some are profoundly hurt (Postman 1992, 9). In all of his work, Postman examines the impact of technological change on American culture. A great writer and thinker, you really should read him.

Note:



For a more extensive discussion of Postman's theory, as well as a fuller discussion of its implications for understanding human behavior, refer to *Macrosociology: the Study of Sociocultural Systems*. For an even deeper understanding of Postman's thought read from the bibliography that follows.

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