Neil Postman, RIP

Culture, Technology, and the Modern Soul

On October 5, 2003, Neil Postman, one of America's most insightful critics of modern media and technology, passed away at the age of 72. An NYU professor for over forty years, Postman was a prolific author and lecturer, and his twenty books and over two hundred essays and articles had a lasting resonance with contemporary life.

Like so many of the best critics, Postman cannot easily be labeled "conservative" or "liberal." Although he served for a time on the editorial board of the leftist magazine *The Nation*, he showed over his career a general ambivalence toward any particular political program. He will be remembered above all for pushing his readers to engage in a thoughtful recollection of the past in order to see the present, and the future, more clearly.

Postman believed that by mistaking technological progress for human progress, we have lost the ability to direct our lives toward higher pursuits. In our age of technology and mass media, he argued, we indulge in the endless pursuit of appetite upon appetite, stunting individuals and stultifying society.

In his best-known book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1984), Postman delivered the most scathing attack on our television culture since Newton Minow's 1961 speech that dubbed TV a "vast wasteland." And Postman's attack cut far deeper than Minow's, because instead of confining himself to the content of television programming, Postman criticized the medium itself. By eclipsing, and in some instances, threatening to replace altogether, the written word and our literary culture, television trivializes the serious and noble pursuits of human life—politics, religion, education, art, and commerce; they all become mere entertainment, Postman argued.

This trivialization at best makes existence shallow and stupid; at worst, it "creates a culture without moral foundation."

Postman explored these consequences further in *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (1992), where he described the uneasy tension in nineteenth-century America between the worldviews of "traditional" culture and "technological" culture. In our day, he argued, this tension has turned into an active conflict, one in which the technological is clearly emerging the victor, and has begun to dominate our cultural and political life completely. The era we live in is "antihistorical, information-saturated, technology-loving."

Postman described how our tools prejudice and limit our interaction with the world. As the saying goes, "To a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail." Why stop there? "To a man with a pencil, everything looks like a list. To a man with a camera, everything looks like an image. To a man with a computer, everything looks like data. And to a man with a grade sheet, everything looks like a number."

But, Postman said, the worst symptoms of the age of "Technopoly" aren't even related to our machines or our tools; they are deep within us, in our assumptions and our mindset. For instance, Postman scathingly criticized the rise of "scientism," which is "not merely the misapplication of techniques such as quantification to questions where numbers have nothing to say; not merely the confusion of the material and social realms of human experience; not merely the claim of social researchers to be applying the aims and procedures of natural science to the human world," but also "the desperate hope, and wish, and ultimately the illusory belief that some standardized set of procedures called 'science' can provide us with an unimpeachable source of moral authority."

Postman of course offered no easy solutions to the problems he described. He himself chose partial withdrawal: according to one of his NYU colleagues, Postman "wrote with a pen, never used e-mail, owned no computer and had no regrets about never going online." Very few of us would want to disengage from our technology-dominated world even to that small extent—but Postman's writings give us the means to step back and reflect on the role technology plays in our lives, even in the midst of Technopoly.