

## **Does Postman Convince us Technology is the Future? (Rough Draft for Peer Review)**

Life is not resolute, but to what fault is technology to blame? *In Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, author, Neil Postman, writes that our future is foreseeable, not so much in descriptive ways, but in the way that technology will alter everything, including thoughts, actions, and culture, even if the exact changes are unknown. Postman was a critic, one that wrote seventeen books, demeaning technology, education, and media, among other things; his critique of technology was as much a critique as it was a prediction of the future, one where technology changes societal values, intellect and goals of achievement. Postman's writing, although infused with bias, an arrogant tone and some questionable ethos, convinces his audience through the use of metaphors and examples that technology will not only change the way we live, but will fundamentally alter who we *are*.

Postman uses the fairly universal bias that technology equates to advancement, as grounds to add his own bias, that that same advancement in fact changes the foundation of current culture. Depending on his audience, that tactic either furthers his argument or discredits his authority on the subject. As a critic, he has geared himself towards a crowd of readers that are looking for a controversial thought, but he alienates the broader public by appealing to that faction of subscribers. Postman's bias is undeniable if one is prepared to disagree, "Nothing could be more obvious, of course, especially to those who have given more than two minutes of thought to the matter" (5). Immediately discrediting the intellect of his doubtful readers taints his opinions, however, for those looking to agree, he plays to their ego of the "obvious" based thinking. His attempts to appease the other side by mentioning their rationale are still biased, "I shall not argue here that this is a stupid or dangerous idea, only that it is peculiar" (Postman 13). Peculiarity is not often a sought after attribute, so by using that particular descriptor, Postman is

reaffirming not only his stance, but his strong belief in his stance. Whether Postman's bias elevates his argument or undermines it is up to his audience.

An arrogant tone permeates Postman's writing, but with that arrogance comes conviction, conviction that leaves no opportunity to argue. To dissuade a counterpoint, confidence is key. "Technophiles" as Postman calls them are those that "see only what new technologies can do and are incapable of imagining what they will undo" (5). By separating the general population into categories, and then putting himself above said categories, Postman's arrogance is establishing him as the expert. If anything he sees himself as closer to a "technophobe", who while may have some downfalls, are better than the sheep-like technophiles: "My defense is that a dissenting voice is sometimes needed to moderate the din made by the enthusiastic multitudes"(Postman 5). This group needs to be dulled, which is a condescending descriptor, that elevates his bravery to stand up to the technology loving multitudes, again establishing his superiority because he is courageous enough to speak to the masses and defy popular belief. However, he believes he is not completely partisan: "That is certainly an argument I would make (thus proving I am no one-eyed Technophobe), but it is not necessary at this point to pursue it" (Postman 7). Here Postman argues that this counterpoint is so inconsequential that is not even of worth to be discussed, which one again shows his conviction that his beliefs are so obviously correct that argument would be futile. Postman's tone throughout his essay could be described as pompous, pretentious and smug, and those characteristics leave little room or desire to argue.

While Sigmund Freud is a renowned psychology expert, his theories of development and social control could be used to support almost any claim, particularly the claims of Postman that technology controls the present and future. This discourse underscores the effect of using Freud's clout to further his claim; "I have brought Freud into the conversation only to show that a wise man—even one of such a woeful countenance—must begin his critique of technology by acknowledging its successes" (Postman 7). Freud's idea, but mostly his name in and of itself,

lends credibility to the argument that technology is beneficial yet detrimental. It helps that many do not truly understand Freud's teachings, which allows Postman to take that vague understanding and use it to his advantage. Postman links his authority to that of Freud by using Freud's influence as a psychology expert, as evidence that Postman's thinking that technology is *the* factor that creates our culture and our mental processes; while that may not always be bad, it is a consequence that must be taken into account when evaluating the future. Consequence is almost too inconsequential of a word to portray Postman's negative view of technology, an "enemy" he calls it (Postman xii). Psychologically speaking an enemy is a social construct, so that verbiage ties back to why Freud is a consequential choice in backing up Postman. Upon first read, Postman's use of ethos was strong, which is ultimately what matters most, even if the use was not as strong upon further examination.

Metaphors add intrigue, spur imagination and hook the reader into their narrative, and stylistically, Postman's use of metaphor adds potency to his argument. Postman uses metaphors to provide yet another opportunity to use provocative language, while also simplifying the matter in order to make it hard to view the situation in another light: "If this metaphor puts the matter too brutally, we may try a gentler, kinder one: Technological change is neither additive nor subtractive. It is ecological. I mean "ecological" in the same sense as the word is used by environmental scientists. One significant change generates total change" (18). Setting up a reference frame for the reader is helpful when being persuasive, as well as is using powerful figurative language to make the statement memorable. Rousing metaphorical statements add another, almost, but not quite, lighthearted, energy. Postman explains how education will change: "In other words, in asking their practical questions, educators, entrepreneurs, preachers, and politicians are like the house-dog munching peacefully on the meat while the house is looted" (19). Equating much of society to oblivious dogs is galling, but it makes a point, leaving even disagreeing parties no choice but to remember it. He also furthers his chosen frame for the audience by continuing to reinforce it through metaphors.

Examples, along with parables - a moral example - make Postman's claim more solid, and even adds a sense of ironic levity to an otherwise more somber essay. The parable of Thamus is the thread that ties Postman's argument to something greater than him, but it is also a story that creates investment in the reader to see how Thamus's judgement could be a modern concept. Postman writes, "I begin my book with this legend because in Thamus' response there are several sound principles from which we may begin to learn how to think with wise circumspection about a technological society" (4). This parable allows the reader to also understand Postman's argument from a different light, which strengthens Postman's argument as he is able to reach a wider audience. Those that understand the world through examples, parables and stories, are now integrated into Postman's captive audience by his use of Thamus. Postman uses examples to give context to what could otherwise be considered a meaningless argument. He writes, "After television, the United States was not America plus television; television gave a new coloration to every political campaign, to every home, to every school, to every church, to every industry" (Postman 18). This is a very clear example that everyone can picture, literally. Postman's use of parables and a plethora of examples gives a way for readers to visualize the effects of his arguments allowing him to resonate with a wider variety of readers.

The extent of Postman's criticism of the unbridled love of technology is deep, but it is convincing nonetheless, as he grabs the reader's attention with a wide variety of techniques, allowing him to appeal to as many people as he can. Readers are inundated with information from Postman, which will plant a seed of doubt or further thinking into his audience, a potentially doubting audience at that. Maybe a less authoritative approach would have worked as well, but in order to guarantee understanding, his fervor was needed. Critical thinking is important, especially as technology starts to make more decisions for humankind.

## Citations

Postman, Neil. "Introduction/Chapter 1." *Technopoly: the Surrender of Culture to Technology*,  
by Neil Postman, Vintage, 1993, pp. xi-20.