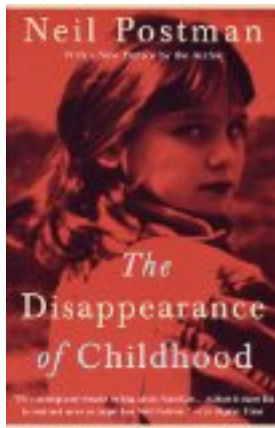


The Disappearance of Thought

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Neil Postman is generally considered a thoughtful liberal critic of technology and its deleterious effect on our culture. My friends praise his attacks on television and rethinking of education. But it's hard for me to take him seriously after reading his *The Disappearance of Childhood*, in which he argues (p. 87) that television is bad because it teaches children homosexuality is normal and praises the Moral Majority as being the only group to realize this important truth. And true, he admits it's an exaggeration to say "such a situation necessarily and categorically signifies cultural degeneration", he does insist it clearly "poses dangers".

Postman's argument is that childhood is the creation of the printing press, which led to a culture in which learning to read was necessary to become an adult, and thus children became a separate group. In the same way, he argues, the emergence of television, which requires no special training to view, is destroying the distinction between children and adults and bringing us back to that pre-literate age.

Not once does Postman ever explain why this should be considered a bad thing. Instead, his book simply assumes it's obvious that we need to pretend to keep kids from naughty words (even though they know them anyway), that we need to make it hard for kids to learn about sex, that we need to pretend for them that political leaders are infallible, etc.

One is almost tempted to believe the book is tounge-in-cheek, an impression assisted by the preface to the second edition — the only place where actual children are ever considered — which quotes letters Postman has received from

students who have read portions of the book and disagree completely with his argument that childhood is disappearing. They don't, however, criticize childhood itself, so Postman assumes they are in favor of it and praises them as "a force in preserving childhood", a sort of "moral majority".

And this, in miniature, is the problem with the whole book. Postman investigates the history of childhood and modern thought, finding it a creation of the printing press, and thus a social and not a biological entity. But instead of investigating whether the result was good or bad, he simply ignores his own work and proceeds directly to assuming it must be good. What we are witnessing here is not the disappearance of childhood, but the disappearance of thought.