

Neil Postman's
Technopoly
The Surrender of Culture to Technology

by: Marilyn Hawkins

Neil Postman is a writer, and critic of technology and how it has replaced the teacher in education. Postman was educated at the state university in New York and at Columbia University. He received many awards in his lifetime, which included in 1991 the Laurence Lombard Visiting Professor of the Press and Public Policy award at Harvard University.

Postman was a student of Marshall McLuhan and seemed to in his lifetime to contradict most of McLuhan's teachings about technology. In Postman's book, *Technopoly--The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, he says that any new technology that man uses is going to be both a burden and a blessing. One example is the use of the computer for writing papers. One finds that when students use the computer to compose and write reports and research papers, they write better than when they actually try writing by hand. Developing a rough draft and then writing a final draft can be long and cumbersome when writing in long hand. However, with the ability to cut, copy, and paste, one can compose much more easily at the computer than writing by hand. But, when the students use only the computer to write, then, the art of writings things down by hand is lost.

Postman wanted to be a dissenting voice toward the new technologies of today. He felt that those who believed that new technologies were the only tools to use in education were dangerous and they had to be approached with caution. Postman also

stated, when referring to writing, that writing was not a neutral technology. He said that the good or harm of the new technology of writing would depend on the uses made of it. Of course, one can see this today when one uses writing as propaganda. There is such a thing as writing untruths. The act of writing an untruth is called libel and that is a crime. So, Postman was right to say that the new technology of writing could be used to harm instead of helping others.

Postman described the use of new technologies, such as the computer, as a process that can change literacy. For example, since people started using computers they developed a different language, which included words like hardware, software, wordprocessing, Internet. The processing of the computer has even been compared to the processing of the human mind. Postman says that these changes have occurred quickly and have created a group of elitists who have the knowledge of this new literacy that has developed since the use of the computer. It's like in education one speaks of the "haves and have nots." This phrase is referring to the skills of people in the workforce of today who have the skills of operating a computer and those who don't. Postman believed that there exists a conspiracy against those who don't have access to the special knowledge gained from the literacy of using a computer by those who do. Perhaps he was right.

Postman made several references to teachers in his book. He mentioned the possibility of the television taking the place of teachers in school. In education today we sometimes see the television movies as being a substitute for students reading a book. Students would much prefer to see the movie instead of reading the book. And, we know that the movie and book can be quite different. One does see students today who can't read and write well and who can't organize their thoughts well enough to pass English,

Math, Science, and History. Even in computer classes students can operate the computer and type pretty well, but they can't pass a written exam or explain in writing how to do an operation on the computer. This media war with television versus the printed word is causing educators to rethink how teaching students today should be done.

Postman may have had some great ideas and possibly convinced many of his ideas of Technopoly, until he approached "The Ideology of Machines: Computer Technology." He was right to say that the computer was probably the most life-changing tool since the invention of movable type by Gutenberg. Postman said that the computer is the "quintessential, incomparable, near-perfect machine for Technopoly." He actually thinks that computer technology "subordinates the claims of our nature, our biology, our emotions, and our spirituality." The artificial intelligence of our computers is often compared to the intelligence of man. However, men are still in control of the computer. The computer is still just a tool. Programs still have to be written by men to make computers think as they do. Postman was way off base when belittling the jobs that computers can do for us today. Even in education. Just keeping track of databases of student's names and addresses is a chore for educators. Also the data of test scores, grade point averages, free and reduced lunch lists, and transcript data are tracked more easily with computers. The computer is an extremely necessary tool in education today.

Postman spoke of the terms one uses when the computer becomes infected with a virus. He compares this to humans when they become infected with viruses. This began in 1988 when the first computer virus was passed among computers in the Arpanet network and made them perform sluggishly. A software program, the virus, attached itself to another program and hence spread among many of the computers in the network.

The computers acted like humans when they catch a virus that is spread among people. A "vaccine," a program, was then written to eradicate the virus from the infected computers. Postman calls this comparison of the computer to the human condition Technopoly.

Is it Technopoly when computers are used to help diagnose, operate, and heal people with certain illnesses. One could say that the computer does help man in his ability to survive. Doctors use the computer to operate and diagnose common ailments. This new technology in the hands of doctors increases their ability as mere men to cure human conditions. Even replacing such vital organs as the heart or just regulating the heart with a pacemaker. The computer can be used to detect cancer in certain body parts, such as the lungs. With this tool doctors can then operate and remove the tumor from the body and thus prolong life. Postman asks, does this lead to better medicine. He thinks yes in the case of an operation on the eye with lasers. However, he asks how many procedures are performed because of the existence of the technologies. His example is the cesarean section in the delivery of babies. It has only been in recent times that so many babies have been delivered by C-section. Normal childbirth is not risked in many cases. Could this be because of the existence of the new technology? Postman thinks that it is. Postman feels that the treatments in many ways are worse than the illness.

Postman proposes that education needs to return to a curriculum of the basics. A curriculum of historical development in which the philosophies of science, history, language, religion, and technology have as their basic expression the classical forms of artistic expression. Is this possible? The new technologies of our century have changed this philosophy of education and there is no turning back. People have developed and

changed from the use of technology. Postman believes that turning back should be in opposition to Technopoly. The hope he places in his book is that society would distance itself from the world of technology. But, there is no way. The media technologies have become a part of man. They have, in fact, altered the way we think and educate. The classics of language, religion, science, and history are still a part of man and man's literacy. However, that literacy is forever changed by the technologies that exist in the way we educate ourselves. Even if it means that we are not reading books and studying literature as our parents and grandparents did. We have replaced that with another literacy--the computer. Are we better off than our ancestors were? In many ways our tasks are easier. The computer has made us into an information society. The computer has helped our doctors to be better doctors. The computer has made it possible for students to write better, and locate information better. In many kinds of artistic expression the computer has made us better. History can be recorded and read from the Internet. Scientific discoveries can be shared and passed on to later generations by the use of the computer. Even religion can be affected by the use of the computer. Religious leaders are using the Internet to spread their theologies. Pastors are using computers to enhance their sermons. We are indeed a changed society by the use of technology. Technopoly--no. Postman will not have his way. Not in the world in which we live today.