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NEIL POSTMAN ON TELEVISION

by

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**A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of**

Master of Journalism

School of Journalism and Communication

**Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
June, 2000**

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and Research acceptance of this thesis

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ABSTRACT

Neil Postman is best known as a persistent critic of television. He ascribes vast powers to it, claiming it has transformed public discourse and infiltrated our very thought processes. Postman is vague, however, about how television exercises this power. He stresses television's visual form as key, thereby prompting accusations towards him of technological determinism. However, other factors are as, if not more, determinant: television's power derives from its exploitation by American commercial culture as well as its status as an emotion-evoking analogic symbol. Another factor is Postman's structuralist view of human nature; television's emotional grasp makes it an internal structural constraint on individuals, rendering them powerless. This attitude results from Postman's contradictory view of emotions: he sees them as powerful, yet affords them little significance. Uneasiness with emotions, and an acute need to be in control - in part through the rigors associated with print - further explain this.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Christopher Dornan, for his forthrightness, patience and knowledge. For their help, support and/or inspiration, I wish to thank Paul Attallah, David Beattie, Katherine Scott, Greg MacIsaac, Anne MacIsaac, Doug Williams, Jock Gunn, Freda Choueiri and my family. I thank my father for searching out Postman's volumes for my own library.

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INTRODUCTION

Professor Neil Postman is not known for his position as Chair of the Department of Communication and Culture at New York University. Instead, Americans recognize his name as that of one of their most lucid, trenchant, witty and yet despairing social critics whose books constitute a comprehensive indictment of the technological advancements of modern American society.

These twenty-five volumes, which include Linguistics; A Revolution in Teaching (1966), Teaching as a Subversive Activity (1969), Teaching as a Conserving Activity (1979) The Disappearance of Childhood (1979), Amusing Ourselves To Death (1985), Technopoly: the Surrender of Culture to Technology (1992), and his latest book, Building a Bridge to the Eighteenth Century (1999) cover, in general, four fields: language, education, mass communications and technology. While doing justice to all these fields may seem overly ambitious, Postman writes with a very clear agenda and to fulfil it he weaves the same themes into all of these books. The overlapping nature of these fields helps him in this respect - his thoughts on one topic are usually relevant to another topic.

This agenda, in its most general terms, is to raise society's collective consciousness about the effects that new technologies and forms of communication are having on our lives. As he repeatedly asserts, technology is a Faustian bargain - it giveth but it also taketh away. Technology "makes life easier, cleaner and longer," he writes in Technopoly, but its uncontrolled growth "destroys the vital sources of our humanity. It creates a culture without a moral foundation. It undermines certain mental processes and social relations that make life worth living."¹

Career

After graduating from New York City's Fredonia State University in 1953, Postman began teaching elementary school, stopping this work to serve in the army.² He then obtained both an MA in English education and a doctorate of education (EDD) from Columbia University³ and was hired by the English department of San Francisco State College where he taught linguistics and semantics alongside Canadian S. I. Hayakawa.⁴

His preoccupations at this time were education and linguistics and the importance of the latter to the former. This reflected his exposure to the general semantics of Alfred Korzybski, Hayakawa's prime interest. He had also

just begun reading works by Marshall McLuhan, the person, say his colleagues, who influenced Postman the most intellectually.⁵

In 1959, he moved to New York University (NYU) to teach in its English Education Department.

Postman's thoughts on education reform and language were reflected in various publications throughout the sixties including Television and the Teaching of English (1961), a report on ways to use television in the classroom, written in collaboration with the Committee on the Study of Television of the US National Council of Teachers of English as well as a series of high school textbooks, The New English Series, begun in 1964 for Holt Reinhart and Winston and seen as progressive to the point of "revolutionary" in the words of Terence Moran, one of Postman's colleagues at the time⁶. He also co-authored with then-colleague Charles Weingartner Linguistics: A Revolution in Teaching (1966), The Soft Revolution (1971), "a student handbook for turning schools around," and The Schoolbook: For People Who Want to Know What the Hollering is All About (1973).⁷

All of these early texts had a slight radical element in them. The first, Television and the Teaching of English, because Postman was promoting TV in the classroom at a time

when many were denouncing its effects on children. As for his other books on education, they promoted a rather rebellious movement by students to make schools more responsive to their perceived needs. They advanced what Postman called "The Inquiry Method" of teaching. According to this method, at the centre of the learning process were students, their perceptions and questions, as opposed to the act of answering traditional questions set by teachers.⁸

Postman's first really big book - in the sense that it spread Postman's name and that of his co-author Charles Weingartner beyond teaching circles - was the 1969 Teaching as a Subversive Activity⁹ which argued that school should be "training grounds for subversion"¹⁰ helping students to "combat entropy".¹¹ This book integrated a wider range of fields than any of his others and was the first of Postman's books to include serious criticism of media.

At this time, Postman also became known for a Linguistics Demonstration Centre he established at NYU to promote the Inquiry Method.

In 1971, for a new department established at NYU, Postman and Terence Moran set up a new curriculum - Media Ecology: Studies in Communication. Its content reflected the professors' shift in interests from linguistics towards mass

communications. This is now the Department of Culture and Communications of which Postman is Chair.

In 1979 he published Teaching as a Conserving Activity, a sister to the earlier book. It is notable because, for one, it marked a reversal in Postman's thinking - he now believed that schools should conserve what a fast-changing world could not.¹² Secondly, the book contained many key observations about television, some which are not contained in his other books.¹³

In 1982 he wrote the first edition of The Disappearance of Childhood, a book that faulted television directly for the loss of childhood and its innocence in American society. Its stirring thesis furthered his reputation as a TV critic. In 1985 came Amusing Ourselves to Death, his famous no-holds-barred critique of television, and in 1988 an entertaining yet disturbing collection of essays and speeches, Conscientious Objections; Stirring Up Trouble About Language and Technology. During this time, the eighties, while Postman focused less on language he still brought it into his books and discussions as a contrast to our televisual culture.

Postman began the nineties with a now-famous debate over dinner in 1992 with professor of humanities Camille Paglia,

which was arranged by and published in Harper's magazine.¹⁴ In 1992 he also wrote How To Watch TV News, a less apocalyptic Amusing Ourselves To Death, as well as Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology. In 1995, he returned to education with The End of Education which laments the impact of consumerism and technology on the pursuit of learning. In his most recent book, Building A Bridge to the Eighteenth Century: How the Past Can Improve the Future, (1999) he shows his cynicism towards the twentieth century and suggests we reach back to the Enlightenment and the Counter Enlightenment for guidance.

Agenda

Postman once outlined three themes that together "have formed the core of my academic interest for the first thirty years."¹⁵ The first is, in his words, "the triumphs of one-eyed technology" - how our engineers see only what is straight ahead of them and are blind to how their inventions have "laid waste some of our most creative, not to mention charming habits of thought." In America, he writes, "technology is a one-eyed king ruling unopposed amidst idiot cheering."¹⁶

The second theme, related to the first, is the "humiliation of the word". The phrase is the title of a book by French thinker Jacques Ellul, who attributes the problem to the

rise and omnipresence of visual forms of communication.

The third theme is education, which Postman feels is the prime instrument for understanding these circumstances and counterbalancing them.

Putting these themes together, Postman's overall general thesis could be: Exemplary of the rate and nature of technological change, the media, especially television and computers, are having a profoundly disintegrative effect on all aspects of our lives. The onus of responsibility rests with the education system which should act as a counterbalancing force against the biases of these medium, namely those stemming from the visual nature of television and the loss in human judgement that comes with computers.¹⁷ In so doing, educators must fine-tune students to the importance and rudiments of language. For it is language, and the human intelligence it depends on, that is most threatened by television.

Television is at the centre of both Postman's criticisms and his reputation. Even today, as he analyses more recent inventions such as computers, Postman is best known as a television critic, and one of America's harshest.¹⁸ He is repeatedly summoned to take the "TV critic" or the "anti-technology" role in many forums.

A contributing factor to this role was the success of Amusing Ourselves to Death, whose shrewdness was matched only by its wit and gusto. Amusing completely condemned TV, asserting that owing to its visual nature, it has co-opted the serious discourses in American life such as politics, education and religion and turned these into "entertainment packages".¹⁹ Without a doubt, Amusing remains his most popular book and one of the best known in print on the topic of television.

Part of the reason for its popularity is that Amusing is vintage Postman - aggressively argued, insightful and witty yet troubling. Indeed, Postman's effectiveness stems in part from the sense of foreboding in his books; but one example - "Orwell feared that what we will hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us." He continues, "This book is about the possibility that Huxley, not Orwell, was right."²⁰ The use of these seamless parallel phrases is another of his tools. Two other examples: "Whereas television taught the magazines that news is nothing but entertainment, the magazines have taught television that nothing but entertainment is news."²¹ In America, "the least amusing people are its professional entertainers."²²

And, as many have pointed out, even as he carries out his consciousness-raising, Postman is always amusing us -

"never losing his sense of playfulness,"²³ in the words of one commentator. For example, criticizing newspaper USA Today in Amusing, he foresees a time when we will give awards for "the best investigative sentence".²⁴

Reputation

Postman's reputation is uneven. He has been called everything from "a brilliant writer", "an accomplished polemicist" and "one of the most original writers in defence of the book" to "earnest and homely", with a "slovenly way of arguing" and a provider of "congealed ideas, self-contradicting arguments, poor citation practices, and a tone more appropriate to a Larry King interview than a printed text".²⁵ With such a range of opinion, one can understand the blunt conclusion the editor of The New York Times Book Review made that in terms of media critics, Postman is "in many ways one of the best. He is also in some ways, one of the worst."²⁶

The overall lack of substantial academic commentary on Postman's work²⁷ suggests that academics do not take him all that seriously. Their comments show up, for the most part, only in book reviews of his work. In these reviews, as I will discuss, their criticisms centre on what they see as a poor academic performance on Postman's part, one that includes inaccuracies historical and otherwise, insufficient

evidence for his theories and an exercise of technological determinism.²⁸

That said, some academics writing on media quote Postman's lively language or use one of his original concepts to enrich their own argument.²⁹ As well, academics often express an appreciation for his emotional appeal,³⁰ for how he raises consciousness about the dominance of technology,³¹ and the way he makes the work of McLuhan and others more accessible.³²

Journalists are slightly more approving, often impressed with his writing,³³ his scholarly ideas,³⁴ and his wit.³⁵ At the same time they criticize him for being historically inaccurate, ignorant of media and their operations, nostalgic, prone to making sweeping generalizations and embracing a McLuhan-like technological determinism.

Educators, sociologists, psychologists and those in the library sciences tend to praise Postman, offering little criticism. They approve of how he "provokes and disturbs us"³⁶ into thinking about the effects of technology, fights the degeneration of schooling into an "amusing activity" and promotes a so-called moral frame of existence.³⁷

One journalist's comment about Amusing - that it is "inferior as argument but has an unmistakable authenticity as complaint"³⁸ - captures well Postman's overall standing in public discourse: He is not intellectually consistent or even accurate, but he is engaging and compelling. Owing to this, he reaches a larger, more mainstream audience than the average academic and likely exceeds the latter in influence.

This thesis focuses on Postman's role as a critic of television. Specifically, it discusses one key aspect of his arguments: the power that he attributes to television.

Postman constructs his argument about TV by contrasting it with language and print-based media. In so doing, he taps into a rich history of thought.

Postman's Intellectual Antecedents

Postman is greatly indebted to Marshall McLuhan's work, especially to McLuhan's ideas on how writing, using the twenty-six letter alphabet, affected human attitudes and ways of life. In Understanding Media; The Extension of Man, McLuhan makes the case that the phonetic alphabet, used most effectively for the first time by the Greeks and Romans in fourth century B.C., "alone, is the technology that has been the means of creating 'civilized man'."³⁹ It does this, claims McLuhan, because it fostered a sense of individuality and power.

McLuhan claims that the alphabet's power comes from its visual uniformity. He compares it to teeth, referring to the Greek myth of King Cadmus who cut the teeth from a dragon he slew in the process of building Thebes.⁴⁰ McLuhan writes that in terms of the book's theme, the extensions of man,

the theme of the dragon's teeth in the Cadmus myth is of utmost importance. Elias Canetti in Crowds and Power, reminds us that the teeth are an obvious agent of power in man, and especially in many animals. Languages are filled with the testimony to the grasping, devouring power and precision of teeth. That the power of letters as agents of aggressive order and precision should be expressed as extensions of the dragon's teeth is natural and fitting. Teeth are emphatically visual in their lineal order. Letters are not only like teeth visually, but their power to put teeth into the business of empire-building is manifest in our Western history.⁴¹

Indeed, what McLuhan calls the "flashing insight" from the Cadmus myth is that "the alphabet meant power and authority and control of military structures at a distance."⁴²

A manifestation of this power is the way that Western society has been built on the "lineal sequences" of the alphabet.⁴³ In this way, asserts McLuhan, literacy is largely responsible for the "achievements of the Western world" from pipes, taps and assembly lines to our ideas of cause and effect to "the most potent example" of literacy's expression, the system of "uniform pricing" we use to trade on world markets.⁴⁴ The alphabet "has been the secret of

Western power over man and nature alike."⁴⁵

At the same time, McLuhan contrasts the visual uniformity and continuity of the alphabet with more pictorial alphabet forms such as the hieroglyph or the Chinese ideogram. The phonetic alphabet, because it intensifies and extends the visual function, is a "unique technology". It is purely functional; "semantically meaningless letters are used to correspond to semantically meaningless sounds". In this way, it "sacrifices the worlds of meaning and perception" - that is, the cultural history, with its accompanying warmth and emotion - that are triggered by a symbol from a pictorial alphabet. The content of both alphabets can be the same, but the phonetic alphabet, by diminishing the role of the other senses of sound and touch, is a "dissociation of senses and functions".⁴⁶

This reasoning helps McLuhan explain how the phonetic alphabet brought about individuality - it freed man from the "tribal trance of resonating word magic and the web of kinship".⁴⁷ He is "emotionally free to separate from the tribe and to become a civilized individual, a man of visual organization who has uniform attitudes, habits and rights with all other civilized individuals."⁴⁸

As we shall see, Postman greatly exalts what he calls "The Age of Typography" - the two or three centuries in America that followed Gutenberg's invention, in 1455, of the printing press with movable type. In his analyses, Postman relies on writers who were concerned with the effects that typography was having on society. These include McLuhan, Elizabeth Eisenstein, Eric Havelock, Lewis Mumford, Harold Innis and Jacques Ellul."

One thing these writers stress is how printing, by mass producing texts, increased the fixity and possible preservation of written material. This potential immortality amplified a writer's ambitions and individual drive, contributing to the new individualism.⁵⁰

This individualism manifested itself in new enlightened privacy. Prior to printing, people tended to come into the community for information and contact with others. Print began a relationship between the isolated writer and the isolated reader at the expense of identity with the parish and the community.⁵¹

At the same time, print gave birth to the public - the new unseen masses to which information was available. This new public enhanced the claims of large collective "causes", as the same advocacy material could be read by people who were

geographically far apart.⁵² As Eisenstein notes, print brought "a sharper distinction between private and public zones of life."⁵³

The authority of books was more widely diffused by printing, something which changed the basics of not only education but daily life. "Learning became book-learning",⁵⁴ in Mumford's words, as opposed to learning by doing or experience. Book reading gave rise to stricter forms of child rearing and a more defined sense of childhood itself - those who could not read. Postman embraces this theme in his book The Disappearance of Childhood as does Philppe Ariès in his book Centuries of Childhood.⁵⁵

It also meant the formation of and spreading of public opinion, new forms of gossip and pornography.

Eisenstein stresses that the form of the printed book revolutionized fields from law to map making, offering a new, logical way - with a chapter, title page and index - for these disciplines to organize their subjects and for practitioners to communicate.⁵⁶

The form of the book, it is claimed, also changed the way people thought. Its linearity, the sequential nature of sentence after sentence, as well as standardized spelling

led to a certain structure of consciousness. Some, such as Ellul, stress that print is necessarily rational.⁵⁷ McLuhan coined the term "Typographic Man" to discuss the unique character created by the isolation of the visual faculty from other senses.⁵⁸

The printing press is also said to have contributed to the development of nationalism; it made the vernacular into a mass medium for the first time, creating the idea of the "Mother tongue" and making this language fixed and visible.⁵⁹ Typography is also linked to the rise of Protestantism in that the Bible, translated into many languages, made God's work accessible and portable.

An entire new symbolic environment had been created, one that required clarity, sequence and reason.

According to Postman, the shift from typography to telegraphy and photography, brought on by electronic communications and the invention of the photograph, amounted to an "assault" on not only language and literacy, but the clarity and reason that, in his opinion, they cultivated. For example, at the beginning of Amusing he explains:

I must, first, demonstrate how, under the governance of the printing press, discourse in America was different from what it is now - generally coherent, serious and rational;

and then how, under the governance of television, it has become shriveled and absurd.⁶⁰

In making these accusations, he calls on the ideas of McLuhan, Daniel Boorstin, Ellul and Innis.

The shift from typography to imagery, occurring towards the end of the nineteenth century, involved the convergence of at least two ideas. One was electronic communications, the first form of which was Samuel Morse's telegraph invented in 1844. The most important thing about the telegraph was that it conquered time and space - it could move information anywhere quickly. Thus, it disembodied information in a way that had never happened with print. The telegraph created context-free information - information for information's sake.⁶¹

McLuhan's chapter on the telegraph, titled "The Social Hormone", argues that with this disembodied information, electronic media created "a kind of organic interdependence among all the institutions of society."⁶² This he contrasts with the mechanization and individualization of the written alphabet. In keeping with his theme, McLuhan asserts that whereas previous technology had extended some part of our bodies - as print did to the visual function - electricity quite possibly "outed the central nervous system itself, including the brain." As a consequence, he writes, the realm

of public interaction now has the same scope of interplay that previously characterized only our private nervous systems. The public is now an integral whole where private and public awareness merge - "a total field of interacting events in which all men participate".⁶³

Electricity combined with other forces. The telegraph crossed with print and rotary presses to create newspapers and news agencies.⁶⁴

Meanwhile, also occurring was what Daniel Boorstin in his book The Image⁶⁵ termed "the Graphic Revolution" - the avalanche of images into society following the invention of the photograph in 1839 by William Talbot. This phenomenon started with advertisements, pictures in magazines and newspapers, and was followed by moving pictures and television.

As critics assess it, this burgeoning of images deeply affected society's habits of mind and action. If print increased individualism and oriented human thinking towards the visual, rational order of the printed page, then the world of images was non-lineal, repetitive, discontinuous and intuitive.

Ellul's argument is quintessential of these. He argues that language is "endowed with rationality" whereas images

require a less demanding type of perception. Using language, he argues, I need to understand what the other person says to me, and "I can do so only if there is rationality in the very structure of what he says". Thus, language requires a "conscious operation" that leads to a "broadened and developed consciousness."⁶⁶

On the other hand, Ellul claims that visual images are different because an image immediately conveys to us "a totality" - it gives us in a glance all the information we could possibly need. The image itemizes its information spatially. It is instant. Its information "belongs to the category of evidence." While visual evidence ensures certainty, the certainty is based on an absence of awareness; the knowledge produced by an image is "unconscious". Therefore, watching images is an unconscious "perception of a whole package of information" without us having to follow "the slow and arduous path of language". This, he claims, explains why we are naturally "through laziness" inclined to watch images rather than read.⁶⁷

The graphic revolution changed culture. As McLuhan details, photography changed art in that painters could not compete with photographs and they turned to expressionism and abstract art.⁶⁸ Travellers became passive, having seen it all in magazines and movies. The traveller is now a mere

tourist, going to the Grand Canyon "to check his reactions with something with which he has long been familiar."⁶⁹ Overall, the photograph, McLuhan claimed, created a "world of accelerated transience" in that we relate to photos the same way people feel about fashion. And "fashion is not a way of being informed or aware, but a way of being with it."⁷⁰

One oft-quoted upshot of the Graphic Revolution is Boorstin's idea of the "pseudo-event" - a happening that is exists because of the media's need for material, such as a press conference or the Miss America pageant.⁷¹

To these writers, this omnipresence of images has had profound long-term effects; for Ellul, it means the corruption of language, or "the humiliation of the word," as well as the prevention of human freedom⁷². For Boorstin, in America, images now substitute for the ideals of the "Great American Dream".⁷³

And McLuhan posits that in the Graphic Age, we have come full circle: if the phonetic alphabet severed sight and sound from gesture, the photograph and its hybrids television and film restored gesture to our experience with recording experience.⁷⁴ Just as the telegraph created a "total field of interacting events," with the purely

electronic forms of media such as radio and TV there is a "new relation of the medium to its user," one of "high participation and involvement."⁷⁵ We have fallen from our pedestal of detached individualism and landed back in a mindset of tribalism where rituals and images create a kind of collective consciousness.⁷⁶

Thesis Outline

This thesis focuses on Postman's role as a critic of television. Specifically, it discusses one key aspect of his arguments: the power that he attributes to television.

The importance of such an exploration is that first, Postman is best known as a television critic; an analysis of his argument will help determine the worthiness of this reputation. Second, in this role, he ascribes far-reaching power to television - seeing it as shaping our thought processes and social and political institutions. A closer examination of this power and what it is based on is necessary to properly evaluate Postman's thought. Third, in his writing, while he implies this power, Postman never openly acknowledges it. Some closer analysis might explain why this is so. Fourthly, as mentioned, the academic analysis of Postman is scarce and limited and yet he is a public intellectual whose popularity is widespread.

In the end, I conclude that while Postman explicitly attributes the power of TV to its form, closer examination reveals a slightly different story. Other factors are as important. One is American commercial culture whose consumership and adoration of technology bring about the exploitation of this form that does not happen in other countries. As well, how Postman views human nature, specifically TV watchers, is key. I assert that for Postman the emotion-evoking analogic symbols of television have a profound effect on its watchers in that they render these watchers powerless.

Thus, this thesis challenges the common criticism that Postman, like McLuhan, is a technological determinist. While for Postman, the medium determines the message, the power of TV derives just as much from the nature of American culture and Postman's deficient view of human nature.

A key point that drives my argument is how Postman sees emotions. I point out a contradiction: He sees them as natural to humans and implies they are powerful, but affords them little significance. I argue that this is because he is fixated on control and he feels uncomfortably out of control when it comes to emotions.

Chapter One presents Postman's main arguments about television - the ways he sees it as affecting American life. These are contained in his most popular books, including The Disappearance of Childhood, Amusing Ourselves To Death, How To Watch TV News and Technopoly. In this way, I show just how much power Postman attributes to this medium. I offer the main criticisms of these books, including what I see as two versions of technological determinism.

Chapter Two focuses on this power, attempting to pin-point its source and the reasons behind it, some of which are found in Postman's earlier writing. It can be seen that TV's status as an analogic symbol and the emotion-evoking responses it triggers are key for Postman to this power.

I make some observations concerning Postman's arguments about TV's power: that his view of these emotional responses is shallow and stereotypical, especially as he sharply contrasts them with more cognitive responses; secondly, that in his written statements, he cites this analogic form as the key to television's power; third, that his complaints about TV are exclusive to the US; fourth that Postman had very different views about TV earlier in his career; and finally, that his writing reveals an adherence to one kind of technological determinism.

Chapter Three presents three contradictions that are revealed by these observations. These lead to some important queries: while emotional responses are powerful and natural according to Postman, why does he have a low opinion of them? If TV's visual form is at the root of its corruptive powers, then why is his argument aimed exclusively at American TV? I offer an explanation through a discussion of "Power and Structure" as outlined in an essay by the same name. I suggest that, contrary to what many critics have asserted, TV's form is only part of Postman's recipe for the power of TV. He is just as concerned with the way America has exploited this form. And, implicit in his thinking is a distinct attitude about the power of agents up against TV.

It is these last two factors that weaken the common assumption that Postman is a technological determinist. They also call our attention to Postman's fixation on control and his disdain of emotions.

ENDNOTES - INTRODUCTION

1. Neil Postman, Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology, First Vintage Books Edition (1993; rpt. New York: Alfred Knopf Inc., 1992), p. xii.
2. Much of the detail of Postman's life was conveyed to me in phone interviews with his current colleagues at New York University, professors Terence Moran and Ted Magder, between December 4th and 9th 1997.
3. At Fredonia State Postman obtained a Bachelor of Science in elementary education, all the while wanting a career as a basketball player. His EDD thesis was titled "The Contribution of Seven Disciplines to a General Theory of Communication." Telephone interview with Terence Moran, 8 December, 1997.
4. Hayakawa's most famous work is Language in Thought and Action, an exploration of the semantics of Alfred Korzybski. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1949).
5. Interview with Moran.
6. According to Terence Moran, not only did these texts teach linguistics - which was itself progressive because it challenged the teachings of traditional grammar - but the series taught Postman's Inquiry Method of teaching. (See endnote 8.). Also, he adds, in keeping with the Inquiry Method and Postman's insistence on asking questions without demanding answers, Postman refused to do a teacher's edition of the texts. Interview with Moran.
7. See Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, The Soft Revolution (New York: Delacorte Press, 1971); Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, The Schoolbook: For People Who Want to Know What the Hollering is All About (New York: Delacorte Press, 1973.). Postman, by himself, also published Crazy Talk. Stupid Talk (New York: Delacorte Press, 1976) a seemingly light little volume that was in fact a highly academic polemic on semantics that he used as a text in his semantic courses.
8. Under the Inquiry Method, learning is not being told what happened, but it is "a happening in itself" - a "delightful, fitful, episodic explosive collage of simultaneous 'happenings'". The purpose of the Inquiry Method is "to help learners increase their competence as learners." They are better learners the less they

fear being wrong, of asking questions or being without a final certain answer to a problem and the more they rely on their own judgement. See Neil Postman, Teaching as a Subversive Activity (New York: Delacorte Press, 1969) pp. 29 and 31-32 respectively.

9. "This book was a breakthrough" for Postman according to Terence Moran. Interview with Moran.
10. Postman, Subversive, p. xiii.
11. Ibid., p. 4.
12. As Postman writes in Teaching as a Conserving Activity, both books are similar in that they both offer "a program for subverting the prevailing biases of the culture". However, where Subversive challenged education to keep pace with the new culture and even break new ground in its efforts to offset culture's questionable aspects, Conserving saw education's role as "to help conserve that which is both necessary to human survival and threatened by a furious and exhausting culture." He explains that while he previously looked ahead "to equip our children to face the present", he now looks back. See Neil Postman, Teaching as a Conserving Activity (New York: Delacorte Press, 1979), p. 25.
13. The early seventies also saw Postman publish work in collaboration with Canadian organizations. Telling It Like It Is: An Examination of the Language of Education was a tape he produced for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. He also contributed to a book, Alternatives in Education (1971) published by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
14. See "She Wants her TV! He Wants His Book !" (Dinner Conversation), Harper's March, 1991, pp. 44-55.
15. Neil Postman, Conscientious Objections: Stirring Up Trouble About Language, Technology and Education (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), p. xii. 15.
16. Ibid, p. xiii.
17. Postman, Technopoly, p. 118.
18. One example is Walter Goodman who wrote "To call Neil Postman a critic of television would be as inadequate as calling Bishop Tutu a critic of apartheid or Jerry Falwell a critic of abortion." See Walter Goodman,

- untitled review of Amusing, The New York Times, 21 November, 1985. See also Anatole Broyard, "Going Down the Tube", rev. of Amusing, The New York Times Book Review, 24 Nov. 1985, p. 9; Robert Blanchard, untitled review of Amusing, Journalism Quarterly, Spring 1986, p. 213; and George Will, "Reading, Writing and Rationality", Newsweek, 17 March, 1986.
19. Neil Postman, Amusing Ourselves To Death (New York: Penguin Books, 1985). p. 159.
 20. Ibid., p. viii.
 21. Ibid., p. 112.
 22. Ibid., p. 5.
 23. Lance Strate, "Post(modern) Man, or Neil Postman as a Postmodernist", Et Cetera Summer, 1994, pp. 159.
 24. Postman, Amusing, p. 112.
 25. See respectively, Broyard, "Going Down the Tube"; Anthony Howard, "The End of the Debate?" rev. of Amusing, Times Literary Supplement, 21 Feb., 1986, p. 89; "She Wants Her T.V.!", p.44; David Denby, "All the World's A Tube," rev. of Amusing, The Atlantic Monthly November 1985, pp. 136; Robert Frost, rev. of Technopoly, Technology and Culture, July, 1993, p. 714.
 26. See Broyard, "Going Down the Tube," p. 9.
 27. In terms of academic articles, I could only find one article and a book chapter commenting specifically on Postman. See Lance Strate, "Post(modern) Man, or Neil Postman as a Postmodernist", Et Cetera Summer, 1994, pp. 159-170; Richard Lanham The Electronic Word (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), Chapter Nine, "Operating Systems, Attention Structures and The End of Chaos."
 28. See for example, David E. Fernie and Patrick Shannon, "Disappearances Can be Deceiving," rev. of The Disappearance, Harvard Educational Review, Vol. 53, 1983, pp. 195-202; LeRoy D. Travis, rev. of The Disappearance, The Journal of Educational Thought, 1985, Vol. 19, no.2, pp 167-168; Donald J. Shoemaker, rev. of The Disappearance, Sociology and Social Research, 1984, vol. 69 no. 1 October, pp. 150-1; Chris Arthur, "Technology: A Questionable Concept," rev. of Technopoly, Contemporary Review (Literary

- Supplement), Vol. 264, May 1994, pp. 273-4; Steven McKinzie, rev. of Technopoly, Government Information Quarterly, vol. 10, no. 2, 1993. p. 298; Howard Segal, rev. of Technopoly, in The Journal of American History, March 1993, pp. 1695-1697; Frost; and Lanham.
29. For example, for John Miller in his Yesterday's News: Why Canadian Newspapers are Failing Us (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1998) Postman's idea of "information chaos" and some of Postman's comments enhance a point about re-inventing newspapers. (pp. 12 and 228). Mark Kingwell effectively uses Postman's problem of the alteration of the "information-action ratio" in a section on the uses of solitude. See Mark Kingwell, Better Living: In Pursuit of Happiness, From Plato to Prozac (Toronto: Viking Press, 1998), pp. 292-93.
 30. See Fernie and Shannon; Bernard K. Duffy, rev. of Technopoly, Quarterly Journal of Speech, August 1993, pp. 372-375. Randle W. Nelson, rev. of The Disappearance and others, Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology, May, 1985, pp. 303-310.
 31. See Duffy; Nelsen; and Segal.
 32. See, for example, Duffy; Fernie and Shannon; and Blanchard.
 33. See respectively, Roy Porter, rev. of Technopoly, The New York Times, 10 May, 1992, p. 20; Broyard, "Going Down the Tube."
 34. See, for example, Constance Horner, "Schools in a Society Overdosing on Change," rev. of Conserving, The Wall Street Journal, 5 Oct. 1979, p. 18; Alexander Star; rev. of Technopoly and others, The New Republic 27 July, 1992, pp. 59-65; Edmund Fuller, "Modern Shamelessness Takes the Childhood Out of Growing Up," rev. of The Disappearance, The Wall Street Journal 30 August, 1982. p. 12; Arthur; and Broyard, "Going Down the Tube".
 35. See Michael Barber, "Tube Trouble" rev. of Amusing Books and Bookmen, May, 1996, p. 18; Goodman; Starr; Denby; Porter; and Broyard, "Going Down the Tube".
 36. See McKinzie.
 37. See for example, Nelson; Fernie and Shannon; McKinzie; Duffy; Howard; Unauthored review of Amusing, Booklist, 1 October, 1985, p.175; Donald Shoemaker, rev. of The

- Disappearance, Sociology and Social Research, October, 1984, p. 150-1; Leonard Kriegal "The New Schooling of America," rev. of Conserving and others (Viking Press, 1979) The Nation, 6 October 1979, pp. 309-310; James Charney, rev. of The Disappearance, Library Journal, Oct 1, 1982 vol. 107 17-22 1982 p. 1890; Elizabeth Stark, "That's Entertainment", rev. of Amusing Psychology Today, December 1985; and Nancy Paul Brandon, rev. of Amusing, Library Journal, July 1994, p. 149.
38. Denby, p. 138.
 39. See Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man, 2nd, ed. (New York: New American Library, 1964) p. 85.
 40. Cadmus reputedly introduced the alphabet into Greece. According to this myth, King Cadmus, in his efforts to construct Thebes, encountered a dragon who ate his workmen. After slaying the dragon, Cadmus removed the teeth and sowed them into the ground. From them sprung armed men, five of which (the others died in mutual slaughter) were the first citizens of Thebes. Although McLuhan refers to this myth in Understanding Media, his account of it is sparse. See Michael Grant and John Hazel's Gods and Mortals in Classic Mythology: A Dictionary (New York: Dorset Press, 1979) pp. 75-76.
 41. McLuhan, Understanding, p. 86.
 42. Ibid., p. 85.
 43. Ibid., p. 88.
 44. Ibid., pp. 87-89.
 45. Ibid., p. 88.
 46. Ibid., see Chapter 9, "The Written Word".
 47. Ibid., p. 86.
 48. Ibid., p. 85. He equates "civilized man" with "the separate individuals equal before a written code of law." (p. 86)
 49. See Eisenstein's The Printing Press As An Agent of Change (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979) and her "Some Conjectures About the Impact of Printing on Western Society and Thought," in The Journal of Modern History, March 1968, pp.1-56; Eric Havelock, Origins of

Western Literacy (Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies In Education, 1976); Lewis Mumford, Technics and Civilizations (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1934); Harold Innis, The Bias of Communication (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951); and Jacques Ellul The Humiliation of the Word, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985).

50. See Eisenstein, "Some Conjectures", p. 23. Similar is McLuhan's claim that writers became self-publicists. "With print, the discovery of the vernacular as PA system was immediate," wrote McLuhan. (Understanding, p. 194) See also Elizabeth Eisenstein, The Printing Press, p. 230.
51. Eisenstein, "Some Conjectures", p. 42.
52. Ibid., p. 42.
53. Ibid., p. 42.
54. Mumford, p. 136. "The divorce between print and firsthand experience was so extreme," writes Mumford, "that one of the great modern educators, John Amos Komensky, advocated the picture book for children as a means of restoring the balance and providing the necessary visual associations." (p. 136)
55. Philippe Ariès, Centuries of Childhood (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1962.)
56. See Eisenstein, The Printing Press, pp. 102-104. This occurred especially in the area of science as print created methods of data collection and standardization, uniform mathematical symbols and eliminated ambiguity.
57. See Ellul, p. 36.
58. See Marshall McLuhan, The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).
59. See McLuhan, Understanding, p. 161, and Innis, p. 142.
60. Postman, Amusing, p. 16.
61. See McLuhan, Understanding, pp. 217-227; Boorstin, pp. 11-12; and Daniel Czitrom, Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), Chapter 2.

62. McLuhan, Understanding, p. 218.
63. Ibid., pp. 218-219.
64. Ibid., p. 175.
65. Daniel Boorstin, The Image: or What Happened to the American Dream (New York: Atheneum Press, 1962).
66. Ellul, p. 36.
67. Ibid., p. 37.
68. McLuhan, Understanding, p. 174.
69. Ibid., pp. 177-78. See also Boorstin, Chapter 3, "From Traveller to Tourist: The Lost Art of Travel".
70. McLuhan, Understanding, p. 176.
71. Boorstin, pp. 10-13. Boorstin is also known for his re-definition of the term "celebrity". He realized that with the graphic revolution, greatness was no longer needed for eminence; we can make people famous whether they are great or not. We can fabricate well-knownness. We have defined the "celebrity" as a person known not for his greatness, but "for his well-knownness."
(p. 57)
72. In The Humiliation of the Word Ellul argues that propaganda, certain intellectuals, what he sees as the meaningless multiplication of words and society's increasing dependence on images are working to "humiliate" the word. Words are increasingly neutralized and valued less than images. Ellul, a devout Christian, sees language as the fundamental weapon in the human struggle for freedom. Language, unlike fixed images, is open-ended and invites response and dialogue. God's choice of language (in the Bible) as the basis of contact with humanity signifies that we are free to respond - or to ignore him if we refuse. Reliance on images, argues Ellul, eliminates the freedom. See especially chapters 2, 4 and 7.
73. It is Boorstin's thesis that America has been a land of dreams. But the Graphic Revolution has meant that this is threatened "by the menace of unreality. The threat of nothingness is the danger of replacing American dreams with American illusions. Of replacing the ideals by the images, the aspiration by the mould. We risk being the first people in history to have been able to make their illusions so vivid, so realistic that they

can live in them. We are the most illusioned people on earth." See Boorstin, p. 240.

74. McLuhan, Understanding, p. 174.

75. Ibid., p. 175.

76. Ibid., See Chapter 20, "The Photograph" and Chapter 31, "Television."

CHAPTER ONE

THE POWER OF TELEVISION: THE ARGUMENTS, THE CRITICS

The purpose of this chapter is to present the key arguments Postman advances about television, its power, and its effects on society. Arguably, these key arguments can be found in The Disappearance of Childhood, Amusing Ourselves To Death, How To Watch TV News, Conscientious Objections, and to a lesser degree Technopoly. While it is necessary to consult books by Postman other than these for the reasoning behind these arguments, I do so in subsequent chapters; I am concerned in this chapter with showing the actual effects Postman argues TV has on civic life.

I will outline Postman's arguments from these books and essays as well as any criticisms they received. What should become clear to the reader is just how much power Postman invests in TV - that is, the extent to which Postman faults television for a variety of society's ills.

The Disappearance of Childhood

In the preface to the 1994 re-publication of The Disappearance of Childhood, Postman explains his choice to change very little from the earlier 1982 version. "What was happening then is happening now. Only worse."¹ He writes that he "will stand by the theme of the book: American

culture is hostile to the idea of childhood."²

The book's thesis, "striking in its simplicity," in one reviewer's words,³ is that the printing press, by creating literacy also created adulthood (those who were literate) and thus childhood (those who were illiterate). In the same way, television, through its visual, non-hierarchical nature - that is, anyone can understand it - is "disappearing" childhood completely.⁴

Postman's Introduction stresses that "childhood is a social artifact not a biological category." Our genes contain no instructions about who is a child and who is an adult.⁵ Instead, the term was created by the media of communications and, as such, it is only a few hundred years old.⁶

In the book's first part he details "The Invention of Childhood." He discusses ages such as Medieval times when there were no children,⁷ attributing this to a lack of literacy. He explains that in a largely oral culture, everyone had access to the same information. They shared pastimes. Therefore, there was no conception of childhood development, prerequisites, sequential learning or of schooling "as preparation for the adult world."⁸ The printing press, Postman suggests, by creating Literate Man, created a new symbolic environment which required a new

concept of adulthood, one defined by literacy. Whereas in the Medieval era different generations lived in the same intellectual world, from print onward:

adulthood had to be earned. It became a symbolic, not a biological achievement. From print onwards, the young would have to become adults, and they would have to do this by learning to read, by entering the world of typography. And to do this, they would require education."²

Whereas infancy ended precisely when command of speech was achieved, "childhood began with the task of learning how to read."¹⁰ Consequently, its definition was soon tied to school attendance - for example, the word "schoolboy" became synonymous with the word "child".¹¹

Formal schooling, born from print, also re-defined the family, Postman asserts, calling on the ideas of Eisenstein and Philippe Ariès.¹² For one, schooling added a new serious element to the parent-child relationship by making the parents the official out-of-the-classroom educators. The presence of books enhanced this role, offering a written authority on child-rearing.¹³

In all his books, Postman describes a version of what he calls in Amusing Ourselves To Death, "print intelligence"¹⁴ - the human characteristics that he believes come with being an avid and regular reader. In The Disappearance, he offers

some of these "biases of print",¹⁵ claiming that as a child evolved into adulthood he acquired "the sort of intellect we expect of a good reader"¹⁶ - traits like a "vigorous sense of individuality", the capacities to think logically and sequentially, to distance oneself from symbols, to defer gratification, and "of course, the capacity for extraordinary feats of self-control."¹⁷(emphasis mine) On this last point, he posits that book learning went completely against the exuberance of youth, demanding that the latter be "sharply modified".¹⁸

Print also made it possible for the young to hone a sense of shame. In his explanation, to which I will return in Chapter Three, Postman calls on Italian philosopher Erasmus's 1516 volume Colloquies, a book that advised boys on how to regulate their instinctual life and promoted a sense of shame.¹⁹ Postman argues that book learning represented a triumph over our animal nature, intensifying the duality of body and mind. But whereas print offered us "the disembodied mind" we were left with the problem of controlling our body. Shame, for Postman, like Erasmus, is the "mechanism" by which we carry out this control. It is the "price we pay for our triumphs over our nature."²⁰

Similarly, book learning meant that children, unable to read, were cut off from knowing about a rich content of

secrets - secrets about money, violence, sex, death and illness with which, Postman argues, they had been familiar in the Middle Ages.²¹ This ignorance further redefined the roles of child and adult, for adults were now tasked with preparing the child for the discovery of these secrets.²²

The book's second part seeks to explain "The Disappearance of Childhood." If the birth of print created childhood, between 1850 and 1950, as print's prominence in America was usurped by a number of electronic inventions, the idea of childhood began to disassemble.

As those responsible for the "emerging childless age", Postman offers his parade of media villains, (these are regulars in his books) in chronological order - the telegraph, the rotary press, the camera, telephone, the phonograph, movies and television. Each incrementally advanced an "assault on language and literacy",²³ an erosion in society's intellectual structure and a radical change in the status of childhood.

Morse's telegraph was key²⁴ in that it changed the nature of information from personal and regional to impersonal and global. To enhance this point, Postman offers, as he does repeatedly in his books, Henry Thoreau's comment in Walden about the possibility of instantaneous communication between

men in Texas and Maine: "But what do they have to say to each other?"²⁵ The telegraph created the "news" industry - decontextualized information that was largely irrelevant, including to anyone in either Texas or Maine. Postman stresses the volume of this information - it was "uncontrollable,"²⁶ coming in an unprecedented rate.²⁷ This, he claims, had a huge impact on childhood. Whereas the maintenance of childhood depended on "managed information and sequential learning"²⁸ - making information available to children slowly, in stages, the telegraph began a process of "wrestling control"²⁹ of information from the home and school. It altered the quality and quantity of information and how and when children would receive it.³⁰

The intellectual hierarchy of the literate world might have stayed intact, argues Postman, if it were not for the fact that paralleling the development of electronic communication was Daniel Boorstin's "graphic revolution" and its new symbolic world of pictures and advertisements, made possible by the photograph. The upshot of the two phenomena was "the recasting of the world of ideas into speed-of-light icons and images."³¹

Contrasting print with these new images, Postman asserts that the graphic revolution undermined the assumptions of the literate world. This is a contention that I will revisit.

Briefly, he asserts here that the image changed information itself from "discursive to non-discursive, from propositional to presentational, from rationalistic to emotive."³² A picture may be worth a thousand words, but "it is in no sense the equivalent of a thousand words." In fact, pictures and other images are "cognitively regressive"³³ compared to the printed word. Whereas the printed word requires "an aggressive response to its 'truth content'", pictures require an, "aesthetic response. They call on our emotions, not our reason. They ask us to feel, not think."³⁴ He paraphrases writer Rudolph Arnheim to say that "the graphic revolution has the potential to put our minds to sleep."³⁵

Postman claims that thinkers who have made these judgements, including Arnheim, Boorstin, Roland Barthes and Robert Heilbroner, "indicate by implication" how the graphic revolution contributed to a radical change in the status of childhood. For, Postman claims, "they are talking about a symbolic world that cannot support the social and intellectual hierarchies that made childhood possible."³⁶

But TV was the key catalyst in this radical change. Television shows "most clearly" how these hierarchies are collapsing. TV presents information in a form that is undifferentiated in its accessibility, he claims. That is,

he argues, because it is first and foremost a visual medium, anyone be it adults, children, labourers or intellectuals can watch it and understand it. "There are no ABCs for pictures" - they require no lessons in grammar or spelling. "The TV image is available to everyone regardless of age."³⁷ He denies that TV can offer variability in the conceptual level of programs. Even "high-brow" shows such as The Ascent of Man, he writes, "must make their focal point the ever-changing visual image."³⁸ (emphasis mine) And an image show "requires conception, not perception."³⁹ Postman summarizes how this undifferentiated accessibility means TV need not make the distinction between child and adult.⁴⁰ Television

erodes the dividing line between childhood and adulthood in three ways: first, because it requires no instruction to grasp its form; second, because it does not make complex demands on either mind or behaviour; and third because it does not segregate its audience.⁴¹

Television is "The Total Disclosure Medium" Postman argues. Because it operates around the clock, and its form prevents it from dwelling on a subject for a long time, it needs a constant supply of novel material. Thus, it is making use of all of society's taboos, forcing the entire culture to "come out of the closet".⁴² As a result no subjects are mysterious or awesome anymore.⁴³

In this way, television is revealing the secrets of adult life to children. TV's pictures are "concrete and self-explanatory," writes Postman. "The children see everything it shows."⁴⁴

This "total disclosure" also brings about a decrease in childhood curiosity and eliminates the need for shame.⁴⁵

And it has brought about what Postman calls the "adult-child" - a grown-up whose intellectual and emotional capacities are "unrealized" and "not significantly different" from those associated with children.⁴⁶ The adult-child was "a normal condition" in the Middle Ages due to the absence of literacy.⁴⁷

Postman offers examples of the adult-child only when he offers "evidence" for the disappearance of childhood. In the media, children are depicted as miniature adults, as in the case of Gary Coleman, or they are "adultified" as in films such as the Exorcist or Bugsy Malone, or Brooke Shields in Pretty Baby. (Shields also gets this treatment in blue jeans commercials). Similarly, adults are "childified" and act like kids like those in the show The Love Boat or the film Being There.⁴⁸

Meanwhile, authors like Judy Blume, whose coming-of-age novels include Are You There God? It's Me Margaret, are trying to grow up kids fast. Kids dress like adults," they participate in adult sports (he laments the seriousness of Little League), and they watch the same movies and listen to the same music as adults. Other facts support this homogeneity of style⁵⁰ such as a rise in child crime, sexual activity and alcoholism. Moreover, adults are acting less responsibly - for example, getting more divorces.⁵¹

In the end, Postman stresses that the "enemy" of childhood is American culture, although it does not intend to be;⁵² the fact is, we simply do not realize "that in a hundred years of redesigning how we communicate" we have obliterated the need for children.⁵³ Indeed, he claims that while many factors are responsible for the disappearing child, it seems "obvious" that "childhood is a function of what a culture needs to communicate and the means it has to do so."⁵⁴

As for the chances of sustaining childhood, he sees this as possible in both institutions of the school and the family, but only if parents engage in an "act of rebellion against American culture"⁵⁵ by fostering literacy and controlling media's access to their children.

Amusing Ourselves To Death

Three years after writing The Disappearance of Childhood, Postman published Amusing Ourselves To Death, arguably his most famous book.

Postman begins Amusing with a stern warning. George Orwell and Aldous Huxley had different prophecies and it is to those of the latter that we should take heed. While Orwell said we would surrender our freedom to an externally opposed oppression, Huxley believed the erosion of our autonomy and maturity would be self-imposed through our "almost infinite appetite for distractions" and society's ability to satisfy this with irrelevant, trivial and pleasurable entertainment.⁵⁶ Thus, while Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us, Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us. This book is about "the possibility that Huxley, not Orwell, was right."⁵⁷

He calls the book an inquiry into the "most significant American cultural fact of the second half of the twentieth century" - the decline of the Age of Typography (part one of the book) and ascendancy of the Age of Television (part two). The book's underlying premise is:

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 suitable to television.⁵⁸ (emphasis mine)

Postman insists that his focus is not content itself. It is not the "junk" on television that bothers him - "the best things on television are its junk,"⁵⁹ and this threatens no one. But TV is at its "most dangerous" when it aspires to being a carrier of important cultural conversations such as those about politics or religion. It co-opts these and turns them into "entertainment packages."⁶⁰ Cheers and The A Team are no threat to public health, but 60 Minutes, Eyewitness News and Sesame Street are.⁶¹

Rather than content, his concern then is epistemology - "definitions of truth and the sources from which such definitions come."⁶² He stresses that these definitions derive from the media through which information is conveyed.⁶³

While acknowledging the similarity of his argument to Marshall McLuhan's belief that "the medium is the message", Postman prefers to substitute 'metaphor' for 'message' because he feels that what is important is not the concrete messages but the forms of our media which act unobtrusively like "metaphors" to enforce their definition of reality on

us. "Our media-metaphors classify the world for us, sequence it, frame it, enlarge it, reduce it, color it, argue a case for what the world is like."⁶⁴

Media metaphors, claims Postman, are complex and they create their own intelligence. Oral intelligence involves, for example, memory.⁶⁵ "Print intelligence" is the most demanding because it requires bodily control, some detachment and objectivity to see "through" the shapes of letters to the meaning of the words they form.⁶⁶ One must also be submissive to the intentions of the author, for example by delaying a verdict until the argument is finished.⁶⁷ Above all you must be able to "negotiate in the world of abstractions," without pictures. "Intelligence implies that one can dwell comfortably without pictures, in a field of concepts and generalizations."⁶⁸

With his conceptual framework in place, Postman traces the rise of typography in the United States arguing that because the printed word monopolized eighteenth and nineteenth-century America, it became a land of intellectuals.⁶⁹ He attempts to prove this link between language and a finely-tuned intellect in a chapter called "The Typographic Mind". He starts with the seven-hour Lincoln-Douglas, debates with their beautiful long clauses, arguing that their audiences had a huge attention span and capacity for complex sentences

because of the "literary" oratory of the debates.⁷⁰ The debates show typography's power "to control the character of that [public] discourse,"⁷¹ giving it serious, logically ordered content.

Postman then offers what could be seen as another version of "print intelligence" - just how language and reading constitute "the most serious challenge to the intellect."⁷² Reading, for example, exposes unadorned meaning - "There is no escape from meaning when language is the instrument guiding one's thought. Though one may accomplish it from time to time, it's very hard to say nothing when employing a written sentence....Words have very little to recommend them except as carriers of meaning."⁷³

At the same time, Postman paints reading as a rather unpleasant, almost lonely experience.

The reader must come in a serious state of intellectual readiness. This is not easy because he comes to the text alone. In reading, one's responses are isolated, one's intellect thrown back on its own resources. To be confronted by the cold abstractions of printed sentences is to look upon language bare, without the assistance of either beauty or community. Thus reading is by nature a serious business. It is also, of course, an essentially rational activity.⁷⁴

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Postman argues that this, the "Age of Exposition", began to be replaced by the "Age of Show Business". The latter was triggered by the convergence of the telegraph and the "graphic revolution", the latter which "bid to replace" language as our dominant means for constructing and understanding reality."⁵

One upshot of electronic communication was that the "information-action ratio" was dramatically altered. In typographic culture, argues Postman, this ratio was direct - the importance of information stemmed from how it made action possible. It provided us with facts that would help us with our day or a problem we were trying to solve."⁶ People had a "sense of being able to control some of the contingencies in their lives."⁷ But with electronic communications comes an "information glut" and we lose this sense of potency. We get information, about world affairs for example, for which essentially we have no need."⁸

Photography and telegraphy took the lead in creating a non-coherent "Peek-a-Boo World", named after, Postman explains, a self-contained but endlessly entertaining child's game. Here, one event, then another "pops into view for a moment, then vanishes again."⁹

The culmination of the Peek-a-Boo World, claims Postman, was the TV because it gave the epistemological bases of the telegraph and the photograph "their most potent expression" and brought them into the home.¹⁰ Now, he argues, TV has attained the status of what Roland Barthes would call a myth - it has so infiltrated our lives that it is invisible.¹¹

It is so invisible that Postman insists the question of "how does television affect us?" has "receded into the background." He continues:

Twenty years ago, the question, Does television shape culture or merely reflect it? held considerable interest for many scholars and social critics. The question has largely disappeared because television has gradually become our culture.¹²

For example, Postman believes that TV cannot co-exist with print. Recall his statement above (page 43) that two media "cannot accommodate the same ideas." He states elsewhere: "they delude themselves who believe that television and print can co-exist, for co-existence implies parity. There is no parity here. Print is now merely a residual epistemology."¹³

If television's pervasiveness makes it invisible, Postman aims in the book's second half to make it visible again - that is, to show, how TV "is transforming our culture into

one vast arena for show-business.""⁴

Postman asserts that only in the United States is television having this detrimental effect."⁵ He distinguishes between a technology and a medium, the former being "physical apparatus" which becomes a medium as it is put to use interacting with a social setting. "A technology is merely a machine. A medium is the social and intellectual environment a machine creates.""⁶

While in many countries TV remains a mere technology,"⁷ America, Postman argues, is not one of them. Here, television has found in liberal democracy and the free market a climate in which its full potentialities as a technology of images can be exploited."⁸ The result, American TV - the Peek-A-Boo-World of visual delights, including exquisitely crafted TV commercials - is in great demand all over the world."⁹

It is loved the world over because American TV's underlying goal is to amuse us. In TV journalism, this explains the music, the appeal of the newscaster and the verbiage - "Now...This" or "Join Us Tomorrow"."¹⁰

There is nothing wrong with a little entertainment, says Postman."¹¹ The problem is that TV "presents all subject

matter as entertainment,"²² the result being that America no longer approaches the world with seriousness.

For example, phrases such as "Now...This" suggest that what the viewer has just seen or heard has no relevance to what she will see or hear next, or even ever. They suggest a world without order or meaning that "is not to be taken seriously"²³. They suggest that even the most horrific murder or costly political blunder can be erased from our minds by a newscaster saying "Now ..This."²⁴ The result is fragmented news without context or consequences; that is to say, "pure entertainment."²⁵

Commercials add more discontinuities - for example, when a report that a nuclear war is inevitable is followed by "a word from Burger King".²⁶ Youth, especially, suffer from such juxtapositions, claims Postman, coming to assume that "all reports of cruelty and death are greatly exaggerated" and hardly require serious responses."

What Postman calls "the critical point", however, is not that on TV entertainment is now the metaphor for all discourse, but that off screen the same metaphor prevails. "How television stages the world becomes the model for how the world is to be staged."²⁷ In courtrooms, classrooms, operating rooms, boardrooms and airplanes, "Americans no

longer talk to each other, they entertain each other."⁹⁹

To demonstrate this transformation, he devotes a chapter each to the fields of religion, politics and education.

Television, claims Postman, strips away everything that is profound, sacred and enchanting about religion. The shows of Jerry Falwell and Jimmy Swaggart contain no ritual and no sense of spiritual transcendence and showcase the host as a celebrity, rather than God.¹⁰⁰ The commercial aspect, with its need to maximize ratings, breeds marketing gimmicks such as Falwell's "Jesus First" pins and content-development. Television makes "authentic religious experience impossible"¹⁰¹ and in the end he calls it blasphemous.¹⁰²

As for political discourse, Postman posits that the perfect metaphor for this is the TV commercial. For one, a commercial's slogans and brevity imply that problems are solvable quickly, which distorts expectations of the political process. But more important is the way that the images in today's commercials address the psychological needs of viewers, as opposed to the traits of products.

(see below) Similarly, a politician now gains support by projecting images that appeal to the public in a personal way, offering herself "as an image of the audience."¹⁰³

This is one way TV is responsible for image politics, including the irrelevancy of political parties and our preoccupation with a politician's personal life. A television commercial empties itself of product information to do its psychological work and image politics empties itself of authentic political substance for the same reason. In short, the television commercial "has devastated political discourse."¹⁰⁴

Postman's chapter "Teaching As An Amusing Activity" is a severe critique of the TV show Sesame Street, which he claims promotes the idea that learning is intended to be an amusing activity. In fact he argues TV undermines the activities of a traditional classroom such as asking questions, obeying rules, learning in sequence and language development.¹⁰⁵ He balks at claims that research shows learning increasing when information is presented in a dramatic setting, something TV does well.¹⁰⁶ Instead, he argues that students now think that they can learn by being entertained. They will want their physics to come to them "on cookies and T-shirts" and will want their news, politics and religion "in the same delightful way."¹⁰⁷

Again, claims Postman, the "single most important" aspect of television is that people watch it.¹⁰⁸ He claims: "It is the nature of the medium that it must suppress the content

of ideas in order to accommodate the requirements of visual interest."⁹² (emphasis mine) TV producers

are televising news to be seen. They must follow where their medium leads. There is no conspiracy here, no lack of intelligence, only a straightforward recognition that "good television" has little to do with what is "good" about exposition or other form of verbal communication but everything to do with what the pictorial images look like.¹⁰⁹

Even a serious ABC roundtable program on the controversial H-bomb film "The Day After" could not produce a "discussion" as we know it, he claims. Discussions demand thinking which does not play well on TV - "There is not much to see in it."¹¹⁰

In the end, Postman sees "insurmountable difficulties"¹¹¹ in remedying the situation he describes, including the absence of both any real concern or real cure. While he favours limits on violence and commercials, he reminds us that the problem is how we watch TV - that we do so uncritically. He believes "we have yet to learn what television is."¹¹² We need to ask questions; "to break the spell",¹¹³ and learn its biases. Such "media consciousness" is the responsibility of our schools.

Postman goes back to his Huxleyan Warning. What's so dangerous about TV is that no one has opposed its

brainwashing. Television is an ideology "about which there has been no consensus, no discussion and no opposition. Only compliance."¹¹⁴ He reminds us that in Huxley's *Brave New World*, the tragedy was not that the people were laughing instead of thinking, but "that they did not know what they were laughing about and why they had stopped thinking."¹¹⁵

Commercials

In much of his work, Postman's concern about television commercials and their power is deep. He offers, as we have seen, some comments about them in Amusing - that their interruptive form and frivolous content dilutes both the import of the news and the seriousness with which we, especially our youth, take the world. He offers additional analysis in other places such as his 1992 book, co-written with Steve Powers, How To Watch TV News, essays in the 1988 collection Conscientious Objections, and his 1992 book Technopoly.

While commercials are about money, Postman claims, they are also about "the serious manipulation of our social and psychic lives."¹¹⁶ He posits that TV commercials tell us more about our society than "straight news" does¹¹⁷ in that they are "the most constant and voluminous source of value propaganda in our culture."¹¹⁸

The emotional resonance of commercials stems from the fact that most take the form of religious parables. As he explains in his essay "The Parable of the Ring Around the Collar", they all have a scheme¹¹⁹: they put forth first, a conception of sin, (in this case, a couple in a restaurant experience self-loathing as the waitress comments on the man's dirty collar); second, intimations of the way to redemption (at home, the wife uses a certain brand of detergent, gets rid of this dirt and the husband forgives her "with an adoring smile"¹²⁰); and third a vision of Heaven or Redemption (they are back in restaurant, free of the waitress's "bitter social chastisement"¹²¹). Indeed, Postman exploits the parallel with the Parable to the fullest.¹²²

But what this parable, and that of "the Man Who Runs Through Airports" (car rental commercial) and that of the Spotted Glassware show is that TV commercials have nothing to do with the rationality behind capitalism - that a rational consumer makes clear and rational choices about the traits of a product ¹²³ - and everything to do with the character of the consumer; specifically his or her fantasies and, mostly, his or her fears and inadequacies.¹²⁴

He writes that mouthwash commercials are not about bad breath, but "the need for social acceptance" and to be

sexually attractive. Beer commercials are about a man's need to share the values of a peer group. A car commercial is about the need for autonomy or social status.¹²⁵

Postman argues that this change in approach, from appealing to rationality in buyers to the irrational or emotional, came with the invention of photography and its visual images. As he explains in an interview with a graphic arts magazine, advertisers discovered that certain images did a better job of tapping into consumer's needs and wants than showing just the product. "If you want to sell Coca Cola, well, you could show the bottle of Coke, but wouldn't it be better to show people in a ski lodge sitting around a fire?"¹²⁶

Commercials are replacing the values of the Judeo-Christian religion. First they suggest problems can be solved fast and through a product. But, claims Postman, "There is no simple or fast solution to life's important problems."¹²⁷ The remedies for rejection, fear and anxiety are now called Scope, Comet, Toyota, Bufferin and Budweiser. "They take the place of good works, restraint, piety, awe, humility and transcendence."¹²⁸

He makes a similar appeal to Christianity in Technopoly, asserting that commercials, especially those on TV, are

responsible for "The Great Symbol Drain" - that is, the trivialization and exhaustion of a culture's sacred symbols.¹²⁹ He cites a commercial for Hebrew national Frankfurters where the voice-over says "We have to answer to a Higher Authority"¹³⁰ and another that uses George Washington's image to "announce linen sales on President's Day". The symbol is rendered meaningless because of the indiscriminate context in which it is used.¹³¹

Postman reminds us of Boorstin's argument in The Image that before the graphic revolution the scarcity of an image contributed to its power.¹³² Today, the continuity of electronic images is a factor in the exhaustion of symbols; they now "breed[ing] indifference if not necessarily contempt."¹³³

Postman gives the name "cultural rape" to this co-opting of images and icons from our sacred world, a suggestion of how powerful he deems these commercials to be.¹³⁴ Indeed, he portrays the viewer as a victim; commercials are effective because they are "in a sense, invisible". "They invade our consciousness, seep into our souls...penetrate your indifference. In the end, it is hard not to believe."¹³⁵

Postman's Critics

As mentioned in the Introduction, the lion's share of

criticisms of Postman's work come from reviews of his books, although at least two longer analyses of Postman's theories can be found elsewhere.

With all of Postman's books, critics seem to find both much to like and much to dislike, the more academic writers falling into the latter category.

All the books are praised for being witty, provocative, emotionally appealing and persuasive, all these despite the books' faults.¹³⁶ Postman is complimented for cleverly reiterating, in a readable way, the ideas espoused by thinkers such as McLuhan, Jacques Ellul and Harold Innis,¹³⁷ and for sending out an early warning signal about the possible erosion of childhood and its innocence or the invisible co-opting of our serious discourses by television or the price we are paying for technological progress.¹³⁸

Even his critics praise the wide range of examples and fields he calls on.¹³⁹

Certain strengths particular to each book are worth mentioning. For example, his thesis in the Disappearance of Childhood - that TV destroys the notion of shame as well as the necessity for children to earn adulthood by acquiring literacy - was seen as original and even "brilliant", by

several including writers for The New York Times, The Atlantic and The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology.¹⁴⁰ And his general theories about TV were in general heartily embraced - his belief that its form dictates its content, its pervasiveness, and the challenge it is posing to the school curriculum.¹⁴¹

Reviews for Amusing Ourselves To Death - perhaps to match Postman's increased sarcasm in this book - were more wide-ranging than those for any other book. While Journalism Quarterly called it an "articulate and though provoking elaboration of McLuhan,"¹⁴² for The Atlantic Monthly, it was, "a diatribe, a jeremiad even, written in a violently assertive, humourless, not always coherent style."¹⁴³

Postman's writing in this book was widely praised. For example, Anatole Broyard of The New York Times claimed he "writes so brilliantly" with a "wit and genius for quotation" all the while "so elegant in his turn of mind and phrase."¹⁴⁴ This writing, together with his wit and apocalyptic style, wins him adjectives such as arresting, eloquent, provocative,¹⁴⁵ "bristling with prophecy",¹⁴⁶ and "an accomplished polemist,"¹⁴⁷ with Amusing being called a "stinging critique".¹⁴⁸

Reviewers liked two particular things in the book. One was Postman's comments on print - the discipline it allegedly demands and how it is being undermined by electronic media.¹⁴⁹ Even moreso, Postman was praised for how well he describes what's happening on the television screen, be it the discontinuities and irrelevant verbiage, how it is eliminating the idea of contradiction, or what TV makes of religion or politics.¹⁵⁰ Indeed, David Denby, writing in The Atlantic suggested that "if Postman had confined himself to modest observations like this, he might have written a stunning book."¹⁵¹

As for Technopoly, probably his best known book since Amusing, as well as being praised for his eloquence¹⁵² and the issues he raises,¹⁵³ Postman was complimented for his explicit humanist stance, as one reviewer put it, "for the pervasiveness of his plea for vigilance against the onslaught of scientism."¹⁵⁴

As for criticisms, several repeat themselves from book to book.

First, he is accused of having little data and researched evidence to support his claims. In reviews of The Disappearance, this applies to the term and the existence of "childhood" which according to some goes back to mid-10th

century¹⁵⁵, as well as his identifications of inventions - such as the printing press and the telegraph - as origins of social change. For example, regarding the latter accusation, one professor wrote: "Supporting evidence is largely anecdotal and selective, making the case logical but not overwhelming."¹⁵⁶

Another example, referring to Amusing, is that he paints a highly idealized picture of life in pre-television America, ignoring for one the poverty and illiteracy that prevented much of the population from participating in the political discourse.¹⁵⁷ His arguments about this time period are deemed to be flimsy - one critic suggests that comparing the Presidential debates to the Lincoln Douglas debates "is like saying Harold Robbins isn't Henry James."¹⁵⁸

Witness a comment from a review of Technopoly: "If we are going to profit from the author's insights, we will have to take much of it with a grain of salt."¹⁵⁹ Such a lack of research has others less patient.¹⁶⁰

From these errors, critics often accuse Postman of having a poor or even a "bankrupt" reading of history.¹⁶¹ On this point, Adrian Wooldridge, writing in the Times Literary Supplement, was indignant:

Postman's book is an exercise in instant history, concocted out of a mixture of Philippe Ariès scholarship, Marshall McLuhan's theory, and Mary Whitehouse's prejudices. Its hypothesis is flawed, its reasoning is confused and its evidence is defective. Its main contention, that adults managed to use the printing press to preserve childhood innocence, can be discredited by even the most superficial acquaintance with the historical literature.¹⁶²

Postman is also often accused of not recognizing arguments that compete with his own.¹⁶³

Perhaps more importantly - as I point out in the Conclusion, Postman does not try too hard to be accurate - crucial elements of his theses were found wanting. With The Disappearance, for example, critics accuse him of having a confusing definition of literacy, one that muddles his definitions of childhood and adulthood. His conception of the word, claim David Fernie and Patrick Shannon, writing in The Harvard Educational Review, varies from "simple decoding" to "reading critically" making it hard to understand who is literate and who is not. Some adults cannot read critically; are they children?¹⁶⁴

Several critics question Postman's direct link between literacy and childhood - that in his words, "reading created childhood." Not only do many adults read very little, but the idea that reading preserves innocence exaggerates the

influence of literate education and ignores other realities.¹⁶⁵

And, Postman pays no attention to distinctions of geographical context or social class. He compares literacy rates across time, ignoring that its meaning changed from the 17th century to the 20th century.¹⁶⁶

Indeed, critics frequently complain of such sweeping statements, bereft of any qualifications; one critic called The Disappearance "a dazzling display of one bold assertion after another."¹⁶⁷

Postman is also accused of overstating the popular view that the acquisition of print literacy yields cognitive superiority, and of offering little empirical evidence to support this. "We must not over look the fact that a reading people develop the capacity to conceptualize at a higher level than do the illiterates", he writes.¹⁶⁸ Fernie and Shannon cite studies, for example, which conclude that rather than literacy promoting a person's abstract reasoning, "schooling seems to be the important variable."¹⁶⁹ Moreover, such an exaltation of print forgets that writing is often shallow and highly entertaining, including Postman's own prose.¹⁷⁰

A major criticism of at least three of Postman's books is his simplistic idea of television, something which allows him to dismiss it as cognitively regressive and mere entertainment. For one, he is accused of describing TV as a manifestation of only one of its elements, the picture, and ignoring, in one critic's words, "the complex features of television's form - sound and camera techniques, pace and variability of action, dialogue - which shape meaning, convey information and create narrative."¹⁷¹ Similarly it is suggested that he would not be as critical about TV if he looked further than celebrity roasts and commercials.¹⁷²

It is also suggested that TV is above all a commercial operation, where the market determines content and thus what secrets are given and withheld. As one reviewer of The Disappearance asserts, in this commercial world, where we subordinate our values to those of the market and general consumer culture, "anything is fair game for exploitation," not just the innocence of childhood.¹⁷³

And, critics, especially those of Amusing, accuse him of misreading the TV audience, painting it with broad brush strokes as faceless, passive reprobates.¹⁷⁴ In their opinion, he considers neither that many intelligent people watch TV nor that many do so critically.

Fernie and Shannon are among those who challenge Postman's insistence that TV demands an uncritical response. They cite studies showing that the relationship between thought and media is complex and that "task demands" for print and television do not vary nearly as much as Postman implies.¹⁷⁵

They also take him up on his "undifferentiated accessibility" argument - that the six-year-old and the sixty-year-old are equally qualified to experience TV. Research, they say, shows that the quantity and quality of one's understanding of TV changes with age and viewing experience.¹⁷⁶

Another central criticism of his books is that Postman is a technological determinist, although not all writers use this term explicitly. It can be seen that Postman is accused of technological determinism on two levels, what I will call a micro level and a macro level. On the first, micro level, Postman is accused of letting TV's visual form determine its fate. We saw this criticism above: that "the picture", TV's visual nature, is everything for him - it dictates TV's content and its status, regardless of a host of other factors including the commercial market.

For Fernie and Shannon, this "television as picture" attitude is what causes Postman to see all responses to TV as aesthetic and non-critical and to assume that interpretation of TV cannot take place. If we believe this, they assert, we believe that cartoons and Shakespeare elicit equivalent audience responses.¹⁷⁷

Basil Ransome-Davies, writing in The New Statesman, agrees; if TV is just a "mesmeric distraction" then he suggests it follows that its audience is "brainless and passive". Ransome-Davies suggests that Postman is only following McLuhan in this determinism. Like McLuhan, he asserts, Postman seizes on the discovery that TV is never value free, that its form dictates "a self-limiting framework of knowledge." He then "treats this single fact as an ironclad and overriding cause of the defects of American TV."¹⁷⁸ Says Ransom-Davies,

The medium is the message, pure and simple, regardless of patterns of use, ownership and control or of the distribution of social power in a given culture."¹⁷⁹

Postman is also accused of a second, larger (macro) type of technological determinism - the claim that technology, be it television or another type, has a causal power and is responsible for shaping society. Put simply, Postman "flings his argument too widely", writes Anatole Broyard in The New

York Times about Amusing, holding TV responsible for any corruption he sees in contemporary society be it the degeneration of the political process, the challenges of teaching in the modern age or the decline of reading.¹⁸⁰ Postman implies that TV is the reason people are reading less, prompting critics to point out for example that if TV were to vanish, those who read nothing would still read nothing.¹⁸¹ (This zero sum attitude is also seen in his belief that print and TV cannot co-exist.)

Writing about The Disappearance, Fernie and Shannon conclude that Postman offers a linear equation - that media determine the social concept of childhood, period, "when a quadratic one is needed". That is, he forgets that TV operates in tandem with other forces to shape our values and consciousness both individual and collective.¹⁸² They concede that Postman seems to acknowledge the role of social and economic factors, but that these acknowledgements are too flimsy to exempt him from a deterministic attitude.¹⁸³

Postman, some claim, has things backwards; that is, the yearn for triviality he claims TV has cultivated is in fact responsible for TV's debasement.¹⁸⁴ Their argument is that television programming is more a symptom than an agent of social change. "Visual technology", writes Aram Bakshian Jr.

In The National Review, is like audio technology: it is "aesthetically and intellectually neutral" and reflects the interests of its target audience "for better or worse."¹⁸⁵

One academic, Richard Lanham, in his book The Electronic Word analyses Amusing and calls Postman "the most clamorous of humanist voices questioning the new operating system for the arts and letters."¹⁸⁶ He offers some additional criticism to the above, including that Postman's narrow technological focus on analogue broadcast completely ignores digital technologies like multimedia and cable TV with its "narrowcast attributes."¹⁸⁷ He also claims that Postman's scorn for mere information masks social snobbery - a preference for certain kinds of "purposive information", which he aligns with print, over context-free information appealing to novelty and curiosity.¹⁸⁸

In light of Postman's claim to be a defender of propositional thought against the mindlessness of television, Lanham offers a list of propositions that Postman offers, but does not prove. These to some degree sum up many of the criticisms of Amusing. These include: that typographical culture equals human reason; that typographical culture was more moral than electronic culture; that commercial broadcast TV equals electronic media; that TV news is intrinsically glib and superficial

and print news is intrinsically deep and concerned with the issues; that visual thinking is inferior to verbal thinking; that behavioural thinking is inferior to verbal thinking; that print political debate was intrinsically more rational, more issue-oriented and more sincere than that on TV; and that theatricality is bad in life and sincerity is good.¹⁰⁹

ENDNOTES - CHAPTER ONE

1. Neil Postman, The Disappearance of Childhood, First Vintage Books Edition (1994; rpt. New York: Delacorte Press, 1982), p. viii.
2. Ibid., p. ix.
3. Adrian Wooldridge, Rev. of Amusing, The Times Literary Supplement, 13 May, 1983, p. 492.
4. Postman, The Disappearance, p. xii.
5. Ibid., p. xi.
6. Ibid., p. xi.
7. Ibid., In these times, "there wasn't a word in French, English or German for a young man between six and sixteen." (p. 15)
8. Ibid., p. 15.
9. Ibid., p. 36.
10. Ibid., p. 42.
11. Ibid., p. 42.
12. Ibid., p. 44.
13. Ibid., p. 44.
14. Neil Postman, Amusing Ourselves To Death (New York: Penguin Books, 1985) p. 26.
15. Postman, The Disappearance, p. 46.
16. Ibid., p. 46.
17. Ibid., p. 46.
18. Ibid., p. 46.
19. Ibid., p. 47. "As self-control became important as an intellectual and theological principle, as well as a characteristic of adulthood," writes Postman, "it was accordingly reflected in sexual mores and manners." (p. 47) For Postman Erasmus' books on social etiquette - another was De Civilitate Morium Puerilium - symbolized the need to civilize children, a need that rose out of

print. (pp. 47-50)

20. Ibid., p. 48.
21. Ibid., p. 49.
22. Ibid., p. 51.
23. Ibid., p. 73.
24. Ibid., p. 68. In fact, Morse is the "single person" he calls "the parent" of the childless age. (p. 68)
25. Ibid., p. 69.
26. Ibid., p. 72. The telegraph, he writes, "created a new definition of intelligence, for as the world became flooded with information, the question of how much one knew assumed more importance than the question of what uses one made of what one did know." (p. 72)
27. Ibid., p. 71.
28. Ibid., p. 72.
29. Ibid., p. 72.
30. Ibid., p. 72.
31. Ibid., p. 73.
32. Ibid., p. 73.
33. Ibid., p. 73. He attributes the phrase "cognitively regressive" to Reginald Damerall. Postman's endnotes cite an "unpublished book" by Damerall, who is of the University of Massachusetts. (p. 159)
34. Ibid., p. 73.
35. Ibid., p. 74.
36. Ibid., p. 74.
37. Ibid., pp. 77-79.
38. Ibid., p. 78.
39. Ibid., p. 78.
40. Ibid., p. 79.

41. Ibid., p. 80.
42. Ibid., p. 82.
43. Ibid., p. 97. He writes: "Television is unsparing in revealing the secrets of adult life". (p. 95)
44. Ibid., p. 84.
45. Ibid., p. 89. This authority, curiosity and shame are all rooted in the idea of secrets, explains Postman. "Children are curious because they do not yet know what they suspect there is to know;" (p. 89)
46. Ibid., p. 99.
47. Ibid., p. 118.
48. Ibid., See pp. 121-127.
49. Ibid., p. 128. "'Children's' clothing has virtually disappeared. Twelve-year-old boys now wear three piece suits to birthday parties, and sixty-year-old men wear jeans to birthday parties." (p. 128)
50. Ibid., p. 134.
51. Ibid., p. 139.
52. Ibid., p. 141.
53. Ibid., p. 142.
54. Ibid., p. 122. He writes "Indeed, nothing seems more obvious to me than that childhood is a function of what a culture needs to communicate and the means it has to do so. Although economics, politics, ideology, religion and other factors affect the course of childhood - make it more or less important - they cannot create it or expunge it. Only literacy by its presence or absence has that power." (p. 122)
55. Ibid., p. 152.
56. Neil Postman, Amusing Ourselves to Death (New York: Penguin Books, 1985) p. viii.
57. Ibid., p. viii.
58. Ibid., p. 8.
59. Ibid., p. 16.

60. Ibid., p. 159.
61. Ibid., p. 161.
62. Ibid., p. 17.
63. Ibid., p. 17. "As a culture moves from orality to writing to printing to televising, its ideas of truth move with it." (p. 24)
64. Ibid., p. 10. He quotes Ernst Cassirer from Cassirer's An Essay on Man: "Physical reality seems to recede in proportion as man's symbolic activity advances." (p. 10)
65. Ibid., p. 25.
66. Ibid., p. 25. He also suggest we exercise what Bertrand Russell calls an "immunity to eloquence". That is, writes Postman, "that you are able to distinguish between the sensuous pleasure, or charm, or ingratiating tone (if there be) of the words and the logic of the argument. (p. 26)
67. Ibid., pp. 25-26.
68. Ibid., pp. 25-26.
69. Ibid., see Chapter 3, "Typographic America. He writes: "We might even say America was founded by intellectuals." (p.41) "The resonances of the lineal analytical structure of print, and particular of expository prose, could be felt everywhere." (p. 41)
70. Postman, Amusing, pp. 45-47.
71. Ibid., p. 48
72. Ibid., p. 50.
73. Ibid., p. 50.
74. Ibid., p. 50.
75. Ibid., p. 74.
76. Ibid., p. 68.
77. Ibid., p. 69.
78. Ibid., p. 68.

79. Ibid., p. 77.
80. Ibid., p. 78.
81. Ibid., p. 79. He writes: "We are no longer fascinated and perplexed by its machinery, We do not tell stories of its wonders. We do not confine our television sets to special rooms. We do not doubt the reality of what we see on television, are largely unaware of the special angle of vision it affords." (p. 79)
82. Ibid., p. 79.
83. Ibid., p. 28. Another example is his suggestion that "television does not ban books" but it "displaces them." (p. 141)
84. Ibid., p. 80.
85. Ibid., p. 84.
86. Ibid., p. 84.
87. Ibid., p. 85.
88. Ibid., p. 85.
89. Ibid., p. 86.
90. Ibid., pp. 87-1103. Postman writes that television provides a new definition of truth - "the credibility of the teller". And "credibility" does not refer to the teller's record for accuracy, but "only to the impression of sincerity, authenticity, vulnerability or attractiveness (choose one of more) conveyed by the actor/reporter." (p. 102)
91. Ibid., p. 87.
92. Ibid., p. 87. In other words, TV has made entertainment itself the natural format for the representation of all experience." (p. 87)
93. Ibid., p. 87.
94. Ibid., p. 99.
95. Ibid., p. 100. Similarly, Americans are no longer informed, but "disinformed" - given misleading, misplaced, irrelevant or fragmented information "that creates the illusion of knowing something, but in fact leads one away from knowing it." (p. 107)

98. Ibid., p. 92.
99. Ibid., p. 92.
100. Ibid., p. 117.
101. Ibid., p. 118.
102. Ibid., p. 123.
103. Ibid., p. 135. Postman uses as his take off point, Joe McGinnis' book The Selling of the President which discusses the 1968 Richard Nixon campaign. The title of the book says it all, says Postman. "If politics is like show business, then the idea is not to pursue excellence, clarity or honesty but to appear as if you are which is another matter altogether. And what that other matter is can be expressed in one word: advertising." (p. 126)
104. Ibid., p. 126.
105. Ibid., p. 143.
106. Ibid., p. 150.
107. Ibid., p. 154.
108. Ibid., p. 92.
109. Ibid., p. 88.
110. Ibid., pp. 90-91.
111. Ibid., pp. 144 - 158.
112. Ibid., p. 161.
113. Ibid., p. 161.
114. Ibid., p. 157.
115. Ibid., p. 163.
116. Neil Postman and Steve Powers, How To Watch TV News (New York: Penguin Books) p. 120.
117. Ibid., p. 162.
118. Ibid., p. 124.

117. Ibid., p. 162.
118. Ibid., p. 124.
119. Neil Postman, "The Parable of the Ring Around the Collar," in his Conscientious Objections: Stirring Up Trouble About Language, Technology and Education (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), p. 67.
120. Ibid., p. 68.
121. Ibid., p. 68.
122. Ibid., pp. 70-71. He has a parallel in commercials for several Christian ideas - the roots of evil, the path to Redemption, glimpses of Heaven and glimpses of Hell. For example, the Parable (Commercial) of the Lost Traveller's Checks gives us a glimpse of Hell - "Technological Innocents lost and condemned to wandering far from their native land." (p. 70)
123. See Neil Postman, Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology, First Vintage Books Edition (1993; rpt. New York: Alfred Knopf Inc., 1992), p. 169.
124. Postman and Powers, How To Watch TV News. He writes, "The thematic thrust of advertising is to take your mind off earth quakes, the homeless and other irrelevancies, and get you to think about your inadequate self and how you can get better." (p.127)
125. Ibid., p. 124.
126. Jenefer Curtis, "Wait a Minute Mr. Postman", (interview) Applied Arts, May, 1998, p. 50. Postman says "It's hard to blame [advertisers] for this; they use sacred imagery - whether it's a picture of the president or the flag or Moses on Mount Sinai or anything else like that - precisely because such images have tremendous emotional resonance in the emotional life of people."
127. Postman and Powers, How To Watch TV News p. 122
128. Ibid., p. 125. Commercials are a "corrupt modality of spiritual instruction". (p. 125)
129. Postman, Technopoly, p. 165.
130. Ibid., p. 165.
131. Ibid., p. 167.

132. Ibid., p. 165.
133. Ibid., p. 166.
134. See Postman, Technopoly, p. 170 and "Wait a Minute Mr. Postman." p. 50.
135. Postman and Powers, How To Watch TV News p. 124
136. The reviews and articles I am calling on in this section are: Michael Barber, "Tube Trouble", rev. of Amusing, Books and Bookmen, May, 1996, p. 18; Aram Bakshian Jr. "Criminal Inanity", in The National Review, 28 Feb., 1986, p. 56; Robert Blanchard, untitled rev. of Amusing, Journalism Quarterly, Spring, 1986, p. 213; Anatoyle Broyard, "Going Down the Tube", rev. of Amusing, The New York Times Book Review, 24 Nov., 1985, p. 9; Anatoyle Broyard, "Child as Small Adult," rev. of The Disappearance Books of the Times, 28 Aug., 1982, p. 13; David Denby, "All the World's a Tube," rev. of Amusing, The Atlantic Monthly, Nov. 1985, pp. 136-8; Bernard K. Duffy, rev. of Technopoly, Quarterly Journal of Speech, Aug. 1993, pp. 372-375; David Fernie and Patrick Shannon, "Disappearances Can be Deceiving", rev. of The Disappearance, Harvard Educational Review, vol. 53, 1983, pp. 195-202; Robert Frost, rev. of Technopoly, Technology and Culture, July, 1993, pp. 714-715; Walter Goodman, rev. of Amusing, The New York Times, 21 Nov., 1985, p. 24; Anthony Howard, "The End of the Debate?", Times Literary Supplement, 21 Feb., 1986, p. 89; Steven McKinzie, rev. of Technopoly, Government Information Quarterly, vol. 10, no. 2, 1993, p. 298; Randle Nelsen, rev. of The Disappearance and others, Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology, May 1985, pp. 303-310; Roy Porter, rev. of Technopoly, The New York Times, 10 May, 1992, p. 20; Basil Ransome-Davies, "Box-Baddie", rev. of Amusing, The New Statesman, 14 Feb., 1986, pp. 26-7; Howard Segal, rev. of Technopoly, The Journal of American History, March, 1993, pp. 1695-1697; Donald J. Shoemaker, rev. of The Disappearance, Sociology and Social Research, vol. 69, no. 1, Oct., 1984, pp. 150-1; Alexander Star, rev. of Technopoly and others, The New Republic 27 July, 1992, pp. 59-65; Elizabeth Stark, "That's Entertainment", rev. of Amusing, Psychology Today, Dec., 1985, p.80; LeRoy Travis, rev. of The Disappearance, The Journal of Educational Thought, vol. 19, no. 2. Aug., 1985, pp. 167-8; Unauthored review of The Disappearance, Choice, Jan., 1983, p. 736; George Will, "Reading, Writing and Rationality," Newsweek, 17 March, 1996, p. 86; Adrian Wooldridge, "Instant Adulthood," rev. of The Disappearance, Times Literary

Supplement, 13 May, 1983, p. 492; and Jonathan Yardley, "The Vacuum at the End of the Tube", rev. of Amusing, Manchester Guardian, 24 Nov., 1985, p. 18.

137. See Fernie and Shannon; Segal; Nelsen.
138. See Broyard; Stark; Goodman; Will; McKinzie; Duffy; and Star.
139. See Denby; McKinzie; Duffy; and Fernie and Shannon.
140. Broyard of The New York Times called it a "brilliant but rather too tidy polemic". See Broyard, "Child as Small Adult"; Denby; and Nelsen.
141. See Nelsen; Goodman; Barber; and Howard.
142. Blanchard.
143. Denby, p. 138.
144. Broyard, "Going Down the Tube."
145. See Bakshian Jr.; Goodman; Stark; and Will.
146. Denby, p. 136.
147. Howard.
148. Duffy, p. 372.
149. See Stark; Blanchard; Will; and Goodman.
150. See Denby; Goodman; Wooldridge; and Yardley.
151. Denby, p. 137
152. See Porter.
153. See McKinzie; and Duffy.
154. Duffy, p. 373. Duffy continues, "The educational bulwark from which the encroachments of a soulless technocracy can best be defined is humanism, to which the author is clearly dedicated. He voices his concerns as a disaffected citizen of the technopoly he describes, rather than as a disinterested specialist in a particular department of academia." (p. 373)

157. See Bakshian Jr. p. 56. He also ignores, claims another reviewer, "the waves of European immigrants that engulfed America at precisely the point when the hegemony of print was under threat." (See Barber)
158. Goodman.
159. McKinzie.
160. In the journal Technology and Culture, Robert Frost refers to writers who offer "subtle analysis" of technology. "Postman," he writes, "provides nothing of the sort. Instead, he presents us with a chromium Frankenstein who mocks our very inclination to seek an understanding of technology." (p. 715)
161. Travis. p. 168. Travis accuses Postman of this by comparing him to McLuhan. Travis writes: "What the British polymath Jonathan Miller says of McLuhan in his very fine biography, McLuhan, applies to Postman... McLuhan, says Miller, was 'an exponent of a bankrupt form of cultural history, the success of whose peculiar endeavour relies to a great extent on the use of large scale, tendentious generalizations.'" (p. 168) See also Bakshian Jr.; Barber; Goodman; Yardley; Wooldridge; Travis; and Shoemaker.
162. See Wooldridge, Bakshian Jr.; Denby, p. 137; Barber.
163. See Shoemaker, p. 151; and Fernie and Shannon, p. 200.
164. Fernie and Shannon, pp. 196-197.
165. See Wooldridge who offers other examples, such as that Postman ignores the extent to which children, in childhood's Golden Age, especially those of the lower classes, were confronted with adult realities.
166. Fernie and Shannon, p. 197. As Wooldridge writes, Postman's discussion of childhood jumps from Europe to America and focuses on a "specific notion of childhood popular only with the literate middle class in a particular period."
167. See unauthored review in Choice. Denby writes, "Postman keeps slamming his fists into walls, insisting over and over, without qualification that we are now getting all our information from television. Unaccompanied by distinctions of class and profession, this assertion is meaningless." p. (137)
168. Postman, The Disappearance, p. 39.

169. Fernie and Shannon, p. 197.
170. See Broyard, "Going Down the Tube"; and Denby.
171. Fernie and Shannon, p. 198.
172. See, for example, Fernie and Shannon, p. 199.
173. Travis, p. 168.
174. See Denby; Ransome-Davies; Star; Fernie and Shannon; and Travis.
175. Fernie and Shannon, p. 199.
176. Ibid., p. 200. According to the reviewers, the cited studies show "that [m]ere exposure to television does not, as Postman contends, ensure full retention or full understanding of information." (p. 200)
177. Ibid., pp. 198-99.
178. Ransome-Davies, p. 26.
179. Ibid., p. 26.
180. See Broyard, "Going Down the Tube"; Ransom-Davies; and Goodman.
181. As we saw, in Amusing, Postman writes "Television impairs a student's freedom to read, but not by censorship. It does so with innocent hands, so to speak. Television does not ban books, it simply displaces them." (p. 141) This criticism was made by George Will.
182. Fernie and Shannon, p. 200. For an example of this acknowledgement on Postman's part, see endnote 53.
183. See Denby; Segal; Star; and Bakshian Jr.
184. See Bakshian Jr., p. 56. Bakshiam Jr., however, contradicts his assertion that TV is without casual power by then suggesting that proper use of TV, for unbiased coverage and informed documentaries, might in fact "strengthen the very values Mr. Postman fears for." (p. 56)
185. Richard Lanham, The Electronic Word (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993) p. 236.
186. Ibid., pp. 237-238.

187. Ibid., pp. 240-41. Lanham suggests that for Postman there is good and bad information - that which is purposive, in Postman's words, "tied to the problems and decisions readers had to address in order to manage their personal and community affairs" - and that which is "context-free" and which "we use for game and play." (p. 240) This snobbish attitude, claims Lanham, denigrates what anthropologists Bronislaw Malinowski and Gregory Batesman call, respectively, "phatic communion" and "ticking over" behaviour - the conversation we pursue simply to maintain social contact and social cohesion. Writes Lanham, "It reassures both parties that the social engine is still 'ticking over,' still running. From it various other purposes can be created, but its main purpose is creating social cohesion." (p. 240)
188. Ibid., pp. 244-246.

CHAPTER TWO

THE POWER OF TELEVISION; OBSERVATIONS

In Chapter One, through examining several of Postman's books, including Amusing Ourselves To Death and The Disappearance of Childhood, we saw just how villainous a force Postman claims TV to be. It has "disappeared" childhood completely, creating a society in which adults act like children and vice versa and where children grow up too fast, discovering all of the "secrets of adult life" early in their lives.

TV has turned our public discourse into a "vast arena for show-business" and provided a model for how Americans now conduct themselves in other areas of their lives. These include the once-serious areas of religion, politics and education which have become "entertainment packages".¹ Television also gave birth to the TV commercial which has co-opted our culture's sacred symbols and trivialized our very existence.

In short, it is clear how much power Postman endows TV with.

The purpose of this chapter is to account for these arguments- that is, just how and why, according to Postman, is TV so powerful? I suggest that the extreme claims Postman

makes about television can be explained by examining, in addition to the above books, some of his earlier works, namely Teaching as a Subversive Activity (1969) Teaching as a Conserving Activity, (1979) and Television and the Teaching of English, (1969). What emerges as a key point is Postman's discussions of analogic and digital symbols and the responses they evoke from people.

After outlining his statements on these symbols, I make several observations about Postman's arguments, one being that he makes too sharp a distinction between emotional and intellectual responses, showing inadequate appreciation of the former. Similarly, he makes too neat an alignment between TV and print media, and emotive and intellectual responses respectively.

As well, Postman is fixated on the visual analogic form of television and sees this as the sole source of its power, although this statement, I suggest, requires a caveat.

A third observation is that Postman's criticisms of TV are aimed almost exclusively at American television.

Fourthly, I observe how different Postman's views on television were at the beginning of his career, compared to those in his more recent popular books.

Finally, I underline that Postman qualifies as a technological determinist in what I defined as the larger, macro sense of the term.

Symbolism

First, for our overall argument, a brief examination of the role of symbolism to Postman is necessary.

For Postman, all media are part of a symbolic environment, and, as such, are to some degree removed from reality. While speech is a direct symbolization of events and things, the alphabet is "a set of symbols of a set of symbols"; that is, an attempt to represent the sounds of speech through a set of graphic designs.² Through these designs man can extend his language beyond the natural limits of time and space.³

In this way, a new medium means an "intrusion on man's symbolic consciousness."⁴ As we saw in The Disappearance of Childhood, Postman describes childhood as a "description of a level of symbolic achievement."⁵

Note that Postman celebrates humans' ability to deal with symbols. While many forms of life can 'think' he writes, "only man, through symbols, can think about thinking".⁶

It is integral to his idea of being human. He

writes repeatedly that "More than the tool-making animal, man is the symbolizing animal."⁷

He also refers constantly to the way language works as a symbol. This starts in his earlier books and their many references to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, named after the anthropologist-turned-linguist Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Whorf. Whorf wanted to expand the field of linguistics to include the largely invisible interaction between language, thought and reality, seeing language as critically affecting human affairs.⁸ The hypothesis was essentially that the structure of the language one habitually uses influences the manner in which one perceives and understands one's environment.⁹ As Postman explains it, "Language is not the vehicle for expressing thought, but the driver," or that "thought occurs 'in' a language."¹⁰

In this way, writes Postman, language creates its own reality. "Words speak a life of their own; they become more important than the reality they intend to codify," he writes in Subversive.¹¹ He relies here also on the thinking of Alfred Korzybski, the founder of general semantics. Language "imprisons us", says Postman, paraphrasing Korzybski. The naming of things means we live in "two worlds - the world of events and things and the world of words about events and things."¹²

Postman felt that McLuhan simply extended the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis to new electronic media in his belief that the new electronic means of communications comprise new languages.¹³ But Postman implied that McLuhan does not take the symbolism far enough. Recall his revision of McLuhan's "the medium is the message" to mean the medium is the metaphor, emphasizing that media do not just convey information but work like metaphors to enforce their definition of reality.¹⁴ In Teaching as a Conserving Activity he writes,

They are metaphors through which we conceptualize reality in one way or another. They will classify the world for us, sequence it, frame it, enlarge it, reduce it, argue a case for what it is like. Through these media-metaphors we do not see the world as it is. We see it as our coding systems are. Such is the power of the form of information.¹⁵
(emphasis mine)

Analogic/Digital

Postman makes an important distinction between two kinds of symbols in which information is codified: analogic and digital forms of information. The importance of this distinction, which he first raises in Conserving,¹⁶ is that it is the foundation of his explanation of the differences between how language affects us and how TV images affect us.

He explains that analogic forms of information are systems of codification that have a real, direct and intrinsic

relationship to what they signify, a photograph being a good example, a map another. "A picture of a man calls to mind the reality of that man because the picture itself is analogous in form to the man himself."¹⁷ Analogic forms "have direct correspondences to the structure of nature itself."¹⁸

On the other hand, digital forms, of which language is the prime example, are entirely abstract and have no correspondence to nature.¹⁹

The word "man", whether spoken or written, has no intrinsic relationship to that which it stands for. Here, the connection between the symbolic form and the thing it represents is arbitrary. You cannot know what "man" refers to by your knowledge of nature alone. You must know the semantic code.²⁰

Referring to this "semantic code" Postman claims that the meaning of digital forms has its origin in "complex human conventions and binding human agreements," whereas the meanings of analogic forms originate from "our perceptions of the structure of nature and our ability to copy its form."²¹

In digital systems such as language, he writes, meanings are "context free (at least relatively so)" - something he calls "portability" - which is why dictionaries are possible.

However, pictures, maps and the like cannot be captured by

vocabularies. Their lines and areas are "entirely dependent on the total context in which [they] appear" and are therefore "captive of that which is, in reality, being depicted."²²

He emphasizes two points about language as digital forms of information - first, and this harkens back to Korzybski, that words, unlike pictures, do not call to mind specific referents but "a category of things; which is to say, words are concepts."²³ Words are not representations of reality. "They are representations of ideas about reality."²⁴

This is why (the second point) dictionaries are possible and all language is paraphrasable and translatable. Translation can occur because an idea, unlike a picture, can be represented in various ways. "Words have synonyms. Pictures do not."²⁵ Analogic forms, such as a picture, are not translatable. "A picture must be experienced to be experienced."²⁶

In two important paragraphs, Postman then brings TV and school into the discussion.

The image - concrete, unique, nonphrasable - versus the word - abstract, conceptual, translatable. This is one of several conflicts between TV and school, and perhaps the most important. For obvious reasons that have to do with the structure of television, its curriculum is essentially

imagistic, that is picture-centred. Its teaching style is therefore almost wholly narrative. To put it simply, the content of TV curriculum consists of picture stories. The school curriculum, on the other hand, tends to be word or concept-centred and its teaching style exposition. The school curriculum - at least in its content - consists of abstract propositions: linguistic statements of which we may say they are true or false, verifiable or not, logical or confused."¹⁷

In the next paragraph he links analogic forms to emotion and digital forms to cognitive capacities:

This is another way of saying that the TV curriculum does its work in analogic symbols which appeal directly to emotional and largely unreflective responses, while the school curriculum, relying heavily on digital symbolism, requires sophisticated cognitive processing. It is not so true, as so many have insisted that watching TV is a passive experience...In watching TV, children have their emotions fully engaged. It is their capacity for abstraction that is quiescent. In school, the situation is apt to be reversed. For there, you are required in principle to understand and consider what is being said. That means you are expected to paraphrase, translate and reformulate what is said, which is why tests are so easy to give in school. In experiencing TV, you are required to feel what is seen, which is why there can be no paraphrase and no meaningful test."¹⁸

The difference between these two symbols, which he sums up bluntly as "one that 'demands conceptualization' and one that 'evokes feeling'" has many implications, claims Postman.²⁹ The "most important" implication is that the content of the TV curriculum is "irrefutable. You can

dislike it but you cannot disagree with it."³⁰

To justify this irrefutability, Postman relies on his equation of analogic symbols to emotions. "The picture-stories on TV do not make statements except in the sense of evoking feelings."³¹ This is why, he interjects, the truth-in-advertising laws are mostly pointless. "There is no way to show that the feelings evoked by the imagery of a MacDonald's commercial are false or indeed, true. Such words as true and false come out of a different universe of symbolism altogether."³²

In a 1982 article Postman claims that "the first character of the TV curriculum....the one from which most of the others are generated," is TV's "analogic, nondiscursive visual image."³³

Indeed, as this chapter in Conserving progresses, it is clear that a fundamental factor in TV's power is its analogic status and the emotional responses its images evoke.

TV is both aesthetic and (at least) quasi-religious. Because its primary form of information is the image...it is concerned with showing concrete people and situations toward which one responds by either accepting or rejecting them on emotional grounds. Television teaches you to know through what you see and feel. Its epistemology begins and largely ends in the viscera. As blasphemous as it may appear to say it, television

has something of the power we associate with religious communication, at least in the sense it relies heavily on moral teachings resting on an emotional base.³⁴

What is also clear is the importance of this digital/analogic dichotomy. As he said above, the implications of this are many. As well as TV's irrefutable nature, the difference between these two types of symbols explains TV's undifferentiated nature, and the fact that the school curriculum is hierarchial and graded.³⁵

Observations: i Emotions

Consider, based on Postman's arguments presented so far, several observations regarding his view of the power of TV. The first concerns emotions. For one, his view of them is severely limited; he aligns emotions with passivity and absence of cognition, so much so that he sees emotions in complete opposition to the intellect. He refers above to "emotional and largely unreflective responses." In The Disappearance he writes. "[pictures] call on our emotions, not our reason. They ask us to feel, not think."³⁶ He believes that ideas have a structure - "they are built upon one another,"³⁷ and it is necessary to understand the lower order ideas before the complex ones. But emotions are one-dimensional and uncomplicated; "I doubt there is a hierarchy of emotions."³⁸

Not only does Postman make too sharp a contrast between emotional and intellectual responses," but he starkly aligns them with TV and print media respectively. Among the many examples: In The Disappearance, he writes that television, "requires perception, not conception. [It] offers a fairly primitive but irresistible alternative to the linear and sequential logic of the printed word and tends to make the rigors of a literate education irrelevant."⁴⁰

"One must qualify for the deeper mysteries of the printed page by submitting oneself to the rigors of a scholastic education. One must progress slowly, sequentially, even painfully...Television, by contrast, is an open-admission technology to which there are no physical, economic or cognitive imaginative restraints."⁴¹

In Amusing, he says that American TV offers a "variety of subject matter, requires minimal skills to comprehend it, and is largely aimed at emotional gratification."⁴²

As we saw in Chapter One, critics honed in on this point - that Postman offers only the stereotypical extremes; that is, the rational enlightened reader and the most enlightened form of reading such as books, as well as the passive TV watcher and the shallowest TV shows. He does not acknowledge

anything in between, be it the gritty, sensational novel or the fluffy tabloid newspaper, both of which likely evoke an emotional response, or the thought-provoking TV documentary.

ii Form

A second observation of Postman's take on the power of TV is that he is fixated on TV's form. By "fixated", I mean that while he alludes to other aspects of TV, he always returns to TV's form as its determining characteristic.

In The Disappearance, and elsewhere as we have seen, he states, "TV is first and foremost a visual medium....It is the picture that dominates the viewer's consciousness and carries the critical meaning. To say it as simply as one can, people watch television."³

Recall from Chapter One that some critics called this emphasis on TV's form technological determinism. (I distinguished this from a another, larger-scale technological determinism.) Postman certainly implies that form has sealed the fate of TV. There is little anyone can do.

TV is not a school, or a book or a curriculum other than itself. It does what its structure makes it do, and it teaches as it must."

In Amusing, he writes that it is "moving pictures" that people like to watch," - millions of them of short duration

and dynamic variety. It is 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 accommodate the values of show business."⁴⁵ (emphasis mine)

Another example of this determinism: Postman cites a TV program, Sunrise Semester, saying that the conceptual level could be varied because it was just a person talking, giving forth sentences. But, he writes, "television is rarely used in this way, for the same reason that a 747 jet is not meant to carry mail from New York City to Newark: it is badly suited to the task."⁴⁶

One reason Postman is fixated on TV's form is that, as we saw above in the discussion about analogic and digital forms, TV's form, its analogic nature, is responsible for its power. Trace his logic back when he described analogic symbols above - TV's power comes from the emotion it evokes, which in turn derives from its analogic nature. Therefore, its power comes from its analogic visual form.

Recall, from the discussion on symbolism, his idea of media metaphors and the powers he endows them with - they classify the world for us, and "argue a case of what the world is like." He continues, "such is the power of the form of information."

In Conserving, he writes that TV offers

interesting and dynamic form, not interesting and dynamic ideational content. That is why viewers can watch the same program five or six times without boredom, for even the stories themselves are subordinate to the attractions of the individual image."

As well, recall that TV's visual form is the foundation of TV's irrefutable nature.

Pause for a moment to consider the implications of this irrefutability argument. Again, it is the most important implication of the digital/analogic dichotomy - "that the content of TV curriculum is irrefutable. You can dislike it, but you can't disagree with it. There is no way to refute Donny and Marie or an Ajax commercial. The semiotic form of the TV curriculum is not in propositional form, does not deal in the same sort of information that the symbols of the school curriculum do."

See that for Postman, the viewer has no choice - it is irrefutable; you cannot disagree with it. While I deal more with human beings, that is TV watchers, in Chapter Three, it is worthwhile to consider here the extent of TV's capabilities - it takes away your freedom. You cannot choose; you simply cannot disagree with it.

Returning to the idea of form as the key for Postman to TV's power, there is a caveat to this idea. This caveat means that those accusing Postman of this first, micro-technological determinism are not entirely correct. The caveat is that in many of his publications Postman states that the commercial aspect of TV is key to the way it currently operates, key to its manipulation.

By the commercial aspect, I mean the fact that TV is owned and operated by networks, who sell time to advertisers. In Postman's words, that "American TV is an unsleeping money-making machine."⁴⁹

He begins one chapter of How To Watch TV News with: "The backbone, the heat, the soul, the fuel, the DNA (choose whatever metaphor you wish) of non-public television in America is the commercial. This is as true of the television news show as any other form of programming."⁵⁰

Chapter One showed us how powerful Postman holds commercials to be. They tap into human needs and "seep into our souls"⁵¹. They have "devastated political discourse".⁵² Postman refers to them as "the most powerful source of socialization"⁵³ in society and "the most peculiar and pervasive form of communication to issue from the electric plug."⁵⁴

Then there is the commercial structure itself. "The anarchy in TV," Postman explains in an essay "The News", is a direct result of the commercial structure of broadcasting, which introduces into news judgement a single-mindedness more powerful than ideology - the overwhelming need to keep people watching."⁵⁵

This need for viewers is responsible for the chaotic atmosphere of the TV news; the story order, claims Postman, must be disorderly so as to "hold and build the viewership"⁵⁶. This need "to include everyone"⁵⁷ also means commercial TV cannot afford to be specialized with its content and journalists cannot offer lengthy or complex or sequential or challenging information.

Therefore, while Postman remains fixated on TV's form, in many places he acknowledges the importance to TV's power of its commercial nature. I will return to this caveat in Chapter Three.

iii Postman's Target: American TV

Consider a third aspect of Postman's arguments about TV - their exclusivity to American television.

Recall from Chapter One his views in Amusing and elsewhere⁵⁸. He distinguishes between a technology and a

medium, asserting that only in America has the technology been exploited to the point where it is a medium and, as such, has become a paradigm for American social and political culture.⁵⁹ In contrast, there are many places in the world where TV is used "mostly as if it were radio"⁶⁰ and where it does not have "the same meaning or power as it does in America."⁶¹

Indeed, throughout his books, while Postman occasionally refers to TV generically, almost all his statistics are from the US and all his references to programs, newscasts and personalities are to American television.⁶²

There are some corollaries to his comments. One is that, despite its corruptive nature, Postman insists American TV with its beautiful images and "exquisitely crafted commercials"⁶³ is in demand the world over. It even threatens to undermine the TV systems of other countries, including drawing audiences away from home-grown programs.⁶⁴

Secondly, for Postman the main difference between American TV and that in other countries is its commercial nature. In a speech to the Austria Club of Vienna where he is trying to warn the Austrians of the consequences of adopting commercial TV, he refers to the US as "the only nation, at

present, where commercial interests dominate television."⁶⁵ In the US, he writes, "where television is controlled by advertising revenues, its principal function, naturally enough is to deliver audiences to advertisers."⁶⁶ But he asserts that commercial TV poses "the biggest threat to traditional patterns of life in all industrialized nations, including your own."⁶⁷

It seems that for Postman this commercialization is part of a larger American attitude. In the preface to this speech he says that the Europeans might not be aware of the impact of US television because "the American method of imperialism is more subtle than it might seem. I said that what we do is send our television shows. Not exactly. What we really send is our idea of television." After expounding on the difference between a technology and a medium he says, "Television is essentially the same technology in America and in Europe. But for forty years it has been two different media, used in different ways for different purposes, based on different suppositions."⁶⁸

In an essay about commercials, "The Parable of the Ring Around the Collar," he applauds the Europeans for taking television "seriously". However, he writes

I have been close to obsessed about television,
for it does not seem to me that my countrymen have

yet taken its measure. We speak about America as if television has been merely added to it and little else has changed. Americans watch television but we have not yet reached the point where we are watching ourselves watching it."⁶⁹

iv Past Attitudes

Another observation is how Postman's attitudes about TV have changed since the beginning of his career.

When he first wrote about television, he endowed it with considerable powers, but he was very positive towards it.

Consider the claims Postman makes about TV in his first book, Television and the Teaching of English, which he wrote as an English Professor interested in linguistics. The book's purpose was to "contribute towards the 'television education' of our students...to offer motivation, aid and confidence to teachers of English who wish to help their students obtain that education."⁷⁰

This book tries to convince teachers that TV is useful. "Teachers need to accustom themselves to the serious possibility that print, their preferred or "natural" medium, is not necessarily the preferred medium of the youngsters they teach."⁷¹In sharp contrast to his statements in Amusing he advocates the co-existence of TV and the print medium many times. For example, he writes: "A more realistic

and challenging point of view is to regard the coexistence of these forms as a more or less permanent arrangement and aim at making the students 'literate' in the various media which engage their attention."⁷²

He devotes a lot of space to TV's effects and refutes the argument that TV is harmful to children. He writes, "there is little scientific evidence to support this."⁷³ He sees as a good thing that "children may accumulate, through television, a fund of knowledge that was simply inaccessible to pre-television children."⁷⁴ Moreover, TV has made available an unprecedented number of products "of high culture"⁷⁵ - be they Shakespeare's plays or the works of Euripides - to the point that it is "an instrument of cultural enlightenment."⁷⁶

In this book he sees TV as having certain powers associated with its ability to create intimacy.

For example, he is very impressed with TV drama writer Paddy Chayefsky, asserting about Chayefsky's most widely known play *Marty* (comparing it to its movie adaption) that, "On the television screen, however, the play was an artistic masterpiece, producing an illusion of intimacy that was at once disturbing and edifying. Perhaps no other medium is better suited to the 'slice of life' drama than television,

and Chayefsky exploited this fact repeatedly."⁷⁷

He speaks of certain "inescapable facts" about the medium, one being its effectiveness at showing people up close. He quotes writer Rod Serling: "The key to TV drama was intimacy and the facial study on a small screen carried with it a meaning and power far beyond its usage in the motion pictures."⁷⁸

Another is its visual nature. He lauds critic Walter Kerr's idea that TV is a "visual essay", and that there is a "direct, informal and intimate communication with the audience."⁷⁹

Postman celebrates this power, but without feeling it is manipulative. He calls television's ability to reveal events and people "with a sense of intimacy and truthfulness" as its most "natural and compelling resource".⁸⁰ In this way, the everyday can be believable and dramatic. Here he adds (ironically considering how much he blames TV for the corruption of politics in his recent books) that "this is an aesthetic principle which candidates for office ignore at their peril."⁸¹ And in many other places Postman states that TV helps politics and campaigns.⁸²

Importantly - because it contrasts with the technological determinism (the larger macro type) he shows in his recent books - he observes more than once that TV reflects the values of its environment rather than creating them and that we should not blame television for any poor values we have. He enthusiastically cites two studies, one by Joseph Klapper, another by Wilbur Schramm. Klapper's offers scientific research that "attitudes which make people behave the way they do are formed by forces such as the home, school, religion, and peer groups and that television tends to reinforce rather than change these attitudes."³ Schramm's study, explains Postman, suggests the question "what is television bringing to the child?" is considerably less relevant than the question, "What is the child bringing to television?"⁴

Postman lists many children's TV programs, recommending a few such as Captain Kangaroo which shows "unfailing respect for the intelligence of the young viewers."⁵

Indeed, what strikes a reader about this book is the breadth of Postman's knowledge not so much on the theory of television but on the shows themselves. Its writers, directors, critics, genres, the films on TV, the actors and actresses - he knows them all.

As well, he seems to applaud its ability to call up particular emotional responses. "Television is the only medium in which comedy is given a central place."⁸⁶ And he details Chayefsky's play *Marty* - the unmarried Bronx butcher attracted to a sensitive homely girl; a mother who "fears being abandoned". The play is entirely successful against a backdrop of "man's need of loving and being loved, his fear of living alone and his need of communicating articulately."⁸⁷

In the end, the book encourages "a serious consideration of television in the classroom,"⁸⁸ promoting for example the development of a television workshop in every classroom. These will be "an acknowledgement that television is an important medium of communication that belongs somewhere in the English curriculum."⁸⁹

v Technological Determinism

Before summarizing this chapter, some clarifications about technological determinism are necessary. In Chapter One we put such determinism on two levels - a micro and a macro level, the former describing a tendency to see one aspect of a medium - such as its "form" - as its determining characteristic, the latter as the tendency to see media and technology in general as determining our culture and its values.

Regarding the first micro level, we saw in this chapter's section on Form that Postman is, for the most part, guilty of this, although we conditioned this with a caveat about the commercial aspect of TV. Chapter Three clarifies this.

But with respect to the second, macro level, there is no doubt that Postman qualifies. The opposition he offers to such determinism in his earlier work as we just saw above, makes this even more intriguing. He is explicit about the fact that he sees media as creating our social institutions, rather than the other way around. In Amusing, he even writes, that the question, "Does television shape culture or merely reflect it?" has "largely disappeared as television has gradually become our culture."⁹⁰

In Conserving, he writes: "We are surely permitted to say that our social institutions do not create information. It is information that creates our social institutions."⁹¹

Later in this book, he describes media education as the discovery of "how our thought and behaviour are controlled by our communications technology."⁹² The field of media ecology then "transcends several subjects of wider acceptance, including, for example, psychology and sociology, since it assumes that the psychology or people and their methods of social organization, are, in large

measure, the product of a culture's characteristic information patterns."”

Review

Chapter One demonstrated just how powerful Postman sees TV as being. This chapter has accounted for that power, pinpointing its source in a variety of Postman's writing. The main source of this power is TV's status as disseminator of analogic symbols and its ability to elicit emotional responses from the TV audience. We have also observed that Postman has a narrow view of emotions, a strict division between emotions and the intellect and their alignment with visual and print media. For the most part, Postman is fixated on TV's form as the source of its power. We saw that Postman's criticisms of TV are directed primarily at the US and, as well, that earlier in his career, the power with which he endowed TV was not accompanied by accusations of its corruptive nature. Finally we saw that there is no doubt that Postman is a technological determinist in the larger macro sense of the term.

ENDNOTES - CHAPTER TWO

1. Neil Postman, Amusing Ourselves to Death (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 159.
2. Neil Postman, Teaching as a Subversive Activity (New York, Dell Publishing, 1969), p. 161.
3. Ibid., p. 161.
4. Ibid., p. 163.
5. Neil Postman, The Disappearance of Childhood, First Vintage Books Edition (1994; rpt. New York: Delacorte Press, 1982) p. 42.
6. Neil Postman, Charles Weingartner and Terence Moran (eds) Language in America (New York: Pegasus, 1969) p. vii. Postman continues, "Or to put it another way, man is the only form of life with the potential for abstracting, for using symbols to stand for aspects of the existential environment in which he tries to survive. (p. vii-viii). In an earlier book he writes, "Communication, defined in its basic and most human terms is a process of exchanging symbolic meaning" (See Neil Postman Television and the Teaching of English (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts Inc. 1961) p. 14.
7. See Postman, Television, p. 6. See also Postman, Subversive p. 161.
8. Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, Linguistics: A Revolution in Teaching (New York: Dell Publishing, 1966), Chapter 2.
9. Ibid., p. 18.
10. Ibid., p. 198. To quote Postman in full, "Language is not merely the vehicle for expressing thought, it is also the driver. Or to shift the metaphor around, language is related to thought somewhat in the way in which a musical instrument is related to the sound it makes. No matter how various are the runes one can play, the instrument one uses limits what can be played." (p. 198)
11. Postman, Subversive, p. 106.

12. Postman, "Alfred Korzybski", in Consciousness Objections: Stirring Up Trouble About Language, Technology and Education, (New York: Vintage Books, 1988) p. 141. In Subversive, Postman paraphrases Korzybski:

The only reality that is not metaphorical is 'reality' itself. All human symbolization, therefore, is metaphor, an abstraction, an 'as if'. The word is not the thing, Korzybski insisted. Whenever you say something is, it is not. (p. 83)

13. Postman, Subversive, p. 160. Here he writes: "One of McLuhan's important contributions to the new education is the extension of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis...McLuhan and his colleague in media studies, anthropologist Edmund Carpenter, have suggested that the new electronic media of communication comprise new languages."
14. Postman, Amusing, p. 10.
15. Neil Postman, Teaching as a Conserving Activity (New York: Delacorte Press, 1979), p. 39.
16. Conserving, pp. 52-57. The only other place Postman refers to this distinction, to my knowledge, is in an article, "Engaging Students in the Great Conversation," Phi Delta Kappan Vol. 64 (December 1982) No. 4, p. 311.
17. Postman, Conserving, p. 53.
18. Ibid., p. 53.
19. Ibid., p. 53.
20. Ibid., p. 54.
21. Ibid., p. 57.
22. Ibid., p. 54.
23. Ibid., p. 54.
24. Ibid., p. 54. Just prior to this, he writes: "As long as words are used, we are always at a considerable distance from reality."
25. Ibid., p. 55. Or as he often claims, "One word is worth a thousand pictures. For a word is a creation of the imagination in a way that a picture never can be." See "Engaging Students", p. 311.

26. Ibid., p. 55.
27. Postman, Conserving, p. 55-56.
28. Ibid., p. 56.
29. Ibid., p. 56.
30. Ibid., p. 56.
31. Ibid., p. 57.
32. Ibid., p. 57.
33. Postman, "Engaging Students", p. 311.
34. Postman, Conserving., pp. 58-59.
35. Ibid., pp. 58-70.
36. Postman, The Disappearance, p. 73
37. Ibid., p. 59.
38. Ibid., p. 59.
39. It seems very clear to me, even without consulting literature on the topic, that some emotions are more complex than others. Pure fear - as when someone is chasing you wanting to kill you - is pretty base. Guilt is more complicated, as is revenge. Guilt for example could hardly be seen in direct contrast to cognitive capacities.
40. Postman, The Disappearance, p. 78.
41. Ibid., p. 84. Another example was cited above: "The TV curriculum does its work in analogic symbols which appeal directly to the emotional and largely unreflective responses, while the school curriculum, relying heavily on digital symbolism, requires sophisticated cognitive processing."
(Conserving., p. 56)
42. Postman, Amusing, p. 86.
43. Postman, The Disappearance, p. 77.
44. Postman, Conserving, p. 70.
45. Postman, Amusing, p. 92.

46. Postman, The Disappearance, p. 78. Another example: In Conserving, he says that TV's structure precludes the possibility of any real improvement to it. "It is pointless to spend time or energy deploring television or even making proposals to 'improve' it. Of course, the seriousness, maturity, and general quality of its programs certainly can be increased. But the characteristics I am talking about are deeply embedded in the structure of television. They are an integral part of the environment that television creates. From this point of view, television cannot be improved." (p. 69)
47. Postman, Conserving, p. 66.
48. Ibid., p. 56.
49. Neil Postman and Steve Powers, How To Watch TV News (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), p.9.
50. Ibid., p. 115.
51. Ibid., p. 124.
52. Postman, Amusing., p. 126.
53. "She Wants Her TV! He Wants His Book!" (Dinner Conversation), Harper's March 1991, p. 148.
54. Ibid., p. 149.
55. Postman and Powers, How To Watch TV News, p. 81.
56. Ibid., p. 112. His idea is that the news tries to present an ungovernable world, but the newscaster is in control. (See pp. 112-114.)
57. Ibid., p. 112.
58. See also Postman's essay "The Conservative Outlook" in Conscientious Objections, pp. 103-115.
59. Postman, Amusing, p. 111.
60. Ibid., p. 85.
61. Ibid., p. 85.
62. From a general review of Postman's texts, it can be said that all his statistics - usually on how many commercials a child has seen by the age of five, or the percentage of the adult population watching TV

at a given hour - refer to the US. As for other references to TV, these amount to the likes of Dan Rather, the NB, ABC, The Federal Communications Act, Gunsmoke, Laugh-In, Charlie's Angels, Ted Koppel, Clint Eastwood, The Children's Television Network and movies like Being There and Bugsy Malone.

63. Postman, Amusing, p. 86.
64. Postman and Powers, How to Watch TV News, p. 4.
65. Postman, "The Conservative Outlook", p. 109.
66. Ibid., p. 109.
67. Ibid., p. 107.
68. Preface to "The Conservative Outlook", p. 104.
69. Preface to the essay, "The Parable of the Ring Around the Collar", in Conscientious Objections, p. 66.
70. Postman, Television, p. 1. In the same introduction he writes: "By giving it an unprecedented opportunity to function on new contexts and to appear in new forms, television has extended the force and influence of the English language." (p. 1)
71. Ibid., p. 13.
72. Ibid., p. 13. Another example from that book:
"Apparently, reading and watching television are not only competitive but also complementary activities. On the other hand, some of the functions of reading - for example as a means of acquiring information - are fulfilled more satisfactorily by television so that reading assumes a new role in the media spectrum."
(p. 35)
73. Ibid., p. 32.
74. Ibid., p. 35.
75. Ibid., p. 36.
76. Ibid., p. 37.
77. Ibid., pp. 46-7.
78. Ibid., p. 47. "[Television] is the psychoanalytic medium," writes Postman, quoting "a director". (p. 47).

79. Ibid., p. 66.
80. Ibid., p. 67.
81. Ibid., p. 67.
82. Two examples of television's beneficiary role here are:
"Certainly, the campaign debates [on TV] of the presidential candidates drew much of their excitement from their sense of the actual and the unpredictable." (Television, p.65) and;
"This mixture has also been used with notable success for journalistic purposes. For example, probably one of the dramatic visual essays ever presented on television was the 'Army-McCarthy' hearings, in which the television camera, as incisively as an any characterization written by Herodotus or Carlyle, penetrated to the essential qualities of public figures." (p. 66)
83. Ibid., p. 32. Several pages later he writes: "Like all literary types, the literature of television reflects the assumptions and values of the men who create it and to some extent, their assumptions about the about audiences for whom they create....Although we may criticize some of the literature of television for encouraging the acquisition of material comforts as an end in itself, we must concede that this tendency, too, is a genuine reflection of our times rather than an emphasis manufactured by latter-day Medicis." (p. 40)
84. Ibid., p. 32. "Television is, as Schramm puts it, 'only one voice and one influence...' and, according to the scientific research, not necessarily a malignant or an overwhelming voice." (p. 32)
85. Ibid., p. 72.
86. Ibid., p. 71.
87. Ibid., p. 46.
88. Ibid., p. 85.
89. Ibid., p. 107.
90. Postman, Amusing, p. 79.
91. Postman, Conserving p. 40. Another example is in The Disappearance of Childhood: "Although economics, politics, ideology, religion and other factors affect the course of childhood - make it more or less

important - they cannot create it or expunge it. Only literacy by its presence or absence has that power." (p. 122)

92. Postman, Conserving, p. 192.

93. Ibid., p. 186.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CONTRADICTIONS, THE POWERLESSNESS

In this chapter I explore further what underlies Postman's reasoning about the power of TV. I argue that, in addition to the reasoning offered in Chapter Two - the emotion-evoking powers of analogic symbols among them - Postman's television is powerful because Postman sees human beings as powerless before it. As well, a third factor in this power is the nature of American commercial culture.

I start by offering three contradictions based on the observations made in Chapter Two. These contradictions lead to two conclusions: that despite his dismissal of them, emotions are important to Postman. I also conclude that it is not so much TV Postman is against but American commercial culture.

I then outline a discussion of power contained in an essay "Power and Structure" by Steven Lukes.

From these conclusions and Lukes' article I make another conclusion that a crucial element in the power of TV for Postman is his view of human beings - the powerlessness of people in front of television. I argue that for Postman TV's non-hierarchical, non-elitist, emotion-evoking nature is in Lukes' terms a structural constraint for people and puts

them out of control. Indeed, I suggest further that behind this attitude is deep preoccupation with being in control. Both of these help us to clarify Postman's arguments about TV's power.

Three Contradictions

Consider first, three major contradictions on Postman's part based on the points made in Chapter Two.

The first is that while Postman has a low opinion of pictures and the emotional responses they evoke, he also sees them as powerful. He sees these responses as unreflective, completely non-hierarchical and the product of non-cognitive visceral reactions. Yet he endows these emotional responses with considerable power. Recall a statement from Chapter Two - "Television teaches you to know through what you see and feel. Its epistemology begins and ends largely in the viscera. As blasphemous as it may appear, TV has something of the power we associate with religious communication." In a 1982 essay, he writes, "linguistic content must always lose when it competes with high-speed visual information."¹

Can he have such a low opinion of these emotional reactions yet see them as so powerful?

The second contradiction is that although Postman has low opinion of TV pictures and the emotional responses they evoke, he makes it clear that the emotion-evoking TV experience is more natural than the experience of reading print.

In a dinner debate with cultural theorist Camille Paglia, Postman says, "humans are not programmed to be literate. In Locke's essay on education, he insists that the body must become a slave to the mind. One of my students, upon hearing that quotation, said, 'I know what you mean.'"²

He admits to Paglia that reading entails a loss of "some part of the cerebral development of the senses, the sensorium."³

The literate person does pay a price for literacy. It may be that readers become less physically active and not as sensitive to movement, to dance, and to other symbolic modes. That's probably true.⁴

As we noted in Chapter One, in The Disappearance of Childhood Postman refers to the traits that children develop as they become adults (and, by his extension, good readers). These include "a vigorous sense of individuality," the capacity to think logically, defer gratification and, "of course, the capacity for extraordinary feats of self-

control."(emphasis mine)⁵ He agrees with Ariès that because reading valued "quietness, immobility, contemplation, precise regulation of bodily functions," with children "'nature' had to be overcome" if they were to receive a satisfactory education.⁶

Consider these two contradictions: Postman has a low opinion of TV pictures and the emotional responses they evoke yet he sees these responses as powerful.

Postman has a low opinion of TV's pictures and the emotional responses they evoke, yet he sees them as natural.

We can conclude that if for Postman TV's emotional responses are both powerful and natural, he must see them as significant.

A third contradiction is that while Postman insists that TV's visual form is the source of its corruption, he claims that it is only American TV that is corrupt. Either other factors contribute to TV's corruption, or Postman feels his arguments about TV apply worldwide.

Recall from Chapter Two why he feels this way about American TV - It's because American TV is both commercial and more visually appealing than TV elsewhere. As he said in Amusing,

TV's form is exploited more in the free enterprise climate of the U.S.

He traces this exploitation in an essay, "Remembering the Golden Age", given to a group of Swedish TV producers to try to show them how TV can "create a true theatre of the masses." He reviews what he sees as the Golden Age of TV - the time of Chayefsky and others whom he thinks produced a corruption-free, captivating "theatre for the masses."⁷

He then explains how, after 1960, Americans became fascinated with the technological magic of TV and the scripts became irrelevant. Entrepreneurs and business people discovered that TV "was a vast, unsleeping money machine" as long as it "kep[t] viewers in a condition of almost psychopathic consumership."⁸ As TV moved away from serious and provocative dramas towards sit-coms and game shows, "the function of TV changed. Its uses fell into the hands of merchants who, obviously, have a different agenda from serious artists."⁹

He contrasts the U.S. with Sweden, where TV culture "doesn't operate on twenty-four hours a day." Its writers are - thanks to Sweden's increasing significance in world affairs - provided with "weighty themes to explore," and not, "obsessed with technological wizardry." As a result, Sweden

has the conditions for a television theatre that "will speak to and for a national audience who will support it and take pride in it."¹⁰

This exploitation, and lack of exploitation, however have very little to do with TV's form, and a lot to do with the exploitative actions of the people and networks who produce television - that is the culture of commercial TV and the society that fosters this.

In fact, Postman writes in Amusing that television will not have "the same meaning or power as it does in America, which is to say, it is possible for a technology to be used so that its potentialities are prevented from developing and its social consequences are kept to a minimum."¹¹

We can conclude from this that Postman's real target of criticism is American commercial culture. In fact, the immediately preceding quotation alone exempts Postman from accusations of the first type of technological determinism - that it is TV's form alone that determines its performance.

There is much evidence for such a conclusion.

Postman's books are full of indirect and direct criticism of the U.S. First, as we saw in Chapter Two, there are his

critical statements about TV most of which refer to American TV.

As for American politics, Postman is beyond disillusionment. Image reigns and political parties are "irrelevant".¹² He writes that "In America, the fundamental metaphor for political discourse is the television commercial,"¹³ believing that politics, like consumer decisions, is based on emotional appeal and appearances "not tests of truth."¹⁴ And not all of his criticisms of U.S. politics have to do with TV. His low opinion of Ronald Reagan goes beyond Reagan's status as a former actor.¹⁵ He disagrees with most American foreign policy.¹⁶ Some of the essays in Conscientious Objections parody this policy and other aspects of American culture.

One essay, "Safe-Fail",¹⁷ tells of American translator Russell Goves, who, while working in the United Nations, misinterpreted the Russian ambassador's threats to invade certain countries as statements of peaceful withdrawal. It caused a huge uproar and made the U.S. look foolish.¹⁸

"Megatons for Anthromegs" mocks America's preoccupation with nuclear weapons. This quite sensationalist essay offers a dictionary of euphemistic terms we can use to talk about nuclear war in front of the children so they do not lose

sleep due to nightmarish images.¹⁹ "The Naming of Missiles" is a hilarious account of an actual Cape Canaveral Conference on Democratic Missile Nomenclature mocking both the U.S.'s preoccupation with weapons and its "unlimited devotion to democratic principles."²⁰

Many of his books and essays have a recurring pattern: he gives a nostalgic account of pre-twentieth century America and then lambastes certain aspects of the twentieth century. We saw this in Amusing. One essay, "Future Schlock",²¹ describes how the U.S., once known for its superior universities and churches, once the "The Empire of Reason", has now become "The Empire of Schlock."²² Because of "induced" technological change, Americans are now experiencing "the rapid erosion of our own intelligence"²³ and becoming "a massive class of mediocre people."²⁴

Postman sometimes wanders from his theme of TV or technology, often giving anecdotes or examples that reveal his underlying aversion to American culture - specifically its consumership, domination of show-business and exploitation of technology.

For example, in Amusing he cites the commencement exercises at Yale University. He bemoans that in the awarding of honorary degrees, the applause for actress Meryl Streep far

exceeded that for Mother Teresa or other humanitarians.²⁵

Recall what Postman stresses in The Disappearance of Childhood - that American culture is "the enemy of childhood" and that any improvement requires "an act of rebellion against American culture."²⁶ What Postman is angry at is that someone allows twelve-year old Brooke Shields to model blue jeans on bill boards, that Judy Blume decides to write grown-up books for pre-teens. TV has a role in this, but TV is not the only target of Postman's complaints.

Postman has some ingrained opinions about Americans, their attitudes and practices which repeat themselves in his work.

In his 1992 book Technopoly - something he defines as a "totalitarian technocracy"²⁷ - he explains why the "United States is the only culture to have become a technopoly."²⁸ One reason is "the American character"²⁹- something he brings up many times, whose description includes an obsession with newness to the point where newness "is the definition of improvement"³⁰. Or he defines this character as "so congenial to the sovereignty of technology."³¹ He attributes this to freedom in America, referring to "the American distrust of constraints" and "the American scepticism towards culture itself."³² Technology succeeded

in America because in the face of technology's promises of convenience and comfort, Americans thought "there seemed no reason to look for other sources of fulfilment or creativity or purpose."³³ Even the U.S. medical system is "notorious for its 'characteristic aggressiveness'".³⁴ In his discussion with Paglia he puts American commercial TV on par with the imagistic propaganda of Nazi Germany.³⁵

To reiterate then, the target of Postman's criticisms is to a large extent American culture. The form of TV is an important factor in its power, but the damage that TV has done - Postman's true concern - is a function of the exploitation of this form by American society.

Power

As the idea of power is important to this chapter, it is necessary first to explain in what sense I use the word. I am relying on the concept of power contained in an essay "Power and Structure" by the British philosopher Steven Lukes. I offer here a very streamlined and partial interpretation of Lukes' discussion.

For Lukes, the concept of power at its most simple level deals with the extent to which social actors, whether individuals or collectives, are constrained to think and act in the ways that they are.³⁶ For example, we might ask in

what ways is the Prime Minister prevented from signing Canada to a multi-lateral nuclear disarmament treaty? In what ways is my friend prevented from overcoming her alcohol addiction? How can the education system act - that is, exercise power - to counterbalance the rising One-Eyed Monster of Technology? Writes Lukes, these sorts of issues centre on the relation between power and structure.³⁷

For Lukes, we can talk about power only when human agents perform voluntary actions in the face of open alternatives:

Human agents exercise their characteristic powers when they act voluntarily on the basis of wants and beliefs which provide them with reasons for so acting. Such an exercise of the power of human agency implies that the agent at the point of action has the power to act otherwise, that is, at the least the ability and the opportunity both to act and not act; it is in his power to do either; there is, 'an openness between performing and failing to perform the action' and there is no set of external circumstances such that in those circumstances the agent will necessarily act."³⁸
(emphasis mine)

According to Lukes, then, agents exercising power have a relative autonomy and, "could have acted differently".³⁹

He gives the example of an employer who fires his workers in pursuance of a strategy to cut costs. He compares this to a government liquidator who declares an insolvent company bankrupt, and has to throw his workers out of work. The

first example writes Lukes, is "a simple case of power exercise on practically every level" whereas the second is not, "just because we assume that the liquidator has no alternative (as liquidator - we may argue otherwise if we separate the man from his role)."40

If people exercise power only when they act voluntarily, then an important issue is whether or not they are constrained and how they are constrained.

In this light, Lukes discusses how we define constraints on agents. The categories for constraints can have many permutations. He starts with external constraints - those that have little to do with what agents want or feel and exist outside the agent; they are usually geographical or technological. (I cannot walk to Australia.) Internal constraints are those internal to agents such as his attitudes or inabilities. Lukes cites an MP restrained by pressures from his constituency to appease certain groups, or an incapacitation such as a headache or a disease.

He makes a second distinction between positive and negative constraints: the former is an actual obstacle or preventing condition, the latter is an absence of something such as resources or knowledge that prevents an option from being realized.

He points out that these can all cross-cut one another, creating four categories: internal positive restraints (headaches, obsessive thoughts and desires are examples) or internal negative restraints (ignorance weakness and deficiencies in skill); external positive constraints ("pointed bayonets", locked doors) and finally external negative constraints (lack of money, weapons or transportation).⁴¹ How we make these distinctions, Lukes adds, especially that between internal and external constraints, depends on, in the words of philosopher Joel Feinberg, "how we draw the boundaries of the self".⁴²

Most relevant to this chapter is whether or not constraints deprive agents of their power - their ability to act, or act otherwise. In this light Lukes raises another distinction - that between rational and structural constraints: those constraints which operate through the agent's reasons and those that do not.

Rational constraints limit an agent's options by "simply providing them with relevant and sufficient reasons not to act in certain ways".⁴³ The paradigm example here is economic restraints which by putting too high a price on certain options, make them ineligible - a student cannot go to Florida because of her budget. Another example would be a decision not to work in Canada because one hates the cold.

While your reasons limit and determine your choices, they are also compatible with your freedom to overcome them, depending on your weighing of the consequences - such as being further in debt in the case of the student. Rationally constrained, writes Lukes, the agent's actions are "both constrained and voluntary; on this view, I retain the power to act otherwise". Rational constraints, therefore, are not structural, "that is limiting the power of agents; the agent is seen as retaining the power to overcome the restraint, however high the price."⁴

Structural constraints, on the other hand, do not act through agents' reasons. They "limit an agent's freedom or power to act otherwise by precluding, (rather than putting a price tag on)" an option. They can take the form of a limit on one's internal ability such as being mentally handicapped, or addicted to alcohol, or a constraint on external opportunity such as being unable to apply to a male-only position because you are a woman. The point is, structurally constrained, the agent cannot act otherwise. He is powerless vis à vis that option.

Agents

Lukes stresses again that whether constraints are structural or rational depends very much on how agents are conceptualised. He offers later in the essay two extreme

views of agents: The first, the voluntarist or anti-structuralist view, holds that the constraints on choice-making agents are "minimal", and

in particular, the only structural constraints are external to the agent; internal constraints are always rational ones and can always be surmounted."⁴⁵

The voluntarist view "is hostile"⁴⁶ to the notion of internal structural constraints, believing that "the opportunity to succeed in one's projects may be lacking, but never the ability to think, choose and act otherwise."⁴⁷ We make the choices we make as free and autonomous individuals.

The views of Jean Paul Sartre and John Stuart Mill would be voluntarist - a person is what she makes of herself. She is rational, knows what is best for her and for this reason freedom is highly valued.

At the other extreme is what Lukes calls the structuralist position which "maintains (at its most extreme) that structural constraints - operating at different levels (economic, political and ideological) and both internally and externally - are uniquely determining and totally explanatory (hence the irrelevance of the problematic of agents as subjects)."⁴⁸

Such a position is often held by conservatives who feel man is Fallen Man, weak and irrational and as such deeply affected (and in need of) structures such as the State and the Church." Or, this position is that of most radicals, such as Marx or Freud, who see people as the product of economic and social structures, so much so that they allow this external structure to be "displaced" internally creating, in the case of these two thinkers, false consciousness and the Superego respectively.

One more point that may seem evident from the two views of agents: In his introductory comments, Lukes states that his argument addresses, among other things, the age-old conflict between voluntarism and determinism. Indeed, to talk of power in the sense Lukes does, he states, is to presuppose human agency - that people alone or together affect the thoughts and actions of others. "To put it another way, in a world of total structural determinism, imposing uniquely determining constraints upon action, there would be no place for power."⁵⁰

Powerless and Out of Control

Lukes' thinking is useful in that it helps clarify what I mean when I say powerless. For Postman, I argue that the power of TV stems from, as well as its form and its commercial nature, its ability to render watchers powerless.

Television's non-hierarchical, emotion-evoking, fragmented entertaining images are a structural constraint on viewers; they cannot do otherwise than to watch.

Return to the contradictions and the conclusions about them.

For one, we concluded that Postman's dislike of American culture is a large part of his criticism of TV. If this is true, why, one might ask, does he not just make a case against the content of American TV? Why does he remain fixated on TV's form insisting that this is behind its corruption?

The answer lies in the other conclusion we made - that despite Postman's low opinion of emotions in his recent books, he sees them as natural and powerful and hence they are quite significant to him.

I believe they are significant to him because he sees them as uncontrollable and unwieldy. Postman may not like the content of TV, but he is mesmerized by its form, its technology and its abilities such as that to evoke intimacy, and he always has been. (Recall the awe he felt towards Chayefsky and early TV dramas.) In fact, now, as then, he sees it as a temptation - as something very pleasurable and captivating that brings life alive like nothing else can.

Evidently he felt different about this power earlier in his career. I deal with the time span momentarily. For now, focus on how Postman has felt in his recent books: when TV is on it is in control. His experience has him believing that the TV watcher is powerless. In Lukes' terms, TV acts as a structural constraint.

A clarification should be made here. When I refer to Postman's view of TV watchers or agents or human nature, I am referring to how he feels about other people in general as he observes and analyses them. That said, my comments above apply to how Postman himself feels about TV. Indeed, I would argue that Postman's feelings and his assumptions of others are connected and that he himself empathizes with much of this powerlessness.

Returning to the fact that the TV is a structural constraint rendering viewers powerless, recall from Chapter Two Postman's discussion on form and how it automatically sealed the fate of TV. "It is the nature of the medium that it must suppress the content of ideas in order to accommodate the requirements of visual interest" we cited from Amusing. "It does what its structure makes it do" and no one can change this," he wrote in Conserving. TV's power necessitates the elimination of the potency of print. Recall from Chapter One Postman's assertion that co-existence between print and TV

is impossible. To Camille Paglia he laments, "So idolatry has triumphed. I think Luther would join Moses in saying that the cult of the word is defenceless in the face of the image."⁵²

At the same time, Postman implies that viewers are and have always been powerless to fight back. Recall his statement in Chapter Two about TV - that "you can dislike it, but you can't disagree with it."⁵³

In Amusing he insists that while TV, unlike Marxism, has not come as the design of an articulated ideology, it is

an ideology nonetheless, for it imposes a way of life, a set of relations among people and ideas, about which there has been no consensus, no discussion and no opposition. Only compliance.⁵⁴

He continues, commenting on how the automobile changed our identity. However, he writes, technological changes in our modes of communication are "even more ideology-laden than changes in our mode of transportation. Introduce the alphabet to a culture and you change its cognitive habits...Introduce speed-of-light transmission of images and you make a cultural revolution. Without a vote. Without polemics. Without guerilla resistance."⁵⁵ (emphasis mine)

Recall that in The Disappearance Postman argues that like books, TV publicizes what is private, namely socially sensitive subjects. But TV "has no way to close things down." It is "an open-admission technology to which there are no physical, economic, cognitive, or imaginative restraints."⁵⁶

No one can successfully oppose TV, Postman is implying. If structural constraints act by precluding options, making it impossible for agents to act otherwise, then for Postman, agents are powerless and TV is a structural constraint.

To take this further, I argue that Postman implies we are without any inner defences to resist this power. In this way, TV is also an internal structural constraint. It works on a personal level to affect our abilities and capacities.

Consider that Postman often refers to TV as a temptation, even a dangerous one⁵⁷, and often a temptation over print. In the exchange with Paglia, he refers twice to the importance of "building defences against the seductions of imagery."⁵⁸ He often uses the language of "addiction". One example: "We have become information junkies, addicted to news, demanding (even requiring) more and more of it, but without any notion of what to do with it."⁵⁹ In Amusing he promotes asking questions about TV, writing "To ask is to

break the spell."⁶⁰

And he refers constantly to manipulation. Commercials, he writes, are about money, but "they are also about the serious manipulation of our social and psychic lives."⁶¹ Their effectiveness stems from their invisibility. "Like religious parables, they invade our consciousness, seep into our souls. Even if you are half-awake when commercials run, thirty thousand of them will begin to penetrate your indifference. In the end, it's hard not to believe."⁶²

Temptation, addiction, manipulation - all imply a loss of inner control for the agent, as well as a futility in resisting TV. They suggest the emotional grasp that Postman feels TV has on a person, something we have emphasized. They imply that when watching TV, agents cannot do other than stay entranced, going back to Lukes. This, I would argue explains one of the contradictions above: even though Postman sees emotions as powerful and natural, the reason he does not explicitly recognize their importance is that they put him out of control. ⁶³

In Control

i Reading

This lack of control that Postman associates with TV becomes more clear if we consider, in contrast, the control Postman

associates with the experience of reading. First, reading is intellectually and physically engaging and demanding. More importantly, these passages are full of the language of not only control, but self-control. Arguably, Postman sees the complete occupation that reading offers as a way of staying clear of, that is controlling, emotions.

As we saw in Chapter One when he offers his versions of "print intelligence", reading for Postman is an industrious activity requiring logical sequential thinking, detachment and "struggling over semantic meaning"⁶⁴ with the author. Recall his preoccupation with symbolization, especially how readers must decipher the symbols of language, drawing the specific from the general, to reach the meaning of words. In other words, he believes we must work to get our information. He wrote in 1982 that, "[t]o the extent that a reader attends to the form or shape of letters, he or she is stalled or blocked from getting at their meaning."⁶⁵ Recall how important the ability to decipher symbols is to his idea of being a human being.⁶⁶

Postman makes great use of the language of self-control. Reading takes "feats of self-control", Postman states in The Disappearance, so much so that it is "unnatural" and requires that the exuberance of youth be "sharply modified."⁶⁷ When one learns to read, "self-restraint is a

challenge not only to the body, but to the mind as well."⁶⁸
 Another example: "One must progress slowly, sequentially, even painfully," he writes about reading, "as the capacity for self-restraint and conceptual thinking is both enriched and expanded."⁶⁹

Self-restraint and self-control are different from simply being "in control" in that the former evokes the image of the two selves, implying that reader is controlling some internal Id-like second self.

This split-self is certainly suggested in The Disappearance of Childhood when Postman explains how reading honed a sense of shame. For him, shame was an "essential element in the civilizing process."⁷⁰ He writes,

The book and the world of book learning represented an almost unqualified triumph over our animal nature; the requirements of a literate society made a finely honed sense of shame necessary. It is stretching a point only a little to say that print - by separating the message from the messenger, by creating an abstract world of thought, by demanding that the body be subordinated to the mind, by emphasizing the virtues of contemplation - intensified the belief in the duality of mind and body, which in turn encouraged a contemptuous regard for the body. Print gave us the disembodied mind, but left us with the problem of how to control the rest of us. Shame was the mechanism by which such control would be managed.⁷¹

Postman may not have a "contemptuous regard" for the body, but his huge endorsement of reading together with the complete rational engagement he associates with it leads one to suspect that he promotes a state of engagement where there is no room for emotions. In a tell-tale sentence, Postman sarcastically comments, "That is why a good reader cannot cheer on an apt sentence or pause to applaud even an inspired paragraph. Analytic thought is too busy for that, and too detached."⁷²

From what we know - that he sees TV and its emotions as powerful - we could speculate that for Postman reading offers him a way of staying clear of emotions.

ii Information

The importance of control for Postman and his view of agents is also revealed starkly in his arguments about information. In short, he values only that information which is linked to an immediate purpose. Anything else is irrelevant and part of an "information glut."

Recall from his books his idea that prior to the telegraph when you could not send news through space, news was "selective and pertinent to the lives of people"⁷³ and helped them to manage their affairs.⁷⁴ Thus, the "information-action ratio" was close enough that people had

"a sense of being able to control some of the contingencies in their lives."⁷⁵ The telegraph with its huge amounts of decontextualized information "began the process of making information uncontrollable," creating a market for "fragmented, discontinuous and essentially irrelevant news" which is the commodity of today's news industry."⁷⁶

Now, he writes, our information glut gives us "information as garbage, information divorced from purpose and even meaning."⁷⁷ We get answers to questions we never asked. This glut strips us of our defences; it causes a "diminished social and political potency."⁷⁸

To prove his point, Postman offers the reader some current affairs questions:

What steps do you plan to take to reduce conflict in the Middle East? Or the rates of inflation, crime and unemployment? What are your plans for preserving the environment or reducing the risk of nuclear war? What do you plan to do about NATO, OPEC, the CIA, affirmative action, and the monstrous treatment of the Baha'is in Iran?

He continues,

I shall take the liberty of answering for you: You plan to do nothing about them. You may of course cast a ballot for someone who claims to have some plans, as well as the power to act. But you can only do this once every four years, giving an hour of your time..."

Postman implies that we are so narrow-minded and impotent that we cannot take public information and find some interest in it.

In contrast, he claims a print culture is based on "the principles of managed information and sequential learning."⁸⁰

Indeed, it's managed information that Postman wants. Technopoly "flourishes", he writes, "when the defences against information have broken down."⁸¹ A chapter of Technopoly, called "The Broken Defences", details how "additional control mechanisms are needed to cope with new information,"⁸² these mechanisms being schools and other social institutions. He once told an American education journal that "The role of school is to protect children from information."⁸³ These institutions are a culture's "information immune system,"⁸⁴ in that they help combat "the dangers of information on the loose."⁸⁵

Then and Now

Returning to the power of TV, we have seen that early in his career Postman also noted this mesmerizing effect of TV, but in a positive way. In his later books while he still sees TV as captivating, the power is controlling and has turned TV into a social menace.

Recall how TV entranced him back in his Television and the Teaching of English - "Words which would scarcely be remembered when read in a novel or heard on the stage can almost never be forgotten when they invade the living room," he writes.⁶⁶

But nowhere do we sense that viewers are victims - that they are being controlled by the television. In fact he often implies that they are capable of handling new modes of technology and information. Take for example his comment (from Chapter Two) about TV and books. "A more realistic and challenging point of view is to regard the coexistence of these forms as a more or less permanent arrangement and aim at making the students 'literate' in the various media which engage their attention."⁶⁷

Technological Determinism

We have yet to clarify whether Postman is guilty of the second, macro type of technological determinism. Recall that we concluded he was not a technological determinist in the micro sense of the word.

The above discussion of power and control helps in this respect. I have tried to argue that the powerlessness of agents and the importance of being in control has only been a factor in Postman's more recent works. Early in his

career, while he is well aware of the power of TV, it does not strike him in a negative way - he does not feel he is losing control.

Recall the observations we made in Chapter Two about the second, macro type of technological determinism - that Postman directly contradicts himself on this at the beginning and at the middle of his career. Early on, as we saw, he cites Klapper and Schramm asserting that TV reinforces attitudes learned elsewhere. In later books he insists that rather than vice versa, "it is information that creates our social institutions.""

We can think about this huge change in attitude in another way. Recall Lukes' two views of agents as well as his idea that voluntarism and determinism directly conflict. For some reason, in his views on the way people react to TV, Postman evolves from a voluntaristic position, where he assumes agents have power, to a structuralist one, where he assumes they do not.

Recall that a voluntarist view is hostile to the idea of internal structural constraints. Back in 1961, for Postman, TV was just a piece of technology - albeit a captivating one - that sat in the living room and operated. By the 1980s, something sinister had happened - TV had "seeped into our

souls" and "infiltrated our lives". It became, arguably, an internal structural constraint. It follows that if his views on agents evolved so dramatically, that his position as a technological determinist (macro) changed too.

As I concluded then in Chapter Two, he does hold a technological determinist view in the macro sense of the term, but this attitude has come with time.

Summary

This chapter has attempted to hone in on the power of TV based on some observations made in Chapter Two.

While in Postman's work the power of television is assumed, Postman does not really make the source of this power explicit. In fact, as we saw, he can contradict himself on this matter.

In the end, there are three sources of power for TV - its analogic form, American commercial culture which exploits this form in a way that no other country does and lastly, the powerlessness of individuals in front of its images.

But we have made other conclusions that lead us to believe that Postman's arguments are possibly about more than the

power of TV. They are the outpouring of someone who dislikes American culture and who feels manipulated and controlled by his environment.

ENDNOTES - CHAPTER THREE

1. "Engaging Students in Great Conversation," Phi Delta Kappan Vol. 64, Dec., 1982. p. 310.
2. "She Wants Her TV! He Wants His Book!" (Dinner Conversation), Harper's, March, 1991. pp. 44.
3. Ibid., p. 47.
4. Ibid., p. 47. Postman continues, "It's a Faustian bargain. Literacy gives us an analytic, delayed response in perceiving the world, which is good for pursuits such as science or engineering. But we do lose some of the part of the cerebral development of the senses, the sensorium."
5. Neil Postman, The Disappearance of Childhood, First Vintage Books Edition (1994; rpt. New York: Delacorte Press, 1982), p. 46. He adds, "It is sometimes overlooked that book learning is "unnatural" in that it requires of the young a high degree of concentration and sedateness that runs counter to their inclinations."
6. Ibid., p. 46. In Conserving, he argues that whereas language promotes role models and human improvement, the media curriculum has an egalitarian base. Its message is that "Except for your unaccountable ignorance of how the products of technology may help you to achieve happiness, you are fine as you are. How you speak, what you value, and what you know require no improvement, for there is no level of culture that is better than yours." See Neil Postman, Teaching as a Conserving Activity (New York: Delacorte Press, 1969) p. 176.
7. Neil Postman, "Remembering the Golden Age", in Conscientious Objections (New York: Vintage Books, 1988) p. 123.
8. Ibid., p. 126.
9. Ibid., p. 126.
10. Ibid., p. 127.
11. Postman, Amusing, p. 85.
12. Ibid., p. 133.

13. Ibid., p. 126.
14. Ibid., p. 128. In the introduction to Amusing he writes "[W]e have reached the point where cosmetics has replaced ideology as the field of expertise over which a politician must have competent control." (p.4)
15. Examples abound of negative references to Reagan not including those complaining about his status as a former actor (He "would not be president of the United States were it not for television.") For example: "Even the Germans who know Ronald Reagan know that he is incapable of conceiving and putting together five consecutive sentences of political substance and logical force."; "But in fact President Reagan does not care one way or another whether any of this is preserved. I do not say that he is against preserving tradition; I only say that this is not where his interests lie."; "I see it as significant that although our current President, a former Hollywood actor, rarely speaks accurately and never precisely, he is known as the Great Communicator."; "The Reagan administration did not lie to the American public about Libya; it merely disseminated disinformation. And on the subject of the present administration, I am obliged to mention one of its more creative euphemisms concerning President Reagan,, of whom it is said he favours a 'hands-off managerial style'. I assume that the reader understands that this means he doesn't know what the hell is going on." See, respectively, "The Conservative Outlook", in Conscientious Objections, p. 107; "My German Question", in Conscientious Objections, p. 51; "The Conservative Outlook," p. 105; "Future Schlock" in Conscientious Objections, p. 169; "The Educationist as Painkiller", in Conscientious Objections, p. 92. See also Amusing, p. 97, 108-9.
16. For example, he writes "There are many Americans who carry in their heads such answers as 'America should proceed at once with our Star Wars project,' or 'We should send Marines to Nicaragua'. But if they do not know the questions to which these are the answers, their opinions are quite literally thoughtless." See "Defending Against the Indefensible", in Conscientious Objections, pp. 26-27.
17. Postman explains that the essay is titled "Safe- Fail" because the popular novel Fail-Safe told of how we accidental fell into nuclear war. See "Safe-Fail", in Conscientious Objections, pp. 175 - 184.
18. Ibid., pp. 175-184.

19. "Megatons for Anthromegs", in Conscientious Objections, pp. 99-103.
20. "The Naming of Missiles", in Conscientious Objections, pp. 35-39.
21. "Future-Schlock" in Conscientious Objections, pp. 162-174.
22. Ibid., p. 164.
23. Ibid., p. 164.
24. Ibid., p. 162.
25. Postman, Amusing, p. 96.
26. Postman, The Disappearance, p. 152.
27. Postman, Technopoly, p. 48.
28. Ibid., p. 48.
29. Ibid., p. 53.
30. Ibid., p. 53. He makes the same point in "The Conservative Outlook", p. 106.
31. Postman, Technopoly., p. 95.
32. Ibid., p. 53.
33. Ibid., p. 54. He also refers to the "audacity" of turn-of-the-century American capitalists, such as Samuel Morse and Alexander Graham Bell who believed "that nothing is so much worth preserving that it should stand in the way of technological innovation." (p.54)
34. Ibid, p. 95.
35. "She Wants Her TV!" p. 47.
36. Steven Lukes, "Power and Structure," in his Essays in Social Theory (London, The MacMillan Press, Ltd., 1977), p. 3.
37. Ibid., p. 5.
38. Ibid., p. 6.

39. Ibid., p. 7. Lukes' exact words are: "In speaking thus, one assumes that although the agents operate within structurally determined limits, they none the less have a certain relative autonomy and could have acted differently."
40. Ibid., p. 7.
41. Ibid., p. 11. These examples come from philosopher Joel Feinberg, who Lukes quotes here. See Joel Feinberg, Social Philosophy (Englewood Cliffs. N.J: Prentice Hall), pp. 12-13.
42. Lukes, p. 12. Feinburg continues: "If we contract the self sufficiently so that it becomes a dimensionless non-empirical entity, then all causes are external. Other narrow conceptions of the self would attribute to its 'inner core' a set of ultimate principles or 'internalised values' or ultimate ends or desires, and relegate to the merely 'empirical self', or to a world altogether external to the self, all lower-ranked desires, whims and fancies." (Feinberg, p. 13)
43. Ibid., p. 12.
44. Ibid., p. 13.
45. Ibid., p. 14.
46. Ibid., p. 15.
47. Ibid., p. 14.
48. Ibid., p. 17.
49. For some insights on different views on agents and how they interact with their social and political structures see Graeme Duncan, "Political Theory and Human Nature," in I. Forbes, S. Smith (eds,) Politics and Human Nature (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983) Chapter One.
50. Lukes, p. 7.
51. Postman, Conserving, p. 70.
52. "She Wants Her TV!" p. 54.
53. He makes versions of this comment in many places. See for example "Engaging Students", p. 313.
54. Postman, Amusing p. 157.

55. Ibid, p. 157.
56. Postman, The Disappearance, p. 84.
57. In Amusing he states "Therein is our problem. For television is at its most trivial and, therefore, most dangerous when its aspirations are high, when it presents itself as a carrier of important cultural conversations." (p. 16)
58. He says "What worries me is that we have not yet figured out how to build defences against the seductions of imagery." He later says "I think the only defence against the seductions of imagery is a literate education." See "She Wants Her TV!", pp. 47 and 54 respectively.
59. Neil Postman and Steve Powers, How To Watch TV News (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 153.
60. Postman, Amusing, p. 161. Further, in Conserving he writes that "the most powerful bias of television its stress on immediate gratification," and he paints this as an irresistible indulgence. "The pleasure of total comprehension and involvement is immediately accessible. The Kingdom of God is of this world, now, and not of any other later." (p. 60)
61. Postman and Powers, How To Watch TV News, p. 120.
62. Ibid., p. 124.
63. In an objective impersonal way, TV is also an external structural constraint in the way it precludes some options. As Postman points out in How To Watch TV News, viewers have no choice as to how they digest television's information. As opposed to a newspaper where they can choose how, when and what they read, TV viewers get the same sequence and the same broadcast. "They have no choices. A report is either in the broadcast or out, which means that anything which is of narrow interest is unlikely to be included." (p. 112) However, seeing TV as an internal structural constraint, as I argue Postman does, is more worrisome because, going back to Lukes, as such, it invisibly affects a person's abilities or capacities.
64. Postman, Amusing, p. 50.
65. Postman, "Engaging Students", p. 312. The full quotation is: "Letters on a page must be psychologically transparent if one is to read fluently."

To the extent that a reader attends to the form..."

66. See Chapter Two.
67. Postman, The Disappearance, p. 46.
68. Ibid., p. 76.
69. Postman, Conserving, p. 84.
70. Postman, The Disappearance of Childhood, p. 48.
71. Ibid., p. 48.
72. Postman, Amusing, p. 51.
73. Postman, The Disappearance, p. 71.
74. Postman, Amusing, p. 66.
75. Ibid., p. 69.
76. Postman, The Disappearance, p. 71.
77. Neil Postman, Building a Bridge To The Eighteenth Century (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc.), p. 89.
78. Postman, Amusing, p. 68.
79. Ibid., pp. 68-69.
80. Postman, The Disappearance, p. 72.
81. Postman, Technopoly, p. 72.
82. Ibid., p. 72.
83. Carolyn Pool, "Perspectives" in The Journal of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development Vol. 55. No. 3, November, 1997, p. 5.
84. Postman, Technoploy, p. 76.
85. Ibid., p. 72. Just as he sees TV's beautiful images as dangerous, he sees extra information as dangerous. And just as he saw people as unable to resist TV, we are clearly, he believes, unable to deal with too much information. If we get too much, "a general breakdown in psychic tranquillity and social purpose occurs. Without defences people have no way of finding meaning in their experiences, lose their capacity to remember, and have difficulty imagining reasonable futures."

(p. 72)

86. Neil Postman, Television and the Teaching of English (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts Inc., 1961), p. 49. He also writes "The mixture of intimacy and actuality probably accounts for the magnetism of the Jack Parr show which, despite its frequent commercial interruptions, communicates with a directness and candour which is possible only on television." (p. 66)
87. Ibid., p. 13. Another example from that book: "Apparently reading and watching television are not only competitive but also complementary activities. On the other hand, some of the functions of reading - for example as a means of acquiring information - are fulfilled more satisfactorily by television so that reading assumes a new role in the media spectrum." (p. 35)
88. Postman, Conserving, p. 40.

CONCLUSION

One question that must be addressed is whether Postman deserves the attention he has received as a TV critic. My answer is that, in this respect, he has received exactly what he deserves - little attention from the academic community but a considerable amount from the media and the public.

Certainly critics have a point when they claim that Postman's research is poor, that his interpretation of events, especially historical ones, is flawed, that he makes unqualified sweeping statements, does not have the courtesy to acknowledge arguments that are counter to his own and gives us a picture of television that is incomplete and simplistic.

Further, this thesis has honed in on other faults: While Postman implies TV has a great deal of power, he does not state clearly the source of its power. There are arguably several contradictions in his arguments about TV.

For these reasons and others, on a scholarly level, Postman has not fulfilled his mandate as a TV critic. One can understand why academics see his work, as one wrote about The Disappearance of Childhood, as "not likely to be a major

contribution to the social sciences," but as something that "presents an interesting hypothesis which deserves at least some reflections by those interested in the connection between technology and society."¹

At the same time, and in part because he has not adhered to scholarly standards, Postman has arguably made a valuable contribution by writing in an accessible manner and in this way reaching a wide audience.

As reviewers mentioned, he describes how TV operates with explicitness and flair. Instead of, for example, just theorizing about TV's incongruity, he interjects: "Who would be really surprised if Anwar el-Sadat made a guest appearance on Little House on the Prairie?"²

And while he has been criticized for his range of examples, this could be seen as an important and helpful trait. Few thinkers can detect common themes from such a wide range of life experiences and diagnose them as Postman does.

Ironically, Postman is extremely entertaining, "bitterly funny" in one journalist's words.³ With his humour and his troubling and apocalyptic statements, he and his message get attention, which is more than some writers or academics with similar complaints can say. When she was introducing

Postman on her TV show, Canada's Pamela Wallin rightly said, "Amusing Ourselves to Death jolted us all out of our couch-potato comas."⁴

It remains clear that whatever Postman deserves in the way of attention or reputation, it does not seem to concern him. It has been said by those familiar with him and his work that Postman has his own agenda and neither tries to be nor cares about being accurate.⁵ He once wrote,

I write as I write and the only important question I ask myself is, Did I say what I wanted to say in the way I wanted to say it? The answer is never 'yes'. The answer is always 'yes and no', and my reasons for the 'yes' and for the 'no' rarely have any connection to what scholars, critics and reviewers have said. Which doesn't mean I don't learn anything from their analyses. What I learn may show up in the next book but if it does, how it got there is a mystery to me.⁶

Some final comments on the power of TV are necessary. In making these I hope to bring together the several strands of this thesis.

I have argued that critics often see Postman as a mouthpiece for McLuhan, and thereby a technological determinist. I have distinguished between a micro and a macro type of such determinism. Regarding the first, micro type, to a large extent these criticisms are justified - Postman is constantly stating that the form of TV is the source of its

power and determines its operation. But this is my point; what Postman says and what his writing shows are not the same. Examining this writing shows that for Postman there are two other key factors in television's power. One is its commercial nature which means that for Postman the only TV that is really powerful is American TV. The other is his view of the nature of agents.

Some clarifications on these other two factors: First, I have argued that Postman's lamentations about television mask deep criticisms of American culture and society in general, including its consumership, the domination of show business, the adoration of technology and the preference for being entertained rather than working. In fact, on one level TV becomes a scapegoat - Postman signals out a piece of technology and blames it for America's so-called corruption.

If Postman's most recent book, A Bridge to the Eighteenth Century, is any indication, this aversion has not abated.'

Second, despite a much more optimistic - what Lukes calls a voluntaristic - position at the beginning of his career, Postman seems to have adopted a structuralist view of agents, at least when it comes to their interactions with television. We saw that TV's emotional grasp renders agents defenceless.

To the extent that he has this structuralist view, he is denying the relevance of human power, initiative and the very idea of agency.

In this way, he is also denying that social actors alone can change either themselves or their circumstances or that they have any control over them. It implies that, for example, TV cannot be changed; it cannot be other than what it is.⁸

Richard Lanham, in his comments about Postman, takes issue with this denial of agency. Recall the public affairs questions Postman asks when he is talking about the information glut which gives us information we do not need. ("What steps do you plan to take to reduce the conflict in the Middle East?...") Lanham responds:

Speak for yourself Neil. I do a number of things, from recycling my trash to designing new writing curricula, from talking to my congressman to giving money and (although he seems to denigrate this) casting a ballot. Small things these, but actions. Most people act on the 'information glut'. They pick out what looks vital to them and try, in whatever ways they can, to do something about it.'

Thirdly, one of the reasons Postman has this view is his attitude towards emotions. As I have argued, it is the emotional impact of TV's analogic visual form that has always captivated Postman and been for him a key source of

TV's power. At the same time, I have suggested that a need to control these emotions - which is part of an overall need to be in control - underlies his work.

This need to be in control was not always present in Postman's work. Earlier in his career, he trusted TV and modes of communication in general. As we have seen, many of his current attitudes towards TV are opposite to his earlier thinking.

As time progresses, this trust erodes. Beyond this thesis, one could trace this erosion of trust in Postman. One by one, starting with language and continuing to TV and computers, Postman grows wary of a communications form and then dislikes it completely.¹⁰

This erosion of trust parallels, and helps explain, the complete reversal of Postman's position regarding the casual power of TV and technology - what I call the macro technological determinism. The more he starts to dislike technology, the less power he attributes to individuals and the more deterministic he is.

But returning to emotions, while Postman is increasingly hostile towards his outside world - the world of American culture and evolving technology - it seems he is attempting

to control it and himself by promoting a culture of literacy. Whether he knows it or not, he is aspiring to be McLuhan's Literate Man.

In Understanding Media, McLuhan writes that literacy and typography bestowed a gift on Western man - the ability "to act without reaction or involvement". He explains this as a "dissociation of action from feeling and emotion."¹¹

Literate Man, he writes

undergoes much separation of his imaginative, emotional and sense life, as Rousseau (and later the Romantic poets and philosophers) proclaimed long ago. Today the mere mention of D.H. Lawrence will serve to recall the twentieth-century efforts to by-pass literate man in order to recover "human wholeness". If Western literate man undergoes much dissociation of inner sensibility from his use of the alphabet, he also wins his personal freedom to dissociate himself from clan and family.¹²

The lofty platitudes of Literate Man have their place in society. But we must question their merits when they are used as a retreat.

ENDNOTES - CONCLUSION

1. Donald Shoemaker, rev. of The Disappearance of Childhood, Sociology and Social Research, October, 1984. p. 150.
2. See Neil Postman, Teaching as a Conserving Activity, (New York: Delacorte Press, 1979), p. 66.
3. See David Denby, "All the World's A Tube," rev. of Amusing Ourselves To Death, The Atlantic Monthly, November 1985, p. 136.
4. "Pamela Wallin Live", prod. Janine Blanchard, CBC Newsworld, 8 July, 1998.
5. This comment was first made to me in electronic mail by Professor Vincent Mosco of Carleton University's Department of Journalism and Mass Communications (December 8, 1998). Professor Terence Moran, a colleague of Postman's at New York University, agreed with this. Moran also said that Postman has very little ego when it comes to his work and tends to distance himself from it. "It's remarkable, when you talk to him about his work, it's not as though you're talking about him. You're talking about the book - the ideas. He never gets upset when people criticize him.. he never gets defensive." Moran added, "He has a tremendous belief in himself. He never gets embarrassed or confused. I've never seen him when he wasn't in control of his environment." (Phone Interview with Terence Moran, 4th December, 1997)
6. Letter received from Professor Neil Postman, 28 August, 1995.
7. Postman begins this book recognizing a survey that says as many as 62 percent of American believe in the Devil. The details of the survey caused him "to go into denial". He continues saying that denial is necessary when writing to an American audience; "Its hard to write three pages unless you emphatically deny that many of your potential readers believe in deal-making devils". Neil Postman, Building a Bridge to the Eighteenth Century (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc.), p. 7.
8. This denial of agency may explain why Postman analyses the commercial side of television so little. For if he did, he would have to address the issue of agents - people who work in the field of television, and whether

or not they could change it. As it is, he has us believe that its fate is sealed.

9. Richard Lanham, The Electronic Word (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993) p. 243. Further, Lanham argues that rather than rendering us "impotent" as Postman would have it, "'the information glut' vastly expands the dramatic stage upon which all of us lives." (p. 243)
10. This erosion of trust starts with language in Language in America. The intention of this book, which Postman edits, is to "serve as a check on the many languages currently being used in America." He writes in its Introduction that "in each essay, there is a deep concern that the mode of discourse has got out of control." Postman's contribution "The Demeaning of Meaning, Or What Is the Language Pollution Index Today?" argues that we have a "polluted semantic environment". His reasons include that many people say what they do not believe, the communications revolution has given a voice and an audience to people with little to say. The result is a "saturation of nonsense." Again, Postman seems to be using a form of communications, in this case language, as a scapegoat for general civic corruption. See Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner and Terence Moran (eds) Language in America: A Report on Our Deteriorating Semantic Environment (New York: Pegasus Publishing, 1969), pp. ix, x and 15 respectively.
11. Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man, 2nd ed. (New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 162.
12. Ibid., p. 90.

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