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## **Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology**

### **Introduction**

Technology is “the branch of knowledge that deals with the creation and use of technical means and their interrelation with life, society, and the environment, drawing upon such subjects as industrial arts, engineering, applied science, and pure science (2).” Neil Postman’s definition of technology not only includes machinery like the television and the computer but also any repeatable technique that tends to cause people to constrain their thinking about the world like the assembly line. Most new inventions or techniques aim at making our lives easier simplifying the way we do something.

The US has evolved from a Tool-using culture to a Technocracy to the only Technopoly in the 20th century. The problem is that we allow ourselves to get wrapped in technology and tend to believe it is never wrong. The US has allowed for technology to become a religion in which people tend to put more faith in technology than we should. This can be viewed as the break down of the defense against technology due to our lack of awareness of the consequences of new technology.

### **Tool-using Cultures**

Tool-using cultures are cultures in which tools are used to solve specific and urgent problems of physical life but do not attack purposefully the integrity of the culture. In these types of cultures the use of tools depends on the culture’s belief system or ideology. Tools do not take over but instead become integrated into the current culture. During the Medieval Ages ideas for tools remained only ideas if it was deemed that the idea would not be in God’s favor. A specific example would be Leonardo Da Vinci keeping his design of a submarine a secret because he thought it would cause more harm than good for society.

Cultures that are often placed in this category are in third world countries. These cultures simply use tools to improve their human conditions. An invention can not threaten the way in which things are done in the society in order for it to be called a Tool-using culture. Once the inventions start to threaten morals and values of a culture it begins to move towards a Technocracy. The inventions that Postman considers to be in this category are the waterpower, windmills, and the heavy wheeled plow.

### **Technocracy**

Technocracy calls for a separation of moral and intellectual values. “Tools are not integrated into culture: they bid to take over” (5). “They bid to become the culture. We need to take a look at the benefits and consequences of a new technology. For example the mills in Europe which were common places for farmers to take their grain to be ground became a common ground for prostitutes. People tried to close down the mill but because it was too important to the economy its consequences were seen as minimal (5).” Technocracy is a culture in which you have serious technology competing with a more

traditional social and symbolic world but with an ultimate goal still the same as the Tool-using the improvement of the human condition. Tools play a central role in the culture but everything gives way to some extent.

### **Technopoly**

Most other countries are Technocracies according to Postman. The only Technopoly is the US the one thing that separates the US from other countries is that the technology has become so engrained in the US culture that it has enslaved our society. We have so much technology that it has crossed that invisible line from improving the human condition to enslaving humans to technology.

According to Postman US is the first in the 20th century to be a Technopoly. Since we are a Technopoly we have a society in which we are always trying to make things easier and faster for us. We no longer look to see if our inventions are in Gods favor. This causes a problem in which we allow technology to make and dictate our culture because we no longer have anything to compare the usefulness of technology as they did in the Tool-using cultures. In those cultures technology is measured against the ideology of the culture and if it does not measure up to the standards of the culture that technology is not introduced.

Techniques are considered technology to Postman because a technique like the assembly change the way in which things are built and change the culture of the society. Henry Ford's assembly line was a new way of accomplishing the goal of building a car. This technique allowed for specification of workers skills and greater productivity. The Henry Ford assembly line has been a technique that has enslaved the US. In the US people would a really hard time stepping away from the assembly line. Assembly lines now have machines making machines but the assembly line technique is still used.

Another example is the QWERTY keyboard which refers to a type of keyboard layout you have on your computer at home. This is not the most effective way in which to layout a keyboard. The QWERTY layout was designed to slow down typists who were using the typewriter in order to prevent jamming of the keys. The jamming of the keys was later corrected yet the QWERTY layout remained. A lot of money and resources were already spent on training for people to use the QWERTY keyboard and it had gained a monopoly (3). The thought of changing the layout was not justified in people's minds. Today most people do not know why the keyboard is laid out the way it is much less that there is a more efficient way. It has been engrained in people's mind and we have become a slave to it. If a company was to start selling computers with a more effective layout for the keyboard there would be great opposition to it. Since it would require training everybody in the new layout and putting new keyboards in all the schools libraries and business' people would be unwilling to spend the money and time to do so.

Technopoly's primary goal is efficiency in human labor. This Technopoly continually updates itself and eliminates the previous alternatives. According to Postman it does not make previous technology illegal, immoral or unpopular it only makes them invisible but I believe that it must become unpopular before it becomes invisible. For example the personal CD player does the same thing as an MP3 player yet hardly anybody has a personal CD player anymore because the popularity of MP3 players such as the Ipod have made the personal CD players unpopular and invisible by allowing you to listen to your music collection at the touch of a button.

Items such as the Ipod do not just want to be accepted into a society's culture it vigorously attacks the current culture and making the Ipod a culture within itself. The Ipod itself has changed the way people interact with each other. When you ride a Unitrans bus here at UC Davis you will notice that a great percentage of the students are wearing the white Ipod earphones. A consequence of this is that no longer are people talking on the bus getting to know each other but they are isolating themselves and becoming numb to their surroundings because of their Ipod. Since the Ipod is so popular most people ignore the consequences. This is precisely what Postman is talking about in this book. Some may not see this consequence as a danger to our society but we simply need to be aware that there is a consequence and decide from there whether we should use that technology or not.

Computers have changed the way in which we live our everyday lives. According to Postman it has been for the worse because people are now living as slaves to the computer instead as it being a tool. The computer has achieved an almost God like status. He refers to how people are often swayed by comments that start by "the computer shows" or "the computer has determined" (5). People have so much faith in technology and in this case the computer and the data it spits out that they are blind to the consequences it carries.

Computers have control of many things in our society. For example all our nuclear weapons are linked to computers. They are programmed to follow a certain chain of commands based on events that happen. Nuclear weapons have computers that are programmed to make the decisions that will affect the entire human population. This is what Neil Postman fears the most the fact that now computers and technology in general hold power over us. The computer makes decisions based what it has been programmed to do and it does not second guess itself. The decision to set off a nuclear attack would be hard for a person to make knowing the consequences of his actions on the human race. A computer program that does not have any moral inclinations it would simply do what it has been programmed to do (1).

Machines such as the computer and the television have changed our society tremendously. Whether they changed it for good or bad is debatable to people like Postman. The television has provided us with many positive elements for example it has allowed for greater communication via news but it has also helped in the in creating a culture of obesity that threatens to cut many lives short. The computer as stated about has allowed for us to do things otherwise unimaginable. It has enslaved and possibly doomed us.

### **Conclusion**

Technology is part of our current culture and society. We have computers that are engrained in almost all parts of our daily lives. From the automobile to the Internet, technology has changed the way in which people do things from shopping to interacting with people. Now we do not go to the store we just shop online or type an email instead of using other types of communications such as writing a letter or face to face interaction.

Postman's conclusion tries to portray is our necessity to understand humanity, our histories, our emotions - and that technologies are tearing these things out of our lives. We live in a society were we place our technology: machinery and techniques above all else. Once they become part of our culture such as the automobile and the QWERTY keyboard they are not easy to get rid of. We are polluting the earth with the cars we drive

and although we have alternative solutions such as the electric cars we have become enslaved by this technology and are unwilling to give it up.

Postman does not completely hate technology his solution to this problem of being enslaved by society is to simply be aware of it. He believes there are technological advances that did just help improve the human condition us but we need to draw the line somewhere. We must evaluate the pros and cons of technology and not just blindly embrace it. Just as there can be technology that can improve human conditions compared to the technology we have now such as the electric car there are also other inventions that have greater consequences than positive affects on human improvement (4).

Have we become a society that uses technology or are we being used by technology? The increase in technology has changed all our lives and will continue to do so in the future. Will we be overcome by our own technology or will we be able to separate our technology from our culture and have it simply be a tool? It seems that our technology has the ability to take over without us realizing it. If we are aware of the consequences we will be better equipped to control our technology rather than having it control us

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