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ECS 188
May 17, 2004

Ideas from
Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology

The title of Neil Postman's book Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology, introduces the word "technopoly." Technopoly plays on the word technology, and it sounds like technology and monopoly fused together. Bill Gates and Microsoft want to have a monopoly on certain technologies, but Postman's book does not describe this type of monopoly. Instead, Postman argues that technology has monopolized culture and refers to this idea in the book's subtitle.

The definition of technopoly depends on the definitions of a tool-using culture and a technocracy. Early civilizations used tools and could be defined as tool-using cultures. Postman acknowledges that this "definition of a tool-using culture lacks precision, [but] it is still possible and useful to distinguish a tool-using culture from a technocracy. In a technocracy, tools play a central role in the thought-world of the culture." (28) People not only use tools, but the tools become the culture. Gunpowder changed warfare, and the magnet changed navigation. The printing press changed literature, and the telescope changed religion.

The telescope could not have changed religion without the help of Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo. Copernicus did not intend to challenge the authority of the Church, but he discovered that the Earth moved around the sun. Postman says that Copernicus "did not believe that his work undermined the supremacy of theology. It is true that Martin Luther called Copernicus 'a fool who went against Holy Writ,' but Copernicus did not think he had done so–which proves, I suppose, that Luther saw more deeply" (30)

Kepler felt there should be a separation between theology and science. Galileo believed adamantly in Kepler's views but denied them at his trial to avoid punishment. The views of these three men destroyed the idea that the Earth was the center of universe and everything revolved around the Earth. Instead, the Earth was just one planet in the solar system and of no particular importance.

Postman writes that a technocracy evolves into a technopoly by "redefining what we mean by religion, by art, by family, by politics, by history, by truth, by privacy, by intelligence, so that our definitions fit its new requirements. Technopoly, in other words, is totalitarian technocracy." (48) Technology takes over all aspects of a culture. Postman describes technology as a "form of cultural AIDS, which I here use as an acronym for Anti-Information Deficiency Syndrome." (63) He uses this description of technology because too much information loses its relevance. The first stage of this information revolution began with the telegraph since it enabled information to travel huge distances extremely fast. In the past, messengers delivered important information on horseback and train. The next stage of the information revolution came with photography and introduced the idea that a picture was worth a thousand words. Photographers found out that they could earn money through their photographs. Photography led to broadcasting, which is the third stage of the information revolution. Now, words and pictures could be used together to communicate across large distances. Communication would become faster through computer technology, the fourth stage of the information revolution. The Internet boasted about the speed of the information delivery.

With all this information coming so fast, some forms of information control need to be established. One form of information control is the family because parents control what their children want on television and which sites they go to on the Internet. Another form of information control is school by limiting its curriculum to certain subjects. No school offers a course in creationism. Courts of law also control information by limiting what the jury sees. The judge does not let the jury see the defendant's previous criminal record, and evidence must be weighed before it is admissible in court. Trials often use expert witnesses. The expert witness has expertise in one area of study and filters out irrelevant information from other areas. Ideally, this expert witness is supposed to give objective testimony based on this field of study. The expert could be considered a form of information control. Political parties also help to filter out information because supporters of the Democratic or Republican party do not need to listen to the arguments of the other party.

All these forms of information control tend to oversimplify too much, and people can lose track of what is important. Morality is an important concept that people can track of. Postman explains his belief behind morality. He uses the words of Havel, the Czechoslovakian president in 1992, to say that "we are still incapable of understanding that the only genuine backbone of our actions – if they are to be moral – is responsibility. Responsibility to something higher than my family, my country, my firm, my success." (82) People have to take responsibility for their actions and accept the consequences.

Postman believes that relying too much on medical technology could have repercussions. One example of this is a machine named HAGOTH which could detect if someone on the phone was lying if there was stress in the voice. The level of truthfulness

was measured through eight red LEDs and eight green LEDs. Red LEDs indicate that a person was telling a lie, and green LEDs indicate that a person was telling the truth. The assumption behind this idea was that a person could not lie with a straight face. Richard Nixon would laugh at this idea. (92) HAGOTH has disappeared but the idea behind it still exists in lie detectors. Detectives trust the results of these lie detectors to help them to solve police cases. The fate of a defendant could rest on the results of these tests.

Another example of a questionable medical technique is bloodletting. Some doctors thought that they could cure some diseases by draining blood from patients. Bloodletting only worked in the mild form of the diseases and did not work in other cases. Postman says "during George Washington's final days, Washington was bled seven times on the night he died, which, no doubt, had something to do with why he died. All of this occurred, mind you, 153 years after Harvey discovered that blood circulates throughout the body." (97) Bloodletting was developed because America wanted to be aggressive in science.

Another invention, the stethoscope, changed medical culture. A doctor developed the stethoscope because he wanted to listen to a patient's heart without getting too close to her. Doctors soon found the stethoscope to be very convenient and carried it around with them. The doctors saw the stethoscope as problem because doctors and medical technicians held different social statuses. So, doctors did want to be associated with the lower social status of a medical technician. The stethoscope eventually wins and doctors wear the stethoscope around their necks.

Humans often work with machines, and the human-machine metaphor is not a new one. Humans have become like machines with their interchangeable parts, and these

parts consist of artificial organs. The artificial organs do not always work with the

human body because a human is biological and rejects foreign objects. Computers also

reject foreign substances such as viruses and worms. The media has anthropomorphized

computers through this terminology. Postman states that "Raymond Gozzi, Jr.,

discovered in his analysis of how the mass media described the event, newspapers noted

that the computers were 'infected,' that the virus was 'virulent' and 'contagious,' that

attempts were made to 'quarantine' the infected computers" (113). These infections shut

down the computer network and made the computers incredibly slow.

Relying too much on technology can be dangerous because people make

decisions not technology. Blame can shift from people to technology. Postman states

that we call "this line of thinking an 'agentic shift,' a term I borrow from Stanley

Milgram to name the process whereby humans transfer responsibility for an outcome

from themselves to a more abstract agent." (114) People often blame computers for their

mistakes, but computers have no concept of morality. Humans should not act like

machines and act without thinking. People can not use and invent new technology

without thinking about its intended use. Human judgment and morality determine the

correct uses of technology.