Alicia Lee & Rachel Fukaya (P105)   **WORD COUNT: 2,494**

alilee@ucdavis.edu

rsfukaya@ucdavis.edu

ECS 188

11/29/11

Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology

Neil Postman

We live in an age today where technology surrounds us and is seamlessly

integrated into virtually every aspect of our lives. Even though we have already attained a

level of technological integration that has never been seen before, we still pursue the

ideals surrounding "technological determinism." We are enchanted and lured by the

promises of what new technology can do for us. Blinded by these promises, we overlook

the burdens that these new technologies also bring. We take what technology gives us

without question and without evaluating its moral implications, because we have been

conditioned to believe, in today's society, that technology has the main say. In Neil

Postman's *Technopoly*, he expounds on the tyranny of technology and how society today

has deified technology—how we as a society have lifted it to the status of God. As a

media critic and communications theorist, his book serves as a warning against letting

technology take control of us. This paper attempts to sift through the foundations that

define the current technopoly we live in as well as how Neil Postman proposes we take charge of technology and not let it take charge of us.

Postman begins his book by critiquing a one-sided viewpoint. He contends that most of society today is made up of "one-eyed prophets," who see only the blessings of technology. The community holding these views are defined as Technophiles. They are blinded by their love for technology and its benefits and their views are "dangerous and to be approached cautiously." On the other end of the spectrum, there are one-eyed prophets who focus only on the burdens of technology. The community vested in these ideals are known as Luddites. Today, society classifies these people as having an "almost childish and certainly naïve opposition to technology" (43). As Postman states, there have been critics who accuse him of being a Luddite, because of his critique of technology. Yet, there are statements even within Technopoly itself that do not support the stance of his being a Luddite. One such example can be seen when he says that he would answer Freud's depressing statement of inventions being "an improved means to an unimproved end" with "life has always been barren of joys and full of misery but…[our inventions] have not only lengthened life but made it a more agreeable proposition," which most certainly is not a statement opposing technology (6). He also mention that he has "...no hostility toward new technologies and certainly no wish to destroy them...Of course, I am not enthusiastic about them, either. I am indifferent to them. And the reason I am indifferent is that...they have nothing whatever to do with the fundamental problems in schooling our young" (Postman, 1993). This view is reflected throughout his book, where he does not take on any oppositional stand towards the creation of new technologies.

Rather, his stand is that we as society cannot sit back and let technology take over the reigns—we should be the ones in the driver's seat.

A theme recurrent throughout Postman's works is the idea that, "technologies create the way in which people perceive reality" (21). This highlights his concerns about how technology can take over society and the way we think and function. He classifies our culture into three different types: tool-using cultures, technocracies, and technopolies; each with a different way of thought regarding technology. In tool-using cultures, tools have two distinct functions: "to solve specific and urgent problems of physical life" and "to serve the symbolic world" (23). These functions make tools that are not "intruders" intended to go against the "dignity and integrity of the culture into which they were introduced," (23). On the contrary, they are designed to support the beliefs of the culture. In tool-using cultures, technology is "subject to the jurisdiction of some binding social or religious system" (24). This gives the cultures purpose and thus relegates the ability of the "technics to subordinate people to its own needs" (26). However, this does not imply these cultures are somehow backward; in fact, historically speaking tool-using cultures have produced surprisingly sophisticated technologies, such as windmills and engineering achievements like the Pyramids and Stonehenge. A technocracy is a culture where "tools play a central role in the thought-world… they attack… [and] bid to become the culture" (28). The driving force behind technology created in technocracies is the "impulse to invent," where "if something can be done it should be done" (41-2). Because of the nature of this driving force, a technocracy is marked by the characteristic of speed and the "promise of new freedoms and new forms of social organization" (45). Yet precisely due to the speed at which new technologies are being introduced, technocracies have left

behind "the chains of a tool-using culture" and are in danger of having the traditional part of its culture be subsumed by its technological part. Due to society being unable to fully let go of the "traditions of social and symbolic worlds" while embracing the new technological world-view, these two "[coexist] in uneasy tension" within the technocracy (45-8). It is when the traditional world-view becomes fully subsumed by the technological world-view that culture becomes a technopoly, the focus of Postman's arguments.

There comes a point of irony where a society crosses an illusive threshold and fails to recognize that the technologies once invented to help contribute to an abstrusely easier existence, have actually begun to grab hold of that very society and mold it to its own will. Postman's most prominent theme throughout his book, and thus the appropriated title, is the idea that we live in a technopoly vested in "the submission of all forms of life to the sovereignty of technique and technology" (52). He characterizes a technopoly as a "totalitarian technocracy [where] thought-worlds disappear...It does not make them illegal. It does not make them immoral. It does not even make them unpopular. It makes them invisible and therefore irrelevant. And it does so 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 new requirements" (48). He also purports that, "...the United States is the only culture to become a Technopoly" (49). This propels Americans into a technologic paradox where we are incredibly vulnerable and paranoid to the effects of a country run by technology partly because we cannot see how a technopoly transforms a society and partly because we live in fear that other nations will

become technopolic and somehow overthrow the very institution we do not fully understand.

Postman explores four integral reasons as to why America has allowed technopoly to arise and flourish in our country. First, novice and progress go hand in hand. Stagnation exemplifies a feared constraint. This has fueled a perpetual linear push onward and upward, while often free from confinement has been highlighted as disengaged from thought and reason as well. Second is the basic capitalistic drive to create that which has not been created so that we may transform it into a commodity and distribute it as a market good. Third, our lives have been encapsulated by the insatiable desire for more convenience, more comfort, and more of more. This ambiguous source of fulfillment alone has blindsided any reasons to entertain other ventures outside of technologic advancement. Fourth, a history invested in proving man fallible and science and technology omniscient has bred low societal-esteem and encouraged us to believe that the only efficacious product is the one created by technology. Postman credits the age of information not to computer science but to the printing press, in 1440. This creation enabled an outward flow of information to spread, which has since turned into an all-encompassing flood; what Postman defines as the age of the "information glut." This type of gluttony is characterized by a breakdown in control mechanisms (i.e. schools, political parties, courts of law, and family) set in place to prevent information pandemonium. He goes on to compare humans today with our Middle Age counterparts, ascribing to the acknowledgment that we are no more discerning now than previous minds. A society once dedicated to the awesome and mysterious powers surrounding religion have simply replaced theology with technology as the sole source of reference.

Being inundated with exorbitant amounts of information and no more skeptical than our history, technopoly is proceeding to diminish the civilization it was once furnished to foster.

As Postman's recount of our "surrender of culture to technology" continues, he highlights the advancements in medical technology, which have rendered the doctor as a subordinate to these technologies with little control. As a result of this he believes these advances have made "...medicine about the disease, not the patient" (100). He explores how a deeply entangled system has rewarded the uses of technology and discouraged the use of common sense. For example, "...doctors are reimbursed by medical-insurance agencies on the basis of what they do, not the amount of time they spend with the patient, [and] if a patient does not obtain relief from a doctor who has failed to use all the available technological resources, including drugs, the doctor is liable to be deemed with the charge of incompetence" (101-2). The delicate bond known as the "doctor-patient relationship" has come to incorporate a technological third party, who, by our own employment, has assumed the authoritarian role in the situation. We see more value in the calculations of an instrument versus the contributions and collections of an experienced human.

Postman also identifies the "usurping of power" by computer technologies. He divulges that it is much more difficult to isolate the consequences of computer technology because it is a universal machine and can serve an infinite amount of functions. Postman also relays that, "the computer claims sovereignty over the whole range of human experiences, and supports its claim by showing that it 'thinks' better than we can" (111). However some critiques such as Professor De Palma of Gonzaga

University believe that Postman can be "maddeningly non-specific." De Palma exclaims, "I don't know about Postman's, but my computer, despite all of my attempts doesn't claim anything. Those of us who use computers make lots of claims, as do manufacturers of hardware and software. But we make different claims at different times under different conditions. And, I've not heard one of us 'claim sovereignty over the whole range of human experiences.' This kind of rhetorical device relieves Postman of the burden of precision" (De Palma, 1995). Yet, Postman worries that we have over-humanized the computer by giving it the qualities and characteristics once reserved for the living. For instance, computers get a "virus" that can be "contagious," so we "quarantine" the infected computers and create "vaccines" for these computers. The reasoning behind our tendency towards characterizing computers in this way is that, "if computers can become ill, then they can become healthy. Once healthy, they can think clearly and make decisions" (114). His fear is characterized in his example of Adolf Eichmann and if he "had been able to say that it was not he but a battery of computers that directed the Jews to the appropriate crematoria, he might have never been asked to answer for his actions" (115). While the effects of computer technology are somewhat illusive, it has nevertheless become a technology geared towards garnering a stronger technopoly.

Perhaps, one could argue, the institution of education as we know it began when the practice of "grading" was first introduced at Cambridge University in 1792. Furthermore, we must entertain the notion that grades and education are so symbiotic that we are incapable of comprehending the value in seeking alternatives to quantifying intelligence; though there may be better, more efficient systems. As a result of this conjoined relationship, we are unable to identify the extent to which grades affect

education. This type of abstraction is what Postman terms "invisible technologies," for "they do not look like technologies, and because of that, they do their work, for good or ill, without much criticism or even awareness" (138). He also claims, "...language itself is a kind of technique—and invisible technology—and through it we achieve more than clarity and efficiency. We achieve humanity—or inhumanity" (142). He compares language to a machine in that both have "ideological agendas," or reasons for existence however, "in the case of language, that agenda is so deeply integrated into our personalities and world-view that a special effort, and, often special training are required to detect its presence" (143). He uses the example of a multiple-choice question versus a fill-in-the-blank question. Both forms of questioning may be seeking the same answer yet the form of language itself is inherently biased. Multiple-choice questioning gives you the correct answer among its choices. Fill-in-the-blank questioning allows for an infinite number of possibilities. With this, he points out, "...the structure of any question is as devoid of neutrality as its content...This is the great secret of language: Because it comes from inside us, we believe it to be a direct, unedited, unbiased, apolitical expression of how the world really is" (125). We cannot examine or distinguish the pros and cons of a technology when it is illusive. Thus, we must attempt to seek out a deeper understanding of the world we live in and what we use and get used by.

The final chapters discuss "Technopoly's grand illusion" or what Postman calls Scientism: "To ask of science, or expect of science, or accept unchallenged from science the answers to questions" (162). His proposals on how to study, learn from, and manipulate our technopoly surround the intellectual institutions throughout our country. He urges us to restructure how we educate our youth by "combining art and science" and

incorporating the histories of not only technology, but all subjects, in an efforts to emphasize the importance and connections among our past, present, and future. He also proposes that religion be taught in schools for he, "[does] not see how we can claim to be educating our youth if we do not ask them to consider how different people of different times and places have tried to achieve transcendence" (198). Lawrence Cremin once remarked that, "whenever the United States needs a revolution, we get a new curriculum" (Cremin, 329). This has been a critique of Postman's light proposals for the heavy problem he discusses. However, Neil Postman ends his book on a positive note and claims that we can "begin and sustain a serious conversation that will allow us to distance ourselves from [technopoly,] and then criticize and modify it" (199). As discussed previously, many of his critiques and propositions coalesce the values of Ludditical rationalizing, however he claims in another of his works, that "...we must not delude ourselves with preposterous notions such as the straight Luddite position" (Postman, 1985). A combination of both individual awareness and communal practice will foster a future more aware and capable of using our technopoly to its advantage.

Works Cited

Postman, Neil. *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology.* New York: Alfred
A. Knopf, Inc., 1992.

Postman, Neil. "Of Luddites, Learning and Life." *TECHNOS Quarterly.* 2.4 (1993): n.
pag. Web. 12 November 2011

Saxon, Wolfgang. "Neil Postman,72, Mass Media Critic Dies." *The New York Times.*The
New York Times Company., 9 October 2003. Web. 12 November 2011.

De Palma, Paul. "Book Review: Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology by
Neil Postman." SIGCAS 25.1 (1995). Web. 14 November 2011.

Cremin, Lawrence. "*The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American
Education 1876-1957.*" New York: Vintage, Inc. 1964.