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Theoretician Profile – Neil Postman

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Introduction and Background

Neil Postman (1931-2003) was an American author, educator, media theorist, and cultural critic. He focused on the discipline of media studies, the critical analysis of technology, and the philosophy of communication (Llorente, 2016). He was born, raised, and spent his entire career in New York City, earning a Master's and Doctorate from New York University (NYU) and founding its media ecology program in 1971 (Saxon, 2003). His theories focused on the role of technology in society, particularly the influence of television on American culture. Throughout his distinguished career he wrote 20 books and more than 200 magazine and newspaper articles (Saxon, 2003). As a life-long educator, he was concerned with education and the negative effect of technology on children and their learning process.

As a critical theorist, he used the critical tradition in his writings to assert that technology, particularly television, is an ineffective way of providing education because it does not offer the interaction necessary to maximize learning. He also believed that technology produces entertainment rather than serious thought and discourse. Further, he theorized that television diminishes the distinction between children and adults, thereby eliminating childhood. Since he died in 2003, he had limited interaction with the Internet, but he no doubt would have had very strong opinions on the increasing role technology plays in modern society.

This paper will examine the theories and philosophy of Dr. Postman; his focus on technology, specifically television, and its influence on education and modern society; his influence on communication theory; how his theories have

become more relevant today with the rise of cable news and the Internet; and his contribution to the field of communication.

Critical Theories on Technology, Education and Television

Postman's most influential work was *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1985). In it, he argued that by expressing ideas through visual imagery, television reducing politics, news, history, and other serious topics to mere entertainment and leads to the trivialization of public discourse (Llorente, 2016).

His critiques of television have been compared to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, in which the government provides a drug, soma, to the people of the Brave New World as a way to provide a mindless escapism that makes them comfortable with their lack of freedom (Pearce, 1998). Postman believed that Huxley best foresaw modern society because Huxley, unlike his contemporary, George Orwell, feared that there would be no reason to ban a book because no one would want to read one. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance (Timberg, 2015).

In *Amusing*, Postman lamented that when "a people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture-death is a clear possibility" (Goodman, 1985). Additionally, in *Amusing*, Postman argued that television is destroying the "serious and rational public conversation" that was sustained for centuries by the printing press (Goodman, 1985).

Postman further critiqued the advancement of technology in his work, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1982). In *Disappearance*, he examined the origins of

childhood and posited that the rise of technology, specifically the invention of the printing press in about 1450, caused the creation of childhood. In the oral tradition prior to the print culture, there was not a sharp distinction between children and adults. Youth would fully partake in adult life because culture did not have a need to keep information away from them (Elwell, 2013). The spread of literacy caused a great divide among people, with those able to master literacy being “promoted” to adulthood, where they were able to understand and engage in a new world of facts and opinions (Elwell, 2013). The concept of childhood spread with mass literacy and schooling, and eventually childhood was maintained by schooling where children were carefully monitored and taught sequential learning (Elwell, 2013).

According to Postman, television changed the dynamic of childhood because “in learning to interpret the meaning of images, we do not require lessons in grammar or spelling or logic or vocabulary ... watching television not only requires no skills but develops no skills” (Elwell, 2013). Postman argued that television broke down the barriers between adulthood and childhood because it no longer segregated information from the young (Elwell, 2013). Groups are largely defined by the exclusivity of information and knowledge that their members share, but with television adults no longer enjoy such exclusive knowledge (Elwell, 2013).

Other theorists share many of Postman’s criticisms of mass media and technology. Postman was greatly influenced by Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian English professor who was one of the first well-known modern critics of media and technology, coining the famous phrase “the medium is the message” (Griffin, 2012). McLuhan was also a founder of media ecology, arguing that changes in technology

alter the symbolic environment--the socially constructed, sensory world of meanings (Griffin, 2012).

Stuart Hall, a Jamaican-born sociology professor, is another media theorist, his criticisms of the influence of media on society leaning toward Marxist ideology. Hall theorizes that the media maintains the dominance of those already in power and that the media masks an underlying struggle for power (Griffin, 2012). Griffin observes that Hall places less emphasis on rationality and more emphasis on resistance (2012). Postman and Hall agree on the corporatization of the media being detrimental to society (Griffin, 2012), but Postman is driven more by intellectual curiosity than a desire to challenge the hegemonic system.

Articles on Theory and Importance to Communication

Postman's thoughts on the Internet would be especially salient and relevant today based on his criticisms of television as a medium contributing little value to the development of thought and intelligence. He was concerned with television's ability to consume important issues and reduce them to trivial entertainment (McMenamin, 2017). With the election of President Trump and Fox News, theorists and media critics has lately been promoting Postman as presaging the emergence of cable news and the Internet. Postman's observation in *Amusing* that the "idea [of politics] is not to pursue excellence, clarity or honesty but to appear as if you are ..." seems especially relevant today (McMenamin, 2017).

Those critical of such developments hail Postman and his criticisms of television, including his prediction in *Amusing* that "the act of criticism itself would, in the end, be co-opted by television. The parodists would become celebrities, would

star in movies, and would end up making television commercials” (Timberg, 2015). Media critics have pointed to that passage as a prediction of the rise of political satirists such as Stephen Colbert (Almond, 2014). Almond points to Postman’s warning in *Amusing* that the dependence on television has created a society whose standard of value is “whether or not something can grab and then hold the public’s attention” (2014).

Postman never used the Internet, did not own a computer and never even used a typewriter. All his books and articles were written in longhand (McCain, 2003), fitting for such a skeptic of mass media and technology. Perhaps not surprisingly, he did not believe that Internet belonged in the classroom, saying that no clear evidence existed that children learn better when they have access to the Internet (McCain, 2003).

Conclusion

It seems that those praising Postman see him as a sort of heretic to the religion of technology. Ironically, Postman is admired as a sage in predicting the rise of politics as entertainment, but few people seem to agree with him that the true answer is to resist technology and return to the written and spoken word.

I chose to write my essay on Postman because of my love of television and mass media. I am an avid consumer of television and online content, reading dozens of articles and checking my social media accounts countless times throughout the day. Postman no doubt would shake his head if he were alive to see most Americans, myself included, obsess over their smartphones and televisions.

While his critical theories on technology are certainly interesting, there is little evidence that his theories would stand the test of quantitative scientific scrutiny. Technology has democratized information and access to education, giving anyone with access to the Internet the ability to learn, grow, and succeed.

To argue, as Postman did in *The End of Education*, that textbooks do not belong in classrooms and that alternative curriculums must be created to foster intellectual skepticism (Saxon, 2003), is to be hopelessly naïve. His theories are not practicable or relevant in today's society. Anthropology and linguistics have their place in education, but to elevate the subjects to the primary position in the curriculum, as he proposes in *Education* (Saxon, 2003), would leave today's students woefully unprepared for the professional world.

Today's society views education more critically than ever, with specific skills being more important than becoming a well-rounded intellectual person. He would doubtless be pleased that society is breaking down barriers to education, but those breakthroughs coming at the cost of an increasing reliance on technology would probably be more than he could bear.

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