

Neil Postman, the subject of the following paper, has achieved international recognition as a major analyst and critic of contemporary education, politics, and culture. Postman has authored several provocative books, including Crazy Talk/Stupid Talk, Amusing Ourselves to Death, Conscientious Objections, and Technopoly. He edited ETC. from 1977 through 1986.

POST(MODERN)MAN,

OR NEIL POSTMAN

LANCE STRATE* **AS A POSTMODERNIST †**

AS A FORMER student of Neil Postman's, I want to acknowledge the debt that I and many others owe to him as an educator. I would add that in the fourteen years that I have known him, very little of what I have heard him say might be categorized as crazy talk or stupid talk. A good portion of it, however, has been amusing. For even in the midst of the most conscientious of objections, Neil Postman never loses his sense of playfulness. I am not sure why this is so. Perhaps it is because he is the youngest of four children. Perhaps it is because he is from Brooklyn. Or maybe it has something to do with his name. After all, how many people do you know whose first and last name constitute a complete grammatical sentence (Kneel, postman!). If "naming is destiny," then his surname also may account for his interest in communication, as "Postman" summons images of messen-

* Lance Strate is an Assistant Professor in Fordham University's Department of Communications, Bronx, NY.

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gers, messages, and media, particularly of the pre-electronic variety. Moreover, given our current era of epilogues, this age of *poststructuralism*, *postMarxism*, *postfeminism*, and of course, *postmodernism*, the name *Postman* seems especially timely. But whatever the relationship between the word and the thing it represents, this much is clear: His is a name that is rich in meaning, a name that invites wordplay. And it is in this spirit that I have taken his name and conflated it with the term "postmodern" in order to arrive at the title of this paper, "Post(modern)man." In doing so, I wish to suggest that we can gain some insight into Postman's perspective on media and technology by framing it as a theory of the postmodern. I also mean to imply that those who are interested in the concept of postmodernism would benefit from a review of Postman's scholarship.

I should make it clear at this point that Neil Postman has never claimed to be a postmodernist. Rather, he has referred to himself as an Educationist, his original area of expertise (see Postman, 1961, 1979, 1988; Postman & Weingartner, 1966, 1969, 1971, 1973); as a general semanticist, having served as the editor of *ETC.* for many years (also see Postman, 1976, 1988; Postman & Weingartner, 1966; Postman, Weingartner, & Moran, 1969); and as a Media Ecologist (see Postman, 1979, 1982, 1985, 1988, 1992; Postman, Nystrom, Strate, & Weingartner, 1987; Postman & Powers, 1992, for his scholarship on media and technology). Media Ecology, a phrase coined by Marshall McLuhan, is the name Postman gave to the graduate program that he founded at New York University, and the term that he has used to refer to the general perspective of McLuhan (1962, 1964) and others such as Harold Innis (1977), Eric Havelock (1963, 1976, 1978, 1982), Walter Ong (1967, 1977, 1982), Lewis Mumford (1934), and Jacques Ellul (1964, 1973, 1985). I should also make it clear that these scholars, in turn, have never claimed to be Media Ecologists, the point being that self-identification is irrelevant. Still, it should be duly noted that not only has Neil Postman never referred to himself as a postmodernist, but he never, to my knowledge, uses the term "postmodern." Nor

does he use the jargon associated with postmodernism, including such terms as "decentering," "hyperreality," or "pastiche." In short, Postman does not speak postmodern. He speaks English. I would argue, however, that it is not necessary to speak postmodern in order to speak *of* the postmodern, and Postman's clarity could serve as a welcome corrective to the excessive use of jargon and notoriously esoteric writing that is typical of postmodernists (see, for example, Baudrillard, 1981, 1983, 1988; Jameson, 1991; Lyotard, 1984).

The difference in linguistic style is, at least in part, symptomatic of differences in intellectual background. Postman is very much a part of the Anglo-American tradition of empiricism, utilitarianism, and especially, pragmatism, particularly as manifested in the fields of education and communication; among his chief influences are John Dewey, Karl Popper, George Herbert Mead, Alfred Korzybski, I.A. Richards, and, of course, Marshall McLuhan. Postmodernism, on the other hand, is firmly rooted in continental philosophy, in Nietzsche, Marx, and Sussure, and is intimately intertwined with the disciplines of art and literary criticism. There is some common ground, however, as postmodernists such as Jean Baudrillard (1981, 1983, 1988) and Frederic Jameson (1991) also list McLuhan as a major influence; their path to McLuhan, however, was longer and more convoluted than Postman's.

Having gone on at some length about postmodernism and postmodernists, I realize that some discussion of the concept of the postmodern is overdue. In its most basic sense, the term "postmodern" implies that a period of time that has been labeled "modern" has ended, and that we find ourselves in new and uncharted territory. There is, of course, a certain irony to the term "postmodern" if we interpret it as meaning "post-contemporary" (a phrase actually used by Jameson, 1991), but this is ultimately a reification of the term "modern." For rather than referring to our present point in time, "modern" here signifies an historical era that comes to a close some time during the late 1940s and 1950s. Critics differ on when

this period begins, however. Critics who focus on the history of the arts, and on the modern as an aesthetic style, place the beginning of the modern period at the turn of the 20th century. Clearly, this concept of the modern is relatively narrow and specialized. Social theorists, on the other hand, trace the origins of the modern back to the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and to such factors as the rise of democracy, capitalism, and urbanization, and the influence of the Enlightenment, the industrial revolution, and mass culture (Lyotard, 1984; Jameson, 1991; see also Ewen, 1988 for a familiar but comprehensive summary of these historical developments).

There is no doubt that these developments are of great importance, but they are overshadowed by the periodization used by Postman (1979, 1982, 1985), inspired by McLuhan (1962, 1964), and perhaps expressed most clearly in the work of Elizabeth Eisenstein (1980); according to their chronology, the 18th century may have seen the beginnings of a late modernity, but this follows an early modern period that begins in the 15th century with the European printing revolution. Postman, McLuhan, and Eisenstein argue that the changes brought on by this revolution resulted in the termination of the medieval period and set the stage for the further mutations that occurred during the 18th century. In short, they argue for the essential unity of this larger modern period, a period also known as the "age of Gutenberg" (a phrase used by Postman as early as 1961, one year prior to the publication of McLuhan's *Gutenberg Galaxy*). Thus, from Postman's perspective, postmodernity represents the end of five hundred years of print-dominated culture, a state of affairs that he laments.

In this context, I find it worthwhile to note that postmodernists do not necessarily celebrate the postmodern; many are quite critical of it (e.g., Baudrillard, 1981, 1983, 1988; see also the discussion in Jameson, 1991, chap. 2). And this brings me back to the title of this paper, "Post(modern)man," and to a second meaning that it holds for me: that Postman contains the modern, that he acts as a champion of the modern in the postmodern world. In making this assertion, I realize that I

am placing myself at odds with Joli Jensen who argues in *Redeeming Modernity* (1990) that Postman is hostile to the modern; her use of the term "modernity" however does not clearly distinguish between the modern as an historical period with distinct boundaries and the modern as simply the contemporary. Instead, I would suggest that Postman is a defender of modernity, and in particular of print culture as the better part of modernity. He is at his best when he gives voice to print culture, acts as an avatar of typographic discourse, and plays the role of "Minerva's owl" in the "gathering dusk" of postmodernity (see Innis, 1977, p.3, for a discussion of this quotation from Hegel).

In keeping with this role, Postman not only sounds the alarm, but also identifies those forces responsible for the assault on modernity. They include, of course, television. Like McLuhan (1964), Postman links the adoption of television technology to the demise of the modern. He differs from McLuhan, however, in his explanation of this phenomenon. McLuhan focuses on the relationship between technology and the senses, arguing that after five hundred years of eye dominance through typography, television has restored the ear to its previously held position of superiority. Walter Ong (1967, 1977, 1982) echoes McLuhan in referring to our age as one characterized by "secondary orality." Postman, on the other hand, is concerned with the relationship between technology and discourse. Consequently, while he acknowledges the distinction between orality and literacy, he often focuses on what is common to all forms of language; he is a defender of the word, not just the printed word, but also the handwritten word and the spoken word. For him, the eloquence of print culture is rooted in a balance between what is read and what is said. This balance has now been upset by televisual discourse, which shifts the emphasis from verbal to visual forms of communication. In other words, Postman's concept of postmodernity is that of a culture in which the image has come to overshadow the word (in this respect he is in perfect agreement with other postmodernists such as Baudrillard, 1981, 1983, 1988, and Jameson, 1991). While other

postmodernists become preoccupied with hyperreality, simulation, and the relationship between signifier and signified, Postman focuses on the concreteness of the image in comparison with the word's capacity for abstraction, on the inability of pictures to represent propositional statements, on the association between visual communication and pathos as opposed to verbal communication and logos, on the relative accessibility of iconic forms in contrast to the long process of schooling associated with literacy, and, of course, on the image's tendency to amuse, entertain, and ultimately, to trivialize.

The shift from linguistic to image-based discourse is a key element of Postman's perspective on postmodernity, but he uncovers other aspects of televisual discourse that are hostile to the modern. For example, the continuous, linear, and logical arguments favored by the moderns are left behind in the dust of instantaneous electronic communication's accelerated discourse (for more on the relationship between speed and postmodernity, see Virilio, 1986; Virilio & Lotringer, 1983); ultimately, it is a form of discourse that is present-centered and therefore ahistorical (see Jameson, 1991, for the connection between postmodernism and the loss of a sense of history). Also, telecommunications all but eliminates the concepts of distance and location that the moderns went to such great effort to map out, resulting in a discourse that is decontextualized and often of little direct relevance to postmodern populations (in this respect, McLuhan's, 1962, 1964, concept of the global village is well known, but see also Jameson's, 1991, emphasis on the connection between postmodernity and the rise of the multinationals). Moreover, our new communication technologies have dramatically increased the volume of information transmitted in our culture, crippling the notions of secrecy and privacy that were constructed through typographic discourse, resulting in information overload and the inability to process and control information (also see Lyotard's, 1984, arguments concerning the relationship between science, information technology, and the disappearance of metanarratives).

Postman's emphasis on television might seem to imply that, like many other postmodernists, he views the end of modernity as a sudden collapse and surrender. On the contrary, he traces the attack on modernity back to the 19th century's revolution in communication technologies, which include photography and telegraphy. The evolution of audiovisual media such as the motion picture and radio put modernity on the retreat. The art world's discovery of the modern and its transformation into an aesthetic style at the turn of the 20th century was, as McLuhan would conclude, a sign of modernity's obsolescence. Thus, the fall of modernity associated with the widespread adoption of television during the 1950s and 1960s was part of a longer process of decline. This more gradual view of the advent of postmodernity is consistent with Postman's use of the notion of the extended modern period associated with the printing press; modernity itself develops gradually from the invention of typography through the incunabula of the early modern era.

Postman's arguments about the triumph of the televisual over typographic discourse are the best known elements of his perspective on postmodernity, but they do not represent that perspective in its entirety. Rather, he also points to the triumph of the technological over the traditional (see Postman, 1992, and also 1976, pp. 178-185, and 1979, chap. 5). The modern period, he argues, gave rise to a technocratic culture in which traditional values and customs coexist with an emerging scientific and technological worldview. In this case, the assault on modernity occurs when this balance becomes upset, and the technological, with its emphasis on efficiency, takes command. (This coincides with Jameson's, 1991, description of the modern era as a period marked by the process of modernizing, whereas postmodernity is a sign of a state of full modernization). Postman refers to this aspect of postmodernity as "technopoly," a culture monopolized by the technological. Here again, the shift is not a sudden one, as Postman traces the roots of technopoly to the early twentieth century, and the development of scientific management. Full blown technopoly seems to be associated with the post-

war development of computing technology and the creation of what is sometimes known as the information society. He argues that it is a society characterized by information overload and an inability to screen out or evaluate information, except by technology's own criteria of progress and efficiency. (This corresponds to Lyotard's, 1984, description of postmodernity as characterized by the absence of any ruling ideas, narratives, and myths, and to Jameson's, 1991, explanation of postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism, of a culture in which capitalism has penetrated to all sectors of life; technopoly and late capitalism may be viewed as competing explanations of the same phenomenon, and/or two sides of the same coin.)

Thus, Postman presents us with two paths to postmodernity: from print media to electronic media, and from technocracy to technopoly. What he has yet to do is to explain in its entirety the relationship between these two paths. There is no doubt that a connection exists between typographic discourse and technocracy; Eisenstein (1980) has amply documented that printing technology was a necessary precondition for the development of modern science and technology. The association between the computer and technopoly is also quite clear. What is something of a puzzle is the relationship between technopoly and television. Of course, technopoly's preeminence insures that television technologies will be accepted and adopted without doubt or question. Television in turn serves as technopoly's user-friendly interface; in its programming as well as its advertising, it functions as the great communicator and promoter of the technological. And yet, there is a fundamental contradiction between televisual discourse and technopolistic discourse. Whereas televisual discourse trivializes what is truly important, technopolistic discourse gives the truly trivial the illusion of importance. Whereas television amuses us to death, technopoly's information glut gives us all anxiety attacks. And whereas the discourse characteristic of television might be characterized as irrational, that of technopoly may best be described as hyperrational. The postmodern, therefore, is a

product of these two opposing forces; it is a culture pulled in two directions at once, a culture that is, perhaps, strained to its limits and in danger of being ripped apart. The question, then, is: Can Postman's perspective account for the cultural contradictions of postmodernity?

I believe the answer is yes, and I will extrapolate from Postman's scholarship in order to provide an explanation. As I have noted, Postman favors modernity for its high level of verbal discourse, for its emphasis on the spoken, written, and printed word. Televisual discourse, on the other hand, is largely based on the image, and it is this iconic discourse that is seen as responsible for "the humiliation of the word," as Ellul (1985) puts it. But I believe it fair to say that the word would never have lost to the image had the fight been a fair one, that, in fact, the word was outnumbered, and forced to do battle on two fronts. The other enemy of the word, the image's ally in its victory of the postmodern, is none other than the number. In other words, technopolistic discourse is quantitative discourse, so that it is not so much any particular type or class of technology that is at the core of technopoly, but rather it is the worldview which not only believes but demands that all reality be reduced to numeric form, measured and statistically manipulated in order to maximize efficiency. In sum, the postmodern world is one in which the image and number have outflanked verbal communication and have emerged victorious in the battle for control of our culture and our collective consciousness.

While the biases of the visual and the numeric contradict each other, it should be noted that the two codes have had a long and distinguished relationship, a relationship based on developments such as Euclidean geometry and Cartesian coordinate graphing. In many ways, television reflects the uneasy tension between these two forces, for while its content is dominated by the image, the television industry is run almost entirely by the numbers, by audience ratings, shares, and demographics, and by profits (Postman, 1988; Postman et al, 1987; Postman & Powers, 1992). And while the computer has long been viewed as a number-cruncher, widespread

adoption of computer technology has been dependent on the development of an iconic interface (e.g., that of Macintosh or Windows). Moreover, the visual and the numeric have come together in the form of the digitized image, which represents digital technology in the service of analogic communication. I would suggest to you that the digitized image, free of any necessary relationship with reality, but rather in the realm of pure simulation, represents the ultimate expression of postmodernity's triumph over typographic discourse and the epistemology of the printed word.

This brings me to a third meaning for my title, "Post-(modern)man": that it refers to the type of "man" or rather the type of person characteristic of postmodern culture. In his book *The Disappearance of Childhood*, Postman (1982) explores one aspect of the postmodern population — that it is one in which the distinction between childhood and adulthood has all but disappeared (this is an example of what postmodernists call the decentering of the subject). Postman is not content simply to describe the postmodern sense of self, however. Instead, he has an idea of how postmoderns might be shaped, of how the negative effects of postmodernity might be mitigated. His answer, the answer that runs through just about every one of his books, is education. In his role as Minerva's owl, it is the school, more than any other of typographic culture's institutions, that Postman seeks to salvage. It is schooling, education in the book and by the book, that he offers as a mediator between the binary oppositions of image and number. Postman is a postmodernist because he does not deny that modernity has passed. But he is more than a postmodernist because he does not just accept and describe postmodern culture, but rather seeks an alternative in the form of education. In doing so, he reminds us that teaching is, after all, an activity, not a form of passivity.

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