

“Clarity is courage.”

— *Neil Postman*

***NEIL POSTMAN,
DEFENDER OF THE WORD***

LANCE STRATE*

NEIL POSTMAN¹⁹³¹⁻²⁰⁰³ died on Sunday, October 5th, 2003, at the age of 72, after battling lung cancer for almost two years. His contributions, as a scholar, teacher, and public intellectual, enriched many different fields of study, including semantics, linguistics, communication, media studies, journalism, education, psychology, English, cultural studies, philosophy, history, sociology, political science, religious studies, technology studies, etc. Across these many contexts, and throughout his career, he promoted and advanced the discipline of general semantics. Some years ago, in the course of a conversation we shared on the writing styles that intellectuals and academics employ, he summed up his position on language with these words: “Clarity is courage.” Postman wrote and spoke with a crystalline courage, and championed clarity in language, thought, and action.

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Born into a Yiddish-speaking family in Brooklyn, New York, Neil Postman¹⁹³¹ developed an awareness of the power of language at an early age. Public school education at that time placed a great deal of emphasis on proper grammar and diction, and the elimination of accents and dialects. Consequently he learned to speak in the educated New York manner and idiom made famous by Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Neil Postman^{1950s} established himself as a star athlete on the varsity basketball team at the State University of New York at Fredonia, played minor league baseball, served in the United States Army, and studied for his doctorate in education at Columbia University's Teachers College. His mentor, Louis Forsdale, introduced him to the formal study of linguistics, to the fields of education and communication, and to the study of media. Forsdale also introduced Postman to Marshall McLuhan, the University of Toronto English Professor who would become famous during the 1960s for his study of media.

Neil Postman¹⁹⁵⁸ joined the English faculty at San Francisco State College, where he shared an office with Mark Harris, author of *Bang the Drum Slowly*, and worked under S.I. Hayakawa. Largely through Hayakawa, Postman learned about general semantics, and became associated with the International Society for General Semantics. As a doctoral student at Teachers College, Postman had studied linguistics, and New York University hired Neil Postman¹⁹⁵⁹ for its School of Education because of his expertise in that field. General semantics fit neatly within his linguistics orientation, and he inherited possibly the first college course in general semantics at New York University. In Postman's own words:

I have been unable to verify the exact date but there is suggestive evidence that in the late 1940s, NYU's School of Continuing Education sponsored a seminar given by Korzybski himself. And in Stuart Chase's popular *The Power of Words*, Chase asserts that an NYU School of Education course called "Language and Behavior" was among the first general semantics courses ever given at a major university. That course survives to this day under the title "Language and Human Behavior." (Postman, 1988, p.145)

In teaching "Language and Human Behavior" over four decades, Postman made it into the oldest continuously taught course on general semantics in the history of the discipline.

Neil Postman^{1960s} focused on English education, arguing that we could improve the English curriculum in elementary and secondary schools by incorporating linguistics and semantics, as well as the study of "the new languages," a phrase that McLuhan's colleague Edmund Carpenter (1960) introduced to re-

fer to the media of communication. Thus, Postman's first book, *Television and the Teaching of English*, commissioned by the National Council of Teachers of English (through Forsdale), and published in 1961, clearly indicated the direction his career would take. He then went on to develop a textbook series called "The New English," used in grades 7 to 12. Published between 1963 and 1967 under the titles *Discovering Your Language* (Postman, Morine, and Morine, 1963), *The Uses of Language* (Postman and Damon, 1965a), *Exploring Your Language* (Postman, 1966), *The Languages of Discovery* (Postman and Damon, 1965b), *Language and Systems* (Postman and Damon, 1965c), and *Language and Reality* (Postman, 1967), this highly innovative series became quite popular in classrooms across the United States. Through these books, Postman introduced a generation of students to the principles of general semantics and related perspectives on language and symbolic communication. Postman's first collaborative effort with fellow Teachers College graduate Charles Weingartner gave us the theoretical context behind his textbook series. Entitled *Linguistics: A Revolution in Teaching*, and published in 1966, the book presented a scholarly synthesis especially for the benefit of English teachers.

Postman's calls for a new approach to English education fit together with the growing movement for educational reform during the 1960s, and the publication of *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (co-authored with Weingartner) in 1969 catapulted Postman into a leadership position in the movement. Combining linguistics, general semantics, and McLuhan's ideas about media, and criticizing the American educational system in general this time, rather than just the teaching of English, Postman and Weingartner argued for a curriculum based on the "Sapir-Whorf-Korzybski-Ames-Einstein-Heisenberg-Wittgenstein- McLuhan-*et al.* Hypothesis ... that language is not merely a vehicle of expression, it is also the driver; and that what we perceive, and therefore can learn, is a function of our languaging processes" (p.101). In this new model of education, understanding language (including the new languages of media) would take the leading role. Teachers would emphasize the art of asking questions and what Postman and Weingartner called "the inquiry method" (p.25), and the evaluation of statements or as they put it, "crap detecting" (p.1). *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* had a dramatic impact on the reform movement, and remains influential to this day. And Postman and Weingartner produced two additional books on education, *The Soft Revolution: A Student Handbook for Turning Schools Around* in 1971, and *The School Book: For People Who Want to Know What All the Hollering is About* in 1973. They also co-edited, together with Terence P. Moran, the anthology, *Language in America*, published in 1969; Postman contributed a chapter on the misuse of language entitled "De-

meaning of Meaning.” In this chapter, Postman employs terms such as “semantic environment” and “language pollution,” in presenting an argument that would become central to his media criticism of the 1980s:

In considering the ecology of the semantic environment, we must take into account what is called the communications revolution. The invention of new and various media of communication has given a voice and an audience to many people whose opinions would otherwise not have been solicited, and who, in fact, have little if anything to contribute to public issues. Many of these people are entertainers, such as Johnny Carson, Hugh Downs, Joey Bishop, David Susskind, Ronald Reagan, Barbara Walters, and Joe Gargiola. Before the communications revolution, their public utterances would have been limited exclusively to sentences composed by more knowledgeable people, or they would have had no opportunity to make public utterances at all. Things being what they are, the press and air waves are filled with the featured and prime-time sentences of people who are in no position to render informed judgments on what they are talking about: like Joey Bishop on the sociological implications of drugs, Johnny Carson on education innovation, Ronald Reagan on the *Pueblo* incident, David Susskind on anything, and Hugh Downs on menopause. (“It is,” he says, “a controversial subject.”) (p.14)

As this passage implies, “the ecology of the semantic environment” refers to essentially the same idea as the concept of media ecology, which incorporated the study of symbols, symbol systems, and symbolic form with the study of media and technology. Postman formally introduced the term “media ecology” in 1968, in an address to the annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (published in 1970 as a book chapter entitled “The Reformed English Curriculum”). He also prepared a proposal for a new graduate program in media ecology at New York University, which he incorporated into *The Soft Revolution*. Approved in 1970, the media ecology curriculum included major works in general semantics, linguistics, and the philosophy of symbolic form as required reading, along with the scholarship of Norbert Wiener, Edward T. Hall, Erving Goffman, Paul Watzlawick, and of course Marshall McLuhan, Eric Havelock, Lewis Mumford, etc.

The combination of general semantics and communication theory that served as the foundation of the media ecology curriculum also became the basis of Postman’s 1976 book, *Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk*. Popular among general readers as well as communication educators, *Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk* constitutes an in-depth examination of the semantic environment. That same year, Post-

man followed in Hayakawa's footsteps and became the editor of *ETC*, a position he held until 1986. As editor he sought to advance the discipline of general semantics by broadening its scope. He therefore expanded the focus of the journal to incorporate media ecology, and published a great deal of seminal work in the field, along with more traditional general semantics analyses and discussions. Thus, in his Keynote Address at the 1980 International Conference on General Semantics in Toronto, he tied together the symbolic analysis of Korzybski with the media analysis of McLuhan, Havelock, Carpenter, Innis, and other members of the Toronto School:

This focus on the structure of technics is the arena of inquiry staked out by Innis, who believed that embedded in every medium of communication is a bias toward either time or space. This is the arena in which Innis' most well-known student, McLuhan, has made his mark by probing the extent to which each medium amplifies or deadens one or more of our senses. And, at the risk of offending, I submit that were Korzybski alive today, he would be at the forefront of research in this same arena, for he taught that any medium which conveys a message carries in its structure and mode of presentation messages of its own. He understood better than anyone else that a medium is not a neutral mechanism through which a culture conducts its business. It is by its very form a shaper of values, a masseuse of the senses, an advocate of ideologies, an exacting organizer of social patterns. Korzybski, of course, focused his attention on the medium of language, but how fascinated he would be by the various forms of human communication we must cope with today. (Postman, 1980, pp.322-323)

Postman's marriage of media ecology to general semantics came across as a welcome innovation to some, and a shotgun wedding to others, but overall an adequate assessment of this period in *ETC*'s history does not yet exist. However, Thom Gencarelli (2000) in his examination of Postman and media ecology, suggests that Postman's editorial work on *ETC* constitutes a major turning point in his career. During this period, Postman emerged as a leading media critic and public intellectual, much like Marshall McLuhan had become during the sixties.

Neil Postman₁₉₇₉ published *Teaching as a Conserving Activity*, and in doing so explained that he had had a change of heart, distancing himself from Neil Postman₁₉₆₉ and his earlier positions on educational reform. Whereas Postman₁₉₆₉ had concluded that schools needed to change in order to adjust themselves to the new cultural environment dominated by television and the electronic media, Postman₁₉₇₉ came to the realization that young people do not need any help in adjusting to television, but rather needed the print-oriented counter-

environment that traditional schooling provided. He identified television as a curriculum in its own right, one that rivaled that of the traditional school, one in which images overshadowed words, and capturing attention overruled coherence. However much this amounted to a reversal of the position he took in *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, Postman remained constant in his insistence that schools provide instruction in understanding language, symbolic form, and media.

Television reveals the secrets that we previously had kept from children as they sat, sequestered in the schoolroom.

Neil Postman^{1980s} became a leading critic of television and the electronic media, appearing on television with increasing frequency to deliver his humanistic critique of the medium and its impact on human affairs. *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* took its place as the first of Postman's television trilogy, followed by *The Disappearance of Childhood* in 1982. There he noted that television reveals the secrets that we previously had kept from children as they sat, sequestered in the schoolroom; in revealing all, he argued that television blurs the distinction between childhood and adulthood characteristic of print culture. The third book, published in 1985, became his most powerful and widely acclaimed work. Entitled *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, he wrote again about crazy and stupid talk and the de-meaning of meaning, this time as consequences of our wholesale adoption of television technology. Serious subjects, such as news, politics, religion, and education, become trivialized on television, he explained, because the medium's bias favors entertaining formats that emphasize images and immediacy. Postman earned the 1987 George Orwell Award for Clarity in Language from the National Council of Teachers of English on the strength of this analysis.

Postman remained an outspoken critic of the electronic media as he drew on semiotics to support a call for banning beer advertising from television in a controversial report prepared for the American Automobile Association Foundation for Traffic Safety, co-authored by Christine Nystrom, myself, and Charles Weingartner, and released in 1987. Postman also opposed the introduction of cameras into the courtroom, as a member of a New York State Advisory Committee charged in 1988 with considering the innovation; and he collaborated with newscaster Steve Powers to demystify broadcast journalism in the 1992 book, *How to Watch TV News*. Postman included additional critical es-

says on media (some of which first appeared in *ETC*) in his 1988 anthology, *Conscientious Objections*, along with essays on education and language, and a profile of Alfred Korzybski, which began with the preamble:

In 1976, I was appointed editor of *ETC: The Journal of General Semantics*. For ten years, I served in that capacity, and with each passing year, my respect for Alfred Korzybski increased and my respect for those academics who kept themselves and their students ignorant of his work decreased. I here pay my respects to a unique explorer, and by implication mean to express my disdain for those language educators who steep their students in irrelevancies and who believe that William Safire and Edwin Newman have something important to say about language. (p.136)

Neil Postman^{1990s} expanded his critical focus to include information technologies such as the computer and the Internet. In 1992 he published *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, in which he explained that we accept technology into our lives automatically and uncritically, allowing it to penetrate every sector of American society and govern every aspect of human activity. This prompted some to label Postman a neo-Luddite, although he mainly argued for giving more thought to the unforeseen and negative consequences of technology, and for maintaining values, ethics, and social institutions independent of the technological imperative. Moreover, even when he took as his theme the hardware of technology, he never lost sight of the paramount importance of the software of language, as *Technopoly* included chapters on “Invisible Technologies” and “The Great Symbol Drain.” Similar critiques took the form of short pieces such as “Cyberspace, Shmyberspace” published in 1996.

Postman shifted his focus from media and technology to broader cultural issues in his final two major works. In 1995 he published *The End of Education*, in which he discussed the decline of our common culture and shared set of beliefs, a condition he had previously diagnosed as brought on by the electronic media and technopoly. Postman argued that under such conditions, public education could not maintain its vitality, nor even its viability. In 1999, as a response to President Clinton’s rhetorical call to build a bridge to the 21st century, Postman gave us *Building a Bridge to the Eighteenth Century*. There he argued that we needed to bring with us into the new millennium the rationality of the Enlightenment (which he had earlier identified as a product of print culture). In both works, he remained steadfast in arguing that understanding language, media, and technology would go a long way towards solving our social ills. In *Building a Bridge to the Eighteenth Century*, Postman also criticized

poststructuralist and postmodernist theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes for claiming, in effect, that since “the map is not the territory,” the territory must not exist:

If postmodernism is simply skepticism elevated to the highest degree, we may give it muted applause. The applause must be muted because even skepticism requires nuance and balance. To say that all reality is a social construction is interesting, indeed provocative, but requires, nonetheless, that distinctions be made between what is an unprovable opinion and a testable fact. And if one wants to say that “a testable fact” is, itself, a social construction, a mere linguistic illusion, one is moving dangerously close to a kind of Zeno’s paradox. One can use a thousand words, in French or any other language, to show that a belief is a product of habits of language — and graduate students by the carload can join in the fun — but blood still circulates through the body and the AIDS virus still makes people sick and the moon is not made of green cheese. (p.78)

Postman disliked postmodernism for its mistaken view of language and symbolic form, and also for the way that postmodernists and related cultural theorists used language in their writing, for their lack of clarity, dependence on jargon, convoluted sentence structure, etc. Reflecting on his career as an academic, he stated that,

... if an academic has anything interesting or useful to say, I believe he or she has a responsibility to say it to fellow citizens. And, of course, to say it in a way that will capture and hold their interest. It is something of a minor tragedy that so many brilliant academics I know — people who have a great deal to say of interest to their fellow citizens — have been conditioned to write in a way, as Shakespeare said it, that no human ear can endure to hear. (Gencarelli, Borisoff, Chesebro, Drucker, Hahn, and Postman, 2001, p.134)

Postman taught his students that clarity is courage, and that we could achieve clarity by gaining an understanding of language, symbolic form, and technology through the study of general semantics and media ecology.

Neil Postman^{2000s} had served as Chair of New York University’s Department of Culture and Communication for over a decade, had held the rank of University Professor since 1993, and the Paulette Goddard Chair of Media Ecology since 1998. He had continued to develop his ideas about media ecology in short pieces such as “The Humanism of Media Ecology,” his Keynote Address delivered at the first Media Ecology Association convention. And he rejoined the Editorial Board of *ETC* in 2003.

Hundreds of his students, colleagues, friends, and fellow intellectuals came to his funeral service at the Parkside Chapel in Forest Hills, New York, on October 8, 2003, to join with Neil Postman's wife, Shelley, his children, Marc, Andrew, and Madeline, his grandchildren Alyssa, Claire, Samuel, and Charles, and numerous other relatives, to mourn his passing and pay their respects to his memory.

In a 1994 article I published in *ETC* about Neil Postman, I characterized him as a "defender of the word" (Strate, 1994, p.163), and I believe that this best sums up his life's work. He labored to defend the word from the *external* threats posed by the proliferation of media images, and the technological drive to reduce all things to numbers. And he worked to defend the word against the *internal* threat posed by the abuse and misuse of language. Neil Postman¹⁹³¹⁻²⁰⁰³ stands now with Korzybski, Hayakawa, McLuhan, *et al.*, as writers, scholars, and educators for the ages.

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