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Case Against Television

Daryl Vander Kooi
Dordt College

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The Case Against Telelvision

Daryl Vander Kooi
Professor of Communication

Dr. Daryl Vander Kooi has been teaching at Dordt College since 1971. He did his graduate work at Montana State University.

Extensive research has been done on the effects of television: research on its effects of passivity and aggression; research on the effects of violence on children. While the body of research seems contradictory, the consensus seems to support some adverse effects of TV on society. For example, even the adult audience, gathering its impressions from TV rather than facts, sees our society as more violent and dangerous than actual crime statistics indicate that it is. Others have attacked TV for its promotion of consumerism and materialism. Both television ads and programming espouse a materialistic lifestyle. Still other critics attempt to go beyond the analysis of television content to evaluate television as an activity or non-activity with the focus on time spent watching in contrast to alternative activities for that time. Finally, some experts go beyond the study of "couch potatoes" to an analysis of the technology.

In this article I will focus only on current analyses of the technology of television by Marshall McLuhan, Neil Postman, and Jacques Ellul, with the major emphasis on the works of Postman. I will summarize their positions and allow each to speak for himself.

McLuhan

McLuhan was probably the first prophetic voice that addressed the technology of television in North America. He went beyond the behavioristic studies of audience reaction to the analysis of the medium itself. He believed that "Those who are concerned with the program 'content' of media and not with the medium proper, appear to be in the position of physicians who ignore the 'syndrome of just being sick'" (69).

To McLuhan, all media, whether that be a pencil or television, are "extensions of man" that have an impact on human involvment. When humans develop a medium, that medium changes them.

McLuhan distinguishes between "cool" media and "hot" media. Television is a "cool" medium. A "hot" medium is one which is full of definition. It supplies all of the necessary information as well as its interpretation, while a cool medium, in contrast, supplies little definition. A cool medium demands more human participation. McLuhan says, "A cool medium, whether the spoken word or the manuscript or TV, leaves much more for the listener or user to do than a hot medium. If the medium is of high definition, participation is low. If the medium is of low intensity, the participation is high. Perhaps this is why lovers mumble so" (278). McLuhan points out, for example, that, within the political use of TV, presidential candidates must be generalizable or generic. They should not look like a teacher, a lawyer, or a talk-show host so that the audience can fill-in the rest of the character. For

a politician to "look like a politician" is to complete the image, causing an adverse reaction within the audience. This could explain the concern for image in the recent political campaigns. The audience of a "cool" medium must be allowed to fill-in the personality, the character.

Television, along with the other electric technology, translates culture into information. "In this electric age," says McLuhan, "we see ourselves being translated more and more into the form of information, moving toward the technological extension of consciousness. That is what is meant when we say that we daily know more and more about man. We mean that we can translate more and more of ourselves into other forms of expression that exceed ourselves" (64). The translation of humanity into information is another step away from humans and gives it the impression of concreteness. The translation into information changes culture.

That change in culture will have a necessary impact on the people of that culture. Note McLuhan's recognition of that change when he states that

> The young people who have experienced a decade of TV have naturally imbibed an urge toward involvement in depth that makes all the remote visualized goals of usual culture seem not only unreal but irrelevant, and not only irrelevant but anemic. It is the total involvement in the all-inclusive nowness that occurs in young lives via TV's mosaic image. This change of attitude has nothing to do with programming in any way, and would be the same if the programs consisted entirely of the highest cultural content. The change in attitude by means of relating themselves to the mosaic TV image would occur in any event. (292)

That change could explain the increasing demand for class discussions, projects, and exercises which supply immediate involvement in opposition to the lecture.

McLuhan maintains that all media "translate experience into new forms. The spoken word was the first technology by which man was able to let go of his environment in order to grasp it in a new way" (64). All media allow humans to change their culture into other forms such as symbols which can be stored and immediately retrieved (64).

Television translates humanity and human culture into information while actively involving the viewer in that concrete, immediate experience.

Postman

McLuhan's analysis of the technology of television serves as the starting block for much of Postman's run against television. Postman's early work, *Television and the Teaching of English*, recognized some of the problems of television. He saw television as a medium with limitations. The technology focused on movement or action. It had the limitation of size, that is, the medium itself required the use of the close-up picture. The language of television had to be the language of the lowest common denominator; i.e., complexity of language was reduced to that which was understandable by the masses. The medium was forced to focus on people, actors, and to avoid places or ideas. The medium was not capable of analysis, complex reasoning, or discussion.

Despite its limitations, Postman was willing to see TV programming as a type of literature with technical limitations in theme and style (*Teaching*, 42). He was also willing to recognize limited, positive results from TV. He argued that TV actually encouraged reading (33) and that, while the information on reading habits was contradictory, the actual circulation of magazines and newspapers increased and "book sales soared" during the time of television's greatest expansion (*Teaching*, 35). To this point, Postman's analysis focused primarily on the content and time involvment of television.

By 1979, when he wrote *Teaching as a Conserving Activity*, Postman had changed. Now TV had its own curriculum in competition with education which promotes the logical and linguistic activity of reading and writing with its concern for syntax and semantics. Television promotes the nonlogical and nonlinguistic communication of the right hemisphere of the brain (*Conserving*, 71-72). Due to the "language" of television, Postman expected a loss in the ability to analyze, to reason, to debate. Television, along with other media such as radio and film were "undermining . . . traditional patterns of thought and response" and conspire "against almost all of the assumptions on which the slowly disseminated, logically ordered, and cognitively processed word is based" (*Conserving*, 75).

Postman began an analysis of television as technology within the context of other communication technologies which point to an important change in the culture. The most complete explanation of that growing analysis is in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* which is an

> inquiry into and a lamentation about the most significant American cultural fact of the second half of the twentieth century: the decline of the Age of Typography and the as- cendancy of the Age of Television. This change-over has dramatically and irreversibly shifted the content and meaning of public discourse, since two media so vastly different cannot accommodate the same ideas. As the influence of print wanes, the content of politics, religion, education, and anything else that comprises public business must change and be recast in terms that are most suitable to television. (8)

Postman argued that we were a typographic or print-oriented culture. From the time of the New England colonies, with its reverence for books and its estimated literacy of 89-95 percent for men and an estimated high of 62 percent for women (*Amusing*, 31,32), through the early 20th century, American culture was typographic. The rhetoric of exposition which included extensive argumentation, emphasis on style, and thorough analysis, was evidenced in the prolific publication of newspapers and pamphlets during the early years. Libraries developed and expanded. Authors were revered. For a modern day James Schaap to be applauded by students and citizens as he walked home for lunch would pale in comparison to Dicken's welcome to America in 1842 (*Amusing*, 39). "From its beginning until well into the nineteenth century, America was as dominated by the printed word and an oratory based on the printed word as any society we know of" (*Amusing*, 41).

Public address itself was typographic—print in words or oratory. Public lecturers used the analysis, argument, and style of print. Such lectures were the model for discourse. Large audiences attended oratorical events under various titles—Lyceum, Chautauqua. Such audiences were willing and capable of listening to Lincoln and Douglas debate for four hours. While those lectures and debates might be interrupted for meals, music, checking the children at play or other necessities, the audience

was capable of following argument, testing reasoning, checking rebuttals. "In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, print put forward a definition of intelligence that gave priority to the objective, rational use of the mind and at the same time encouraged forms of public discourse with serious, logically ordered content" (*Amusing*, 51). Postman traced that influence in the church, law, and even advertising.

But, with the beginning of the telegraph, technology started to change communication and the culture.

> The telegraph made a three-pronged attack on typography's definition of discourse, introducing on a large scale irrelevance, impotence, and incoherence. These demons of discourse were aroused by the fact that telegraphy gave a form of legitimacy to the idea of context-free information; that is, to the idea that the value of information need not be tied to any function it might serve in social and politi- cal decision-making and action, but may attach merely to its novelty, interest, and curiousity. The telegraph made in- formation into a commodity, a "thing" that could be bought and sold irrespective of its uses or meaning. (*Amusing*, 65)

Communication became content-less. Add the change of communication to the passing of information to the development of another technology, the photograph, which removes the possibilities of analysis, challenge, and argument, and one has the beginnings of a new type of communication and a new way of thinking—a new form of culture. "The new focus on the image undermined traditional definitions of information, of news, and, to a large extent, of reality itself" (*Amusing*, 75). "The telegraph and the photograph had achieved the transformation of news from functional information to decontextualized fact" (*Amusing*, 76). These technologies set the stage for a new technology—the television.

The new technology became a medium. A medium has its own symbolic code which sets the environment or atmosphere for the user of that medium. TV's use of the visual demands a new context for all social settings—political, economic, religious, etc. (*Amusing*, 84) A medium is the social and intellectual environment a machine creates" (*Amusing*, 84).

That medium has a bias. It focuses on the close-up, movement, the short shot—an average of 3.5 seconds (Amusing, 84, 86). Even the news is "seen." Discussions become short segments of tangentially related opinions. Attention is reduced to the time needed to feel the visual which is individually received and accepted. They need no reasoned relationship.

As a dominant medium, television influences others. Other media respond to television as the paradigm for society's understanding of information. "In presenting news to us packaged as vaudeville, television induces other media to do the same, so that the total information environment begins to mirror television" (Amusing, 90).

Television delivery, with its influence on other media, changes the message so that all becomes entertainment of movement, with limited visibility, encapsulated by other forms of entertainment designed to make an impression. That medium changes religious messages, the politics of the country, the education of the children.

While Postman recognized that the television medium has had adverse effect on the culture, he is willing to reserve final judgment to see what the ultimate impact might be.

Ellul

If one reads Ellul, then even Postman's analysis is limited. Postman recognizes that television has set a paradigm which changed other media, thereby changing the culture, but Ellul analyzes television within the broader set of technique. He goes beyond the backdrop of communication technology to include all of technology within his concept of technique. Ellul's concept of technique could include the paring knife that Grandpa used to peel potatoes on Saturday evening or the obsidian arrowhead of the Crow Indians. In short, it is comprehensive enough to include all tools used for human manipulation of nature. But the technique of yesterday is not the same as today.

Earlier cultures limited the areas of technique to production, war and hunting, and magic (Society, 64). It did not involve all of life. Even within those areas which did use technique, it was confined in the amount of time used and the amount of energy expended on it. Technique was not given an important or high value in the culture. Technique was not completely capable either—"The deficiency of the tool

was to be compensated for by the skill of the worker" (Society, 67). Technique was also localized in early cultures (Society, 68). It did not run beyond geographical or cultural boundaries. Nor did early cultures become pre-occupied with the construction of tools or the expansion of technique beyond the known. Since technique was "firmly enmeshed in the framework of life and culture," it did not intrude into life—moral life or psychic life (Society, 72).

Today, technique differs. Ellul states, "Technical process today is no longer conditioned by anything other than its own calculus of efficiency (Society, 74). It is specific, precise, single-purposed. It lacks "spontaneity and personal creativity" (Society, 79). Technique is systematic, standardized and rational. It is no longer limited in time or value, and its growth is automatic (Society, 87). The logic of technique selects its own direction. Ellul adds, "The old characteristics of technique have indeed disappeared; but new ones have taken their place. Today's technical phenomenon, consequently, has almost nothing in common with the technical phenomenon of the past" (Society, 78).

To Ellul, technique becomes self-augmenting so that the logic of the technology sets its direction, its purpose, and the direction of subsequent technology. Ellul maintained that, if humans can conceptualize, they will build, and, if they build, they will use the technology within its direction or bias. The technique of today determines the technique of tomorrow.

Television, as with other technique in our culture, works with, responds to, and determines other technique. The technology of television combined with the technology of the social sciences becomes a system of propaganda. That propaganda comes from its own bureaucracy (demanded by the technique) and the power of administration. In other words, all media become the servant of those in political and economic power. The political powers simplify issues and consolidate enemies which then become the focus of the media. The promotion of simple, clear, black-and-white images allows the powers to create collective passions and suppress critical thinking (Society, 369). Present American political leaders simplify and polarize into East-West, poor-rich. However, if a person does begin to examine the issues or question the direction of his culture, amusement techniques jump into the breach and teach

him at least how to flee the presence of death. He no longer needs faith or some difficult asceticism to deaden himself to his condition. The movies and television lead him straight into an artificial paradise. Rather than face his own phantom, he seeks film phantoms into which he can project himself and which permit him to live as he might have willed. For an hour or two he can cease to be himself, as his personality dissolves and fades into the anonymous mass of spectators. The film makes him laugh, cry, wonder, and love. He goes to bed with the leading lady, kills the villain, and masters life's absurdities. In short, he becomes a hero. Life suddenly has meaning. (*Society*, 377)

The technology of television has become a part of a megamachine encompassing society in which communication has become information—information about man and information to control man (*System*,16,17). Ellul explains: *"Communication no longer passes through a symbolic support, but through a technological support (System*, 36). Because technology simplifies and compartmentalizes, one is left with a dissatisfying, simplified, reduced, instrumental, splintered universe. Television, as a part of that technology, does the same. Mankind is left with the momentary amusement of image.

The word itself is devalued which results in the disintegration of language (*Humiliation*, 158). The language of the image is fused with the language of clothing and many other languages, so that the means of thought associated with the word is giving way to immediate sensation and reaction (*Humiliation*, 159). Technique has reduced the word itself to image. The word has become a singly-defined, pictured and parcelled unit in the word processor or computer which cannot understand ambiguity, irony, metaphor, or satire (*Humiliation*, 160-161). Today, even the potential complexities in conversation are rejected or averted by the proverbial "Ya know." meaning, "Since you already know, I need not become involved in the work of telling you."

However, the word has not only lost its mistique, it is held in contempt. The common man rejects the use of language which might call his work or his perspective into question. To introduce questions or issues beyond his immediate concern is to be a quaint intellectual who is out of touch. Even the experts of language have promoted this reaction when they have diminished the study of the word to that which is beyond the word itself, as in semantics and semiotics (*Humiliation*, 165).

So—what do we do? deny? retreat? destroy? reform?

To deny the problem or situation calls for a denial of McLuhan, Postman, and Ellul. I believe their analyses go well beyond the analysis of TV content, and in doing so, call us to go beyond the usual rejection of programming due to violence or profanity. These men give sufficient argument to demand that we look beyond the programming to the potential results of the technology.

To retreat from the problem, that is, to no longer permit television in our homes and to condemn Christians who participate in television, will block out the program content only. If we are to believe Ellul, then retreat is impossible, for while we stop TV in the home, the entire technological culture will continue to influence us in other ways. We cannot hide from modern technology.

To destroy the technology of television is beyond our capabilities without a totalitarian state, and even the totalitarian state finds TV useful for its own purposes. According to Ellul, one cannot destroy the technology of television because it is but one part of a megamachine. One could also argue that the total technological machine in our culture cannot be removed without the destruction of the culture.

But, if one listens carefully to Postman and Ellul, then even the concept of transforming television is questionable. Postman resolved to wait upon the assumed good results since past changes in technology also brought about good beyond that which was destroyed. With Ellul, to transform TV called for a total remodeling of culture and its technique. That point causes strategic problems. Do we change TV and hope for a change in the culture, or do we change culture and hope for a change in TV?

If one accepts the analyses and arguments of McLuhan, Postman, and Ellul, then there appear to be no options. However, a thorough examination of their analyses is necessary before acceptance of their conclusions.

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