Postman, N. (1995). *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*. Alfred A. Knopf, $22.00 (hardback), 209 pp. (ISBN 0-679-43006-7)

Reviewed by Ellen Rose

I have before me a copy of Neil Postman's *The End of Education*. My original intent was to review this, Postman's most recent publication, in isolation, referring only superficially, if at all, to his many other books. However, I now realize that such an approach would be a disservice to Postman; for if I have learned one thing from my reading of Postman over the years, it is that he values above all continuity and context over the discontinuity and fragmentation which he sees as endemic of our modern technological culture or "Technocracy." Indeed, I believe it would also be a disservice to the reader if I were to limit my comments to this book--not because the book fails to adequately represent Postman's philosophy but precisely because it *does*. *The End of Education* offers a new perspective on ideas and viewpoints set forth in his other books--not just in those which focus on education, such as *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (co-authored with Charles Weingartner in 1969) and *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* (1979); but also in publications on media (*Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 1985), technology (*Technopoly*, 1992), language (*Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk*, 1976), and social history (*The Disappearance of Childhood*, 1982). In fact, during his thirty years as "an affectionate critic of American prejudices, tastes, and neuroses" (Postman, 1995, p. 62), Postman has written approximately 20 books which, though apparently addressing diverse topics, in fact centre on a core of recurring themes dealing with the intersection of technology, language, and education.

It would therefore be a mistake to classify Postman's *End of Education* as one of his "books about education" as opposed to one of his "books about media and technology." The reader who is intent on such categories will surely be less inclined to perceive the larger picture and to understand the deeply serious social and moral intent of Postman's work. Educator, media theorist, and communications expert he may be; but these specialties are all subsumed in the larger pursuit of "media ecology," the study of information environments as a whole in order "to understand how technologies and techniques of communication control the form, quantity, speed, distribution, and direction of information; and how, in turn, such information configurations or biases affect

---

Ellen Rose has been an educational technologist in the private sector for the last fifteen years. Her research interest is the public perception of the intersection of pedagogy and technology.

people's perceptions, values, and attitudes" (Postman, 1979, p. 186). The media ecologist argues, for example, that the emergence of the printing press did not simply result in the same fifteenth century society with the addition of a new machine, but rather in a new society entirely, characterized by new values and understandings, new habits and habits of mind. All of Postman's books are, in one way or another, a study of media ecology, of the way in which we are shaped by our own creations.

As a media ecologist, Postman sees the telegraph and photograph as the catalysts of a profound change which would, a century after their invention, create a dangerous imbalance in the information environment. The introduction of telegraphy into typographic culture disrupted its ecology by creating the idea of "context-free information" (Postman, 1992, p. 67) which had no necessary utility or context; and soon after, with the invention of photography, the reason, logic, and continuity characteristic of expository language began to be sublimated to the immediacy and instancy of the visual image:

> As the twentieth century began, the amount of information available through words and pictures grew exponentially. With telegraphy and photography leading the way, a new definition of information came into being. Here was information that rejected the necessity of interconnectedness, proceeded without context, argued for instancy against historical continuity, and offered fascination in place of complexity and coherence. (Postman, 1992, p. 69)

Television has exacerbated this ecological imbalance, "raising the interplay of image and instancy to an exquisite and dangerous perfection" (Postman, 1985, p. 78). Directing not only what we know, but how we know it (Postman calls TV the "First Curriculum"), television packages all information in entertaining, contextless fragments which we receive mindlessly. If we need proof that this is so, Postman offers advertisements, once comprised of words intended to appeal to the understanding of a rational public, which now consist largely of images intended to manipulate their passions; political campaigns, in which a candidate's success now has more to do with his hairstyle than his political beliefs; and news shows, which are designed to entertain more than inform, and which give prominence to highly visual and haptic events. Achieving its zenith in television, the preeminence of visual imagery "has created an ecological problem, and a dangerous one":

> We have a generation being raised in an information environment that, on one hand, stresses visual imagery, discontinuity, immediacy, and alogicality. It is antihistorical, antiscientific, anticonceptual, antirational. On the other hand, the context within which this occurs is a kind of religious or philosophic bias toward the supreme authority of technicalization. What this means is that as we lose confidence and competence in our ability to think and judge, we willingly transfer these functions to machines. Whereas our machinery was once thought of as an 'extension of man,' man now becomes an 'extension of machinery.' (Postman, 1979, p. 100)

Granted, Postman's contention as a media ecologist that "Technological change is not additive; it is ecological" (Postman, 1995, p. 192) is not new. He is the first to acknowledge that a similar conclusion has been drawn over the years by many others, including the likes of Plato, Louis Mumford, Jacques Ellul, Harold Adams Innis, and, of course, Marshall McLuhan. But I might as well clear the air on this score once and for all: while Postman owes much to the ideas of McLuhan, he is equally indebted to those of Edward Sapir, Sigmund Freud, Aldous Huxley, Northrop Frye, Norbert Wiener, Noam Chomsky, John Dewey, Alfred Korzybski, I.A. Richards, and a host of others; and he is certainly much more than a mere McLuhan "wannabe." Where McLuhan is an observer of culture, maintaining an objective stance, Postman is a media ecologist driven by a profound moral imperative to play a role in maintaining--or perhaps more accurately, regaining--social balance. As a media ecologist, Postman rejects McLuhan's deliberately neutral commentary on the emergence of a new global village, and decries instead what he sees to be the demise of American culture, offering where he can solutions and suggestions for halting the erosion of a literate tradition. And, despite his enormous respect for McLuhan's ideas, he also tacitly condemns McLuhan's use of sensational fragments, or "probes," as a method of "getting a hearing" with the public (Postman, 1969, p. 7). Here, perhaps, is the key to the essential difference between the two men: while both understand that "the medium is the message," that form is content, they differ greatly in what they do with that knowledge. McLuhan used his understanding of how media function to tailor his message to media's requirements. Postman on the other hand deliberately resists pressures to reduce his ideas to contextless fragments, offering instead fully articulated, lucid arguments requiring readers to follow a number of carefully presented premises to a logical conclusion. And while Postman is well aware that his methodology and his sometimes curmudgeonly arch-conservatism prevent him from attracting quite so many followers as the "Oracle of the Electronic Age," it is part of his moral imperative as a media ecologist to champion the values of tradition, whether in exposition or education.

For adherence to the traditional values of a typographic culture is the crux of Postman's philosophy. Beginning in particular with *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* and continuing into *The End of Education*, Postman articulates a serious argument that, given the erosion of our culture by technology, the role of the school should not be to maintain pace with change but rather to provide an oasis of tradition and quietude from which to observe the technological frenzy that is modern society: "Without at least a reminiscence of continuity and tradition, without a place to stand from which to observe change, without a counterargument to the overwhelming thesis of change, we can easily be swept away--in fact, are being swept away" (Postman, 1979, p. 21). Postman rejects the frantic efforts of educators who insist that the school must keep pace with social change, and argues that most of the efforts made on that behalf are mere "educational engineering" based on a shallow educational philosophy: that students should be made "job ready." The deliberately ambiguous title of his most recent book surely contains within it an ironic reference to those, like Ivan Illich (*Deschooling Society*, 1970) and Lewis

Perelman (*School's Out*, 1992), who argue against compulsory education on the grounds that the school and traditional book learning have no relevance in today's high-tech, information rich culture. Postman contends that school as we know it is enormously valuable precisely *because* of its lack of relevance:

> As it is mostly conducted even in the present age, school is one of our few remaining information systems firmly organized around preelectronic patterns of communication. School is old times and old biases. For that reason, it is more valuable to us than most people realize, but, in any case, provides a clear contrast to the newer system of perception and thought that television represents. By putting television and school side by side, we can see where we are going and what we are leaving, which is exactly what we need to know. (Postman, 1979, p. 47-48)

For Postman, adherence to tradition, then, is not a Luddite stance. He is well aware that "We gain nothing but chaos by banning or breaking our machines" (Postman, 1979, p. 101). But as a media ecologist, he argues that tradition is of fundamental importance because it provides the means to an objective, balanced perspective which is our only defense against unmitigated technological advancement. Only through critical insight (what Postman called "crap detecting" in *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*), can we hope to understand how new technologies are shaping our lives and thereby control their effects--disastrous effects which could, without careful stewardship, lead to the demise of American culture. If school is to provide students with critical insight into their culture--if it is to counter the "dull and even stupid awareness" (Postman, 1992, p. 20), the sleepwalking attitude, which currently prevails--then it must do so by providing a neutral forum in which "you [are] positioned some distance away from the influences of your own times" rather than being "held captive in the midst of things" (Postman, 1979, p. 185). True "technology education," as Postman would have it taught, is not instruction on basic programming and the like, but rather on how computers, television, and other technologies are changing the way we think and act:

> As I see it, the subject is mainly about how television and movie cameras, Xerox machines, and computers reorder our psychic habits, our social relations, our political ideas, and our moral sensibilities. It is about how the meanings of information and education change as new technologies intrude upon a culture, how the meanings of truth, law, and intelligence differ among oral cultures, writing cultures, printing cultures, electronic cultures. Technology education is not a technical subject. It is a branch of the humanities. (Postman, 1995, p. 191)

Similarly, Postman contends that instruction in language (specifically, semantics, the study of the relationship of language to reality) must play a crucial role in helping students develop the critical insight which is our best defense against the unmitigated development of new technologies. The study of semantics offers a form of meta-education, in which students learn not just about a subject but about the assumptions and metaphors of which its language is

comprised: "[Semantics] helps students to reflect on the sense and truth of what they are writing and of what they are asked to read. It teaches them to discover the underlying assumptions of what they are told. It emphasizes the manifold ways in which language can distort reality" (Postman, 1992, p. 195). Rather than being drilled on the use of metaphor in a poem, students should be given the opportunity to learn the real power of language to create reality: "how metaphors control what we say, and to what extent what we say controls what we see" (Postman, 1995, p. 186).

In our modern day "Technopoly," then--this barren technological desert, lacking any underlying moral wellspring--a school based on traditional values not only provides an oasis from which to view new technologies, but it also provides sustenance that the arid Technocracy cannot provide. As Postman sees it, school can only "help conserve that which is both necessary to a humane survival and threatened by a furious and exhausting culture" (Postman, 1979, p. 25) if it offers a vision of something different than that culture. That vision is contained in what he calls a "narrative" or "god."

In *Technopoly*, Postman defines a narrative as "a story of human history that gives meaning to the past, explains the present, and provides guidance for the future. It is a story whose principles help a culture to organize its institutions, to develop ideals, and to find authority for its actions" (Postman, 1992, p. 172). *Technopoly* deals largely with the way in which technology has deprived us of our narratives, our coherent view of the world and its meaning, and therefore of our moral underpinnings. In *The End of Education*, Postman continues the theme, emphasizing the need for narratives in education lest the school lose its meaning and function:

> Here, I will say only that the idea of public education depends absolutely on the existence of shared narratives *and* the exclusion of narratives that lead to alienation and divisiveness. What makes public schools public is not so much that the schools have common goals but that the students have common gods. The reason for this is that public education does not serve a public. It *creates* a public. . . . The question is, What kind of public does it create? A conglomerate of self-indulgent consumers? Angry, soulless, directionless masses? Indifferent, confused citizens? Or a public imbued with confidence, a sense of purpose, a respect for learning, and tolerance? The answer to this question has nothing whatever to do with computers, with testing, with teacher accountability, with class size, and with the other details of managing schools. The right answer depends on two things, and two things alone: the existence of shared narratives and the capacity of such narratives to provide an inspired reason for schooling. (Postman, 1995, p. 17-18)

The End of Education begins with a description of several narratives that have failed. For example, the narrative of Economic Utility, the idea that "the purpose of schooling is to prepare children for competent entry into the economic life of a community" (Postman, 1995, p. 27), has failed in light of growing evidence that, despite their education, graduating students are more likely to land a McJob than a well-paying, challenging position. And Postman

contends that the narrative of Technology, based on a sort of hyper-reaction to the inevitability of new technologies, is a "false god" which inhibits the learning of social skills and which, used as an engineering solution to the teaching of subjects, ultimately fosters the kind of sleepwalking attitude to technology which Postman so deplores.

In accordance with the mandate of the media ecologist to find solutions, Postman goes on to offer "five narratives that, singly and in concert, contain sufficient resonance and power to be taken seriously as reasons for schooling. They offer, I believe, moral guidance, a sense of continuity, explanations of the past, clarity to the present, hope for the future" (Postman, 1995, p. 61-62). Used as the scaffolding upon which to build a curriculum, narratives such as the ascent of humanity, the American experiment, and the use of language to create the world will, he suggests, give school a meaning that it currently lacks and help counter rampant information glut and discontinuity. These narratives all continue themes from Postman's previous books and stress the notions of continuity, rationality, and human dignity which are central tenets of Postman's philosophy.

Only by looking at Postman's latest book in the context of his other writings is it possible to gain a full understanding of its implications. Postman is not just trying to save the schools by finding a inclusive narrative upon which to base all learning; he is trying to save public education because he believes it is the only means by which American culture can be preserved from the rampages of uncontrolled technological development. Ultimately, it is not the end of education that he is concerned about, but the demise of culture and "civilité."

Nevertheless, it would be a gross inaccuracy to accuse Postman of cynicism and doom-saying; for Postman writes *The End of Education* and all of his books as a romantic, one who maintains "a belief in the improvability of the human condition through education" (Postman, 1969, p. xiii), a faith "that despite some of the more debilitating teachings of culture itself, something can be done in school that will alter the lenses through which one sees the world" (Postman, 1995, p. x). Examining *The End of Education* within the context of the Postman canon makes it clear that this latest publication is a new lesson in a curriculum that Postman has been delivering for many years to those who will listen, a course of study which promotes concepts of knowledge and ways of knowing which include detachment, objectivity, analysis, and criticism; which challenges us to cast a critical gaze upon our technologies and their underlying meanings, and to examine how language and metaphor shape our lives; which invites us to appreciate and cultivate the values of logical thought and historical understanding; and, finally, which implores us to "enter the conversation with enthusiasm and resolve" (Postman, 1995, p. 91). Only an optimist could continue delivering such a course of study for thirty years.

References

Postman, N. (1985). *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business*. New York: Viking Penguin Inc.

Postman, N. (1995). *The end of education: Redefining the value of school*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Postman, N. (1979). *Teaching as a conserving activity*. New York: Delacorte Press.

Postman, N. (1992). *Technopoly: The surrender of culture to technology*. New York: Vintage Books.

Postman, N. and Weingartner, C. (1969). *Teaching as a subversive activity*. New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc.