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Feature Article

The Information Age A Blessing or a Curse?

Neil Postman

New York University Professor Neil Postman passed away October 5, 2003, at the age of seventy-two. A faculty member at NYU for forty-four years, Postman founded the School of Education's program in media ecology in 1971 and was chair of the Department of Culture and Communication until 2002. He was the author of more than two hundred articles and twenty books, including *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, *The Disappearance of Childhood*, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, and *Technopoly*. The following is an abbreviated transcript of Neil Postman's Brown Bag Luncheon talk given at the Shorenstein Center on February 7, 1995. Postman was the Shorenstein Center's Visiting Lombard Professor in the spring of 1991.

The title of this session is "The Information Age: A Blessing or a Curse?" Or maybe it says a curse or a blessing, I don't know. But, when we get to talking about it, many of you, I would guess, will want to talk about the blessings of the information age. So let me begin with the curse. And the curse was spoken of in a prophetic poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay and this poem is from her book *Huntsman What Quarry*. Wonderful book. This is a fragment of this poem in which Miss Millay describes precisely the problem that bothers me so much. This is the fragment: "Upon this gifted age, in its dark hour, rains from the sky a meteoric shower of facts. They lie unquestioned, uncombined. Wisdom enough to leech us of our ill is daily spun. But there exists no loom to weave it into fabric."

I like that—no loom. Now what the poet speaks of here is a great paradox. Beginning in the 19th century humanity creatively addressed the problem of how to eliminate information scarcity, how to overcome the limitations of space, time, and form. And we did this in spectacular fashion, especially in the 19th century. For those of you who are unfamiliar with the 19th century, here are some of the inventions that contributed to the solution: telegraphy, photography, the rotary press, the transatlantic cable, the electric light, radio waves,

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movies, the computer, the x-ray, the penny press, the modern magazine and the advertising agency. By the way, we also invented the safety pin in the 19th century. Of course in the first half of the 20th century, we added some important inventions, so that the burdens of information scarcity were removed once and for all.

But in doing so we've created a new problem, never experienced before. Information glut, information incoherence, information meaninglessness. To put it far less eloquently than Miss Millay, we have transformed information into a form of garbage and ourselves into garbage collectors. Like the sorcerer's apprentice, we are awash in information without even a broom to help us get rid of it. Information comes indiscriminately, directed at no one in particular, in enormous volume, at high speeds, severed from import and meaning. And there is no loom to weave it all into fabric. No transcendent narratives to provide us with moral guidance, social purpose, intellectual economy. No stories to tell us what we need to know and what we do not need to know.

So this is the problem we have to confront. This is the curse I was referring to. We have to confront this with as much intelligence and imagination as we can muster. So, how should we begin? Well, we have to stop consulting our engineers, our computer gurus and our corporation visionaries, who though they claim to speak for the future are strangely occupied in solving a 19th century problem that was already solved. Instead, I think we need to consult our poets, playwrights, artists, humorists, journalists, theologians, and philosophers, who alone are capable of creating or restoring those metaphors or stories which give point to our labors, give meaning to our history, elucidate the present, and give direction to the future. These people are our weavers and I have no doubt that there are men and women among us who have the looms to weave us a pattern for our lives. And the prospect of their doing so, is for me the gleam of light on the horizon.

We have this special problem, created by our own ingenuity, on one hand that our amazing technologies permit, the constant flow of unedited, as Millay says, unquestioned and uncombined facts; on the other hand, we have lost our sense of narrative in our lives which is always what helps people know what to do with information. And these narratives come from many different sources. When I grew up there were some great American national narratives, which I don't think my students at NYU, it may be different here at Harvard, believe in anymore. One of them was that the great revolution that took place here at the end of the 18th century was not just an experiment in government, but part of God's own plan, and because of that it gave a moral authority to our believing that we could be a light unto other nations. Now just looking at your faces, I can tell you don't believe that anymore.

There was the great narrative of the melting pot, which is now being challenged in a return to tribalism. By the way, the return to tribalism that we see

around now is a kind of response to the decline of great national transcendent narratives; that is, people not believing in some of these stories return to the stories of their own group, their own tribe, in order to find a sense of identity and a sense of meaning. I want to add to all of this notion of the increase of information with a decline in narrative that some of the authority of important social institutions has also declined. Religion, the family, school, even political parties. Institutions of that kind have acted as filters to immunize people against unwanted information.

If you look at the Harvard or NYU catalogue, what you have there is a statement of what sort of information the faculty believes is important and what is not there is a statement of what the faculty thinks you can do without. Astrology for example. Now there's a lot of information about astrology. Is there a course at Harvard in astrology? Probably not, because the faculty has determined this is information that educated people can do without. But there would be a course, let's say, in American history, because the faculty thinks you should let this information in. So, every social institution has a kind of theory about what sort of information is worthwhile and what is irrelevant.

The decline of political parties, by the way, is almost a catastrophe on this issue. I will give you an example. I grew up in New York in a standard Democratic, with a large D, household. And we had a theory which helped us manage information, helped us know what information we needed to pay attention to and what information we could ignore. The theory went like this. Anything a Republican says you could ignore. [Laughter] Now that helps enormously, right there. Now then the theory went on. Anything a Democrat says you should pay attention to, except if the Democrat is from the South, because they are racist and you don't have to pay attention to them. So, this made one's political education simplified. All theories tend to simplify. That's the purpose of theories—to help people manage information.

With the decline of the authority of religious systems and political parties, and the authority of education and families, what you have is people without information immune systems. I have used this metaphor before, which some people find offensive, but I hope you won't. We are suffering from a kind of cultural AIDS in this sense. AIDS is a breakdown in the immune system. What does the immune system do biologically? It protects the organism from unwanted cells. If the immune system breaks down so that it cannot destroy unwanted cells, we basically get cancer. Now to use that metaphor here I would say narratives and the theories of social institutions are somewhat like information immune systems in that they help you manage information by discarding information you do not need in order to function. But if you lose those filters, then you do not know what is relevant, you do not know what is irrelevant, and therefore there is a general breakdown down in your, our, grasp of what is meaningful. And that's what I think is the curse of this information age.

As I said, the answer would be not to consult with the guys from MIT. I read on the plane this morning that Negroponte has a new book out, *Being Digital*. And it says this is the book of the future. My view is that he's solving a 19th century problem. Our problem is not that we don't have enough information. I mean if there are children starving in Somalia, it is not because we don't have enough information. If crime is rampant on the streets of New York or Boston, it's not because people don't have enough information. Think of any serious problem in the world today and I think you'll have to conclude it has nothing to do with insufficient information. The problem lies elsewhere, and I think it is a loss of meaning. People don't know what to do with the information. They have no organizing principle—what I would call a transcendent narrative.

Now there are a couple that the media have promoted. One of them is, technology *uber alles*.

We have this other theology which says the pathway to Heaven is through technological innovation. Technological innovation is the same thing, according to this narrative, as human progress and therefore anyone who would stand in the way of technological innovation is a reactionary neo-Luddite. Should we say a word about the Luddites? You all know about the Luddites and it's something of an insult today to call someone a Luddite. But, when you look at the Luddites, I think you would see them in a favorable light.

This was a group of people in England who between 1811 and 1818 tried to resist the factory system and the machine system. No one knows where the word comes from although one story is that there was a boy named Ludlum whose father told him to fix a weaving machine and he couldn't do it, he got aggravated and busted up the machine. No one's quite clear, but it is true that they became notorious for trying to destroy machinery in the weaving industry.

But when you look at what they were trying to do you get a different picture of them; they were trying to preserve a form of life that they saw the machines would kill. What does Blake say, I didn't want the children to go into the dark Satanic mills. These are people who wanted their children to have a childhood, who wanted a community life, and they saw this machinery crushing that, so they resisted it. Of course, eventually they were put down and in our own time the word Luddite has come to mean someone who is reactionary and is not with it and is not in touch with the future. Well, I'm not a Luddite. It would be pointless to be a Luddite, although I secretly like it [Laughter] when something happens, as it occasionally does, where a group of people in political concert say no to a machine.

Well, suppose it were 1946 and we knew in '46 what television would do and we made our list of possible advantages and disadvantages. Destroy the idea of childhood, that's part of it, and many other things, corrupt political discourse and so on. On the other hand, there'd be a lot of wonderful things. Well in 1946, we say, should we go ahead with this? And people would probably say yes, it's

great. But then someone pipes up and says what can we do to minimize the negative consequences? So here's how dumb I am, I thought that television was going to be the last technology that Americans would go into with their eyes totally shut. And of course I'm completely wrong about this, because the same stuff is happening with computers now. Everyone wants to talk about what they will do for us and it is not so easy to find someone who'll say what it will undo. What I'm interested in is not destroying any machines, but changing the way our citizens view technology.

I do want to tell you that I went in to buy, about eight months ago, a Honda Accord. Do you know this car? So the salesman tells me it has cruise control. I said to the salesman, what is the problem to which cruise control is the solution? [Laughter] He says, well, first of all he's a little taken aback [Laughter] so then he thinks and he says it's the problem of keeping your foot on the gas. I said I'd been driving for thirty-five years and I never really found that to be a problem. [Laughter] Then he says, well, you know, this car has electric windows. You know what I asked him. What's the problem to which electric windows is the solution? So he was ready for me this time—he says it's the problem of going like this, up and down with the windows.

I said, well, I never really found that to be a problem. As a matter of fact I'm an academic and I live a sort of sedate life and I kinda' like the exercise. [Laughter] Well, I bought the Honda with cruise control, with the electric windows, because you cannot get this car without electric windows and cruise control, which is a very interesting point to keep in mind because lots of people think that new technologies, information technologies as well as any other kind, increase people's options. And sometimes they do, but just as often they decrease their options.

Technologies do frequently increase people's options, but just as often they decrease them, they cut them down. So, we have to face up to the issues that technological change brings. Especially in relation to this issue of information. What are we going to do with all this information? And in the end, I think that the great contribution of the computer is not going to be that it gives us access to more information but it can be used to eliminate unwanted information. And in the end that may be how we will discover the blessing of the computer—that it simply functions like an immune system does biologically in the realm of information.

Now these transcendent stories are not always "good" stories. When I talk about "good," I mean a story that gives meaning to your life, but it may not ensure your survival. Hitler's story of the Aryan race is a transcendent narrative and it gave point to the labors of Germans, it gave them a way to interpret their past, to understand their present, and it predicted the future—the Third Reich was to last for a thousand years. It lasted for exactly eleven years. It was a flawed story in many ways and we could study that now.

Of course, one of the most interesting things that's happening in the world, we are talking now about transcendent narratives, not the O.J. Simpson story, is what Vaclav Havel has been talking about. The great story that Karl Marx and then Lenin provided, is that their revolution was not part of God's plan, but part of history's plan. That history is moving inexorably toward the triumph of the proletariat. We can join in the movement of history or we can oppose it, but inexorably it is moving in this direction. This is a great story and a billion people in the world believed that story or so we were led to think. It's sort of strange that almost overnight they said ah, to hell with that story. [Laughter]

What happened: Havel has been saying that if you take a story like that away from people, all of a sudden, they better find another story fast. Without one, it means living without meaning. It's worse than death in a way. So, they're going to find stories that could be very dangerous to others and themselves. Havel asks what are we going to do in Eastern Europe, what are these people going to believe in?

The kinds of transcendent narratives that we're talking about here cannot be manufactured by the carload. There are a limited number of themes that mean something to people and are powerful enough to allow them to organize their lives around them. Now, you mention science fiction. In a movie like "E.T.," Steven Spielberg is trying to amplify an interesting new narrative that young people do respond to—that we are crew members on the spaceship Earth and we must be stewards of the Earth. We're Earthlings not Bulgarians and not Somalians and not Chileans, but we're Earth people and the loss of the rainforest is not a Brazilian problem it's an Earth problem and the toxicity of the ocean is not a Miami problem it's an Earth problem.

By the way, I'm quite sure that this is the essential problem in education in America. I've just done a book that'll be out in the fall, which I call *No Gods to Serve* and what the book is about is this issue: what makes public education possible is not that all schools have the same goals but that all the children have the same gods. By god I mean a small g. That there's some story that connects them and gives meaning to learning. Now the problem I see in education now is there is no god, there is no transcendent. Why should you stay in school—to get a better job.

I propose five narratives around which school might be organized. I don't know if they would work because a school or an education system cannot in itself create a narrative. Schools amplify narratives that are in the culture, make them more articulated and visible, but teachers especially in the public schools have no authority really to create narratives on their own. So, I tried to find stories that I think have some resonance in the culture and around which schools could build a sense of purpose in learning. One of them I mentioned already, my Spielberg narrative, the stewards of the Earth, and I think young people respond to that idea.

Another one is human beings as fallen angels. Meaning that what we should do in education is study human error, that the most human thing about us is that we make mistakes all the time. There isn't an hour that goes by that any one of us doesn't make a mistake. So, I've proposed a curriculum where whatever subjects we study—philosophy, biology, physics, linguistics, history—we're studying the History of human error and our attempts to overcome error. Now that's the fallen part of my metaphor, the fallen angel, that we make mistakes all the time. The angel part is that we can overcome our error if we accept our status as the error prone species. But in overcoming error, what do you think happens? We make more errors.

I mean, Aristotle was a genius—he believed that women had more teeth than men. The guy was married twice. You would think it would have occurred to him to ask one of his wives if he could count her teeth. [Laughter] He believed that if you dropped a ten pound weight from a height it would fall to the ground ten times faster than a one pound weight. He never took the trouble to try it out.

But, it took almost two thousand years for someone to correct Aristotle's error on that. Galileo finally said no, things don't work that way. Ptolemy was a genius, but he had it a little mixed up, so Copernicus corrected him. But Copernicus would have been amazed to see how Newton had corrected him. And if Newton could have read any of Einstein's papers I think he would have said some version of "whoops." [Laughter] Now, this doesn't mean that Einstein is better than Newton or Copernicus is better than Ptolemy. It doesn't mean that at all. It means that people address the work of their predecessors by finding the limitations and the mistakes they've made and then they give us what they have and then the next come along and do the same. I mean Ibsen is not better than Shakespeare, but Shakespeare couldn't write about ordinary people and their problems. That was the limitation that he had and Ibsen could. And Freud is not better than John Locke, but Freud looked in places that Locke dared not to look.

One theme is what I call diversity, because I think the principle of diversity is extraordinarily rich, but this is not the same thing as what most people are calling multi-culturalism, which Jacques Barzun called multi-provincialism. As a matter of fact, it's the opposite of ethnicity. A lot of people think diversity and the promotion of ethnicity are sort of the same thing, but ethnicity wants one to feel pride in being a member of a specific group, whereas diversity, I think, celebrates the contributions of many different groups and there's a principle, that we even get from physics, that promotes the idea of diversity, that strength and power and excellence come when you introduce new perspectives, new energies from outside the system. When people are just interested in cloning themselves, as it were, and building walls around themselves they lose energy and power. A country like America is a wonderful place to build a strong education around the principle of diversity.

Do we offer in America, in education or any other place, something to live by? That's what we're talking about. I don't think to live by technological innovation is going to be the answer. It's not working for people. So, I'll end with this.

I'm writing a chapter in a book on cyberspace. The title of my article is "Cyberspace Schmyberspace." [Laughter] And all I'm going to say is, I don't want to hear about surfing on the 'net. First of all, anyone who needs to use the Internet to make friends really has got to get a life. [Laughter] I mean, as my mother would say, you have to go out and meet people. And the people who think that virtual reality is the answer, I mean, what about real reality? What is it that these people are afraid of?