

Neil Postman: A civilized man in a century of barbarism

A former student remembers a teacher who never stopped raking the worlds of Big Media and technology with his savage wit.

By Jay Rosen

Oct. 10, 2003 | I have no count, but I sense a dwindling number of people in the academic world who are unclassifiable. Neil Postman, who died Sunday, was one, and now we can say he will always be one. Such figures -- with reputation but no real discipline -- have a tendency to make people think. Postman had that.

He was expert in nothing. Therefore nothing was off limits. Therefore one's mind was always at risk, from a joke, a headline, an idea, a person walking through the door. The only way to respond to such strange conditions was with ready humor. And humor would bring you more ideas. Now what discipline, what department is that?

Everyone who knew Postman -- and I include perhaps a hundred thousand who only heard him speak -- knew him first through humor, which was the reflection in person of the satire in most of his books, each of which is a pamphlet, an essay between covers. "The Disappearance of Childhood" (1982) was satire about the infantilization in American culture. "Amusing Ourselves to Death" (1985) was satire about entertainment and what it was doing to us. "Technopoly" (1993) was satire on the "surrender of culture to technology." One of the first journals he was associated with was *Monocle* (long gone), a magazine of political satire, which is where he met Victor Navasky, publisher of the *Nation*, which is how he came to serve on the *Nation's* board, even though he was the world's worst leftist and couldn't stomach the right. Of course, in all the satire there was Neil's sermon, but again: What discipline is that?

Postman's intellectual pose, as well as his poise in public settings, as well as his great gift, which was terribly good humor, came down essentially to this: the trials of a civilized man in a century of barbarism. It later softened into the civilized man in a culture of television. But the barbaric that was in television, between the wicked dots, softened, but still there ... well, Postman had the eye for that. He would teach you this angry eye, and that was one reason I hung around NYU and got a Ph.D. He knew what to ignore, when to object.

"You have to understand, what Americans do is watch television." I heard this many times. "I am not saying that's who they are. But that is what they do. Americans ... watch ... television." And he would have figures, sometimes, demonstrating it: the number of commercials a child would see between 5 and 18 (the number was 675,000 in 1979). But, frankly, he had zero interest in mastering figures about the big machine of commercial TV. He had a big machine of his own, which was simply everything he ever read and learned from wiser heads, all the books he placed against television in order to see it more clearly. One of his essays is titled "Social Science as Moral Theology" (1988).

Among those I heard him talk about most often were Bertrand Russell, George Orwell, G.K. Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, Alfred North Whitehead, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Philippe Aries, Jacques Ellul, Rudolph Arnheim, Norbert Elias, Robert Maynard Hutchins, Christopher Lasch, Walter Ong, Eric Havelock, Lewis Mumford, Harold Innis, and of course Marshall McLuhan, whom Postman met in the 1950s, before anyone had ever heard of the Canadian English professor who would write "Understanding Media" (1964). McLuhan always regretted that he had not founded a Ph.D. program like Postman's, and until the rediscovery of McLuhan by young people of the Internet age, that program helped keep interest in his ideas alive. "The medium is the message," McLuhan's most famous line, is not an easy idea to grasp. It just looks that way.

Neil Postman was easily the best public speaker I ever heard, and most who heard him agreed with that. He never spoke off the cuff, never from notes. He wrote all his speeches in longhand, and would try them on students first, usually revising a few words just to give you the sense that you had participated by listening. He wrote 20 books with only a felt-tipped pen on notebook paper; all sentences crafted by hand. This too was satire, on "progress" in writing instruments. Postman, world-famous media scholar, was famous among students and friends for refusing any technology thought to "improve" something in which he had never requested improvements. A simple rule, with hilarious consequences. He didn't care if you had a better solution to a problem he never felt was real, and he would make fun of you if you tried to recommend it.

That is what I mean by the pose of the civilized man, beset by answering machines. The pose is shared by many stand-up comedians, and Neil had that in him. He also had edge. Television, he always said, is inhuman to children because it gives them answers to questions they never asked. It did this for purposes of control. Educational television -- "Sesame Street" -- was not the alternative; it was the worst offender. This view denied a lot of people, including educated liberals, comfort. To him that was education.

Postman resented being controlled by technology or bureaucracy, way more than most Americans. He resented the new for retiring an "old" that had no reason to quit. But he thought it funny -- and fascinating -- that people allowed this manipulation, especially Americans, who were the most open to it. Postman had a big audience and gave many speeches in Germany, where several of his books were bestsellers during the 1980s, in part because there was so much in American life he simply rejected. Thus he wrote with a pen, never used e-mail, owned no computer and had no regrets about never going online. To him it was not a matter of convenience. It was about keeping an independent mind by making independent use of objects. In this way, he taught me and many others to think for ourselves, precisely because we didn't think as he did.

Postman's general philosophy, which was general education, also known as the great-books approach, was made known to me shortly after I enrolled in a graduate program under his chairmanship in 1980. I was there to study the media, and he was at that time a professor of media ecology (a name for his anti-discipline). As he explained to me: "We're just trying to give people a good liberal arts education." Which, he further argued, and easily demonstrated himself, was exactly the tool needed to understand the gathering beast: the Media. In an age of specialization, this is not how academic life works. But his did.

Postman, one should remember, was originally an English teacher. He entered the university in a time of expansion and optimism in public schooling. We were building lots of schools and creating big public universities then. His degree was in English education, from Teachers College at Columbia. From 1959 on, his home was the School of Education at NYU. His original and core readership remained schoolteachers, and I witnessed the same ritual numerous times: A woman in her 40s or 50s would approach after a speech. "Professor Postman, I just want to tell you, I read your book, 'Teaching as a Subversive Activity' ... That book changed my life." Often she would have the book with her, and he would sign it ... with a felt-tip pen. This made an impression on me. A stray sentence lifted from that book:

"We must emphasize that the concept, 'that we must unlearn dead concepts' is itself new, and so rather incongenial to most who confront it the first time."

If Postman was an English teacher, he realized very early that a bigger, brighter and more compelling classroom existed out there, and it would teach your kids no matter how good you were at reaching them. Today this is a commonplace: They get it from television! But in the 1950s, when Postman began serious study, it was a far more original thought: We're being outtaught by the media. For this he later found a brilliant description. Television, he said, is the first curriculum. School is second.

There's no accounting for what you absorb from such a man. For he knew the two secrets of all great teachers, things no teachers college can teach: First, you don't put knowledge into people, you draw it out. (Which is why personality was his one and only classroom "method.") Second, if you can manage to conceal, artfully, some crucial part of what you are saying, then young people who are listening really, really hard will make it their business to find you out. And that's when you can really teach them. I must have heard it a thousand times. "It's not that simple," the student says to Postman. Oh? And right there, the drawing out begins.

There's no point, he felt, in being an English teacher today -- armed with literature and its human testimony -- if the conditions for successful teaching are all around us being "disappeared." (A favorite construction of his.) That's why he became a media critic. And that is the master image, if there is one, in all of Neil Postman's writings: either a disappearing we should regret, or a forgetting we have failed to do.

The greatest sentence he wrote will, I am sure, give comfort at some time in the future. It's the first sentence in "The Disappearance of Childhood." "Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see."