



Technopoly

You couldn't call it a love affair, but I do like electronic gizmos. I'm envious of my friend who carries his Palm Pilot to our meetings, while I carry my paper day planner. I want to keep up with my friends who have cell phones and high speed internet connections. I don't long for satellite TV, frankly, but I am going to use the video projector tonight to turn my Blockbuster video into a big screen movie. And I've been feeling frustrated this week, staying at a beautiful rural retreat center, because I can't get on the internet.

I'm not alone in my attraction to technology, of course. Bill Gates did not become a gazillionaire just because Jim Read likes PCs! According to Neil Postman, provocative professor of communication at New York University, we've *all* become citizens of Technopoly.

Technopoly, he defines as "the submission of all forms of cultural life to the sovereignty of technique and technology." Its dominant values are efficiency, expertise, standardization, and faith in progress. Postman writes, "its reality was given special force by the great invention of the nineteenth century: the invention of invention. We learned *how* to invent things, and the question of *why* receded in importance."

To have our lives run by our tools is not the way things should be. And when we put it that starkly, none of us wants it that way. It can happen so easily, however, if we aren't alert enough or courageous enough to get into the habit of asking questions. In his

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newest book, *Building a Bridge to the Eighteenth Century*, Postman offers us a list to keep ever before us.

1. *What is the problem to which this technology is the solution?* Is there actually a need that 500-channel TV fills? How about genetically-modified foods? Or power windows on a Honda driven by a middle-aged professor like myself who doesn't get enough exercise as it is?
2. *Whose problem is it?* Do you remember "Tang"? For a while as a kid I preferred it to orange juice. Drinking it made me feel closer to my astronaut heroes, I recall, but in retrospect I'm not sure whose problem that technology solved. By contrast, I know who bears the "problem" of Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases. Will their needs, I wonder, be held in view as we pursue genetic research, or will it be the "problems" of an industry needing new products that will be paramount?
3. *Which people and what institutions might be most seriously harmed by a technological solution?* Neil Postman is not a Christian, but when he raises this question he joins our company, for one of the chief concerns of people whose values are shaped by the Bible is how the actions of the strong affect the lives of the weak. "Remember the widow, the orphan, and the immigrant stranger" is an injunction that runs through both Old and New Testaments.

New technologies can meet real needs for large numbers of people and so be socially valuable, but they always have a down-side. In the nineteenth century, Luddites smashed the machines in the new garment factories because the machines were making their handicraft jobs obsolete. We today need to be especially aware of the new problems

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that our new solutions create, and who they create the problems for. As my daughter-in-law said the other day, "inventions create margins." Somebody is always marginalized.

Living at the speed of light may be particularly unhealthy for those who have attention deficit disorders (and their numbers are growing, I am told). But the rapidity and magnitude of the changes that technology is presently demanding may not be good for *any* of us.

I am reminded of a story in the gospels (Mark 2:23- 28). One day close to harvest, Jesus was walking through a field with his disciples on the Sabbath. The disciples snacked on some of the grain, and this enraged Pharisees who were looking on. Jesus' defense was that "Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."

The Pharisees had lost the point. And we are in danger of losing the point of technology. A habit of regular questioning will perhaps remind us that technology is made for mankind, not mankind for technology.

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