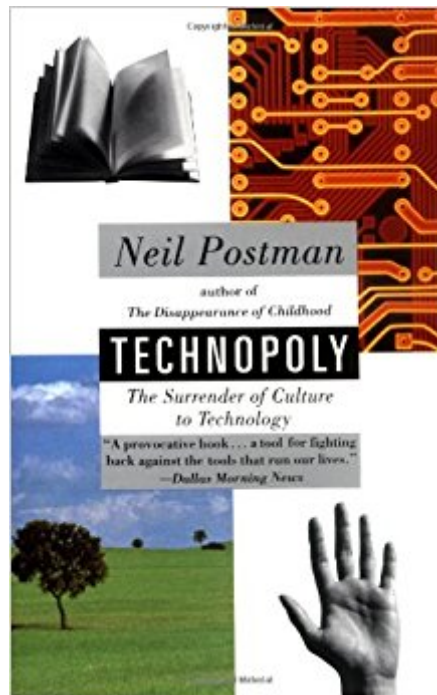




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# Technopoly: The Surrender Of Culture To Technology



## Synopsis

In this witty, often terrifying work of cultural criticism, the author of *Amusing Ourselves to Death* chronicles our transformation into a Technopoly: a society that no longer merely uses technology as a support system but instead is shaped by it--with radical consequences for the meanings of politics, art, education, intelligence, and truth.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Neil Postman is one of the most level-headed analysts of education, media, and technology, and in this book he spells out the increasing dependence upon technology, numerical quantification, and misappropriation of "Scientism" to all human affairs. No simple technophobe, Postman argues insightfully and writes with a stylistic flair, profound sense of humor, and love of language increasingly rare in our hastily scribbled e-mail-saturated world.

Mixing provocative insights and cliched criticisms, Postman defines the U.S. as a society in which technology is deified to a near-totalitarian degree. Copyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Stunning and original work. The author Neil Postman sets the tone at the outset that this is no ordinary work. His interpretation of Plato's Myth of Thamus and Theus is one of the wisest and perhaps most penetrating openings I've ever read. This sets up a lucid description of the interplay between man, religion, and machine thru time dating all way back to ancient Greeks. Although he overplays his hand a bit when discussing what he perceives as technology's totalitarian grip on

society, more broadly his argument has merit, explanatory insight, and predictive value. (Overplayed for example that "Technopoly" completely robs us of history, when in fact the data boom it can be argued is creating a clearer record of it.) But this is a minor criticism, as overall his critiques and insights are spot-on ... it's almost as if he's viewing the world from a 4th dimension the rest of us can't see...or more superstitiously, he's clairvoyant. From this he raises important challenges to the Information Age ethos that insufficient information is the assumed source of major problems, for example from this passage:"You need only ask yourself, What is the problem in the Middle East, or South Africa, or Northern Ireland? Is it lack of information that keeps these conflicts at fever pitch? Is it lack of information about how to grow food that keeps millions at starvation levels? Is it lack of information that brings soaring crime rates and physical decay to our cities? Is it lack of information that leads to high divorce rates and keeps the beds of mental institutions filled to overflowing?"He provides a clear rebuke to the notion that social science is superior to literary tradition in understanding human behavior. It's ultimately about the age old challenge of converting qualitative information into quantitative information, so it be made into a form to make generalized observations about large populations and bespoke ones about its individuals. Postman clearly reasons that abstraction and generalization that are made to seem irrefutable by attaching the qualifier "science" to "social" clearly do much more harm than good. This book goes to dark places, and perhaps "dark" is the best word to describe its overall tone. At times I found myself reading it not because I wanted to, but because I had to. But with an inspiring final chapter on how to counter the negative consequences of what he calls "Technopoly", and uplifting commentary on mankind derived from the classic "Ascent of Man", it ends on a liberating note. Again I'm not saying it's a perfect work either ... I wonder for example how Postman would view advances in AI nearly 30 years since publish date at being more "human-like". He seems to assume that people will always be more morally responsible than machines. But with all the strife in the world can we rely on human judgement and action, versus a machine that be programmed to behave within strict guidelines? He also makes his own presumed unchallengeable "leap of faith" that life without meaning is essentially the worse kind. Something that a zen Buddhist could launch a serious challenge to, as in destructiveness of "gaining" notions. My own criticisms aside, this remains one of the most fundamentally important works I've ever read. It's also very topical and an important reality-check with all the hype-selling these days in tech (some of it most certainly legit, some most certainly not).

Cultural critic Neil Postman goes after what he calls technology which is essentially a "self-justifying, self-perpetuating system wherein technology of every kind is cheerfully granted sovereignty over

social institutions and national life."Postman is not by any means an luddite but he wants us to be aware of how technology has shaped our society, and epistemology. Often not for the better in many respects. We live in a society that does not use machines but is more and more used by them. It shapes our world view. Postman attempts to trace its effect on us from the beginning. Overall he does a fine job. Although a easy read many of the topics require closer scrutiny and thinking. Which is good, he wants you to think about whats happening not just accept what he has to say. In one chapter he roasts the medical industry's infatuation with new technology while the doctors neglect their patients. Patients invariably are reduced to slabs of meat on a assembly line. He makes the salient point that information is not understanding, which is usually ignored by most promoters of technopoly. Another chapter deals with 'scientism' which is science distorted into a intolerant fundamentalist belief system and its effects on our society. This chapter is his most humorous as he dissects some the masters of the obvious (Dilbert like scientists who think they have discovered something profound but what most people on the street already know) Like people are afraid of death and that open minded people tend to be open minded. That's right Ph.d's have done studies to prove these notions! Perhaps a better title for this chapter would have been "the marching morons of science." The last chapter deals on how to resist technology in our daily lives. Which he sums up in several points (not all of them are listed in this review). Though its not enough in my opinion, considering technology's corrosive influence on people and cultures throughout the world. Things need to be addressed at the nation policy level if anything is to be really changed.\* who do not regard the aged as irrelevant\* who admire technological ingenuity but do not think it represents the highest form of human achievement.\* who are at least, suspicious of the idea of progress, and who do not confuse information with understanding.\* who have freed themselves from the belief in the magical power of numbers, do not regard calculations as an adequate substitute for judgement or as synonym for truth. The book is a good starting point to informing oneself on the minuses of technology. Though dated much of his observations are still relevant and a good antidote to high tech mavens like Kelly, Moravec and their ilk. Another good book is David Ehrenfeld's "Beginning Again" written from a profession biologist POV. Or better yet, get Wendell Berry's tract "Life is a miracle" which a rather thorough dissection of technology's epistemology and what lies beneath its pretty public facade.

More relevant than ever.

Neil Postman could be considered a reactionary against television. Certainly, this is how many

people see him. However, if you really look into his beliefs you'll see that he doesn't like commercial media because it effectively restricts all but the most common denominator. This is because by challenging an audience you run the risk of alienating them which means that your ratings go down and, subsequently, so do your commercial rates... meaning less money. In a speech to a group of conservative Austrians, Postman stated that television and other new, commercial technologies were all a part of a seductive imperialism of the USA (though not implemented by the government). The real conundrum for Postman though, is that conservatives have come to be defined as always for the capitalist free market, yet state run media, as proposed by conservatives such as Herbert Hoover, would actually be far LESS restricting than commercial media. Because of that, a state run programme would have more content and less focus on sensation. A side effect would be the return of attention spans greater than a minute or two. And this, in a nutshell, is how Postman's arguments work. I personally agree with him, but he does often make me depressed... ah well. Was Postman a reactionary? I don't think so. I think, by a cultural vantage, you can clearly see the negative aspects that he's pointing out. But will his message ever be practised? I wouldn't be betting on it. Like all of Neil Postman's writing, this book is thought provoking and accessible. I highly recommend it.

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