

Technology Is Never Neutral

A response to Neil Postman's Third Idea, exploring how the hidden assumptions built into technologies like social media and AI influence how we think, relate to one another, and make sense of the world.

Postman's Third Idea: *"Embedded in every technology there is a powerful idea, sometimes two or three powerful ideas. These ideas are often hidden from our view because they are of a somewhat abstract nature. But this should not be taken to mean that they do not have practical consequences."*

Neil Postman's third idea is that every technology has a built-in bias—a way of shaping how we think, what we prioritize, and how we interact with the world. He explains this through the aphorism, "to a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail." In other words, once we adopt a certain technology, we start to see and interpret everything through its lens. We can see this illustrated throughout history. With the advent of print came an emphasis on clear, linear, and logical thinking. Rationality replaced the emphasis on memory, which, prior to text, was the main way of accessing information and knowledge. Learning became more independent rather than community-based—scholars had direct access to religious and informative texts instead of relying on communal procedures such as attending sermons and lectures. This pattern continues today with more recent technologies.

Let's take, for example, Twitter. We can compare its' effects on our cognitive tendencies to that of the telegraph, which also prioritized speed over context. You can see a tweet in real time about something that is happening now in the world. Twitter can also prioritize entertainment over depth, like television did. Overall, Twitter prioritizes content that is attention grabbing and elicits emotional response. The effects of this can be seen in the lack of nuance in Twitter discourse. Viral content is rarely deep or well researched. There is rarely a consideration of multiple perspectives in a Tweet. The virality of misinformation and conspiracy theories are especially concerning. Anyone anywhere can tweet anything they like, and the sheer number and rate of new tweets do not encourage readers to research and verify all the information they absorb uncritically.

The social aspect encourages them to share (retweet) potential misinformation. This is problematic because Twitter and similar social media are now being seen as the third place in our changing society; it is now the main forum we have to interact with our community outside of work and home. In this way it goes beyond how tv and the telegraph changed how we think and communicate, shaping not just our individual cognitive habits, but also the structure of public discourse itself. A result of this is the proliferation of echo chambers and societal fragmentation, which is destabilizing liberal democracy and weakens social cohesion.

Postman argues that technology is not neutral—it pushes us toward certain ways of thinking while making others seem irrelevant. In the case of Twitter, where we seem to prefer cleverly worded “clapbacks” to more sophisticated perspectives, critical thinking is becoming less common. This is what Marshall McLuhan meant when he said, “the medium is the message”—it’s not just the content of a technology that matters, but how the technology itself reshapes our habits, perceptions, and even culture as a whole.