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## IS IT IMPOSSIBLE TO REDEEM ELECTRONIC MEDIA? A Christian Critique of Neil Postman and Other Worrywarts

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Is TV bad for you? Is *reading* a more intellectual pursuit than *viewing*? Recent essayists have held that somehow, electronic media, such as television, films, and the Internet, have caused America's loss of "cultural memory," that is, our sense of history, of place, which grounds our communities in their self-identity, their idea of task, and their future hopes. The following assertion from John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker is typical: "The electronic media, and especially in connection with the fast and global expansion of television and now the Internet...has been accompanied by a *depreciation of cultural memory*, of the hierarchy of the classics, of the canonic, and of recourse to historical memory in the crises of the present moment" (emphasis added).<sup>1</sup>

Joshua Meyrowitz, in *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (Oxford University Press, 1985), reissues the familiar indictment of the electronic media for the social and psychological ills of our age. This popular sociological approach (see also Tony Schwartz, *The Responsive Chord* [Anchor Press, 1973], and Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* [Viking, 1985]) takes a generalized sense of cultural sickness and lays the blame for it at the feet of the messengers.<sup>2</sup>

**The Medium vs. the Message.** This indictment of electronic media fails, however, for at least three reasons: First, it confuses the medium with the message. Basic communication theory posits that communication consists of a source, a message, a channel, and a receiver.<sup>3</sup> This fundamental model often has been refined by adding feedback loops, outside influences on the communicators and the process, and so on, but in its essence this four-part model has never been found wanting, as it covers the essentials of communication. One truth we can draw from it is that a message is a separate entity from the channel or medium through which it is sent.

The medium of communication is the vehicle or conduit for moving the message along from sender to receiver. It is similar to a pipeline. This pipe may be made of plastic, stainless steel, rubber, or another material. The pipe may be curved, angular, or straight. The physical properties of the pipe do have an effect on the liquid it carries. The same is true of communication media, which is why producers of radio, television, film, Internet, and other media content take into account the particular effects of the medium that they are using. For example, producing pictures for small-screen television requires more close-up shots than it does for wide-screen cinema.

The pipe, despite its own characteristics and effect, is not identical to the content it carries. If this is not true, if a medium is the same as the message it carries and is therefore responsible for shaping the behavior of the receiver of that message, then we could also say that the medium of print "caused" the terrorist behavior of the antitechnology Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski, a conclusion that critics of electronic media should prefer to avoid.<sup>4</sup>

Second, the indictment of electronic media ignores the fact that a medium is neutral in respect to its content. Returning to our pipe analogy, the same pipe can carry pure mountain water, orange juice, gasoline, or sewage. Television, likewise, for example, can carry superficiality, pornography, and lies. It can also, however, carry insightful political analysis, masterful artistic performances, and Christian-oriented programming. Electronic media are neutral in this respect.

Arguing that electronic media are entirely corrupted or corrupting ignores evidence to the contrary and overlooks their many pragmatic benefits. The content even of the often-maligned television, for instance, is not entirely bad—the proliferation of “narrowcasting” cable and satellite television channels gives us the History Channel, the Discovery Channel, Biography, documentaries, cultural offerings from all places and ages, and much more. The often-distrusted Internet, likewise, has given users quick and easy access to classic literature from Plato to Augustine to Shakespeare, the entire contents of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* online nearly free of charge, and information that only a decade ago would be prohibitively time consuming and expensive to research.

To argue that books are necessarily good and electronic media are necessarily bad misses the point. The goodness or badness of a medium of communication clearly depends on its content. One could become uncritically engrossed in a “bad” book, such as a trashy romance novel or a destructive propaganda piece. On the other hand, one could be uplifted by a “good” film or television program that is intelligent, informative, and imaginative, such as a news analysis, scientific documentary, or culture piece. The content clearly is the point.

Third, the indictment of electronic media unfairly denigrates the visual. The late Neil Postman’s assaults on “the media” in this regard are particularly insidious, tempting as they are to bookish intellectuals or Christians looking for a convenient scapegoat for American society’s breakdown. Postman develops a theory that the mere physics of television images, which are made up of thousands of minute dots of colored light, allows those images to sneak past our rational defenses as we watch them; thus they enter our brains somehow unfiltered, making us susceptible to their harmful effects.

There is no scientific evidence for this accusation. Even if this physical theory of electronic media were true, in all fairness wouldn’t one have to apply it to other electronic media as well? Should films, whose images are made up of continuous-color-toned celluloid through which white light passes rather than multiple electronic dots through which colored lights are displayed, escape Postman’s criticisms? Are they not also intrinsically deceptive or bad? Or, worse, what about the mechanics of reading, Postman’s ideal medium of mental acuity? When reading, we see the individual splotches of ink on the page and our mind registers words, concepts, and impressions, all in an automatic, “thoughtless” process. Reading electronic text on a computer screen also presents a problem for Postman’s theory. When Postman wrote his criticisms in 1985, there was of course no Internet to bring electronic media to the desktops of American homes like running water. He could not have envisioned that the primary content of this new medium, ironically, would be words that are electronically composed of tiny electronic dots.

All visual images, in fact, can be reduced to light particles (or waves) reaching the rods and cones of the inner eye, which our mind then reassembles into a picture. This God-given ability, this irreducibly complex system of vision, is a gift. One cannot credibly argue, based on some imagined *physical* difference between media, that reading is more intellectual and television viewing more mindless.<sup>5</sup> Finally, it is sometimes argued that because Jesus is the Word, the gospel message therefore must be exclusively one of words. This argument, however, ignores the fact that Jesus is also the *Light* of the world. These biblical figures of speech in part are meant to express His nature as the “message” of God to the world. That message, the gospel, certainly can be expressed in words, but that is not the only medium by which it can be communicated.

**A Powerful Tool for God’s Glory.** “God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind” (2 Tim. 1:7 NKJV). Instead of fearfully throwing out the visual, a major part of God’s good creation, let us work to redeem those media that utilize it. The blood of Christ is reconciling all things to Himself (Col. 1:20), and we have a role in His work when we are obedient in working out His lordship, even in the development of visual media.

It is not the case, moreover, that visual media necessarily undermine our memories and our hopes and dreams. Motion pictures, for instance, have played and must continue to play a significant role in cultural memory and future hope. Regarding cultural memory, *On the Waterfront*, for instance, the 1954 Academy

Award winner, takes the gospel of Christ into the world of labor union corruption in no uncertain terms. Films such as *Where the Lilies Bloom*, *The Spitfire Grill*, and *Chariots of Fire* inspire our future hope.

Such films offer us the gift of *realistic imagination*. This imagination gives us a vision; it says that there is a better way, a way of self-sacrifice and future expectation. This is not a false hope, but one that is based on the actual historical model of the Son of God and His actions in this world. We, therefore, may expect these visions, this hope, to be *realizable*. This gives us confidence in the intrinsic value of those “dreams and visions” that were promised along with the outpouring of the Spirit to sons and daughters, young and old (see Acts 2:17; Joel 2:28).

A church service I attended recently included as part of the “Prayer of Confession” these words of contrition: “Forgive us, O God...for *the loss of our hope*, which settled us into a dull acceptance of things as they are.” As a professional filmmaker with a deep sorrow over the sorry state of media production in Christendom, this sentiment cut me to the quick. We are not called to a spirit of fear, including fear of electronic media, but rather we must stir up the gifts that we have been given to make a difference in our culture, bringing hope to it through these powerful tools of mass communication.

— John R. Hamilton

## NOTES

1. John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker, eds., “Science and Theology on the End of the World and the Ends of God,” in *The End of the World and the Ends of God* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 8.
2. There are other credible scapegoats, such as the government-run educational system, with its evolutionary dogma that man is but an animal, with no meaning, no basis for morals, no ultimate purpose, and no reason for hope.
3. David K. Berlo, *The Process of Communication* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), 72.
4. Alston Chase, “Harvard and the Making of the Unabomber,” *Atlantic Monthly*, June 2000, 41–65.