

Review Article : Wait a Minute, Mr Postman! - Some Critical Remarks on Neil Postman's Childhood Theory

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Abstract

Neil Postman's books on school, television and childhood have attracted considerable attention in the United States and also elsewhere in the Western world. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Postman was associated with the American movement of radical pedagogues, urging the backward school system to meet the challenges of the new media: replace reading and writing with picture and sound. Postman felt that the school system was unable to keep up with the rapid developments in media technology. In the late 1970s, Postman made a complete volte-face. He is now concerned about literacy and the written word, which are being destroyed by visual media. Picture and word are mutually exclusive in Postman's thought. This article focuses on Postman's theory of the disappearance of childhood. Postman, the 'culture critic' maintains that the new media are 'disappearing' the three main conditions of childhood: literacy, school and shame. TV is sweeping childhood aside, and at the same time the moral basis of the prevailing society is collapsing. Special attention is given to the weaknesses of Postman's theory: his information determinism, his concepts of source, receiver, and the relation between them, and whose cause he is advocating with his pedagogic strategy. Postman's question is rather, 'What do media do to people?' than, 'What do people do with media?' Postman is concerned only with how children and adolescents are exploited by the media, not with how the media are exploited by children and adolescents. In Postman's model, receivers are an undifferentiated mass, whereas we feel the receivers should be differentiated according to age, social group, etc. Also, some comments are made on Postman's pedagogic strategy and on his real concern: What is he really trying to protect?

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