

# 5                      Crucially                      Important Reminders about Technology

When discussing technology, people too often fall into the habit of either uncritically praising it or unconditionally condemning it. There is a critical need for greater nuance in the dialogue about technology.

Author and scholar Neil Postman can perhaps help with this nuance. He spent thirty years studying the history of technological change. Among the many books he wrote on the subject, he is perhaps most famous for [\*Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business\*](#), in which he hypothesized that Huxley's dystopian vision of the future in *Brave New World* had in many ways come true.

In [a 1998 talk](#), he provided the following five reminders to help people undertake a more mature evaluation of technology and its effects:

## **1) We always pay a price for technology.**

Technology is never an unmixed blessing. As Postman reminds us, "For every advantage a new technology offers, there is always a corresponding disadvantage." Thus, for example, he points out that the automobile brought obvious advantages, but also "poisoned the air" and "degraded the beauty of our natural landscape." With new technology, it's always important to ask if the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

## **2) There are always winners and losers in technological change.**

"The advantages and disadvantages of new technologies are

never distributed evenly among the population... every new technology benefits some and harms others."

Among the questions Postman suggests asking: "Who specifically benefits from the development of a new technology? Which groups, what type of person, what kind of industry will be favored. And, of course, which groups of people will thereby be harmed?"

### **3) Embedded in every great technology is an epistemology, political, or social prejudice.**

Technology is not neutral: it's creation means that other skills or ways of thinking are seen as less important. For instance, as Postman points out, the invention of writing and the printing press resulted in memorization being increasingly considered "a waste of time." So also, he maintains, the invention of the computer has meant that "information" has become valued above "knowledge" and "wisdom."

### **4) Technological change is not additive; it is ecological.**

As a drop of red dye into a beaker of clear water changes the color of every water molecule, so also does technology change everything in society in some manner. According to Postman,

*"In the year 1500, after the printing press was invented, you did not have old Europe plus the printing press. You had a different Europe. After television, America was not America plus television. Television gave a new coloration to every political campaign, to every home, to every school, to every church, to every industry, and so on."*

It is because the consequent changes are so vast that Postman says "we must be cautious about technological innovation."

## **5) Technology tends to become mythic.**

Postman noticed that there is “a common tendency to think of our technological creations as if they were God-given, as if they were a part of the natural order of things” rather than “artifacts produced in a specific political and historical context.” The danger in this mythical view is that “[technology] is then accepted as it is, and is therefore not easily susceptible to modification or control.” Enthusiasm for technology can then become a form of idolatry.