

POSTMAN’S LEGACY IN A “POST-TRUTH” LANDSCAPE OF ALGORITHMIC PROPAGANDA

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Abstract: Neil Postman’s work on language is an important but often overlooked part of the larger history of media literacy education. By bringing together the work of Alfred Korzybski on language and representation with Marshall McLuhan’s ideas about media as a cultural environment, Postman was able to illustrate how the abstracting function of language could be used to distort reality. Importantly, Postman refused to demonize the persuasive genres because he recognized that all forms of communication and expression are fundamentally designed for social influence. In today’s destabilizing post-truth landscape, Postman’s legacy continues to influence a generation of educators who see value in instructing students to analyze and evaluate sophisticated persuasive techniques in all texts, genres, and types of media.

Keywords: *propaganda, persuasion, algorithms, post-truth, media literacy, general semantics*

Tristan Harris, a cofounder of the Center for Humane Technology, is a man on a mission. Harris believes that humanity is suffering because social media technologies profit from addiction, depression, and division.

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To address this problem, Harris began his crusade in 2013 to diagnose and repair the systemic harms of the attention economy. In a radio interview with Joe Rogan, Harris quoted at length from the preface of Neil Postman's 1985 bestselling book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, where he argued that the most dangerous forms of propaganda did not come from a centralized and powerful government, where Big Brother controls every aspect of society and culture. The most dangerous propaganda did not come from advertising, which lionizes the values of capitalism and submerges personal identity into brand affiliation and loyalty. The real dangers of propaganda occur from the forms of expression and communication that people enjoy, use, and adore the most, "the technologies that undo their capacities to think" (Rogan, 2020, p. 1).

The rise of so-called "post-truth epistemologies" over the past five years describes circumstances in which information and facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. This state of affairs has been generated by the rising levels of mistrust in social, political, and cultural institutions, as well as the dominance of algorithms that decide how people encounter information, entertainment, and persuasion. Over the past five years, we have seen numerous examples of how, by the time facts are gathered, the moment has passed, "the headline has been grabbed, and the lie can be modified, apologized for or replaced by another" (Peters, 2017, p. 565).

One recent example of how social media shapes emotion and attention captures the spirit of post-truth epistemologies in relation to persuasion and propaganda. The whistleblower Frances Haugen released Facebook documents showing that, beginning in 2017, Facebook's ranking algorithm treated emoji reactions as five times more valuable than "likes" (Oremus et al., 2021). Emotion-laden posts tended to keep users more engaged, and engagement equals profit for Facebook's digital advertising business. Although some Facebook employees recognized the danger of these strategies, they continued to systematically spread toxic, hateful content to a wide audience for five years.

Algorithms rely on high levels of surveillance of users' behavior and there may be as many as 10,000 factors involving in filtering social media content (Zuboff, 2019). Characteristics of both the form and content of social media content is considered, with factors including the number of long comments a post generates, or whether a video is live or recorded, or whether comments were made in plain text or with cartoon avatars. Algorithms even account for the "computing load that each post requires and the strength of the user's

Internet signal,” with Facebook weighting the new features it was trying to encourage users to adopt (Oremus et al., 2021, p. 1). Only in 2020 did Facebook finally cease counting angry emoji reactions as a signal of what its users wanted, and this had the immediate effect of reducing misinformation and graphic violence that users encountered.

In his 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman contrasts the two different types of dystopias presented by Orwell and Huxley. Postman wanted to underline a key idea about the most significant harms of propaganda: it was not that falsehoods would masquerade for truth or that valuable information would be concealed from the public. Postman feared the power of entertainment media to reshape language and culture in ways that reduced people to passivity and egoism. In using Postman’s argument to support his advocacy, Tristan Harris is continuing Postman’s legacy: he wants the world to know that (social media) propaganda is harming individuals, culture, and democratic institutions. Harris wants to break the spell that has captivated and subjugated people to digital technologies. As the former ethicist for Google, Harris was once a Silicon Valley insider. Now Harris’s interest in pulling back the curtain on persuasive technologies has explicitly aligned him with Neil Postman, perhaps the most well-known 20th-century humanist in the fields of media studies and education.

In this essay, I reflect on Postman’s legacy as it has affected how educators conceptualize the obligation to help students understand and interrogate the persuasive genres. Over the past 60 years, many have been influenced by Postman’s work (Ross, 2009). But fewer contemporary writers are aware of how Neil Postman’s early work (pre-1980) developed from his interest in language as a form of social influence. In this paper, I aim to better understand significant influences on his conceptualization of media education, particularly in relation to the study of persuasive genres. Through a close reading of texts from the past, I show how Postman’s work on language and propaganda fits into the larger history of media literacy and the persuasive technologies that are now reshaping society in the context of “post-truth” epistemologies.

Historical Context

Although Postman began his career writing about language, media, and education in the early 1960s, he wasn’t the first educator to be involved in efforts to help students learn how to critically analyze language as propaganda. In the years leading up to WWII, the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA) offered monthly publications to educators who were urged

to help people recognize the rhetorical strategies used by propagandists. More than one million students participated in learning activities on the topic of propaganda. Although the IPA folded at the onset of American involvement in the war, many teachers continued to teach students how to recognize “glittering generalities,” “card stacking,” and “bandwagon” and other rhetorical appeals (Hobbs & McGee, 2014). Between the wars, people were concerned about propaganda’s influence on the democratic process, and John Dewey (1927) recognized how partisanship was divisive and distracting, generating media content that makes consumers feel well-informed and “feeds their biases and validates their views without requiring them to participate in any dialogue or investigation themselves to form their own opinion,” offering “ready-made political views and ideologies” (Barton, 2019, p. 1029).

By the 1950s, the spectacular rise of consumer culture was reshaping society. Radio and TV ads were everywhere, and toothpaste, automobiles, fast food, and even TV dinners were promoted as the golden ticket to the American dream, and many were deeply concerned about the rapid shift in cultural values. Among educators, three distinct arguments were typical of this era. First, there were concerns about violence, stereotypes, and materialism in media representations. This led some American educators and parents to use strategies for protecting students from potentially harmful content. Another group of educators sought to advance students’ skills of discrimination, critical thinking, judgment, and creative expression. At the same time, some educators sought to empower students by providing access to quality educational media content (Crook, 1973). Historians of media literacy note that during the period, tensions among these three different pedagogical approaches first surfaced (RobbGrieco, 2018).

As a graduate student at Teachers College Columbia University, Neil Postman was getting deep exposure to many different ideas about the relationship among education, communication, and media. In 1958, he completed his dissertation, entitled, “A Proposed Syllabus in the Communication Arts and Skills for the Westchester Community College.” As he was working on this project, Postman attended a series of lectures sponsored by Professor Louis Forsdale, Postman’s advisor, who invited Marshall McLuhan, an English professor at the University of Toronto, for a series of lectures in New York City. Postman found himself becoming a fan (Postman, 1995). McLuhan had published *The Mechanical Bride* in 1951, which deconstructed the images and tropes of advertising to reflect on changes in culture and society wrought by mass communication.

Helping undergraduates examine advertising and consumer culture was seen as a novel practice at the time.

In 1960, educational leaders and policymakers from the National Association of Educational Broadcasters and the United States Office of Education had commissioned Marshall McLuhan to write a curriculum (Marchand, 1989). But the work that McLuhan submitted was a real surprise to its sponsors: it encouraged educators to teach *about* media as an activity quite distinct from teaching *with* media (McLuhan, 1960). McLuhan argued that because the television environment educates children well before they begin school, children have become dissatisfied with traditional formal education. New forms of learning and teaching were needed for youth growing up in an electronic age. Here, McLuhan employed a much broader conception of media that included substantial focus on the form, context, and technologies that mediate human interactions. In doing so, he collapsed some commonly understood divisions among language, media, and other technologies (Mason, 2016), an approach that did not easily fit into existing paradigms, where the content of media was the exclusive focus of attention.

Within a year, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) commissioned the young Neil Postman to offer up his ideas on the hot topic of communications and media to its own members. In a volume entitled *Television and the Teaching of English*, Postman (1961) offered a translation of some key ideas from the work of McLuhan, spelling out language arts education as an alternative to traditional approaches to English grammar, composition, and literature. The study of communication, media, and technology needed to be a key part of the curriculum, he said. He advocated for dialogue and discussion as a primary pedagogy, focusing on the instructor's role in helping students formulate and explore questions instead of merely transmitting information. He emphasized the importance of using materials that were relevant to children and young people, including the study of advertising, news, music, and even fashion. By emphasizing the interconnectedness of technology, communication, art, and symbolic forms, McLuhan wanted to help people better "understand the past, make sense out of the present, and provide us with the best hope of anticipating and planning for the future" (Strate, 2017, p. 245).

Postman was especially interested in the relationship between oral language and written expression. But while McLuhan (1964) suggested pedagogical activities designed to disorient and heighten perception, helping people notice the often-invisible aspects of the cultural environment,

Postman was more likely to make use of the practice of inquiry. For him, asking critical questions was the best way to open minds. In a 1967 article in *English Journal*, Postman explained new theories of linguistics emerging in the scholarly literature and suggested that teachers could help students “to adopt the attitudes and use the inquiry processes” of linguistics by asking students to investigate matters that can make a difference in their language behavior, making the study of language relevant to students’ lived experience in the real world.

Propaganda Education in a World Made of Symbols

During the early part of the 20th century, many philosophers, writers, critics, and academics were exploring the difficulties of living in an increasingly symbolic world, including Kenneth Burke, Aldous Huxley, Alfred North Whitehead, Ludwig Wittgenstein, C. S. Peirce, John Dewey, Ernest Cassirer, Edward Sapir, and I. A. Richards, to name just a few. As fascism grew in Europe and around the world, these scholars noted that although humans’ use of language enabled vast innovation, it also put people at some remove from reality. As an American Jew raised in a Yiddish-speaking family and educated in a New York City high school during WWII, it is easy to imagine the relevance and urgency of the study of propaganda to the young Neil Postman (Strate, 2006).

Postman’s (1979) essay entitled “Propaganda” is an excerpt from his 1976 book *Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk* and it offers a most unique definition of the word propaganda. Postman takes pains to point how language short-circuits critical thinking about the true complexity of the world. But unlike Tristan Harris and many contemporary academics and political pundits, he does not use metaphorical language that conceptualizes propaganda as a weapon. He does not incite fear. Instead, he acknowledges that the term itself has been used as a smear word to create feelings of repugnancy that short-circuits critical thinking.

Postman defines propaganda as “language that invites us to respond emotionally, emphatically, more or less immediately, and in an either-or manner” (p. 130). It is perhaps one of the most original definitions of the term that exists and it seems to resonate with how we experience propaganda in daily life. To unpack the significance and value of this unique definition of propaganda, let’s consider how the work of Alfred Korzybski affected Postman’s thinking. Korzybski’s 1933 book *Science and Sanity* had explained how language gives people the ability to transport their experience through time, enabling people to accumulate knowledge from

the past and communicate to future generations (Strate, 2010). Establishing a field of practice called general semantics, Korzybski argued that people do not experience their environment; instead, they experience what they tell themselves about their environment (Moran, 2017).

Postman first encountered Korzybski's ideas about the representational function of symbols through the work of S. I. Hayakawa in the 1950s, when they both were teaching English at San Francisco State University (Strate, 2004). In describing the key ideas of Korzybski, Postman explained that since language works by "selecting, omitting, and organizing the details of reality so that we experience the world as patterned and coherent," it shapes social reality and gives stability to our world "by ignoring differences and attending to similarities" (Postman, 2003, p. 356). For this reason, either-or thinking (which Korzybski had called the *two-valued orientation*) could produce dangerous unrealities. Hayakawa's popular textbook *Language in Action* explained Korzybski's axioms and principles with the use of relevant contemporary examples for college students. For example, Hayakawa described either-or thinking concerning Adolf Hitler's use of language, noting that everything Hitler called "Aryan" was "noble, virtuous, heroic, and altogether glorious," whereas everything bad is "Jewish, degenerate, corrupt, democratic, and internationalist" (Hayakawa, 1947, p. 130).

Postman points out that since all language is essentially persuasive, "the distinction between persuasion and other types of talking does not seem to be very useful" (1979, p. 132). Postman acknowledges how the emotional intensity of propaganda may lead people to bypass critical thinking. Even so, Postman resists the easy tendency to use propaganda as a "smear word" (McKenzie, 1942). One of his graduate students, Terence Moran, recalls that one of the first axioms Postman presented to the class was that "words themselves have no meanings, that only people have meanings which they try to express through words" (Moran, 2004, p. 26). This idea expresses an argument originally made by Ogden and Richards (1923) that reflects a particular orientation to what Keane (2019) has called *semiotic ideology*, a term that captures the tacit or explicit assumptions people make about the nature of symbolic expression. Beliefs about symbolic expression matter because they "contribute to the ways people use and interpret them, and on that basis, form judgments of ethical and political value" (Keane, 2018, p. 65).

For Postman, language does much more than merely describe events and things in the world. Language also tells us what we should notice, who we should ignore, and what we should value or hate. Since the words we use have

embedded ideologies, Korzybski was fond of explaining that “Whatever we say something is, it is not” (Postman, 2003, p. 358).

Language as Persuasive Technology

According to Postman, the most urgent issues that needed investigation were questions about the various language systems that impinge on students' lives, especially the genres of news and advertising. He suggests examples of questions to interrogate the language of advertising, including: “What are its purposes? What are its most important symbols? What kinds of relationships does it maintain toward its audiences? What social values does it express? To what extent do these values reflect those of the audience? How do its metaphors work? What are the situations in which its symbolism is most effective? What standards may be used to judge its truth? In what sense can the language of advertising be ‘true’?” For the study of news, Postman suggests these questions: “What is ‘news’ anyway? What is a fact? What do we mean by ‘objectivity’? From whose point of view is news written? How can you tell? What standards may reasonably be used to evaluate news? In what sense can the language of news be said to be ‘true’?” (Postman, 1967) More than 50 years later, these foundational questions continue to be relevant to interrogate the post-truth landscape of today.

Postman was adamant that what happens in the English classroom needs to be relevant to contemporary culture, and at the time he said it, this was a radical argument that caused a stir in education circles. After all, during the late 1960s, youth culture was becoming more prominent, and the antiwar movement was intensifying. Nearly half a million American troops were fighting in Vietnam and peace rallies proliferated. Systemic racism and police brutality against African Americans reached a breaking point in Detroit when a welcome-home party for two veterans led to the arrest of 82 African Americans. As peaceful protest turned violent with significant vandalism, looting, and arson, President Johnson sent thousands of U.S. Army troops into Detroit (Emeka, 2015).

Postman knew that his idea to activate critical questions in the classroom at a time when people were increasingly questioning the “establishment” would be controversial. He gently provoked English teachers by noting that, “If the questions strike you as politically dangerous, I would remind you that there is nothing more dangerous to the future of our country than curriculums which keep students playing with sentence diagrams while the languages of reality go swirling, uncomprehended, around their ears” (Postman, 1967, p. 1165).

New ideas about teaching *about* and *with* mass media were aligned with and responsive to progressive ideas about education and social justice that were developing during the 1960s, as education began to be recognized as a critical practice of citizenship, with the exercise of democratic rights and civil responsibilities. In *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (1969), Postman and Weingartner conceptualize inquiry learning by describing how it alters the nature of the authority relationship between teacher and students. In their formulation of inquiry learning, the teacher rarely tells students a personal opinion about a particular social or political issue and does not accept a single statement as an answer to a question. The teacher encourages student-to-student interaction as opposed to student-to-teacher interaction and the teacher generally avoids acting as a mediator or judge. Lessons develop from the interests and responses of students and not from a previously determined curriculum. Such pedagogical approaches depend on activating student motivation and engagement.

Postman did not use the term media literacy, but he did use the term multimedia literacy, referring specifically to a broadened conceptualization of the expressive function of literacy. According to Postman, students should be engaged in expressing what they know through a wide range of communication skills beyond merely reading and writing. Educators should place equal importance on “speaking, listening, filming, audio-taping, video-taping, painting, and other possibilities” (Postman, 1974, p. 61). With this pedagogy in place, contemporary propaganda can be examined in more fruitful ways than merely spotting rhetorical techniques. When students create propaganda, they get opportunities to develop civic identities as change agents in the world. In the process, they encounter and reflect on the ethical obligations of both authors and audiences (Hobbs, 2020).

Persuasive Genres in English Education

Postman notes that because propaganda “attempts to conceal itself as information” (1979, p. 133), it is “a most mischievous word.” Postman primarily aimed to heighten learners’ attention on the capacity of language to reshape attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge. Propaganda simplifies complex information through abstracting, which is an active cognitive process where we take into ourselves something from the outside environment, using perception, information, and ideas, “which provide us with a necessarily incomplete and selective summary, or map of our environment” (Strate, 2010, p. 35). Through abstracting, we collaboratively create and accumulate knowledge. But in this process, a lot is left out because every choice must be

a particular choice. Every word, graphic display or numerical symbol, is a particular, limited, and partial one.

This may be the most important reason why Postman, McLuhan, and Korzybski all refused to demonize propaganda and propagandists. Language is the principal means that we humans use to interact with our environment. To be literate, learners must first and foremost understand how language constructs and shapes social reality.

But all symbol systems need to be interrogated to understand their biases. Postman emphasized that language even shapes how we understand the meaning of images because visuals can exert a positioning power on the imagination of viewers, activating feelings that may be resistant to reasoning by viewers, who “are not generally provoked to reflect on or deconstruct them in the way that occurs in relation to verbal material” (Joffe, 2008, p. 85). In the post-truth landscape, media literacy has been proposed as a kind of antidote to the crisis generated by the rise of so-called “fake news.” If only people could learn to recognize the biases of visual and social media, democracy would not be at risk. Indeed, when it became evident that the Russian government had used memes, social media, videos, and other types of online content to influence the 2016 presidential election, there were many calls for increased media literacy education in the United States. The U.S. State Department invested substantial funding in providing media literacy educational programs to people in Ukraine and other Eastern European countries. But these efforts were challenged by those who believed that media literacy’s focus on “asking critical questions” could be used to destabilize public trust in mainstream journalism (boyd, 2017). Given that only one in three middle school students is likely to encounter learning experiences that involve comparing and contrasting different news sources, and only one in five students get a chance to analyze advertising or understand how media industries harness human attention as their business model (Media Education Lab, 2021), it seems a bit absurd to blame media literacy education for the epistemological crisis resulting from low trust in social and political institutions and the rise of algorithmic content curation.

But it is quite possible that the lack of attention to persuasive genres in the context of American public education could be responsible, in part, for cultural shifts that have lowered the status of traditional authorities and elevated those who present themselves as authentic voices of the people. Most American students get little opportunity to study persuasion or propaganda in school (Hobbs, 2020). In the latter half of the 20th century, English educators shifted their focus away from persuasion and propaganda,

and toward argumentation. Over time, the concepts of persuasion and propaganda have largely disappeared from the vocabulary of both English education and composition and rhetoric. Indeed, the Common Core State Standards explicitly disparages opinion, persuasion, and the first-person voice, instead extolling logical argument. An analysis of the scholarly literature in composition shows that the word persuasion, when it is used, “almost always comes with negative connotations, associating it with domination and control” (Fleming, 2019, p. 515).

But there is evidence that the tide is beginning to turn. In 2019, the National Council of Teachers of English issued a resolution that called for educators to promote pedagogy and scholarly curricula in English and related subjects that instruct students in analyzing and evaluating “sophisticated persuasive techniques in all texts, genres, and types of media, current and yet to be imagined” (NCTE, 2019). Today, a growing number of young people get such opportunities, in and out of school, to critically interrogate propaganda because their instructor happens to be acquainted with concepts and instructional practices known as media literacy, information literacy, critical literacy, news literacy, media ecology, digital literacy, or other terms (Hobbs et al., 2019). At the same time, empirical research evidence has shown the value of media literacy to disrupt the distorted thinking that comes from persuasive, ideologically compelling persuasion. As Kahne and Bowyer (2017) note:

In a media environment in which political misinformation circulates widely and rapidly and in which individuals can easily seek out news and perspectives from sources that champion their beliefs, this psychological tendency of individuals to accept claims that align with their beliefs as true, even when the claims are not accurate, will undermine the quality and ultimate productivity of democratic deliberation. Thus, it is important for educators to identify ways to counteract the impact of directional motivation on judgments of partisan content.

How do educators help learners to counteract filter bubbles and confirmation bias? Through the study of languages, art forms, symbol systems, technologies, and platforms, people gain metacognitive awareness of the constructed nature of our cultural environment as interdependent parts of an ecosystem. In the process of this approach to education, educators can choose to tap into people’s fears to demonize contemporary persuaders. Tristan Harris certainly positions Facebook as an evil empire, as a business

that relies on harnessing human attention for profit. Postman recognized this inevitability, noting that, "To a man with a computer, everything looks like data" (Postman, 1993, p. 16). Postman believed that the uncontrolled growth of technology destroys humanity by creating a culture without moral foundation. Because the firehose of information has led to a loss of a coherent cultural narrative, Postman believed that the only truly restorative practice must involve deep consideration of matters of ethics and values, contextualized in the practice of education.

In taking future actions to determine the legal and technological future of social media in a post-truth landscape, all participating stakeholders will need to use the power of language, images, and narratives to activate emotions and simplify information in an effort to induce social consensus. The Facebook whistleblower herself does this by synthesizing thousands of pages of research and technical documents into the simple slogan, "Facebook puts profits over safety." Awareness of the communicative processes at work in the creation and circulation of contemporary propaganda heightens human freedom, leading to potentially unpredictable results in the public sphere. In the months and days ahead, some members of the public may see the need for regulation of social media platforms while others will resist the involvement of the federal government in what they see as essentially an editorial function. Judgments like this explicitly call upon reflection, dialogue, and deliberation, an endeavor that Postman would have welcomed. Through education, we learn to live in a world suffused with propaganda and the persuasive genres, as they are the tools humans have long used to express the significance of actions and ideas in relation to people's deepest hopes, fears, and dreams.

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