

An Analysis of the Screen Phenomenology in Postman's Thought from the Perspective of the Television Screen

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Abstract: From the perspective of television screen, this research explores the phenomenology of screen referred in Neil Postman's thought. The media ecology theory underpins the development of Postman's thought, whereas on the basis of Marshall McLuhan's "the medium is the message", the media theorist put forth a series of such core arguments as "media as metaphor" to analyze impacts of television on society and culture and criticized the media culture represented by TV. Postman further expounded that the prevalent "amusement-to-death" inflicted by the immediate communication of electronic media had significantly undermined the rationality and dignity of traditional printing culture. In this vein, this study thenceforth takes "technology" and "media" as the entry point to investigate the development of television, as a media, amidst the contemporary media integration context, and to study the phenomenon of contemporary television screen and its extension and turn via the endeavor of interpreting the communication characteristics of electronic media.

Keywords: postman, the phenomenology of screen, the media of television

1. Introduction

Media technology is a crucial tool for knowledge dissemination and information exchange. First and foremost, as an information carrier, media technology gives full play of its function in this regard, especially in the era of Internet, by virtue of the advancement of Internet and the traditional media technology, information transmits from one-way transmission to two-way interactions. The timeliness, effectiveness, openness and plurality of information dissemination make the information exchange more efficient. Moreover, the cheaper cost of information dissemination, the wide range of coverage as well as the depth of forthcoming influences, etc., also solidify the foundation of scientific development in media field. The application of media, particularly the new media technology, integrates text, image and sound, breaking the confinement of space and time and making full use of global intellectual resources; with such endeavors, the media technology promotes communication and exchange in no small degree worldwide.

2. The Ideological Basis for Postman's Screen Phenomenology

2.1. The Media Ecology

The media ecology, in fact, lays theoretical foundation for Postman's thoughts. Taking the environment as a medium, the media ecology theory focuses on the structure and content of the media environment and its impact on individual, and emphasizes the specific role of media in culture.

The media environment school studies how the technology of communication media affects human cognition, in this regard, the theory argues that the media determines socio-culture and human cognition thereby, establishing symbiotic interactions with human beings. It is safe to say, it is the interaction between the media and human beings that endows culture with its basic characteristics, and hence, the nature of communication technology, conjoined with the impacts that media on socio-culture becomes the focal point of media ecology.

2.2. McLuhan: The Medium Is the Message

The theoretical basis of Postman's thought was also drawn on Marshall McLuhan's idea of "the medium is the message". McLuhan, a preeminent media theorist in the 20th century, maintained that the medium goes far beyond an objective form, but a message in itself, i.e., the influence of the medium on the society resides in the form rather than the specific content of the medium itself. Upon its publishing, the theory of "the medium is the message" broke years of stereotypical thinking with its insightful idea that the form of the technology itself is far more potent than its function of providing information.

By and large, Postman agreed with McLuhan's view on the medium but inherited and developed it, proposing the idea of "the medium is the metaphor" [1]. Postman further expounded that the medium "defines the real world in terms of a hidden but powerful suggestion", and that the metaphorical function of the medium changes the form of human's conversational communication, in the meanwhile, the medium also exerts subtle influences over the cultural content. Media have a huge impact on the way people perceive things, and leverages its role in the manner of metaphor, yet it is often too subtle to be notice. Media technology, on the other hand, constantly influences and even constructs people's cultural life environment, which explains why Postman emphasized his objection to "technological determinism" and "technological monopoly" and explicitly advocated realism, humanism, and morality.

3. Postman's Core Arguments and Inspirational Implications—From the Perspective of Television Screen

3.1. Medium as Metaphor: A New Epistemology

Essentially, Postman believed that metaphor represents a way to reveal the essence of things by comparing it to something else. Suggestive as it is, metaphor is rather powerful, while the medium is the so-called "something else", in an effort to understand things thoroughly, it is indispensable to introduce "another thing", and hence, Postman maintained that the medium is a metaphor that guides people to understand and perceive things in a more insightful manner [2]. Yet its intervention often goes unnoticed, defining the world unknowingly, and all the things people recognize are not what they genuinely are, but merely what they appear to be in the context of medium.

The medium has dual attributes, including technological and social ones. The form of the medium is sufficiently powerful to define reality, provided that such medium resides at the center of

a certain era, it will make people feel that the world presented in the medium is the real world, the preference of which will influence the dominant way of thinking and mainstream values of the society, create new epistemologies and, control the culture ultimately. The medium is biased due to the technology and changes the spectrum of society. From the primitive form of media in prehistory, to the spoken media, the written and printed media, and electronic media nowadays, different forms of media have exerted different impacts on the society.

In general terms, the epistemology of the printing era is rational, of which Postman had spoken highly. After all, the previous print media focus on readers' in-depth understanding of information. In this vein, the text communication is static, mindful, and linear, the printed words, on the other hand, prone to form logical and meaningful content and hence, it is a rational epistemology. Such "hermeneutic culture" urges people to think rationally about the world, which Postman argued is drastically different from the image-centered perceptual cognitive approach of television.

Quite on the contrary with the printing era, the epistemology of the television era is perceptual, television, as a form of medium, exhibits a completely different social merit, and its universality prompts information to be received by a wider mass. Television has grown rapidly as a mass medium, gradually occupying a central place in the construction and dissemination of culture and thereby, fundamentally changes the symbolic environment of society and people's understanding of the world. It is safe to say, people do not need to think in the way of reading when recognizing images, because television relies on image, i.e., an intuitive and concrete perceptual medium. Therefore, a perceptual way of cognition is formed, which, however, weakens the language and meaning of information because of its nature of image.

3.2. Amusing Ourselves to Death: The Amusement of Media

The communication characteristics of electronic media have resulted in the epistemology of "amusement" in television, where sensory pleasure becomes the standard of value assessment. Television provides the public with a new discourse, intensively impacting the "era of interpretation" ushered by the printing media but initiating an "era of universal amusement" [3]. The image-centered television creates a contextless, discontinuous, and disorderly information environment that strongly lashes against the public's visual and auditory senses. The mass output of information has overwhelmed the public, to which Postman called "the world of hide-and-seek". The culture, in fact, has increasingly embraced television as a way of processing information, while the public is accustomed to using television to distribute and receive information, therefore, the era of the entertainment industry has officially arrived.

Postman bitterly criticized the television media technology and argued that the culture had surrendered itself to the technology. His criticism was not started from the content of television, but held an original view that television, as a form of media, created an entertaining social consensus, which discouraged serious and rational thinking. Compared to the printing technology, the medium of television is more likely to leverage upon human's emotions, making them insufficient in thinking and judging. Because television constructs a cultural symbolic environment with its consummate image technology, and television images become the benchmark for the public, especially the viewers, to judge information. In this context, all things have been forged into concrete images by the television medium.

As a media theorist, Postman advocated rationality and did his utmost to retain the seriousness of public discourse. What he criticized was not that the entertaining content of television, since there was nothing wrong with entertainment itself, instead, what he bitterly rebuked was the entertaining way that television had presented due to the communication characteristics of the electronic media itself, and the fact that television had replaced the printing media to become the dominant medium of the modern society.

3.3. The Gone of Childhood: The Adultization of Children

According to Postman, “childhood” is a product of socialization [4]. The abstract symbols printed on paper set up a natural barrier for the uninitiated minors, and the printing media draw a distinct line between adults and children, establishing a hierarchy of information reception, while “omnipresent” nature and “pictorialization” of television make it possible for children to receive information from the adult community, and hence, the boundary between adults and children are no longer distinct. Due to the non-segmented feature of television, children are subject to the same information as adults via television. The medium of television overlooks the cultural needs of different groups of people, which inflicts the adultization of children and consequently, the “gone of childhood”.

3.4. The Era of Technology Monopoly

The advent of electronic media in the 1950s tolled the death-knell for the print culture, henceforth, mankind has entered the “era of technology monopoly”, wherein culture becomes a slave of technology. Postman was pessimistic regarding the development of technology, he believed that technology also has a worldview and would eventually become a cultural faith system.

Technology encroaches the core of value mainly in the form of technological monopoly. Postman divided the history of human culture into three periods, i.e., tool-using culture, technology-dominated culture and technology-monopolized culture, of which the television era belongs to technology-monopolized culture. Attaching culture to itself, the technology has become the core of culture content, just like in the era of television technology monopoly, the authority and philosophy of television also penetrates into the culture. As a matter of fact, the culture is self-consuming with the information it produces, wherein the traditional worldview and value system has been utterly destroyed, and the technology becomes a comprehensive belief system and the core of value.

The rationale of technology occupying a core position is the dilemma caused by the explosion of information due to the monopolization of technology, wherein oceans of meaningless culture pours in and brings about overload information eventually. Postman maintained that in the era of image perception, television, as a “meta-medium”, has become a tool for us to determine the perception of the world [5]. Television has consumed a great deal of time in everyday life, defines reality through images, and omni-presently influences the public’s consciousness. The public, on the other hand, has become fully integrated into the cultural environment shaped by the myths of television. In this vein, the influence of technology upon human life is pervasive. What merits attention, technology mostly emphasizes efficiency and pursues profit to achieve economic development, while lacks humanistic concern and cultivation.

4. The Turning of the Television as a Medium—The Phenomenology of the Screen in the Context of Media Convergence

4.1. Monopolization of Entertainment Technology in the Traditional Media of Television

Underpinned by its ability of crossing time and space, traditional television turns information into commodities. Novelty and excitement gradually become the standard for measuring the value of information. In this context, a symbolic world composed of images impacts significantly on the original language and text, creating a world of images as fast as the speed of light. The television is excelled at delivering information with emotion, the realism created by television renders audience stop thinking but accept whatever feed them. The following sensory pleasure becomes the general demand of society and stimulates consumerism in turn. When the public is used to thinking with

images, such “epistemology” of rationality will be replaced by an entertainment-oriented sensory experience.

Traditional television is a dynamic and ever-flowing medium that is centered on the present. Rather than delving in a specific topic in-depth, fragmenting and entertaining everything, not only news, but also education and politics is what television as a medium aims for. And that is the reason why it poses a severe threat to the discourse in the public sphere, where the viewer in front of the TV is merely a spectator, establishing his or her own opinion as per the guidance of the TV. In this way, personal thinking, habits and ideas are suppressed.

Taking the news in traditional television as an example, current news broadcasted in the television usually is summarized in a short and concise way so as to spread out swiftly. To this end, each piece of news has little connection. The cramming information further incurs redundant information and everlasting fatigue of comprehending it. The independent existence of each piece of information makes it unlikely to be remembered. Social communication, commodity listing, celebrity effect etc. all hinge on the spread effect of television, whereas audience simply and numbly accept all the fed information on television with slightest doubt.

4.2. Development and Transformation of Television as a Media in the Era of Media Convergence

At the time being, visual culture constitutes an indispensable part of culture, which breaks the boundaries and barriers of words, shortens the psychological distance of readers. Against the backdrop of globalization, visual culture links audiences all over the world and arouses emotional resonance.

This era witnesses the integration of media, while the integration of television and Internet constitutes the most notable trend among the wave of media integration. As a benchmark of mainstream development, the intensive integration of television and Internet has induced the emergence of such new media forms as cell phone TV, IPTV, Internet TV, etc.

Following the integration of television and the Internet, the human-computer dialogue is more convenient, concurrently, the Internet has become a form of media that is different from what Postman understood, especially after the creation of browser, which simplifies the operation with the television. The simplicity and convenience of accessing the Internet makes it easy for the public to be exposed much more information than traditional television. Amidst the overwhelming trend of media convergence, the television as a media offer a much richer variety of entertainment than ever before, including not only the common channels, also customized ones such as channels for shopping, gaming, and children’s channels. In the Internet era where media convergence becomes prevalent, the means of television transmission have increased significantly, meanwhile, many televisions also reserve specialized ‘children’s mode’ or ‘teenager’s mode’, alleviating Postman’s concern over the “disappearance of childhood”. The trend of television segmentation, together with the customized services, becomes the major features of the contemporary television media.

In the advent of fierce market competition, television programs are not merely satisfied with superficial reports, but develops in depth. By and large, almost all TV stations now set up news commentary columns, which give full play the inherent advantages of such medium in image presentation, so that they can provide background introduction, analysis and explanation, and generalization and prediction of major news events in a graphic manner.

5. Conclusion

It is safe to conclude that in the contemporary context of media integration, the television, as a media, is developing benignly in the positive orientation, while the media technology exerts a

positive effect on the society change. Especially in this age of information, the media leverages a positive role in spreading information, popularizing knowledge, representing public interests and consolidating the public's ideological consciousness.

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