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Technology, culture, and values: the ethical dimension of Neil Postman's concept of technopoly in the age of AI

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Abstract

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Th The aim of this article is to identify and characterize the ethical dimensions of the critique of technopoly formulated by Neil Postman in his book „Technopoly: The surrender of culture to technology" (1992) and in the public addresses that accompanied it. The article describes the genesis of media ecology as the principal theoretical context within which Postman formulated his critique and then explains the concept of technopoly itself as a cultural stage following tool-using culture and technocracy. The main part of the article offers a synthesis of the ethical aspects of this critique. The conclusions, set against Postman's critical reception in the English- and Polish-language literature, indicate that his critique rests on the conviction that the human person cannot be reduced to measurable categories, yet it does not draw on any single, systematically elaborated philosophical tradition.

Keywords: Neil Postman, technopoly, media ethics, media ecology, technocracy, values, AI

Contemporary technology is no longer confined to the role of a tool that human beings consciously choose and just as consciously employ. Increasingly, it functions as an environment within which the full range of human experience unfolds: education, politics, work, family relationships, and religious life. This diagnosis, formulated by Neil Postman in *Technopoly: The surrender of culture to technology* (Postman, 1992), has gained renewed relevance today in the context of artificial intelligence, algorithmic attention distribution, and the ongoing reduction of human experience to measurable or material data. Postman, however, was not the first to draw attention to the ambivalent character of technological change as such. He situated himself within an intellectual tradition that he, together with his collaborators at New York University, named media ecology (Postman, 2000) — a tradition whose roots reach back to Harold Innis, Walter Ong, and Marshall McLuhan (Marcyński & Laskowska, 2019), and which today is sustained chiefly by scholars affiliated with the Media Ecology Association (MEA). On the European side of this tradition, mention should certainly be made of Jacques Ellul's celebrated *The technological society* (1964), in which the French theorist offers, among

other things, a critique of the position that technology is merely a neutral tool.[1]

The critique of technopoly tends to be read primarily as a cultural diagnosis, consisting chiefly of a description of the mechanisms by which technology takes over functions once performed by religion, philosophy, or tradition. Less often addressed is the question of which ethical aspects this diagnosis encompasses.[2]

The aim of the article is to identify and characterize the most prominent ethical aspects of the critique of technopoly in Neil Postman's work. The article employs qualitative content analysis of the following research materials: (1) Neil Postman's publication on the concept of technopoly, *Technopoly: The surrender of culture to technology* (1992), and three accompanying public addresses: (2) *Informing ourselves to death* (1990), (3) *The humanism of media ecology* (2000), and (4) *Five things we need to know about technological change* (1998). These materials were supplemented with scholarship on Postman's reception (Cieślarek, 2013; Stephens, 2014) and with texts that apply his categories to contemporary technologies and challenges (Wang, 2019; Walsh, 2025).

The research questions were formulated as follows: RQ1: What ethical aspects are present in Neil Postman's account underlying the critique of technopoly? RQ2: What anthropological and axiological assumptions underlie this critique? Answers were sought through several analytical categories, derived deductively from a reading of the research materials: the absence of ethical neutrality in technology; the divergence between efficiency and ethical judgment; bureaucracy as a procedure devoid of ethics; scientism as an ersatz moral authority of science; the diagnosis of information devoid of ethical foundations; the stance of the "loving resistance fighter";[3] and

1 For further discussion of other scholars who held views similar to Postman's on technopoly and who examined this theme, including its ethical dimension, see Franssen et al. (2026).

2 Among scholars who have addressed the ethical aspects of technopoly, the following may be mentioned: J. M. van der Laan (2004), Phil Rose (2012), Robert Albrecht and Carmine Tabone (2015), and Umut Eldem and Beşir Özgür Nayır (2022).

3 To better understand this metaphor as Postman employs it, it is worth quoting a longer passage from his book: "It is this: You must try to be a loving resistance fighter. That is the doctrine, as Hillel might say. Here is the commentary: By 'loving', I mean that, in spite of the confusion, errors, and stupidities you see around you, you must always keep close to your heart the narratives and symbols that once made the United States the hope of the world and that may yet have enough vitality to do so again. [...] Which brings me to the 'resistance fighter' part of my principle. Those who resist the American

the irreducibility of the human person to measurable or material categories. The article concludes with a discussion of the coherence — and, above all, the contemporary relevance — of the ethical aspects of Postman's technopoly within today's dimensions and contexts of technology.

Neil Postman and media ecology as a theoretical foundation

Postman's way of thinking is grounded in a broader media-ecological perspective that understands technologies not simply as tools, but as environments that shape human perception, communication, culture, and patterns of thought. Building on an earlier intellectual tradition, Postman developed and applied this perspective to examine how technological change can transform the cultural conditions within which people construct knowledge, make judgments, and determine what is considered valuable. Postman examines how technology acquires authority over cultural values and social life. Media ecology thus provides an essential theoretical foundation for understanding his critique of technopoly and its ethical implications.

Meaning of media ecology

The term "media ecology" derives, as Postman himself noted, from a biological metaphor. Just as the growth medium (*medium*) in a Petri dish[4] is

Technopoly are people who pay no attention to a poll unless they know what questions were asked, and why; who refuse to accept efficiency as the pre-eminent goal of human relations; who have freed themselves from the belief in the magical powers of numbers, do not regard calculation as an adequate substitute for judgment, or precision as a synonym for truth; who refuse to allow psychology or any 'social science' to pre-empt the language and thought of common sense; who are, at least, suspicious of the idea of progress, and who do not confuse information with understanding; who do not regard the aged as irrelevant; who take seriously the meaning of family loyalty and honor, and who, when they 'reach out and touch someone', expect that person to be in the same room; who take the great narratives of religion seriously and who do not believe that science is the only system of thought capable of producing truth; who know the difference between the sacred and the profane, and who do not wink at tradition for modernity's sake; who admire technological ingenuity but do not think it represents the highest possible form of human achievement" (Postman, 1992, pp. 182–184).

4 This refers to Julius Richard Petri, the German bacteriologist who lived from 1852 to 1921. He worked as an assistant to Robert Koch. In 1887, he invented the flat glass dish used for culturing bacteria, which was named after him: the Petri dish.

the substance within which a culture of bacteria grows, so a medium, in the communicative sense, is the technology within which human culture grows: "a medium is a technology within which a culture grows; that is to say, it gives form to a culture's politics, social organization, and habitual ways of thinking" (Postman, 2000, p. 10). To this metaphor Postman added a second, drawn from the Greek *oikos* — "house," "household" — whose meaning the nineteenth-century German zoologist Ernst Haeckel extended into the science of the mutual relations among the elements of the natural environment. The conjunction of the two metaphors was meant to underscore that the object of interest is not media themselves, but the way in which the interaction between media and human beings gives a culture its character and helps it — or fails to help it — maintain "symbolic balance" (Postman, 2000, p. 11).

Media ecology: continuing an earlier line of reflection

Media ecology, in this sense, did not arise as a response to the emergence of electronic media. Rather, it continued a line of reflection pursued earlier by, among others, Harold Innis, Walter Ong, and Marshall McLuhan (Marcyński & Laskowska, 2019, pp. 55–59). When Postman, together with Christine Nystrom and Terence Moran, founded a graduate program under this name at New York University in 1971, he himself insisted that he was not the inventor of this intellectual tradition but had merely given it a name (Strate, 2002, p. 3). What matters, however, is how Postman interpreted and carried this tradition forward and it is here that a distinctly ethical choice emerges, one that sets him apart from McLuhan. The Canadian media theorist, discussing the New York media ecology program with Postman, warned him against turning it into a moralizing enterprise. He invoked, in this connection, the closing lines of Stephen Vincent Benét's poem *John Brown's body*, in which the author, describing the consequences of the Industrial Revolution, advises: "Say neither, it is blessed nor cursed. Say only *It is here*" (quoted in Postman, 2000, p. 11). McLuhan held that this kind of moral or ethical neutrality offered the best chance of genuinely understanding how new media operate, and that evaluation or judgment obscures understanding. In other words, McLuhan believed that focusing on whether the effects of media are good or bad could distract from understanding their mechanisms. Postman rejected this approach: "I don't see any point in studying media unless one does so within a moral or ethical context" (Postman, 2000, p. 11).

As he himself recalled: "From the beginning, we were a group of moralists" (Postman, 2000, p. 11).

The adoption of an ethical, rather than neutral research perspective

This aspect of Neil Postman's approach to the study of media and technology and his adoption of an ethical, rather than neutral, research perspective is not a secondary matter for the remainder of this article. It establishes the fundamental status of the critique of technopoly itself. That critique is not merely a description of a particular cultural position or mechanism toward which the researcher maintains a distance. It is, above all, a media-studies, communication-studies, and social evaluation demanding axiological justification. The question that must be asked at this point is: what, precisely, does this ethical evaluation of technopoly consist in? What does it concern? What specific aspects does it contain? The answers must be sought in *Technopoly* itself, to which the next section of the article is devoted.

Neil Postman's concept of technopoly

Postman opens *Technopoly* by invoking the Platonic legend of King Thamus, to whom the god Theuth presents his inventions — writing among them — as a means of perfecting the memory and wisdom of the Egyptians. Thamus replies that the inventor is not the best judge of the benefit or harm that his invention will bring to those who use it. Writing, he argues, will weaken memory by substituting external record for it, and will produce the appearance, not the reality, of wisdom (Postman, 1992, pp. 3–4). From this legend Postman derives several principles that form the foundation of his subsequent argument regarding the critique of technopoly.

The ambivalence of technological change

One of these is the principle of the ambivalence of technological change: "Every technology is both a burden and a blessing; not either-or, but this-and-that. [...] Nonetheless, we are currently surrounded by throngs of zealous Theuths, one-eyed prophets who see only what new technologies can do and are incapable of imagining what they will undo" (Postman, 1992, pp. 4–5).

Seeing technology honestly, then, requires simultaneously perceiving what it gives and what it takes away, and Postman treats the inability to sustain this double perspective as an error committed by enthusiasts and critics of technology alike.

"Faustian bargain"

Another principle is that of the "Faustian bargain," to which Postman returned in nearly identical formulations throughout his career, across numerous publications and addresses:

> all technological change is a trade-off. I like to call it a Faustian bargain. Technology giveth and technology taketh away. This means that for every advantage a new technology offers, there is always a corresponding disadvantage. The disadvantage may exceed in importance the advantage, or the advantage may well be worth the cost. Now, this may seem to be a rather obvious idea, but you would be surprised at how many people believe that new technologies are unmixed blessings (Postman, 1990; cf. Postman, 1992, p. 5).

Naming this mechanism "Faustian" is no accident. Postman invokes the image of a transaction whose price is revealed only after the fact and can no longer be undone, suggesting that adopting a new technology without reckoning its costs and benefits is closer to moral recklessness than to mere cognitive naivety. He stresses, moreover, that the problem is not a lack of awareness of this principle. He himself admits that it is "rather obvious" but rather how many people nonetheless continue to treat new technologies as "unmixed blessings," gifts that come at no price at all.

The conviction that no technology is neutral with respect to values

A further principle, decisive for the argument that follows, is the conviction that no technology is neutral with respect to values, and that its effects arise from its form, not from the user's intentions: "embedded in every tool is an ideological bias, a predisposition to construct the world as one thing rather than another, to value one thing over another" (Postman, 1992, p. 13). From this principle follows directly the question that Postman poses as fundamental to any reflection on technology: to whom does a given technology give power, and whose power and, above all, whose freedom does it reduce?

"To whom will the technology give greater power and freedom? And whose power and freedom will be reduced by it?" (Postman, 1992, p. 11).

The relationship between culture and technology

The legend of Thamusprovides the interpretive principles for understanding technopoly. The historical reconstruction itself follows in subsequent chapters of the book, in which Postman proposes a scheme for the development of the relationship between culture and technology. In a tool-using culture, technology remains subordinate to purposes set by the religious, philosophical, and aesthetic values of a given community. Technocracy — whose symbolic starting point Postman locates in James Watt's invention of the steam engine (1765) and the publication of Adam Smith's *Wealth of nations* (1776) — marks a stage in which technology gains autonomy and begins to compete with tradition for the authority to define what is real and valuable. Tradition in a technocracy nonetheless remains alive, "still functional, still exerting influence, still too much alive to ignore" (Postman, 1992, p. 48).

The transition from technocracy to technopoly and its consequences

Postman then devotes particular attention to the transition from technocracy to technopoly, a transition essential to understanding the concept. As the symbolic turning point, he identifies the year 1911 and the publication of Frederick Taylor's *The principles of scientific management*. In this work he discerns "the first explicit and formal outline of the assumptions of the thought-world of Technopoly" (Postman, 1992, p. 51). This book, in Postman's view, embodies the conviction that the sole or principal aim of human work and thought is efficiency. That technical calculation surpasses human judgment and human capacities in every respect; that human judgment and perspective cannot be trusted, since they are burdened by ambiguity and needless complexity; that subjectivity, characteristic of the human being, is an obstacle to clear thinking; and that whatever cannot be measured either does not exist or has no value (Postman, 1992, p. 51). The consequence of these assumptions is a sentence that may be regarded as the most concise summary of the ethical core of the entire critique: Taylor's system, Postman notes, rests on the conviction "that human beings are, in a sense, worth less than their machinery" (Postman, 1992, p. 52).

Thus, in Postman's interpretation, the difference between technocracy and technopoly is, above all, a qualitative one. Technocracy makes human life an object acted upon by technology, whereas technopoly turns the subordination of the human being to technology into a defining and central cultural program. As Postman explains: "technocracy does not have as its aim a grand reductionism in which human life must find its meaning in machinery and technique. Technopoly does" (Postman, 1992, p. 52). The consequence of this program is not so much a conflict between technopoly and alternative worldviews — religious, humanistic, traditional — as their invalidation through being rendered invisible: "It does not make them illegal. It does not make them immoral. It does not even make them unpopular. It makes them invisible and therefore irrelevant. [...] Technopoly, in other words, is totalitarian technocracy" (Postman, 1992, p. 48).

The definitions of technopoly

Neil Postman formulates at least two definitions of technopoly in the course of his book. The first reads: "one way of defining a Technopoly is to say that its information immune system is inoperable. Technopoly is a form of cultural AIDS, which I here use as an acronym for Anti-Information Deficiency Syndrome" (Postman, 1992, p. 63). He returns frequently to this metaphor in other writings and addresses. In the second definition, he describes technopoly as the condition of a society in which the defenses against an excess of information have broken down: "it is what happens to society when the defenses against information glut have broken down. It is what happens when institutional life becomes inadequate to cope with too much information" (Postman, 1992, p. 72). Both definitions share the same underlying conviction: technopoly is a diagnosis of a culture that has lost the capacity to make sense of information, and that has surrendered the human being, together with his natural capacities and dispositions, to the service of technology.

The ethical aspects of Postman's critique of technopoly

Neil Postman's critique of technopoly contains numerous ethical references, several of them highly distinctive of his deeply humanistic approach to reading media and technology. Above all, as already noted, Postman consciously

rejected the stance of researcher neutrality regarding technology. This approach followed primarily from his own understanding of what technology is and of the influence it exerts on those who use it.

Media and technology require an ethical framework

Postman insisted explicitly that the study of media and technology should always be conducted within a moral or ethical framework, pointing in this connection to Lewis Mumford and Jacques Ellul as scholars who — like him — could scarcely write about technology without reference to its humanistic or anti-humanistic consequences (Postman, 2000, pp. 11–12). This does not amount to an endorsement of moral relativism in the evaluation of technology. Postman cautioned that although people differ in their assessment of what benefits them, and although such assessments change over time, this does not mean that every assessment is equally valid. It is possible to say that one side of a dispute over the effects of a new medium was mistaken, and that the passage of time itself, while it contributes to changes in how we judge, can also be a source of error (Postman, 2000, p. 12). Postman explained this ethical dimension of technology use precisely: "I mean, let us say, that the negative effects of a medium might still be a problem and remain one in spite of the passage of time. In other words, time does not always erase the disadvantages of a medium. Neither does it necessarily weaken the advantages" (Postman, 2000, p. 12).

Human beings as less valuable than their machines

The rationalization of production, and the efficiency arising from machinery discussed by the aforementioned Taylor, is for Postman more than a historical fact in the history of the world's successive eras and their technologies. In Taylor's system he discerns the first explicit outline of anthropology on which the whole later culture of technopoly rests: a human being whose judgment is by definition unreliable, and whose worth is measured by his usefulness to the demands of technology. Taylor did not write a philosophical treatise but a management manual, which makes it even more striking that the anthropology of technopoly is typically formulated inadvertently, in the course of reflections that appear purely practical. Postman summarizes this anthropology by writing that, on the Taylorist view, human beings are, in a sense, worth less than their machinery (Postman, 1992, p. 52). One may thus read in

this an inversion of the classical hierarchy of means and ends: it is not technology that is to serve the human being, but the human being who is to serve technology. This is another of the ethical aspects that Postman addresses in his treatment of technopoly.

Efficiency as a supreme value

On this basis Postman derives his understanding of what constitutes the central ethical aspect of the critique of technopoly. The opposition to which he repeatedly returns in his book is not an opposition between progress and backwardness, but between *efficiency* as a supreme value and *judgment* — understood as the capacity to distinguish the sacred from the profane, together with the conviction that not everything measurable is thereby important. In the chapter titled "The Broken Defenses," in explaining this ethical aspect of technopoly, Postman returns to his critique of Taylorist efficiency, supplementing it with an analysis of the institution that, in the culture of technopoly, has assumed the function once performed by the traditional guardians of the order of values: religion, family, law, and school. This role is today filled by bureaucracy, which Postman defines as "a coordinated series of techniques for reducing the amount of information that requires processing" (Postman, 1992, p. 84). Whereas in the nineteenth century bureaucracy served social institutions, in technopoly, as Postman notes following James Beniger, it transforms the relationship of mastery: from a tool it becomes an autonomous meta-institution that "not only solves problems but creates them [...] and defines what our problems are — and they are always, in the bureaucratic view, problems of efficiency" (Postman, 1992, p. 86).

Bureaucracy as the technical embodiment of evil

In this context, Postman invokes two references of clear ethical significance. The first is C. S. Lewis's warning, which identifies bureaucracy with the technical embodiment of evil: "my symbol for Hell is something like the bureaucracy of a police state or the office of a thoroughly nasty business concern" (Lewis, quoted in Postman, 1992, p. 84). The second is the invocation of Adolf Eichmann as "the basic model and metaphor for a bureaucrat in the age of Technopoly" (Postman, 1992, p. 87) — an official whose training and temperament rendered him indifferent to the human being and to any form of humanism,

and who considered the consequences of his decisions solely insofar as they affected the efficiency of the bureaucracy itself. This kind of stance exemplifies the dangers associated with technopoly which, as history has already shown, carry consequences for humanity that are enormously difficult to reverse.

Bearing in mind the ethical aspects of bureaucracy, understood as a system of techniques for reducing and controlling an excess of information, Postman also invokes the words spoken by Václav Havel before the United States Congress, to the effect that contemporary culture still cannot bring itself to place responsibility — "responsibility to something higher than my family, my country, my firm, my success" — above politics, science, and economics (Havel, quoted in Postman, 1992, p. 82). Bureaucracy, as Postman writes, "has no intellectual, political, or moral theory — except for its implicit assumption that efficiency is the principal aim of all social institutions and that other goals are essentially less worthy, if not irrelevant" (Postman, 1992, p. 86).

Scientism and the loss of sacred moral authority

The most extensively developed element of the ethical critique of technopoly, however, is the chapter devoted to what Postman calls scientism — a phenomenon distinct from science itself and from the legitimate application of scientific method. Its starting point is the observation that the desacralization of the world brought about by modern science deprived Western culture of its traditional source of moral authority, namely "sacred stories" (Postman, 1992, p. 160). Natural scientists themselves, as Postman notes, never claimed the right to have science determine what is good and what is evil: "the very principles of natural science [...] compel the natural scientist to abjure in his or her role as a scientist such moral judgments or claims" (Postman, 1992, pp. 160–161). Social researchers, in Postman's view, acted differently: eager to model their disciplines on the natural sciences, they began to attribute to their "discoveries" the power to determine how one ought to act.

Postman illustrates the consequences of this substitution with examples of considerable ethical and social weight. In his view, in the culture of technopoly it is not enough to say that racial segregation in schools is unethical; one must, above all, demonstrate through tests and statistics that segregation lowers the academic performance and self-worth of Black students (Postman, 1992, pp. 158–159). Nor is it enough to say that society's toleration of homelessness is unconscionable. What is needed, in his view, is statistical data

showing that homelessness burdens the economy or produces other quantifiable consequences (Postman, 1992, p. 159). Postman names this mechanism itself scientism: "the desperate hope, and wish, and ultimately the illusory belief that some standardized set of procedures called 'science' can provide us with an unimpeachable source of moral authority" for questions such as "What is right and wrong to do?" (Postman, 1992, p. 162). As an example on the level of an entire culture, particularly Western culture, he cites the statement of President Ronald Reagan, who replaced his personal conviction that abortion was immoral with the declaration that science should determine when life begins (Postman, 1992, p. 162). In Postman's view, this exemplifies how easily a moral question comes to be recast as a procedural one, so as to avoid having to settle it directly, on humanistic grounds.

Scientism, in this sense, is closely bound up with the critique of efficiency discussed earlier. Both mechanisms transfer to technology — understood here broadly, as method and procedure — the function once performed by human judgment grounded in values. The difference is that whereas efficiency, in Taylor's sense, concerns the organization of labor, scientism concerns the very source of moral authority: it is not that technology should serve as a tool in the hands of a person making an ethical decision, but that technology — disguised as science — is meant to make that decision on the person's behalf.

When information overwhelms meaning and the loss of judgment

This same mechanism, namely the detachment of technology from the function it was originally meant to serve in relation to values Postman examines even more forcefully in an address delivered in Stuttgart in 1990, at the invitation of IBM Germany, titled *Informing ourselves to death*. This address preceded the publication of *Technopoly* by two years, and passages concerning the consequences, including the ethical consequences, of technological change reappear in the book in almost identical form (cf. Postman, 1990; Postman, 1992, pp. 10–11). This suggests that Postman tested and refined his critique of technopoly across successive public addresses before it took its final, book-length form.

The central thesis of this address is that the computer, contrary to the promises of its enthusiasts, is unable to supply what human culture lacks most. Postman had in mind here values, humanism, and above all the ethical foundations within which information might acquire meaning: "The computer

cannot provide an organizing moral framework. It cannot tell us what questions are worth asking. It cannot provide a means of understanding why we are here or why we fight each other or why decency eludes us so often, especially when we need it the most" (Postman, 1990). Postman illustrated this claim with a series of rhetorical questions — do war, hunger, crime, or the collapse of marriage result from a lack of information? — consistently answering in the negative: what most afflicts human beings has nothing to do with the kind of information a computer can supply.

This diagnosis develops a theme already present in *Technopoly* but gives it a still more severe cast. The issue is no longer simply that technology subordinates the human being to itself, but that an excess of information, lacking any coherent picture of the world, produces a condition in which the ability to distinguish the credible from the absurd disappears. Postman describes this as the loss of an "immunological" resistance to informational noise: "our information immune system is inoperable. We don't know how to filter it out; we don't know how to reduce it; we don't know [how] to use it" (Postman, 1990). In this framing, the ethical dilemma of technopoly is no longer reducible to the question of whom a given technology serves, as it is in *Technopoly*, but becomes instead the question of whether a culture still possesses any humanistic foundation within which any piece of information might be recognized as significant.

Loving resistance fighter

Postman closes *Technopoly* with a chapter titled "The Loving Resistance Fighter," in which — while acknowledging that he has no ready-made solution to offer, only a principle of conduct — he proposes a formula joining two seemingly contradictory imperatives, or stances: "You must try to be a loving resistance fighter" (Postman, 1992, p. 182). "Loving" refers here to fidelity to the narratives and symbols that once gave meaning to a particular cultural community. In Postman's case, these are American symbols, but the principle is universal, applicable to any culture defending its identity against the expansion of technopoly. "Resistance," by contrast, denotes a conscious, unrelenting vigilance toward technology, which should never be accepted as part of the natural order of things: "a technological resistance fighter maintains an epistemological and psychic distance from any technology, so that it always appears somewhat strange, never inevitable, never natural" (Postman, 1992, p. 185).

The catalog of traits with which Postman describes this stance has an almost litanic character, and it is precisely this form that makes it something more than a mere list of practical recommendations. The resistance fighter is someone who pays no attention to a poll until he knows exactly what questions were asked, and by what methodology; who refuses to accept efficiency as the pre-eminent goal of human relations; who has freed himself from belief in the magical power of numbers and statistics, and who does not treat calculation as a substitute for judgment or precision as a synonym for truth. The resistance fighter is also one who takes the great narratives of religion seriously and does not regard science as the sole system of thought capable of producing truth, who distinguishes the sacred from the profane and does not forget tradition for the sake of modernity. He is, further, one who admires technical ingenuity and innovation but does not regard it as the highest possible form of human achievement (Postman, 1992, pp. 183–184).

This list, despite its form — resembling a decalogue of practical stances — reveals a coherent anthropological core: the conviction that the human person possesses capacities such as judgment, memory, a sense of the sacred, and family loyalty, which cannot be reduced to measurable categories and to which technopoly systematically denies significance. This is not a technophobic position. Postman states explicitly that the resistance fighter admires technical innovation (Postman, 1992, p. 184). The objection is not to technology as such, but to making it the measure of all things.

The enduring human dilemma in a technological age

Postman conveys a closelyrelated response, though formulated in a more personal register,at the conclusion of the address discussed above. He invokes figures from across the ages — Thoreau, Goethe, Socrates, the prophet Micah, as well as Confucius, Isaiah, Jesus, Muhammad, the Buddha, Spinoza, and Shakespeare — to show that the question of how to live well is not a new question, reserved for a single religion, denomination, or ideology, nor one that requires new tools: "There is no escaping from ourselves. The human dilemma is as it has always been, and we solve nothing fundamental by cloaking ourselves in technological glory" (Postman, 1990). In other words, no technology — including the computer, the very subject of the address — relieves the human being of the moral reflection that confronted every generation before us. The same idea is condensed in the figure invoked at the very end:

the opossum Pogo, from Walt Kelly's comic strip: "We have met the enemy, and he is us" (quoted in Postman, 1990) — meaning that the source of danger is not technology itself, but the human being: specifically, the human abandonment of a wise, humanistic approach to technology.

The contemporary relevance of Postman's ethics of technopoly

Postman's diagnosis has recently been applied directly to artificial intelligence by Toby Walsh, an AI researcher at the University of New South Wales, in a text based on the transcript of a lecture he delivered in Shanghai in 2024 (Walsh, 2025). Walsh describes Postman's 1998 essay, also drawn upon in this article, as "a fantastic speech" and "an excellent framework for understanding the potential impacts of AI" (Walsh, 2025). That a computer scientist working on the ethics of artificial intelligence should turn to a media scholar's text written a quarter-century earlier is itself confirmation of the thesis advanced in this article: Postman's critique was not a diagnosis of a single technology, or of the technology of a single era, but a timeless reconstruction of a mechanism that recurs with every technology that follows.

Walsh applies all five of Postman's principles of technological change directly to AI[5]. He illustrates the "Faustian bargain" principle with the example of satellite navigation. fMRI studies of London taxi drivers taking the "Knowledge" examination on the city's streets show that the hippocampus — the part of the brain responsible for spatial memory — grows by

5 These principles are: (1) The Faustian bargain: no technology is a pure gain; every technology gives something and takes something away at the same time, though not always in equal measure. Hence his formula: "technology giveth and technology taketh away" (Postman, 1990; 1992, p. 5; Postman, 1998). (2) The unequal distribution of gains and losses: the benefits and costs of a new technology are never distributed evenly across a population; there are winners and losers, and the winners typically persuade the losers that they, too, are winning. (3) The embedded idea (ideological bias): every technology carries within it a particular vision of the world and hierarchy of values; none is a neutral tool. (4) Ecological, not additive, change: a new technology does not simply add itself to an existing culture the way a new item is added to a list; it changes the entire system — much as a drop of dye changes the color of an entire glass of water, not merely a part of it. (5) The mythologizing of technology: over time, technology comes to be perceived as natural, self-evident, "given," rather than as the product of specific historical and political decisions, which makes it correspondingly harder to subject to critique (Postman, 1998). Some of these principles were already discussed earlier in the article.

15 percent among those who acquire this knowledge; among people who rely exclusively on satellite navigation and never learn spatial orientation for themselves, no such growth occurs. AI, as Walsh notes, "may 'dumb us down'" (Walsh, 2025): what we gain in convenience, we lose in cognitive capacity.

Walsh illustrates the principle of the unequal distribution of benefits and costs with the example of predictive policing: systems that forecast where crime will occur are trained on historical data reflecting the earlier, unequal intensity of policing in poorer and predominantly Black neighborhoods. As a result, such AI does not predict crime but reproduces and entrenches the bias embedded in the data it was trained on (Walsh, 2025). The third principle that a powerful idea is embedded in every technology ("ideological bias") Walsh locates in the assumption that thinking is computational ("thinking is computational"), warning that this assumption can too easily lead to the belief that machines possess other distinctively human traits — consciousness, the capacity to suffer, mortality as the boundary of responsibility — which computers do not, in fact, possess.

Walsh illustrates a further principle, that technological change is ecological rather than additive, with the example of the Boeing 747, introduced in 1969, whose inventors correctly foresaw the shrinking of distances and the growth of international tourism, but failed to foresee that acceleratedair travel would become a channel for the global spread of future pandemics — and with the example of Facebook's algorithm, designed solely to maximize user engagement, whose unforeseen consequences included the polarization of public debate and vulnerability to manipulation of the kind seen in the Cambridge Analytica affair (Walsh, 2025).

Walsh translates the fifth principle — the rejection of treating technology as part of the natural order of things, already familiar from the figure of the "loving resistance fighter" (Postman, 1992, pp. 184–185) — into a warning not to forget the first word in the term "artificial intelligence": "artificial." Machine intelligence, in his view, is fundamentally different from human intelligence, just as the flight of an airplane differs from the flight of a bird, even though both solve the same physical problem (Walsh, 2025).

Toby Walsh thus demonstrates convincingly that none of the principles Postman proposed with respect to technology needs to be modified in order to retain its explanatory force with respect to artificial intelligence. Postman's question of whom a given technology serves remains as pertinent as ever, as does his claim that a computer "cannot provide an organizing moral

framework" (Postman, 1990). Both, however, take on new weight in the face of systems capable of formulating answers that sound like moral determinations, while possessing nothing of what, for Postman, would have made such a determination legitimate.

Summary and conclusions

At its foundation, Neil Postman's critique of technopoly contains a coherent anthropological argument, expressed, among other contexts, in his interpretation of the legend of Thamus and in the motif of the "loving resistance fighter." Its central claim is grounded in the view that the human being possesses a capacity for judgment that cannot be reduced to calculation, to what is countable. A further important ethical aspect of the critique of technopoly is the inversion of the relationship between means and ends that Postman diagnoses in Taylor's system of scientific management: it is not technology that is to be subordinated to the human being, but, in the culture of technopoly, the human being who is always subordinated to technology. Hence Postman's statement that human beings are "worth less than their machinery" (Postman, 1992, p. 52) constitutes, in this sense, a pivotal moment in the entire book. Another important ethical aspect of Postman's critique of technopoly is his view of technology as never neutral with respect to values. Bureaucracy and scientism, in the New York media theorist's account, show, moreover, that the critique of technopoly is not confined to the relationship between an individual and a single technology, but extends to institutions that, within the culture of technopoly, have assumed the function once performed by the traditional guardians of value. Bureaucracy and the "scientific" pretensions of social research share the same defect: neither possesses a moral theory of its own, and yet both claim the right to settle questions that require one. Postman, in his broader critique of technopoly, also observes that an excess of information is closely bound up with the ethics of communication, since it leads to moral confusion in reception. A computer, Postman argues, can supply ever more data, but it cannot answer the question of which data matter—and that question is, by its nature, always axiological.

Postman proposed the stance of the "loving resistance fighter" as a humanistic response to technopoly. This resistance fighter represents an ethical stance in the fullest sense of the term: it requires constant vigilance, the

ability to distinguish efficiency from the good, and the willingness to accept that not every problem can be solved by supplying more information.

With these ethical aspects of the critique of technopoly in mind, Paweł Cieślarek (2013), who likewise examines Postman's place within the tradition of media ecology, proposes describing his position as a form of cultural conservatism — a stance rooted in the defense of the Greek ideal of *paideia* and in the conviction that education should shape character, not merely skills (Cieślarek, 2013, p. 331). Cieślarek also notes that Postman's reception in Poland has at times been dismissive: as he observes, Maciej Mrozowski, in his introduction to the Polish edition of *Amusing ourselves to death*, presented Postman as a brilliant but "unscholarly" commentator, passing over in silence his theoretical contribution to media ecology (Cieślarek, 2013, pp. 328–329). This observation reinforces the justification for undertaking, in the present article, an examination of the ethical — not merely journalistic — foundations of the critique of technopoly.

The contemporary relevance of the themes discussed in the preceding section does not mean, however, that Postman's critique is free of limitations. Its weakest point remains the uncertain status of its normative justification. In the recurring cascade of citations, across his addresses, from Thoreau, Goethe, Socrates, Micah, Confucius, and Shakespeare, one can discern Postman's conscious avoidance of grounding his anthropology in any single, systematic philosophical tradition. It is precisely this absence of systematic, philosophical grounding that constitutes the most promising direction for further research. The question of whether and under what conditions Postman's ethics of technopoly can be brought to closure within the framework of a specific philosophical tradition remains open.

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