

THE DARKNESS AND THE LIGHT

Neil Postman

Neil Postman (1931-2003) is a frequently cited social critic and communications theorist. He chaired the Department of Culture and Communications at New York University, and was the author of numerous articles and books, including The Disappearance of Childhood (1982), Amusing Ourselves to Death (1985), and Technopoly (1992). The following speech was given at a forum sponsored by Utne Reader at the town hall in New York City in 1995. It first appeared in Utne Reader (July-August 1995), p. 35.

The darkness of which I am most acutely aware was spoken of in a prophetic poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay. The poem is from her book *Huntsman, What Quarry?* and in this fragment of it Ms. Millay describes precisely the problem that darkens our horizon:

Upon this gifted age, in its dark hour,
Rains from the sky a meteoric shower
Of facts...
They lie unquestioned, uncombined.
Wisdom enough to leech us of our ill
Is daily spun,
but there exists no loom
To weave it into fabric....

What the poet speaks of here is a great paradox. Beginning in the 19th century, humanity creatively addressed the problem of how to eliminate information scarcity, how to overcome the limitations of space, time, and form. And we did so in spectacular fashion, especially in the 19th century.

For those of you unfamiliar with the 19th century, here are some of the inventions that contributed to the solution:

telegraphy, photography, the rotary press, the transatlantic cable, the electric light, radio, movies, the computer, the X-ray, the penny press, the modern magazine, and the advertising agency.

Of course, in the first half of the 20th century, we added some important inventions so that the burdens of information scarcity were removed once and for all. But in doing so, we created a new problem never experienced before: information glut, information incoherence, information meaninglessness. To put it far less eloquently than Ms. Millay did, we have transformed information into a form of garbage, and ourselves into garbage collectors.

Like the sorcerer's apprentice, we are awash in information without even a broom to help us get rid of it. Information comes indiscriminately, directed at no one in particular, in enormous volume, at high speeds, severed from import and meaning. And there is no loom to weave it all into fabric. No transcendent narratives to provide us with moral guidance, social purpose, intellectual economy. No stories to tell us what we need to know, and what we do not need to know.

This, then, is the problem we have to confront with as much intelligence and imagination as we can muster. How to begin? We will have to stop consulting our engineers, our computer gurus, and our corporate visionaries, who, though they claim to speak for the future, are strangely occupied in solving a 19th-century problem that has already been solved. Instead, we will need to consult our poets, playwrights, artists, humorists, theologians, and philosophers, who alone are capable of creating or restoring those metaphors and stories that give point to our labors, give meaning to our history, elucidate the present, and give direction to our future. They are our weavers, and I have no doubt that there are men and women among us who have the looms to weave us a pattern for our lives. The prospect of their doing so is, for me, the gleam of light on the horizon.