Chapter One: The Narrative Mode

Cause and Effect: Reading 2
Neil Postman, "Technology as Dazzling Distraction"

Neil Postman (1931-2003) was an American educator, media theorist, and cultural critic. He is best known for his still-relevant book, Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business *(1985), in which he argues that the careful argumentation and development of ideas that is possible in print media like books, newspapers, and journals is near impossible in the newer, primarily visual media of television. He continues this line of thinking here as he discusses the effects on society and culture of the displacement of old technologies by new.*

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Questions for Reading and Discussion

1) Make a list of all the pieces of technology that are used in your college classrooms during a typical day of classes. Do you agree with Postman's statement that these technologies "have nothing to do with the fundamental problems we have to solve" as educators, students, and citizens? Are these technologies vital to teaching, learning, and living or are they mere distractions, as Postman argues?

2) How does technology shape our consciousnesses? A more targeted way of asking this question might be, How do those generations who grew up with smartphones generally differ in their thought, imaginative capability, and social behavior than those generations who came to use this technology later in life? Discuss the same questions regarding those who grew up with cars, television, or answering machines as opposed to those who didn't.

3) What does Postman assert is the function and purpose of school, if not getting information to students? How does his view on the purpose of school match up with or depart from your own view?

Questions for Writing and Research

1) Write out three scenarios in which having access to information becomes a problem rather than a solution to a problem.

2) Research a cutting-edge technology—some examples in 2017 are self-driving cars, gene-editing (CRISPR), 3D gaming, and augmented reality—and write a paper in which you argue your position on whether the technology should be pursued or abandoned for the good of society, given its potential benefits and drawbacks. As you form your position, remember Postman's central question: "What is the problem to which this technology is the solution?"