

CRAP DETECTION AND THE CONTINUING NEED FOR MEDIA ECOLOGY

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We live in a world in which conspiracy theories have run rampant. Donald Trump went on Alex Jones' *Infowars* show and told him, "your reputation is amazing."¹ This is the same man who claims that the Sandy Hook school shooting was a hoax, 9/11 was an inside job, and the Boston bombing was a false flag operation, among other things.² We have a president who calls *CNN* "fake news," all while trumpeting talking points from *Breitbart*, an alt-right news site that has published *actual* fake news in the past.³ Incidentally, *Breitbart*'s former executive chair served as the White House chief strategist. When Kellyanne Conway was asked why Trump had claimed that "this was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration, period," when this claim was demonstrably false, she refused to call it false, insisting that they merely offered "alternative facts."⁴ Now there's a doubleplusgood piece of Orwellian doublespeak! This is not merely a symptom of the Trump era. A 2007 study found that the techniques identified by the Institute for Propaganda Analysis were used by Bill O'Reilly as much as—and in some cases more than—the infamous demagogue Father Coughlin.⁵

We can take some comfort in recognizing that this is not a new problem. We have long had to contend with urban legends that can often be dismissed by a cursory glance at the website Snopes.com. They used to be chain letters and stories that spread by word of mouth, but now these tales are seeded in the fertile ground of social media. But these stories are not merely falsehoods dressed up in truthful garb. As folklorist Jan Brunvand suggests: "The legends

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we tell, as with any folklore, reflect many of the hopes, fears, and anxieties of our time.”⁶ What, then, are we to do in such a media environment, when the entire enterprise of truth-seeking and truth-telling has been called into question? I believe that we can take some solace and guidance from the writings of Neil Postman.

In their book, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, Postman and his coauthor Charles Weingartner paint a bleak picture of education:

In our society, as in others, we find that there are influential men at the head of important institutions who cannot afford to be found wrong, who find change inconvenient, perhaps intolerable, and who have financial or political interests that they must conserve at any costs. Such men are, therefore, threatened in many respects by the theory of the democratic process and the concept of an ever-renewing society. Moreover, we find that there are obscure men who do *not* head important institutions who are similarly threatened because they have identified themselves with certain ideas and institutions which they wish to keep free from either criticism or change. Such men as these would much prefer that the schools do little or nothing to encourage youth to question, doubt, or challenge any part of the society in which they live, especially those parts which are most vulnerable.⁷

It is almost as if Postman and Weingartner had a crystal ball and read the 2012 Texas GOP platform, which states: “We oppose the teaching of Higher Order Thinking Skills (values clarification), critical thinking skills and similar programs that are simply a relabeling of Outcome-Based Education (mastery learning) which focus on behavior modification and have the purpose of challenging the student’s fixed beliefs and undermining parental authority.”⁸

As a parent, I understand the utility of challenging students’ fixed beliefs because they can have some interesting beliefs. As my six-year-old son Soren remarked once, “I know all the answers, except the ones I don’t.” Moreover, if teaching a student to think critically undermines parental authority, then more than just the student was failed by the educational system. If one cannot defend one’s values, then perhaps it is time to develop new values.

Postman and Weingartner suggest that the main focus of education should be to cultivate people who are “experts at ‘crap detecting.’”⁹ How do we do this? Postman offers some advice in *Technopoly*, when he suggests that “every teacher ought to be a semantics teacher, since it is not possible to separate language from what we call knowledge.”¹⁰ This applies especially to us, as Postman explained that “Media Ecology is General Semantics writ large. It starts with the assumption that people do their thinking and feeling not only in

and through language but in and through all those media which extend, amplify and transform our senses. Further, Media Ecology assumes that what is important in understanding these processes is not so much the content of media but the ways in which they structure our transactions with them.”¹¹ As I read this, we are to learn two things. The language that we use matters, and the media environment in which this communication takes place matters.

We have witnessed a coarsening of public communication in my lifetime. This is not to say that there were not previously instances of such language. After all, the Watergate tapes are filled with profanity.¹² However, it is difficult to imagine any previous presidential race in which one candidate brags that he could simply “grab ‘em by the pussy,” and that he could get away with it because “when you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything.”¹³ Contrast this with the case of Gary Hart, whose presidential aspirations were torpedoed when he was photographed with Donna Rice on his lap (on a yacht named *Monkey Business*, no less).¹⁴

Thus, in 30 years we have gone from innuendo (Hart denied that he had a sexual relationship with Rice)¹⁵ to bragging about sexual assault with seemingly little political consequence. Then again, Trump famously boasted: “I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn’t lose voters.”¹⁶ Speaking of shooting people, we have also seen what seems to be an increase in violent rhetoric. Sarah Palin told her followers: “Don’t Retreat, Instead – RELOAD!” but then expressed shock that one of her “targets,” Gabrielle Giffords’ congressional district (which was notated with crosshairs), was the site of a mass shooting that severely wounded 20, including Giffords, and killed six others.¹⁷ With the rise of the alt-right and the current rhetorical environment, it seems to be getting worse. As Jonathan Greenblatt, the national director of the Anti-Defamation League explains: “It’s allowed some of the worst ideas into the public conversation in ways we haven’t seen anything like in recent memory.”¹⁸

Let me be clear—I am not arguing that we should return to some utopian era of civility that never was.¹⁹ Rather, I am arguing that we be more careful and precise with our language. As Wendell Johnson states: “The way we classify, or label, an individual or thing determines very largely how we will react toward it. When our classification, or labeling, of an individual determines, entirely and without exception, our attitudes and reaction toward that individual, our behavior is scarcely distinguishable from the behavior of Pavlov’s dogs.”²⁰ The terms that we use to describe people, actions, and beliefs not only color our perceptions, but also maintain in/out group boundaries. I once taught a course on uncivil discourse at the University of South Alabama in

which we explored such issues as hate speech and rioting. One day we examined the website of the Ku Klux Klan, and as we discussed some of the shirts on their merchandise page, I realized that I recognized some of them—the ones emblazoned with the Confederate flag and the words “Heritage Not Hate.” I realized that I had not seen them for sale anywhere other than the Klan’s website, and it finally dawned on me that these shirts functioned as code. I would remain blissfully ignorant, whereas they would easily recognize each other. As media ecologists, we have a responsibility to decipher such codes when we find them, especially when these messages serve to promote dangerous ideologies.

Along with the discourse itself, we have the media through which these ideas travel. Donald Trump has been called America’s first Twitter president, and this is quite consistent with his style of government so far.²¹ His proposals have been heavy on slogans and light on substance. After all, there is only so much that one can convey in 140 characters (unless you happen to be Robert Blechman and use the medium to write a novel).²² The medium itself shapes and constrains the message, and Twitter is an excellent example of this process. These constraints, in turn, shape the political environment as well. As Navneet Alang writes in the *New Republic*: “Donald Trump will likely reign as the Twitter President, and he will do so like the worst of Twitter itself—primed for outrage, and quick to react with only the barest amount of thought.”²³

So, what are we to do? First of all, Postman observed: “No medium is excessively dangerous if its users understand what its dangers are.”²⁴ Lance Strate, in his extension of Postman’s thought, writes: “What we need to do, then, is to engage in concerted evaluation of what we are doing and how we go about doing it, to carefully weigh the costs and benefits of our technologies, to consider what are the appropriate uses of our media, and what uses might be inappropriate, and to proceed with caution, understanding that our innovations will always result in unanticipated effects, many of which will also be undesirable.”²⁵ In short, we must understand well the media environment in which we live. In the introduction to *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman contrasted the divergent dystopian futures of George Orwell and Aldous Huxley: “Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance.”²⁶ His suggestion that Huxley’s vision was the more likely possibility seems almost prophetic in an age of total media saturation. My family recently had to spend two weeks in a hotel because a faulty water heater in the unit above us had leaked into our

walls. Rebecca, my wife, remarked that we were surrounded by televisions at every restaurant that we went to for dinner and that the din made it almost impossible to carry on even a brief conversation. Those around us who were not watching the large screens above us were looking down at the small screens in their hands. As Sherry Turkle poignantly asks: "Technology reshapes the landscape of our emotional lives, but is it offering the lives we want to lead?"²⁷ This question is at the heart of media ecology.

But it is not enough that *we* understand the media. Postman was, above all, an educator, so it is incumbent on this organization to assist in that work. One will notice that we have the standard awards for scholarship, but we also have the Mary Shelley Award for Outstanding Fictional Work, the John Culkin Award for Outstanding Praxis in the Field of Media Ecology, the Jacques Ellul Award for Outstanding Media Ecology Activism, and the James W. Carey Award for Outstanding Media Ecology Journalism. All of these are "public facing" awards, rather than the standard academic articles that have as their audience other academics. At their best, the recipients of these awards help teach people how media work. One exemplar of this is the 2008 Culkin Award recipient Eric Goodman for *Thus Spoke the Spectacle*, a tour-de-force of media criticism that is easily accessible to the layperson.

Postman offers the solution of becoming a "loving resistance fighter."²⁸ Postman couches the "loving" portion of this corrective in terms of love for our nation and its symbols, but I do not think that this goes far enough. We must set a positive example of how to use discourse. It is quite seductive to demonize what we perceive as the opposition. Richard Gregg notes: "By painting the enemy in dark hued imagery of vice, corruption, evil, and weakness, one may more easily convince himself of his own superior virtue and thereby gain a symbolic victory of ego-enhancement."²⁹ Eric Hoffer puts it another way: "Mass movements can rise and spread without belief in a God, but never without belief in a devil."³⁰ In our own narratives, we are always the good guys and gals. But this already paints us into a black and white, us versus them, false dichotomy. Media ecology should teach us that things are rarely so clearly differentiated into good and evil categories. As Jacques Ellul wrote: "Let us refrain from erecting the kind of Manichean world that propaganda suggests—one side white, the other black, a good side, a bad side—saintly information, on the one hand, diabolical propaganda, on the other. The truth about the devil is that he created ambiguity."³¹

Becoming a loving resistance fighter requires a kind of informed skepticism; one must critically assess the information that is given to us and the means by which it is disseminated. Postman argues that there is "no definitive history of

anything; there are only histories, human inventions which do not give us *the* answer, but give us only those answers called forth by the questions that have been asked.”³² This requires not only a considerable amount of humility on our part, but also a willingness to entertain the potential that our own dearly held narratives may be flawed. Langdon Winner argues that technology is “a license to forget,”³³ and it is precisely this kind of forgetting that Postman guards against. In her classic study on the “banality of evil,” Hannah Arendt argued that the problem with Eichmann was not that he was a monster, but rather that he was merely a cog in a machine, helping the work of death move along smoothly even as he “never realized what he was doing.”³⁴ Indeed, Arendt notes: “He was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period.”³⁵

Becoming a loving resistance fighter requires that one become aware and vigilant, which brings us back to the crap detectors mentioned at the beginning of this talk. As Postman argued: “One way of looking at the history of the human group is that it has been a continuous struggle against the veneration of ‘crap.’ Our intellectual history is a chronicle of the anguish and suffering of men who tried to help their contemporaries see that some part of their fondest beliefs were misconceptions, faulty assumptions, superstitions, and outright even lies.”⁹ The more fundamental these assumptions and beliefs, the more difficult it is to critically assess them, but this is precisely what we must do.³⁶ As I have written elsewhere: “Just as societal norms are created through language and action, they can be dismantled through language and action.”³⁷ This is the task that we have before us.

Notes

1. Ben Collins, “Sandy Hook Dad on ‘Performance Artist’ Alex Jones’s Trial: ‘I Wish I Could Be There to Stare Him Down,’” *Daily Beast*, April 17, 2017, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/sandy-hook-dad-on-performance-artist-alex-joness-trial-i-wish-i-could-be-there-to-stare-him-down>.
2. Eric Hananoki and Ben Dimiero, “104 Actual Headlines From Alex Jones’ Infowars,” *Media Matters for America*, February 8, 2017, <https://www.mediamatters.org/blog/2017/02/08/104-typical-headlines-alex-jones-infowars/215218>.
3. Emma Anderson, “No Breitbart, a Muslim Mob Didn’t Set Fire to Germany’s Oldest Church,” *The Local de*, January 5, 2017, <https://www.thelocal.de/20170105/german-media-blasts-misleading-breitbart-reports-of-violence-on-new-years>.

4. Eric Bradner, "Conway: Trump White House Offered 'Alternative Facts' on Crowd Size," *CNN*, January 23, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/22/politics/kellyanne-conway-alternative-facts/index.html>.
5. Mike Conway, Maria Elizabeth Grabe, and Kevin Grieves, "Villains, Victims and the Virtuous in Bill O'Reilly's 'No-Spin Zone': Revisiting World War Propaganda Techniques," *Journalism Studies* 8, no. 2 (2007): 197–223. This, of course, makes the "No-Spin Zone" a particularly ironic case of doublespeak. The specific elements described by the IPA are: name calling, glittering generality, transfer, testimonial, plain folks, card stacking, and band wagon. For more on the IPA's discussion of these techniques, see Alfred McClung Lee and Elizabeth Briant Lee, eds., *The Fine Art of Propaganda: A Study of Father Coughlin's Speeches* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1939), 22–24, and generally for in depth analysis of each; J. Michael Sproule, "Authorship and Origins of the Seven Propaganda Devices: A Research Note," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 4, no. 1 (2001): 135–143.
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7. Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (New York: Dell, 1969), 2.
8. The Texas GOP platform can be read in its entirety at http://s3.amazonaws.com/texasgop_pre/assets/original/2012Platform_Final.pdf. For more on this, see Richard Whittaker, "Half True: What Politifact Got Wrong About the GOP and Critical Thinking," *Austin Chronicle*, August 18, 2012, <https://www.austinchronicle.com/daily/news/2012-08-18/half-true-what-politifact-got-wrong-about-the-gop-and-critical-thinking/>.
9. Postman and Weingartner, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, 3.
10. Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 194.
11. Neil Postman, "Media Ecology: General Semantics in the Third Millennium," *General Semantics Bulletin* no. 41, 42 & 43 (1974–1976): 76.
12. Tom Curry, "Angry Nixon: New Tapes Reveal an Overwrought President in Grips of Watergate," *NBC News*, August 21, 2013, <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/other/angry-nixon-new-tapes-reveal-overwrought-president-grips-watergate-f6C10972359>.
13. "Transcript: Donald Trump's Taped Comments About Women," *New York Times*, October 8, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/us/donald-trump-tape-transcript.html?_r=0.

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15. James R. Dickenson and Paul Taylor, "Newspaper Stakeout Infuriates Hart: Report on Female House Guest Called 'Character Assassination,'" *Washington Post*, May 4, 1987, p. A01.
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17. For more on this, see Brett Lunceford, "On the Rhetoric of Second Amendment Remedies," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 1, no. 1 (2011): 31–39.
18. Nicholas Confessore, "For Whites Sensing Decline, Donald Trump Unleashes Words of Resistance," *New York Times*, July 13, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/14/us/politics/donald-trump-white-identity.html>.
19. For example, even Habermas concedes that the eighteenth-century public sphere that he holds up as an ideal was not necessarily realized. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 36.
20. Wendell Johnson, *People in Quandaries: The Semantics of Personal Adjustment* (Concord, CA: International Society for General Semantics, 1946), 193.
21. Navneet Alang, "Trump Is America's First Twitter President. Be Afraid," *New Republic*, November 15, 2016, <https://newrepublic.com/article/138753/trump-americas-first-twitter-president-afraid>.
22. See Robert K. Blechman, *Executive Severance* (Seattle, WA: NeoPoiesis Press, 2011).
23. Alang, "Trump Is America's First Twitter President."
24. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 161.
25. Lance Strate, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Neil Postman's Brave New World Revisited* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 138.
26. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, vii.
27. Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 17.
28. Postman, *Technopoly*, 182.
29. Richard B. Gregg, "The Ego-Function of the Rhetoric of Protest," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 4, no. 2 (1971): 82.

30. Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (New York: Perennial, 1951), 91.
31. Jacques Ellul, "Information and Propaganda," *Diogenes* 5, no. 18 (1957): 77.
32. Postman, *Technopoly*, 191.
33. Langdon Winner, *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), 315.
34. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, rev. and enl. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 287.
35. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 278–288.
36. For more on these levels of abstraction in human understanding, see Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin Bavelas, and Don D. Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication; A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes* (New York: Norton, 1967), 260–267.
37. Brett Lunceford, "The Walk of Shame: A Normative Description," *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 65, no. 4 (2008): 324–325.

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