
Response to Presidential Address

MEDIA AS MESSAGE: TECHNOLOGY AS REDUCTIONISM

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Firstly, thanks to Eric Sheffield for such a thought-provoking and timely address. What could be more important than focusing our attention to that which is otherwise ubiquitous and assumed? Secondly, as engaging and well-crafted as the address is, it caused me enormous angst—it's much less fun to agree as a respondent than it is to criticize. My primary goal, then, is to extend some of the excellent points Eric raises and to offer some questions for continued inquiry.

Eric lays out for us the Jamesian goal of living well and using pragmatism—*not* the Obama kind—to focus on the following central question: “how do various mediums ‘play out’ in their intrinsic relationship to meaningful expression given both their potential and their simultaneously restrictive natures?”¹ Eric is especially concerned with epistemological implications that follow from such restriction. His ultimate concerns about technology, specifically Twitter, are illustrative of the dangers inhering in communicative constraint.

Before I respond to the specific points of Eric's address, I want to make sure we are aware of an irony untouched upon in the paper: pragmatists embraced what has become known (not unproblematically) as “technological innovation.” Pragmatists didn't eschew combustion engines, the light bulb, or airplanes. Larry Hickman makes this point in a series of works dealing with Dewey, James, and technology. The key for pragmatism, as I'll explore momentarily in light of Neil Postman, had to do, not unsurprisingly, with solving social problems. Our lives in Georgia are made better with the use of air conditioning, Amazon orders are quick and convenient, and GPS technology gets us efficiently from point A to B. Keep these three illustrations in mind as I'll return to them shortly.

My goal in this response is to extend Eric's critique and provide openings for conversation about the myriad topics raised in Eric's address. A Jamesian critique of Twitter has more to offer than James and Twitter alone. To extend Eric's critique, then, I offer three points: 1) defining technology and the limits entailed; 2) why a pragmatist understanding of technology is helpful both philosophically and socially; and 3) a Postman heuristic that is useful when

¹ Eric Sheffield, “Human Expression and Meaning Making: Pondering the Role of the Medium in Creating a Life Worth Living,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 51 (2020): 9.

applied to technological “innovations.” I end this response with a few specific questions to Eric that he may or may not wish to take up.

1) DEFINITIONS AND LIMITS

Instead of a long dissertation on the Greek term *techné*, and its many iterations through contemporary times, technology, literally, is the study of specialized aspects of knowledge. Usually associated with engineering, industry, and computer science, technology is a term used so variously that competing definitions abound. Thomas Hughes, in *Human-Built World: How to Think about Technology and Culture*, defines technology as “a creativity process involving human ingenuity.”²

Interestingly, in another book, *American Genesis: A Century of Invention and Technological Enthusiasm, 1870–1970*, he altered the definition as follows: “Technology is the *effort* to organize the world for problem solving so that goods and services can be invented, developed, produced, and used.”³ Robert Friedel, in his *A Culture of Improvement: Technology and the Western Millennium*, notes that “technology can, indeed, be defined as a pursuit of power over nature.”⁴ In *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, French philosopher Bernard Stiegler defines technology as “the pursuit of life by means other than life.”⁵ Jacques Ellul, another French philosopher, preferred the term “technique” over “technology,” partly because of the potential overuse of “technology” to mean everything.⁶ Similarly, for Neil Postman, technology includes the pencil and the book, but is not so overly broad as to include *everything* on the planet.

Eric operationalizes the concept in classical pragmatist fashion. Functionally, he is asking, what operates as technology as a medium for improving social problems? Eric uses to Postman’s

argument that mediums are ideological and as such direct our capacity to express meaning and potentially “resonate” that understanding widely, Twitter, in its 280 character limit, seems to be a medium whose underlying ideology includes the following: “truth” matters so little that it can be determined briefly—not, certainly, as the complicated matter suggested by Peirce and James; political expression is a

² Hughes, *Human-Built World: How to Think about Technology and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 3.

³ Thomas Hughes, *American Genesis: A Century of Invention and Technological Enthusiasm, 1870–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 6, emphasis in original.

⁴ Friedel, *A Culture of Improvement: Technology and the Western Millennium* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 543.

⁵ Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 2.

⁶ Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964).

simple matter needing little to no factual understanding; and, expression here is often simply a matter of name calling.⁷

We should worry that Twitter is as prominent as it is in political discourse. Journalists, when not preening themselves to moralize in hyperbolic frenzy, appear to at least grasp the perverse irony that Twitter is problematic, yet continue to quote Donald Trump repeatedly. Such is a vicious inverted spiral that limits rather than expands inquiry and thoughtfulness.

2) PRAGMATIST UNDERSTANDING OF TECHNOLOGY

Historically, pragmatists tend to be overlooked in the history of technology. Carl Mitcham, arguably the leading historian of technology, notes that the first publication in philosophy of technology was Friedrich Dessauer's *Philosophie der Technik*, published in 1927.⁸ As Larry Hickman reminds us, it was also in 1927 when Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (Being and Time) appeared. Heidegger's work is widely accepted as the first major contribution to the field of philosophy of technology. Again, as Hickman points out, "works on the subject [of technology] by Ernst Jünger in 1932 and by José Ortega y Gasset in 1939 quickly followed."⁹ But Dewey, James, and Peirce each dealt with technology in their own ways. I won't go into those details in this response, but let me refer you to Hickman's work on the topic.¹⁰ Suffice to say that pragmatism does not recognize technology as somehow inert, objective, or value-free. A problem exists and is identified such that technology is created or built to solve or address the problem. For pragmatists, unlike many in society, technology is not "just a tool," if by that characterization we mean that it has no purpose or function—no tether to axiological matters of normativity. Technology is not inherently evil, but it isn't inherently good, either. There is *no inherence*. There is, for pragmatists, function and consequence, instead. The air conditioner in Georgia functions to reduce soul crushing humidity. Amazon supplies almost anything a consumer might want directly to their doorstep. The GPS provides guidance for efficient travel. I'll return to these examples one more time momentarily.

3) NEIL POSTMAN HEURISTIC AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TWITTER

Eric isn't concerned with Twitter being a medium for sharing an announcement of the birth of a child or an RSVP to a social function. He isn't opposed to the idea that social movements profitably use the medium for

⁷ Sheffield, "Human Expression and Meaning Making," 14–15.

⁸ Carl Mitcham and Robert Mackey, eds., *Philosophy and Technology* (New York: The Free Press, 1972).

⁹ Larry Hickman, "John Dewey as a Philosopher of Technology," in *Readings in the Philosophy of Technology*, ed. David M. Kaplan (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 43.

¹⁰ Larry Hickman, *John Dewey's Pragmatic Technology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

organizing, if not ushering in Arab Springs. “Twitter’s impact on meaning making; on understanding truth; on expression” is the ultimate focus of Eric’s address.¹¹

Here I’m reminded of a conference I attended in the 1990s at Penn State. Neil Postman was a featured speaker, along with Langdon Winner and Ivan Illich. Among the points Postman made at that conference was a trio of questions I’ve used ever since, and I think might be helpful here in thinking through Eric’s presidential address. In setting up this point, please remember that Postman, in other works, namely *Technopoly*, stipulates that technology is not limited to flat-screen phones or supercomputers.¹² At the Penn State technology conference, Postman offered what I think is a very pragmatic way of approaching technology when he suggests that, in considering any technology, we should first ask three primary questions:

- 1) what problem does the new technology solve?;
- 2) what problem does the new technology cause or create?; and
- 3) who benefits most from the new technology?

The air conditioner in Georgia is ubiquitous because of stifling humidity. It is also powered by energy generated in ways that contribute to global warming. Amazon is convenience itself, even if we don’t need the material goods in 2-days’ time. The GPS provides directions, but in the case of Japanese tourists in Australia who followed the GPS exactly, it led them to drive into a mangrove swamp at high tide.¹³ In the rush to champion “technological innovation,” and carve out market share, technology enthusiasts tend to focus on the first question and if they address the other two questions, they do so in characteristic reverential fashion. That is, there are no problems that technology causes or creates that cannot be addressed by more technology. Hence, the answer to the third question is always Silicon Valley billionaires.

As Kip Kline and I note in a 2018 *Philosophical Studies in Education* article, Evan Williams, one of the founders of Twitter, claimed that “the internet is broken.”¹⁴ His chief concerns include the degree to which Facebook livestreams suicides, Twitter trolls attack people with abandon, and “news links” lead to falsehoods. I won’t even get into Russian ads and Trump promos.

¹¹ Sheffield, “Human Expression and Meaning Making,” 14.

¹² Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage, 1992).

¹³ See Rachel Pickard Straus, “Japanese tourists blame satnav after being stranded in Australian mangrove swamp at high tide,” *Daily Mail*, March 16, 2012, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2115821/Japanese-tourists-blame-satnav-stranded-Australian-mangrove-swamp-high-tide.html>.

¹⁴ David Streitfeld, “The Internet is Broken,” *The New York Times*, May 21, 2017, Business, 1, 5. See Deron Boyles and Kip Kline, “On the Technology Fetish in Education: Ellul, Baudrillard, and the End of Humanity,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 49 (2018): 58–66.

The assault on truth, I think Eric will agree, is a direct result of one of Williams' other inventions: the blog. Blogs as media allow narcissistic posting of virtually anything, resulting, on Williams' own admission, in a culture of "extremes." The solution, for Williams, is not to reposition humanity as central to deliberation, but to shift reality to a consumer-pay model for content access. As he puts it:

Ad-driven systems can only reward attention. They can't reward the right answer. Consumer-paid systems can. They can reward value. The inevitable solution: People will have to pay for quality content.¹⁵

Even though a founder of Twitter gets the diagnosis at least partially correct, his prescription reifies a broader problem: the commodification of humanity. Eric relies on Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* and I turn to it for a conclusion. In the last chapter, "The Huxleyan Warning," Postman draws on Aldous Huxley's prescience thusly:

In the Huxleyan prophesy, Big Brother does not watch us, by his choice. We watch him, by ours. There is no need for wardens or gates or Ministries of Truth. When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when, in short, a people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act [or a YouTube influencer channel] then a nation finds itself at risk; culture-death is a clear possibility.¹⁶

Postman's use of Huxley is somewhat similar to Max Weber's notion of calculability: citizens as *homo economicus* are expected to achieve competition and the free exercise of "@market choice" *even when such choices are hegemonic*. We literally buy into the idea that tweeting is better because it is more convenient (and easier) than it is to take the time and effort to physically discuss and face others and others' ideas, especially competing or opposing ones. When a phone call is too much effort, in other words, we're doomed. It is a form of narcissism characteristic of Americans for a long time but heightened in the age of Twitter.¹⁷ The problem is that the ubiquity of Tweets reifies them as legitimate spaces for authentic communication. Does anybody know why there is a 280-character limit? Originally, the limit was 140 characters. Only a few years ago was the character-amount doubled. Perhaps a reversal of Ockham's razor, I don't think Eric is joyful about doubling the

¹⁵ Streitfeld, 5.

¹⁶ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 155–156.

¹⁷ See Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1991).

number of characters, though I wonder if it was a strategic marketing decision to “address” the idea of limitation, but only by expanding and also formalizing and reinforcing a different character limitation.

QUESTIONS FOR A CONCLUSION

For Twitter, I honestly don’t know what the answer would be. Structurally, by extension, it appears that the problem to solve is a “more than 280 characters” dilemma facing humanity. Perhaps it’s too difficult to write complete words and Twitter solves the literacy problem by sidestepping it completely. But this only leads to reductionism: taking complex and intricate problems and over-simplifying them. As though those stupid emoji characters hyper-proliferate to “cover” more and more emotional dispositions in cartoon form, we are abdicating our epistemic and ethical responsibility to expand rather than contract; engage rather than encapsulate convenience.

And so, a few questions for Eric: Is Huxley correct when he claimed that truth becomes irrelevant? If so, what difference does 280 or 280,000 characters make? Is Twitter but another modern take on sophistry? (Appearance over reality, assumptions of answerability, persuasion regardless of truth?) Finally, epistemically, what would it take for Twitter to represent James’ and Dewey’s epistemological fallibilism rather than relativism?
