

The Great Symbol Drain of Christianity: Neil Postman and the Postmodern Church

Abstract: The postmodern church is one that embeds within it the trappings of the digital age. These institutions, whether manifesting as a megachurch with thousands of congregants or a humble emergent church with an intricate website and decent local following, tend to default to therapeutic modes of operating their churches; for instance, the implementation of stage lighting, projection screens, or contemporary music serves to create an emotional response from congregants rather than one of spiritual reflection. This essay seeks to understand the church in this current moment within a media ecological framework. First, it attends to the postmodern church, considering three major components that comprise the model: modern architecture, in-house technology, and Internet and social media use. Next, the essay attends to Neil Postman's work, particularly *Technopoly*, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, and an essay written in *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* about propaganda to understand the media ecological underpinnings of the digital age. Finally, the essay addresses the implications of the postmodern church as made evident through Postman's scholarship. Overall, this article seeks to address the question: "How can the work of media ecologists aid in the understanding of the postmodern, digitized church," using Postman as the primary scholar of interest.

Introduction

The postmodern era is one in which the notion of truth is in contention (Lyotard 1979/1984). Within any given communicative exchange, individuals pull from a multitude of narratives, insinuating contentious goods and multiple understandings of truth that one must confront in their everyday lives as they engage others in the world (Arnett & Arneson, 1999). Within this era of uncertainty, major institutional structures come into question. Robert Bellah (1975) describes this as an age of broken covenants where institutions are imperfect, unable to uphold the promises they make. One method institutions employ to survive this era of organizational disdain is the cultivation and delivery of therapeutic modes of service in order to facilitate relational connections with individuals lost without a metanarrative to guide them. For the purposes of this essay, therapeutic refers to Rieff's (1966/2006) understanding of the term, described as an ungrounded engagement of the world, close to individualism, where one does not recognize or attend to the various institutional grounds they exist within. Therapeutic or emotivist understandings of connection rely on pathos, bringing individuals into a false narrative of togetherness, ignoring any semblance of situatedness in favor of relational engagement. Inescapable from this therapeutic mode of postmodernity is the Christian Church, which defaults to relational modes of engagement rather than traditional elements of the gospel to attract congregants.

In this essay, I argue that these therapeutic churches, which I term postmodern churches, are institutions that embed within them the trappings of the digital age in order to entice more patrons into their religious establishments. These institutions, whether manifesting as a megachurch with thousands of congregants or a humble emergent church with an intricate website and local following, default to therapeutic and emotivist modes of operating their churches in a way that places entertainment above religious practice. Therefore, this essay works to understand the church in this current moment within a media ecological framework. First, it attends to the postmodern church, considering megachurch and emergent church models as iterations of this phenomenon in order to understand how the Christian Church operates within the 21st century. Next, the essay attends to Neil Postman's work as the primary theoretical standpoint for understanding the postmodern church, particularly his *Technopoly, Amusing Ourselves to Death*, and an essay written in *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* surrounding propaganda as they aid in recognizing the inherent biases of digital media and lend themselves to implications surrounding this newer engagement of religion. Finally, the essay addresses these implications of the postmodern church directly as made evident through Postman's scholarship.

The Postmodern Church: Architecture, Technology, and Social Media

Shifts in the structure of a Christian church service are not a new development in the 21st century. However, the postmodern church signifies a turning point that alters the context of the church itself into a less rigorous environment from the outset. The postmodern church differs from previous shifts in context in three major ways. The first concerns changing architecture of the church itself, which alters the context of the service. The second shift includes technological changes, particularly in the form of screens at the pulpit, electronic music, and staged lighting, which frame church service as entertainment rather than spiritual engagement. The final marker of a postmodern church is the utilization of social media, extending the church beyond its physical space and engaging in what Postman would term a technopoly, leaning into the machine and thus transforming the religious experience. The following attends to these three demarcations through review of current literature surrounding postmodern churches, including the mega and emergent church models. It is important to note that while these facets of the

postmodern church are not in themselves moral or immoral (in fact, most churches had to move into the digital landscape during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic regardless of whether they utilized new technology prior to COVID-19 (Edwards, 2020)), these shifts ultimately transform the content and context of church and thus one's perception of the Gospel.

Architecture of the Postmodern Church: Shifting Scene and Context

The Christian church has undergone a transformation in the 21st century, altering how one interacts and finds meaning with others in this space. Once a quiet place of contemplation and community, what I call the postmodern church is boisterous and loud, dressed in the trappings of more secular institutional life, including a more modern layout to the buildings. Architecture and housing in themselves serve as a medium as McLuhan (1964/1994) states homes serve as extensions of the body, replacing bodily heating and physical protection to allow a person to focus on community or work. McLuhan (1964/1994) spends time in *Understanding Media* discussing the shape of a home, noting that the architectural outline of a building speaks to and frames the mindset and activities of those who dwell within. Architecture tells a story and influences the practices of any given building, the postmodern church being no different.

Buggelm (2015) discusses a shift in the architecture of the Christian church in postwar America, providing a foundational understanding of how the church has transformed in recent decades. Beginning in the 1960s, many Christian sects moved away from a traditionally styled chapel in favor of updated and more secular-styled buildings (Buggelm, 2015). The postmodern church shifts away from traditional chapel structure, and moves toward a "less formal" style, allowing for multiple rooms designated for worship instead of one altar space with meeting rooms, classrooms for Bible study, and other more secular trappings filling out the rest of the building (Buggelm, 2015, p. 169) like coffee bars, snack areas, and game rooms. The shape of the church moved away from cruciform, altar-centric design into a secularized square with compartmentalized rooms each of equal import with "worship, education, and fellowship [as] hardly mutually exclusive activities but [instead] intertwined, intentionally, in the weekly activities of the church" (Buggelm, 2015, p. 173). In this way, the postmodern church does not solely reserve Sundays for active building hours: with multiple rooms for public use, church is all hours, every day, with a flurry of activities available to all. This less formal layout imposes a more relaxed feel to religion, with congregation members existing in a more casual, relational setting with others rather than experiencing structure via a traditional church service (Buggelm, 2015). As the foundational layout of church changes, the way to "do church" changes as well (Connable and Steiner, 2003, p. 118).

Heatwole (1989) discusses this idea of "doing church" differently based upon the architectural layout of the building of worship, arguing that one can decipher whether a religious sect is conservative, moderate, or liberal in its teachings based upon the layout of the building, stating "ideological differences [] are embedded in the cultural landscape," including architectural choices (Heatwole, 1989, p. 79). For instance, one Methodist church may utilize the traditional form of a church, in cruciform design, imposing a conservative bias on the ongoing practices inside, where another church of the same religion may utilize a circular shaped building or a modern square, indicating liberal and moderate styles of worship respectively. Of course, Heatwole's prediction does not always come true, with some of the most conservative churches utilizing spaces that one might consider out of the norm and placed within a more liberal sect: Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church, well-known for its conservative viewpoints and charismatic leadership, is shaped like an amphitheater with a large stage in place of an altar. Connable and

Steiner (2003) take issue with this particular layout because it ultimately shifts the center of content within its space.

Connable and Steiner (2003) argue that church architecture, no matter the style, imposes order and control over the communication inside a venue. They discuss a megachurch architecture style, describing a theatrical space in which ushers direct congregation members to their seats in a space without much lighting, creating a more mediated experience for church members. If one's church looks and operates like an amphitheater, the content placed within the space will transform into entertainment. According to Stevenson (2013), the size and shape of the megachurch as an arena alongside larger-than-life screens and projectors move the church service to one of performance rather than participation, "creat[ing] synaesthetic worship experience[s] that draw congregants into an intimate physical relationship with the space and events that take place in it" rather than the content of the service itself (Stevenson, 2013, p. 166). Architecture thus transforms the religious experience, imposing an entertainment-like feel to the content and form of the services themselves.

The architecture surrounding a church can also alter the context of worship. Tokke (2013) describes this notion through study of a church in Times Square in New York City, surrounded by secular fanfare, scaffolding, and imagery. Times Square encapsulates modern design and secular life, with large, boxy buildings and looming lights creating a loud and vibrant atmosphere unlike what one would expect entering a church. Because of the imposition of modern architecture and technology, religious groups that exist on the Square must adapt to a more secular style of worship to "remain relevant" in the space (Tokke, 2013, p. 25). Times Square is a diverse area of people and opinions, acting as a central point of postmodernism in action where culture, narrative, and truth are in flux. Naturally, then, Tokke (2013) asserts the necessity of churches to address these spaces in a way that makes their message more well-received if they wish to continue to minister in these areas. Tokke (2013) finds churches within Times Square "reframe their social work within a consistent theological structure" (p. 50), responding to the environment through mediation that frames the content of church in a way that is attentive to the current moment and context. Architecture is just one feature of the full sensual experience of a postmodern church that ultimately imposes the perception and understanding of the content that exists within it.

In-House Technology: Enlarging and Enhancing Religious Experience

In addition to the general shape of the Christian church shifting in a postmodern church setting, imposing extra mediation such as a PowerPoint or uplifting into the church service is yet another contributing factor to one's perception of what church entails. For the postmodern church, entertainment finds itself at the center of one's understanding of church. Connable and Steiner (2003) explore such an entertainment-based megachurch in their work, stating that it creates a sensory overload for those in attendance.

In their observance of a megachurch, Connable and Steiner (2003) insist there was not a single sense that was not "hailed and stimulated in overt and intentional ways" (p.123) throughout the service. Connable and Steiner (2003) note that these churches play with congregants' senses to draw them in via technology, altering the tone and volume of music as the most serious parts of the mass emerge: in this way, the noise created by a live band pumping through the speakers contextualizes the religious experience. Stevenson (2013) also speaks to the use of music in the megachurch model, stating that the use of music and loudspeakers creates a "rhythmic" sense of the service that aids in the creation and maintenance of its brand (p. 166). Through music, screens, and other new technology, the postmodern church sells its congregants

a brand of theology that goes beyond a traditional service, attracting younger crowds and those who claim to go against the grain (Stevenson, 2013). The postmodern church experience is dramatic, homing in on theatrics to create a transformative and emotional worship experience.

Beyond the adaptation of music and noise through speakers, the postmodern church's most prevalent in-house medium is the screen. Whether one finds themselves in a megachurch with a jumbotron lighting up the arena or in a smaller congregation equipped with two large projection screens, the addition of video, PowerPoint, and enlargement of live objects finds home in the postmodern church model that ultimately shifts the context of church from one of sacred reverence to something more business or entertainment-like.

Ward Sr. (2015) examines the utilization of PowerPoint in church services, positing its incorporation into multiple interpretation areas for congregants: within the spatial awareness of the congregant as it is front and center within the church, as discourse to refer to throughout the service, and as a preaching mechanism as it projects quotes and images out toward members. According to Ward Sr. (2015), screened technology in the church setting impacts the "organizational structure[] and process[]" of worship, with those controlling the PowerPoint controlling the context and flow of service (p. 190). For Ward Sr. (2013), the use of the screen and PowerPoint in religious settings imposes a corporate-like atmosphere but, for Stevenson (2013), screens enhance the entertaining, performative feel of a religious service.

Stevenson (2013) notes that her megachurch experience came with large projection screens where congregants could see and follow along to the lyrics sung throughout worship, enlarging the overall experience by displaying pastors, congregants, and Biblical passages larger than life for all to see. In this enlargement, congregants become overwhelmed with the content presented to them, creating an extreme sensory experience that appeals to pathos. Stevenson (2013) labels churches that rely on in-house technology charismatic/pastor-focused denominations as they incorporate both a captivating and talented leader alongside pathos-boosting elements like loud music, bright lights, and screens. These churches are stereotyped in the megachurch model, where charismatic leaders like Joel Osteen rely on their ethos compounded by the bells and whistles of a large, live, and loud worship experience.

Connable and Steiner (2003) also discuss the sensory component of a postmodern church as mediated through in-house technology, explicating how the use of music, lighting, and screens impose a feeling of sensory overload, almost short-circuiting one's brain. In particular, Connable and Steiner (2003) note the transition away from the written word into the digital projection: replacing a printed bulletin or other texts with minimal writing places precedence on image rather than "the word" due to the tendency to add visuals to a projected slideshow for people to grasp onto and hold interest (p. 124). By using in-house technology and postmodern elements, the church experience is one of sensation and emotion at the expense of a deeper understanding of the theological and historical constructs of the religion in question: it transforms into what Burge and Djupe (2015) term the emergent church.

According to Burge and Djupe (2015), emergent churches place central focus on relational context, allowing individual members to influence the content of each service. In its evangelic mission, the emergent church molds itself into whatever it deems relevant, encompassing any religious orientation, even orientations that suggest there is no God at all (Burge & Djupe, 2015). In this way, the emergent church utilizes any means necessary, including technological and architectural, in order to contextually meet potential newcomers where they are. Emergent churches lean into relativism rather than what one would consider transformational change in postmodernity based upon the historical moment, willing to abandon

traditional narrative structures of a particular religion to entice new members through various media, including the Internet. The sensory and emotional experiences of both churches with heavy technological use and emergent churches that rely upon charisma follow congregants home through the addition of the Internet and social media in an effort to create a church brand and expand their overall reach.

The Internet, Social Media, and the Branding of the Postmodern Church

The final demarcation of the postmodern church is social media and Internet use. In 2020, many congregations were forced to make the switch to online services due to the prevalence of COVID-19 (Edwards, 2020). When utilized out of necessity, social media is useful for communication and connection with others. However, the postmodern church embraces social media in potentially problematic ways, explored in the following section.

The technology of the 21st century allows for greater reach for congregations in the multi-site church that hosts in-person service at their main venue while simultaneously live-streaming to various locations where offsite members can gather and hear the sermon. Connable and Steiner (2003) discuss this model briefly, stating that if members view an entire church service from a live-stream, the screen becomes a central feature as it encompasses the multi-site venue in the form of larger than life, floor to ceiling projection. Those at the main church, in addition to having their own projection screens, have cameras and special lighting as a distraction as well, channeling the religious experience into one of entertainment. The multi-site church invites a centering of entertainment through technology, decentering the actual religious context in its pursuit of evangelism. This extends beyond live-streaming to other church sites into social media use, where the postmodern church can reach people on an individual basis.

When discussing church websites, Connable and Steiner (2003) assert that congregations utilize these avenues to put forth a brand vision, with “the heart” of the message aimed at secularism and modern language (p. 118). To stay relevant, postmodern churches find themselves abandoning scripture and traditional means of communication to cater to the “flattered self” (Connable & Steiner, 2003, p. 118) who seeks constant attention as a response to an overabundance of mediated communication. One becomes a flattered self when they base their worth on others’ perceptions of them. With the addition of the smartphone and its dopamine triggering notifications and alerts (Carr, 2011), the late 2010s finds itself in a milieu of narcissism and individualism in which the focus of attention becomes primarily the self rather than the institutions or narrative structures on takes part in. The postmodern church rises to this occasion via mediated, tailored communication efforts.

Much like technology use within the church itself, utilizing social media and the Internet as a home for faith results in mostly emotional appeals to potential and current congregants. Morgan (2011) asserts that the images utilized both in the church setting and throughout its social media presence serve as a purely sensual background, fueling shallow relational contexts for the services themselves. Because social media is so prevalent in the daily life of many Americans, postmodern churches take on a corporate-like feel, with polished websites and social media pages focusing on simple messages to form emotional connections with the largest amount of people. In this way, the postmodern church becomes performative, with technology at the center of discourse (Stevenson, 2013; Connable & Steiner, 2003; Schultze, 2003).

Stevenson (2013) denotes churches that utilize business-like brand strategies as “Seeker churches” that utilize mass communication to “seek out” new members, but with the addition of young pastors and multiple physical locations, the postmodern church most likely fits her description of a “New Wave” venue as these elements add a layer charisma and relational

context. New Wave churches, according to Stevenson (2013), are the most technologically savvy, able to infuse web streaming, blogging, and web design into their services. Both Seeker and New Wave church models employ secular language and symbolism to bring in congregants, with religious context as an afterthought. Both models are performative, relying upon "evangelical dramaturgy" through use of social media and the Internet to put forth a specific brand with traditional understandings of Christianity less important for identifying with a congregation (Stevenson, 2013, p. 162). Stevenson (2013) describes a "religious consumerism" (p. 163) prominent within the United States where churchgoers expect visually and auditorily sensational experiences that they can share with their friends on social media later, tagging the church in their posts. Thus, Internet and social media use as part of the postmodern church experience become religious in itself.

Schultze (2003) claims that this interplay between technology and religion always existed within an American landscape that privileges the new. Speaking to evangelism and mass media, Schultze (2003) argues that use of communication technologies to reach potential new church members is woven into the fabric of religion, with radio and television paving the way for social media as a form of worship. While evangelical Christians often warn against the over-use of technology and its ability to impose its own message upon one's content, Schultze (2003) argues that this cautioning comes with the understanding that new technology aids in spreading the Gospel. Evangelicals recognized the fore-coming of McLuhan's (1962; 1964) global village in the 1960s and 1970s and, according to Schultze (2003), wanted to be the ones to fuel the electronic revolution by utilizing those channels to spread the Word. Evangelicals at the forefront of this electronic revolution used new technology as "an object of praise" and a "tool" that aided in community building and conversion of non-Christians (Schultze, 2003, p. 70). Because new technology and its adoption by evangelical Christians are so intertwined, one could argue that technology itself possesses an enchanted quality and a religious context; however, this does not negate the imposition of shallow engagement with others and the performative nature of religion when church moves into cyberspace.

Bringing Architecture, In-House Technology, and Social Media Together: Forming the Postmodern Church

Many religious congregations in the 21st century utilize at least one of the media discussed as comprising the postmodern church. Especially in a historical moment where resources are scarce, natural disasters and uncontrollable events occur regularly, and people begin to move further away from communities they grew up in, occupying a non-traditional building, using PowerPoint in lieu of a weekly bulletin, or moving services and community groups into an online setting make sense. Even the Catholic Church, thought to be one of the most traditional Christian sects, finds home in the online world with the Pope speaking to the masses via his Twitter account (Toth & Demeter, 2019) and multiple congregations utilizing email to stay connected to one another (Cantoni, 2007). By themselves and utilized in direct response to a current issue or concern, each facet of the postmodern church feels harmless. However, it is the utilization of all three in which performativity, pathos-facing, and charismatic presentation of religion begin to take precedence over its foundational ground, with a one-dimensional religious experience taking center stage, abandoning spiritual depth. In Postman's words, these elements comprising the postmodern church contribute to its great symbol drain. The following attends to Postman's work closely to understand the media ecological implications of the postmodern church.

Postman, Electronic Media, and Technopoly

As one of the foundational members of media ecology, Neil Postman (1931–2003) provides an understanding of how media influence and constrain how one perceives and interacts with the world around them. According to Connable and Steiner (2013), Postman alerts one to the control media has by imposing an ideological bias on the content housed within it. For Postman, technology comes with particular constraints for communication and perception: for instance, face-to-face interactions allow for nonverbal communication and therefore context of a message, whereas a text message or email removes the physical body from the message, imposing ambiguity. This idea finds most prevalent exploration in Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* and *Technopoly* but also exists in much of his scholarly corpus. Postman's understanding of media ecology serves as a foundation for engaging the postmodern church and the implications surrounding its pervasiveness in American culture. Thus, this section explores each text, engaging the lessons learned about mediated culture in order to obtain a greater understanding of the postmodern church and its consequences for its congregants.

In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman (1985) takes the television in particular to task, noting that instead of George Orwell's *1985* coming to fruition where technology is an unwelcome burden, instead Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* comes to life in which people become willing captives of technology rather than tech-averse victims. For Postman (1985), the major contention surrounding the use of the television is that content housed within it becomes warped when presented through the lens of this medium, privileging entertainment above all else. One might see this persisting in screen life in general, as social media and streaming content online now reign as the primary entertainment media, devolving much of public life into easily digestible sound bites and short messages for anyone to pick up and interpret as they will. In this way, life becomes more of a popularity contest of online influence: whoever Tweets the best owns the day. Any message placed on a screen transforms into entertainment due to the inherent nature of the television and later smart devices (Postman, 1985). The major concern surrounding the imposition of amusement of screens for Postman (1985) is that in one's consumption of content, they fail to recognize what biases exist and impose themselves upon the content, regardless of if one is watching a fictional movie, a documentary, or a church service. If persons are unaware of the influence of media upon the content presented, they become happy captives of the medium they engage, passively allowing content to wash over the senses in the form the media intends it to. In this way, it does not matter what one watches: the screen always imposes an entertainment bias on one's perception of the content consumed. Everything including presidential debates, true crime documentaries, and breaking news presents itself primarily as a piece of amusement for better or for worse.

Postman (1985) chooses the television specifically in his critique because its utilization clearly delineates the shift from print to electric culture. At its publication in the 1980s, the television acted as the primary medium for Americans, so much so that "[people of that time's] use of other media... [was] largely orchestrated by the television" (p. 78). In other words, television, through its advertisements and shows, explained how to use other media, as well as told the viewers which brands to purchase from in real life, stirring real-world conversations surrounding particular brands and products (Postman, 1985). Today, the Internet and digital media find themselves at the height of television's popularity in the 1980s, with notions of entertainment, fast-paced content, and an overflow of advertising materials at the forefront of any smartphone user's mind and consumption habits mimicking those of the television addicts of years past. Although not the same medium, the biases of Internet and television content find

similarity, where users of both media experience a bias of entertainment shrouding the content they peruse. Because of this, the implications for news, education, and religion in Postman's work are of import for this essay as similar biases exist with most screened media. The screen is the most important facet of this bias, with implications for work, play, education, and worship emerging as a result of its overuse.

Postman (1985) observes how news shows operate using soundbites and talking heads as the primary focus with the content of the news itself as secondary for the viewer. Because of the fast-paced form of the typical newscast, Americans get their news in a way that distracts rather than informs and entertains rather than explains. Education in the age of television is also problematic for Postman. Within the constant world of distraction, as influenced through the television, education becomes something that should be "entertaining" (Postman, 1985). Finally, and perhaps most importantly for this essay, there are consequences for religion in the age of television. Postman (1982) posits that religion transforms into a spectacle once placed within television, with doctrine juxtaposed with music and images that serve to evoke an emotional response that has little to do with the religion itself. Religion, much like education and news, becomes entertainment under the gleam of the screen, with Osteens and other talking heads at the center of pious celebrity. Postman (1985) asserts that, despite Christianity being a "demanding and serious religion," when placed within the entertaining context of the screen, it becomes "another kind of religion altogether" (p. 121). The religion Postman refers to is that of television: an atmosphere that includes constant distraction and quick tidbits of information that only scratches the surface of content and never delves any deeper for reflection or understanding. Postman (1985) asserts "the danger is not that religion has become the content of television shows but that television shows may become the content of religion" (p. 124). His notion extends into the postmodern church discussed in this essay where pastors and religious institutions can go beyond the traditional televised mass and extend their content to all screens through social media and streaming services. Because screens take on an entertainment focus, the religious experience is that of amusement, imposing an obligation to pastors and priests everywhere to make church "fun". In the 21st century, screened life expands beyond the living room and into every aspect of daily life, making this issue not necessarily new but much more prevalent and all-consuming.

Technopoly acts as an expansion of the implications asserted in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* beyond the television, examining further the religious consequences of a techno-centric world. Postman (1993) defines a technopoly as a culture that "seeks its authorization in technology, finds its satisfactions in technology, and takes its orders from technology" (p. 71). A technopoly comes in succession after tool-using cultures and technocracies (Postman, 1993). According to Postman (1993), a tool-using culture treats technologies as servants of the physical world, generally following a theocratic mindset. A tool-using culture can be likened to the time of the mechanical clock's invention, in which Byzantine monks utilized the clock as a symbolization of the time God provided them to meaningfully fill their days (McLuhan, 1964; Postman, 1985; Mumford, 1934). A technocracy, on the other hand, brings technological tools to the center rather than any theocratic underpinnings (Postman, 1993). Postman (1993) characterizes late 18th century Europe as a technocracy, in which the idea of progress for its own sake took precedence, with tools driving that impulse. Within a technocracy, however, there are still social and religious narratives acting as a foundation, differentiating it from a technopoly, in which "all forms of cultural life" become second (or perhaps forgotten) "to the sovereignty of technique and technology" (Postman, 1993, p. 53). In a sense, a technopoly is a totalitarian regime in which autonomous technology is at the wheel. In a technopoly, Postman (1993) asserts

that human life and forms of meaning default to the machine. The machine at the center of technopoly is the computer, which, for Postman (1993), contains the means necessary to overtake human creation of meaning.

The overarching consequences of technopoly fall under the umbrella of knowledge monopolies. This term (coming from Harold Innis) depicts elite groups of individuals who either create the technologies themselves or have expert knowledge on them and can use them to their advantage (Postman, 1993). A knowledge monopoly assumes a large group outside of the know who take these technologies unreflectively at face value, making “information [appear] indiscriminately, directed at no one in particular, in enormous volume at high speeds, and disconnected from theory, meaning, or purpose” (Postman, 1993, p. 70). As a result, America finds itself contending with “the great symbol drain” in which many previously meaningful symbols within American life become so banal through consumer culture that they become “trivialized” and therefore meaningless (Postman, 1993, p. 165). In a world in which someone could purchase a technological solution to anything and mass production spews out religious and cultural symbols at a rate of seemingly endless supply, meaning becomes a computer-generated output of information rather than a human encounter with the revelatory. The fears of *Amusing Ourselves to Death* come back tenfold with the computer and *Technopoly*: people become transformed into contributing yes-men to the great symbol drain in their utilization of the interactive screen, privileging memetic, repetitious entertainment over all else. Technopoly regurgitates symbols under the guise of entertainment so viciously that it removes all original meaning from what is housed within the screen.

Technopoly goes hand-in-hand with an essay written by Postman (1979) on propaganda in which he uses Aldous Huxley's view of the term, noting that there are two types: good propaganda, based upon the content being espoused as favorable to one's own views, and bad propaganda, based upon the content as unfavorable to the viewer. Postman (1979) talks about advertisements in particular as propaganda, specifically television commercials, in which a political advertisement is contextually viewed as good or bad depending upon the contextual moment it emerges within. Postman (1979) posits propaganda as "language that invites us to respond emotionally, emphatically, more or less immediately, and in an either-or-manner," hearkening to his later work on technopolies that do not allow for much reflection on content, symbolic or otherwise (p. 130). Postman (1979) warns against propaganda that is not "dressed in its natural clothing"; in other words, one should engage in reflection of messages (and the technology that contains them) that seek to evoke an emotional response primarily over a thoughtful one, lest they fall victim to "herd poisoning", described as individuals who "escape from responsibility, intelligence, and morality into a kind of frantic, animal, mindlessness" (p. 133). Technopolies create environments of herd poisoning, in which computer-mediated information finds emotional and reflexive response, making the rapid information glossing of the television in the 1980s appear like child's play.

Overall, Postman's scholarly corpus warns the reader of the dangers of technological culture, beginning with the television as a place of entertainment that spreads out like tentacles with the advent of the computer and Internet. Screened life places importance upon entertainment over all else, creating a symbol drain of meaningful engagement of the content within it. Like many media ecologists, Postman does not necessarily suggest the removal of all screens: he is not a Luddite. Instead, there is an emphasis on awareness and reflective utilization of these media to avoid falling prey to the biases of infotainment, edutainment, and religio-tainment. Postman provides the foundational understanding of what a digital culture can bring to

the likes of the church, providing grounds for implications for the postmodern church in the 21st century.

Screens at the Pulpit: The Church in Symbol Drain

As previously explored, the postmodern church is one with flashing lights, loud music, and rapid-fire theology without much reflection. In their modernized architecture allowing for a more casual engagement of religion, in-house technologies that transform the religious experience into something more akin to a rock concert, and the adaptation of social media and live-streaming to mass-produce one's congregation on a national scale, the postmodern church seeks to bring more Christians into the fold, with traditional understandings of Biblical text in constant flux and reimagination from congregation to congregation in order to compete with the entertainment landscape it now finds itself within. Media ecology, specifically that of Neil Postman, bridges an understanding of this current historical moment that brings to light implications for the postmodern church. In the digital age, persons find themselves faced with constant distraction. Flashing notifications from smart devices, endless streaming and scrolling, and multi-screened culture have fueled a technopoly in which Americans do not pause to reflect on what appears before them long enough to find deeper meaning or consequences surrounding the content. The postmodern church, in an attempt to compete with these screens, has uplifted rooted religious practices in favor of making church more entertaining for the masses. The postmodern church is a major contributor to the great symbol drain as depicted by Postman (1993). The following provides a case for this symbol drain as it relates to Postman's work, connecting each facet of the postmodern church with his major thesis.

The architecture of the postmodern church removes itself from the iconic layouts of traditional chapels found in Christianity and inserts itself into a more corporate or secular setting, devoid of any symbolic meaning. While architecture itself is not a major component of Postman's understanding of technopoly, the removal of religious iconography in favor of in-house coffee shops, game rooms, stages, and conference rooms transforms the religious experience into a banality one encounters in their non-spiritual life. Like screens, architecture imposes a particular context onto what occurs and is communicated within its walls: thus, the postmodern church in either its corporate-like, boxy structure or its amphitheater grandiosity imposes a secular lean into any and all of the messaging that occurs within it. Suddenly, sermons surround what a pastor watched on television that week, their spouse's work relationships, and restaurants that they recently visited, all eventually wrapped into a surface-level reading of the gospel to provide some religious context. The architecture of the postmodern church sets the scene for a less spiritual context of a religious service and, with the addition of new technology both inside and out of the physical church building, Postman's fear of symbol drain comes more to life.

In-house technology in the form of projection screens, worship bands, PowerPoints, and lighting effects transforms the worship experience into one that privileges entertainment over all else. *Amusing Ourselves to Death* succinctly lays out the major implications for the postmodern church when Postman (1985) writes that the use of technology for the sake of entertainment in church transforms theology into one of the machine. Churches that focus primarily on the performative aspects of a religious service create an environment in which theology emerges as quick bits and pieces of information with little time for contextual understanding for congregants: in Postman's (1993) words, the postmodern church trivializes religion and makes it a form of entertainment rather than spiritual reflection. Of course, religious texts find placement within a PowerPoint or sermon, but cushioned in between the sensory experience of large

projection screens, the overall message becomes lost in favor of emotional, pathos-fueled amusement packaged with a charismatic and relational leader to boot. The symbolic nature of the Gospel is washed away, becoming meaningless in the more casual, secular glint of doing church differently that one witnesses in congregations such as small emergent churches and Osteen's Lakewood Church discussed in this article.

When the tendrils of the postmodern church spread out into cyberspace with branding, websites, and social media pages, full technopoly and symbol drain take hold of this model. When congregations are transfixed with the particular branding of their organization, much like the Seeker churches described by Stevenson (2013), they take away from the actual meaning of religion, bringing it into the realm of propaganda. If one's purpose of attending an in-person service is to post a photo on their social media page and tagging the church to raise its influence, the worship experience is no longer centered on Christian theology and instead moves into, in Postman's terms, the religion of the machine. Repetitive symbol use in branding elements of a postmodern church removes its meaning, especially when competing against corporate secular brands popping up on people's social media feed in one continuous scroll. In a digital technopoly, the knowledge monopolies of the ideological biases of the technology being utilized (whether it be particular lighting, music, projections, social media pages, or PowerPoints) remains behind the curtain, with the larger public unaware of how these media influence their abilities to perceive the content of the message. In attempting to reach the masses through a more secularized way of worship, the postmodern church becomes indistinct from secular brands and organizations, especially on social media. Mix in non-sacral church names like Lakewood, Restored, New Hope, and one may not realize if they are consuming content from a church or a hip new organization. In this digitized, postmodern church model, symbolic drain finds itself at its peak: Christian contexts become meaningless in its shallow, screened packaging. In a world of trivialization and banality thanks to screened life, there seems to be no way out of this problem, even in religious services themselves.

After exploring the different types of technologically imbued churches through the lens of Postman, one may find themselves with a feeling of hopelessness, wondering where to go from here. The postmodern church is unlikely to remove itself on its own terms: selling the church as entertainment seems to work if the many megachurches in America have anything to say about it. What Postman (1993) does leave the reader within *Technopoly* is the Loving Resistance Fighter in the thick of unreflective culture. Postman (1993) calls for an awakening in computer culture for someone who will not accept progress for progress's sake, will not replace computer-generated statistics as a substitute for reflection, and who does not take the traditions of religion and culture for granted. This loving resistance fighter will work to understand the ideological biases present within technology when they find themselves confronted with it, able to at least understand that the content they are being presented with is influenced and constrained in one way to fit that medium. What one can do in the era of the postmodern church is become loving resistance fighters themselves in the religious media they consume. Yes, one may enjoy the contemporary music stylings of a service or even find PowerPoints helpful in guiding a mass. However, it is important to meet those media with reflective understanding, pushing further on the content in order to avoid the trivialization of religious foundations. Only then can society avoid the great symbol drain of this historical moment.

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