
General Semantics, the School Curriculum, and the Curriculum of the Electronic Media

Dr Geetha Bhasker, Professor of English, Department of English, Bangalore University.

Paper Received on 12-12-2022, Accepted on 20-01-2023,
Published on 21-01-23; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2023.8.1.89

Abstract

The Paper discusses the concern about education and the information environment of the youth of today, who get more hours of exposure to electronic media than the time spent in school. The school curriculum places emphasis on language and print literacy and requires sophisticated cognitive processing. The curriculum of the electronic media does its work in analogic symbols which appeal directly to emotional and largely unreflective response. The electronic revolution is here to stay. The Paper suggests the importance of language which is stressed by the school curriculum, and the use of the tools of General Semantics to balance the curriculum of the electronic media available to the youth so that their intellect and character are strong and they become sound thinkers.

Keywords: General Semantics, information environment, language, media.

The purpose of this Paper is to discuss the relationship between General Semantics, the school curriculum, and the curriculum of the electronic media. General Semantics is a discipline with a set of formulations and strategies that “can improve the way we think and talk”.¹ It provides tools for sound thinking and is also useful in dealing effectively with the problems of everyday living.

The term ‘media’ includes “the whole range of modern communications media: television, the cinema, video, radio, photography, advertising, newspapers and magazines, recorded music, computer games and the internet.”² As Marshall McLuhan famously said, ‘the medium is the message’, meaning that “different kinds of media have characteristics of their own different from the content that they are actually delivering...”³

Neil Postman (1979) expresses concern about education and the information environment of the youth. He refers to Marshall McLuhan who wrote that “our education must assume a thermostatic function”.⁴ While pointing out that what is to be warmed or cooled, adjusted and balanced is the information environment, Postman remarks:

“...it is the business of education, at all times, to monitor and adjust the information environment wherever possible so that its inherent biases and drift do not monopolize the intellect and character of our youth”.⁵

He says that “Plato knew that the dominant form of information in a culture shapes the intellectual orientation of its citizens”.⁶

Defining a curriculum as “a design for controlling and shaping the minds of the young”, Postman says that the television curriculum is the first curriculum and the school curriculum is the second one of the youth of today, who get more hours of exposure to electronic media than the time spent in school.⁷

Neil Postman makes a detailed analysis of the school curriculum's primary form of information which is language and the electronic media's primary form of information which is pictures. He says that “all language...is a digital form of information”.⁸ As Postman says, “Language is, by its nature, slow moving, hierarchical, logical and continuous”.⁹ It involves the activity of the left hemisphere of the brain. “The left hemisphere is the source of most of our language power...” remarks Postman.¹⁰

Postman says that “...any decline in the resources of language is likely to be accompanied by an increase in personal maladjustment or, if you will, crazy talk”¹¹ General Semantics is “a useful discipline for preventing crazy and stupid

talk”.¹² Levinson refers to Postman's definition of stupid talk as “talk that has (among other difficulties) a confused direction or inappropriate tone or a vocabulary not well suited to its context”.¹³ General Semantics “emphasizes relationships between language and human behavior”.¹⁴ Postman points out that “...articulate language is our chief weapon against mental disturbance”.¹⁵

Postman says:

“Language, as many anthropologists have shown, is not merely a means of communicating. It is also an organ of perception. It creates the world as much as reflects it by calling our attention to some parts of it and by turning us away from other parts”.¹⁶

He also says:

“As long as words are being used, we are always at a considerable remove from reality, for words are not representations of reality. They are representations of ideas about reality”.¹⁷

One of the formulations of General Semantics is that words are not the things they represent. Postman says: “...all language is paraphrasable ...Words have synonyms. Pictures do not”.¹⁸ He remarks that “Words are of a different order of abstraction, requiring an entirely different mode of intellectual activity”.¹⁹ He points out that

“...the TV curriculum does its work in analogic symbols which

appeal directly to emotional and largely unreflective response, while the school curriculum, relying heavily on digital symbolism, requires sophisticated cognitive processing”.²⁰

The television and other electronic media are a new system of perception and thought and have a nonlinguistic bias. Postman says:

“...it is ...obvious that where information is codified in electronic impulses and moved at the speed of light, there must be a knowledge explosion ...The very definition of knowledge in any era is a function of the form, magnitude, speed, direction, and accessibility of information.”²¹

A relevant question asked by Postman is “...What sort of people our modern forms of information are producing”.²² He refers to the effects of not just “the fragmented, impatient speech of the young or their illogical, unsyntactical writing but in the rapid emergence of an all-instant society: instant therapy, instant religion, instant food, instant friends, even instant reading”. David Crystal points out that one of the most popular media is text messaging and says: “The whole point of instant messaging is that the exchanges should take place as quickly as possible. That’s why it’s called ‘instant’ ”.²³

Martin Levinson points out that General Semantics teaches one “to delay

reacting and bring our higher brain functions into play”.²⁴ He says:

“...we do not have to unthinkingly react to stimuli. We can learn to delay our reactions long enough to investigate conditions and respond to them in a thoughtful manner. This can have a far more salutary effect in situations than reacting precipitously...”²⁵

Expressing concern regarding the effects of the electronic media, Postman says that there may be physiological changes because “continuous TV watching over centuries could conceivably have the effect of weakening left-brain activity, and producing a population of ‘right-brained’ people”.²⁶ He says that “such people would be strong on intuition and feeling but weak on reflection and analysis”.²⁷ He points out that they would be

“...people who are ‘in touch with their feelings,’ who are spontaneous and musical, and who live in an existential world of immediate experience but who, at the same time, cannot ‘think’ in the way we customarily use that word. In other words, people whose state of mind is somewhat analogous to that of a modern-day baboon”.²⁸

This will happen if “the word recedes in importance and the fast-moving, analogic image replaces it”.²⁹ There may be psychological changes such as reduced attention span.

Postman says that the young, who are “immersed in a world of disconnected media presentations ...are experiencing an acute inability to make connections”.³⁰

He says:

“TV or film cannot reveal a thesis. A thesis, a principle, a theme, a law, a hypothesis- these are all linguistic concepts. Pictures have no theses”.³¹

The electronic media distort one's use of language. The hypertext links in the internet lead to a breakdown of a linearity in language, and reading becomes difficult. Emails are written with spelling and grammatical errors just as in the case of text messaging, and the internet is not used to improve one's language.

Postman points out that the commercials are an especially important component of the TV curriculum which through them “is concerned to teach, by parable, that serious human worries are resolvable through relatively simple means and that, therefore, the resolution of anything problematic is never far away.....this teaching is almost the exact opposite of what schools are accustomed to assume about the nature and resolution of human problems”.³²

The tools of General Semantics rather would be more useful in resolving human problems than the message of TV commercials. The youth see thousands of commercials, which cripple the intellect, and they are unable to think. The commercials present a problem and a solution. Postman says “the problem... is

rarely trivial but the solution always is”.³³ These commercials, he says,

“...present us all with a paradigm of how to think and how to live and what to expect.....The new media are more than extensions of our senses. They are ultimately metaphors for life itself, directing us to search for time-compressed experience, short-term relationships, present -oriented accomplishment, simple and immediate solutions. Thus, the teaching of the media curriculum must lead inevitably to a disbelief in long-term planning, in deferred gratification, in the relevance of tradition, and in the need for confronting complexity”.³⁴

While pointing out that human beings automatically behave in certain ways under certain conditions, Levinson says

“Political propaganda, as well as commercial advertising, is premised on the idea that individuals will respond to slogans, names, designs, etc, in the same way that dogs can be induced to respond to bells and buzzers”.³⁵

Postman says that because of TV watching “our youth are being conditioned to intense concentration for short periods of time, and deconditioned, so to speak, to sustained concentration”.³⁶

Levinson says:

“Slogans are intended to go beyond reasoning with the hope of eliciting signal reactions (quick, unthinking

responses, also called knee-jerk reactions). They are a form of groupthink...”³⁷

He also remarks that “Sloganeering is...practiced ...wherever it appears desirable to ease the burden of individual responsibility for thinking things through”.³⁸

Postman says that the new media apart from a nonlinguistic bias has a bias toward one-way communication which results in maladjustment.³⁹ Levinson says “...fanaticism is what happens when we have no will to refute. Thus, our only protection from fanaticism is to develop and maintain our will to refute”.⁴⁰ As Marshall McLuhan says, the world is ‘a global village’ meaning that ‘the great miracle of modern media technology is that the world has been brought closer together’.⁴¹ Yet we are “both mute and powerless”.⁴² The TV curriculum is irrefutable while the school curriculum is refutable by counterargument which is the nature of exposition.

Postman says that “in the ‘completeness’ of our immersion in media, we come to prefer media-life to reality itself”.⁴³ We experience life at a distance. We prefer to live in a virtual reality, a “surrogate to reality” because we are isolated in front of the TV or computer screen and cannot relate to people and we become callous and indifferent. We see life through a filter, a technological filter, and so everything seems colored. Postman says, “...information is not reality. It is an abstraction of it”.⁴⁴ What one sees on

television depends on decisions that are made “by the frame of a television screen, by the values of a television director, according to the biases of a television network” says Postman.⁴⁵ Buckingham says “The media *intervene*: they provide us with selective versions of the world rather than direct access to it.”⁴⁶ Awareness of abstraction is one of the tools of General Semantics.

Postman quotes McLuhan who says:

“When man lives in an electric environment, his nature is transformed and his private identity is merged with a corporate whole. He becomes ‘Mass Man’ ”.⁴⁷

Postman says that Mass Man is a phenomenon of electric speed, not of physical quantity.⁴⁸

George Walsh remarks about McLuhan:

“He is warning that when electronic media replaces visual cultures (by which he means the culture of the printed word) , then the tendency will be for mankind to move from individualism, from being ‘specialists,’ to a kind of collective identity. It is a very simple step, for him, from that prediction to this: That a world that has a collective identity- that is, one that is a ‘global village’ – has the great potential to become a place where terrorism and totalitarian governments rule. If we are all the same, then we are easy

to dominate-as if we were robots”.

49

Postman says:

“...the nonlinear, no sequential nature of electronic information works in powerful ways to create a frame of mind hostile to science. Science depends on linearity of thought, the step-by-step presentation of evidence and argumentation. This method of organizing information is the structural basis of scientific thought. It makes possible the refutation of evidence and argument; it permits translation into other digital forms, such as mathematics; it encourages delayed response and reflective analysis”.⁵⁰

One of the strategies of General Semantics is scientific, sound thinking. Martin Levinson says “Employing a scientific attitude, using ‘uncommon sense,’ can bring our assumptions into awareness and lead us to examine and revise them”.⁵¹

The electronic revolution is here to stay. One is inclined to agree with Neil Postman who advocates the conservation of the teachings of the school curriculum, with its emphasis on language and print literacy, to balance the curriculum of the electronic media available to the youth, so that their intellect and character are strong and that they become sound thinkers by the application of the strategies and tools of General Semantics.

Notes and References

1. Levinson, Martin. *Sensible Thinking for Turbulent Times*. New York: iuniverse. Inc, 2006, p.38
2. Buckingham, David. *Media Education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture*. Cambridge: Polity, 2003, p.3
3. Walsh, George. *51 Great Books You Should Have Read (and probably didn't)*. New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 2008, p.219
4. Postman, Neil. *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* New York: Delacorte Press, 1979, p.86
5. Ibid., pp.31,32
6. Ibid., p.36
7. Ibid., p.38
8. Ibid., p.54
9. Ibid., p.74
10. Ibid., p.71
11. Ibid., p.80
12. Levinson, p.46
13. Ibid., p.38
14. Johnson, Kenneth G. *General Semantics: An Outline Survey*. Third Revised Edition. Fort Worth, TX: Institute of General Semantics, 2004, p.2
15. Postman, p.79
16. Ibid., p.39
17. Ibid., p.54
18. Ibid., p.55
19. Ibid., p.55
20. Ibid., p.56
21. Ibid., p.43
22. Ibid., p.47

- | | |
|---|-----------------------|
| 23. Crystal, David. <i>A Little Book of Language</i> . New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2010, p.185 | 37. Levinson, p.46 |
| 24. Levinson, p.6 | 38. Ibid., p.46 |
| 25. Ibid., p.5 | 39. Postman, p.80 |
| 26. Postman, p.72 | 40. Levinson, p.41 |
| 27. Ibid., p.72 | 41. Walsh, p.220 |
| 28. Ibid., p.72 | 42. Postman, p.80. |
| 29. Ibid., p.72 | 43. Ibid., p.84 |
| 30. Ibid., p.78 | 44. Ibid., p.39 |
| 31. Ibid., p.79 | 45. Ibid., p.80 |
| 32. Ibid., p.61 | 46. Buckingham, p.3 |
| 33. Ibid., pp.76,77 | 47. Postman, p.81 |
| 34. Ibid., p.77 | 48. Ibid., p.81 |
| 35. Levinson, p.5 | 49. Walsh, pp.220,221 |
| 36. Postman, p.61 | 50. Postman, p.77 |
| | 51. Levinson, p.12 |

How to cite this article?

Dr Geetha Bhasker ,“General Semantics, the School Curriculum, and the Curriculum of the Electronic Media”*Research Journal Of English(RJOE)*8(1),PP:83-89,2023, DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2023.8.1.89