

MODULE 5

WHITE PAPER: CULTURE AS A SYSTEM

I. NORMATIVE SYNTHESIS

THEORETICAL CONCLUSIONS

Here the seminar’s analysis moves from technology’s effects on individuals and physical environments directly to its ability for pervasive redefinition of what counts as “normal” or “legitimate” and even what falls into the realm of the intelligible within the relational web of the **cultural environment**.¹ The module claims, as its central theoretical contribution, that cultural environment constitutes the primary site at which technological rationality becomes most powerful and authoritative—that is, the locus where it is no longer experienced as an imposition, instrument, or system, but as what establishes the unquestioned norms for our behavioral patterns.

Where earlier modules examined human formation at the level of individual habit (Module 2) and environment, both built and biological (Modules 3 and 4), Module 5 addresses formation at the level of *collective social relationality*. Cultural realities are “where” (and how) habits and environments are instituted, interpreted, justified, normalized, and subsequently transmitted. It is therefore the domain in which technological influence becomes both self-sustaining and self-perpetuating.

The module’s analysis begins by distinguishing culture from both individual preference and abstract ideology. Culture is neither what people happen to like nor what they explicitly profess to believe. Rather, it is the complex pattern of practices, institutions, symbols, behaviors, responses, and norms through which a society teaches its members how to live, what to “value”, and what to take for granted. Though it may be **stipulated** by conscious intentional use of language, the realization of any cultural reality comes about indirectly, through the acceptance and gradual adaptation of **customary** ways of relating between individuals and institutions.

The subtlety of custom’s influence helps us to understand why technological change so often appears inevitable even when it is not. That is, technologies do not merely extend our capabilities but rather they silently change the criteria through which practices are judged successful or legitimate—or even understood to be pragmatically feasible, given the other cultural norms or expectations to which all behavior is expected to conform. For instance, in any thoroughly technologized culture—where objects

¹ The module did **not** address the more fundamental—but still quite pressing question—as to what is meant by the word “culture”: a term of complex origin, development, adoption, and a confused history of use. Put succinctly, “culture” is the natural florescence of human linguistic relationality into structures by which cognitive habits are rendered into suprasubjective patterns of signification. In other words, culture exists only *in* and *from* individuals, but provenates *through* the patterns we constitute and employ for common signification. E.g., as a very simple example, greetings take on many different patterns across locales, times, climates, etc.

are everywhere evaluated in terms of the presupposed principal metric of efficiency—what can be done most efficiently comes to be understood as what *ought* to be done, and anything done inefficiently is evaluated in terms of whether it might be made more efficient (and if not, how efficiently it can be excised or discarded). Subsequently, whatever cannot be measured appears irrelevant (or even disappears into the “unreal”, the “fictitious”, the world of “fantasy” or “mere opinion”).

Module 5 shows that this shift of our norms occurs primarily through the accepted or promoted habits of behavior governing our institutions. That is, institutions are the mediating structures that carry cultural meaning not only to wider populations, but do so across generations. When institutions adopt technological forms in order to function (to “be efficient”) within a technological environment, they revise the standards by which their own success and the success of participants within those institutions (students, employees, etc.) are evaluated. As those institutions and their members become more successful in the national or global systems, other institutions tend to follow suit—resulting in further homogenization.

This revision is rarely experienced as an immediately-evident loss of irreplaceable goods. On the contrary, it often appears as “modernization” or “improvement”—having unquestionably accepted the metrics that would deem only such to be successes (and thus the self-perpetuation). Yet, as argued in the seminar, such adaptations not infrequently hollow out the very goods that the institutions exist to protect. Education, for instance, has long since become informational instruction or vocational training without any true formation of intellectual habit. Similarly, many more jobs in the world today are measured by productivity alone, and the question of vocational fulfillment is entirely forgotten. And in the diminishment of institutional purpose—subsequent to their homogenizations with one another—their communities provide a kind of “connection” that is merely *ad hoc* and superficial; members of these institutions develop little commitment to one another or to the institution’s purpose, but instead see them as only means to their own individual advancements and purposes.

A key for understanding these revisions and shifts is the concept of *normative drift*. The effects of technological rationality rarely confront culture directly. Instead, they cause our standards to drift over time—always promoting efficiency, scaling to larger numbers, speed of responsiveness and immediacy of satisfaction, etc.—such that they gradually displace older evaluative frameworks with perspectives entirely different, even if they do not appear so, given the granularity of the change. These standards tend to appear neutral because they are **procedural** rather than **substantive**—and thus, even when the change does happen suddenly, because the “substance” appears the same, the change appears to be one merely of *how*, and not of *what*. Yet precisely for this reason, they exercise extraordinary power, for they determine—in advance of any debate or objections—*how* success is defined and measured, and thus, *what* success means.

This analysis helps explain why cultural critique often misfires. Efforts to correct cultural decline by improving the content or style of its messaging fail to address the underlying problem: that is, the issue is not that culture transmits the “wrong values”, but that it increasingly lacks the means to communicate *the good*; instead, striving only to promote one set of values against another, with no rationale available

for explaining why one should be preferred over the others. This value-driven conflict arises because, our daily practices having been altered to fit technological systems and subsequently losing the ritual patterns of repetition and durations of lived experience, the truth of the good can no longer be seen—for it requires such a durational presence.

Module 5 also clarifies the relationship between technologized reasoning and homogenization. Technological systems privilege standardization because it enables coordination at ever-larger scales. When cultural practices are reorganized in conformity with these systems, local variation and tacit knowledge are de-emphasized—not because they are explicitly rejected, but because they resist the homogeneity necessary for large-scale systematization. Thus, any cultural differences that survive tend to be merely superficial aesthetic variation propped up by stipulation rather than continued customary, and meanwhile the substantive differences—from which those aesthetic differences arose in the first place—erode underneath.

It is important **not** to interpret this process as the triumph of a hidden, malicious ideology or secret cabal. The damage is not done by false beliefs imposed from above—or manipulation of media environments by some grand evil force that needs only to be outed or destroyed—but in the common adoption of the path of least resistance: it is and always has been much easier to accommodate oneself to the systems than to maintain customs ill-suited to those systems. Subsequently, older cultural norms cease to be defended effectively because they no longer appear as norms, while those displacing them appear as inevitable changes dictated by the system itself. For instance, the pedagogical shifts away from foundational studies of language and deep literacy—a commonplace of every serious educational institution throughout most of Western civilization’s history—in favor of STEM programs, which unfolded in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, was not initially accomplished by imposition from the top but an acceptance of technocracy from below; the idea, that is, that specialization was the route to success, and that expertise was the most desirable (because most job-secure and marketable) outcome of an education. The changes in our societal infrastructure seemed to demand a pedagogical revolution—and defenses of the traditional liberal arts have appeared as mere nostalgia to those most in need of being persuaded to their intrinsic merits. So too, we see similar shifts occur in expectations for housing (rental vs. ownership), employment (career vs. jobs), and even questions of familial relations (indivisible bonds vs. voluntary associations).

Reflection upon these difficulties prepares our transition to Module 6. Once cultural norms are rewritten in accordance with a technologized mode of revealing, governance naturally follows. Political authority begins to justify itself through totalizing administrative competence—the ability to have policies for every problem—rather than prudential judgment. What appears at the level of culture as modernization or optimization reappears at the level of government as necessary “best practices” and “political mandates”.

In summary, Module 5 shows how technological rationality moves from being a process of influencing minds and environments to establishing an unquestioned authority. If technological thinking becomes infused into the structures of any culture, that is, such thinking no longer needs to persuade or habituate:

it rather *sets the norms*. Careful and deep reflection on our own culture will show just how profoundly technological thinking has, in fact, been infused.

Cultural renewal cannot be achieved through critique alone, nor through insistence upon returning to what was. As long as institutions operate according to technological norms not only unquestioned or presupposed but also invisible or unchallenged (challenged by institutions operating alternatively, that is), even the most humane intentions will be bent toward inhuman ends. What is required of us, therefore, is both the preservation and the recovery or re-founding of institutions sustaining habits of judgment, memory, and responsibility—forms that accept inefficiency and limitation as the means to discovering true meaning in human existence. Otherwise, our “culture” will be a stagnant and lifeless thing.

PRACTICAL ACTIONS INDICATED

1. Institutional self-examination

Institutions must examine not only what technologies they use but what cultural assumptions those technologies import. Adoption of technological instruments or systems without reflection risks surrendering institutional identity to the demands of technological innovation. Before accepting a given technology into use, institutional leaders need to test and evaluate not only the efficiency and practicality of implementing that technology, but reflect carefully on how it extends and potentially distorts the functions of human beings—and reject that which is most efficient if it is not that which promotes human flourishing. Again, as always, a rich philosophical anthropology must provide the standard.

2. Preservation of non-optimized practices

Cultural practices that resist efficiency—whether religious or institutional rituals, traditions, slow forms of learning, deliberate moments of silence, pause, or rest—require conscious integration into the patterns of life. Their virtue lies in their ability to resist the totalizing effects of technological rationalization; such resistance must become a part of individuals’ own habits and promoted throughout the patterns of relations constituting our cultural realities.

3. Limits on metric-driven evaluation

The uncritical use of metrics as proxies for success obscures that which is truly meaningful in life and in cultural development. While measurement has its utility, cultural goods cannot be fully represented by quantitative indicators, and education to a fuller concept of *what is* must be maintained. We must always recall that metric evaluations are *indicative signs*—that is, they *point at* the objects, but they do not tell us what those objects themselves are.

4. Cultivation of cultural memory

Because technologized cultural practices privilege immediacy of result and efficiency of process, institutions must actively cultivate memory through an understanding of tradition, resolute narratives (i.e., having “plots” that stem from and resolve to firmly-established principles), and a continuity of practice from one generation to the next. Without these three efforts, “memory” becomes just another

instrumental utility; and without true memory, a memory that is *lived* in and by persons, culture collapses into a series of overlapping but fundamentally discontinuous trends—a collapse disproportioned to human nature and thus corrosive of the possibilities for human flourishing.

II. DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

CENTRAL QUESTION

In what sense can culture itself be understood as a technological system, and how do technological forms reorganize cultural institutions, practices, and expectations independently of explicit ideological intent?

PRINCIPAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

Readings:

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- McLuhan and Powers 1989: *The Global Village*, II. “The Global Effects of Video-Related Technologies” (83–144).

Background Readings:

- Lyotard 1979: *The Postmodern Condition*, c.1, “The Field: Knowledge in Computerized Sciences”.
- Winner 1982: “Semiotics of Culture” in *Frontiers in Semiotics*.
- Postman 1992: *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*.
- Deely 1994: *The Human Use of Signs, or: Elements of Anthroposemiosis*.
- Deely 2009: *Purely Objective Reality*.

ORIENTATION

Module 5 marks a transition from analyses of the individual person and immediate environments to the level of more widely-shared practices and institutions, understood as the constituent elements of the phenomenon commonly identified by the term “culture”. The seminar proposes that culture is not merely influenced by technology from the outside but today finds itself increasingly constituted through technological mediation. Put otherwise, technology does not simply operate within culture as one element among many others, but it *necessarily* forms an integral element of culture as such; but left unchecked, it actively and increasingly reorganizes culture according to its own dictates as a process of revealing.

The guiding claim of this week is that modern culture has become systematized in a specifically technologized sense: oriented toward efficiency, scalability, predictability, and control—most especially, as these four characteristics touch upon **communication** (anticipating Module 7). This systematization demands conformity from our most important institutions—education, work, family life, religion—not

by overt coercion but by altering the conditions under which cultural participation occurs, especially the communicative-communal constitution of the cultural system. A failure to conform seems to result in “squeezing” these institutions out of existence.

MAJOR FINDINGS

1. Culture is more than aggregated behavior

The module rejects the reduction of culture to a collection of individual preferences or behaviors. Rather, “culture” consists in shared meanings, practices, institutions, symbols, behaviors, responses, and norms that endure across time and are transmitted through habituation rather than explicit instruction. It emerges as the result of common patterns amongst the development of individual minds.

Technological mediation alters culture most thoroughly by restructuring these channels of transmission. That is, when cultural practices are reorganized to fit the demands of technological systems, the meaning those practices once carried is often thinned or displaced, resulting commonly in the advent of cultural simulacra, rather than realities.

2. Technological rationality dominates cultural rationality

A key insight of the week is that the common criteria of technological success—namely, efficiency, optimization, and measurability—gradually come to function as default standards of cultural evaluation. Activities once valued for intrinsic goods (such as religious practice or satisfaction with one’s work) are reinterpreted in terms of outcomes and performance metrics (such as frequency of psychological disorder or reported happiness on a numerical scale).

This shift is especially evident in education and work, where learning and labor are increasingly assessed through quantifiable outputs. On the one hand, this quantified assessment produces an ever-increasing bureaucratic burden (which some hope to see alleviated today by “artificial intelligence”); but on the other hand, and more dangerously, it also results in a transformation of culture from something that emerges from individuals’ natural relationships with one another into something superimposed upon individuals, independent of their relationships.

3. Institutions often unthinkingly internalize technological rationality

Module 5 highlights how institutions adopt technological forms in order to survive within a technologized culture. Schools, churches, and civic organizations increasingly model themselves on corporate or platform-based structures—those that thrive by technologized processes, given their respective but very-narrow and often inhuman ends—and often do so without explicit reflection of the origins or purposes of this remodeling.

This unconscious internalization of technologized rationality produces a feedback loop: institutions reshape themselves to fit technological expectations, which in turn reinforces those expectations as cultural norms.

4. Cultural homogenization and loss of meaning

Technological systems favor standardization, as this increases the efficiency of communication between nodes within the system. While this enables wide access and coordination, it also tends toward cultural homogenization. Local customs, idiosyncratic practices, and the tacit forms of knowledge which can only be developed by deep familiarity with the local become marginalized because they resist conformity to a universal system.

This loss is not merely one of aesthetic variety. Meaning itself depends upon an ability to see the universal *in* the particular—across a diversity within which the true governing force of the intelligible can be understood. Technological culture struggles to preserve this variety and thereby enervates our ability to grasp meaningful objects.

KEY EXPLANATORY CLAIMS

1. **Culture is transmitted primarily through habituated practice.**

The very meaning of “culture” itself demands deeper investigation: but even without delving into the object the term names, we can identify it as a relational reality that comes about not by *explicit* instruction but rather by the habits of practice that each generation inherits.

2. **Technological systems reshape culture by redefining norms of success.**

There are countless examples of this normative redefining. Indeed, every new era of technological innovation has re-shaped the norms of success in fairly obvious ways: the Nixon/Kennedy debate having different interpretations whether heard on radio or watched on television, for instance, showing that evaluation differed by media.

3. **Institutional survival often requires technological conformity.**

One clear-cut example can be seen in the advent of the internet’s impact upon businesses: few survive long without a stable and effective web presence—even small businesses and shops that rely solely on in-person services and exchanges. In a more complex example, large education institutions have often had to alter their curricula to be more “pragmatic” in a world less financially forgiving.

4. **Standardization erodes cultural diversity and idiosyncratic developments.**

Few locales retain strong homogeneous traditions in the age of mass transit, social and geographical mobility, and digital presence. Those that do survive seldom develop or continue to thrive, as they find themselves increasingly turned into relics.

5. **Cultural change occurs implicitly before it is articulated.**

Much more often than not, particularly with the speed of post-industrial and electric technologies, changes come into the patterns of cultural habituation and inheritance well before any linguistic articulation of them can be made. But this happened even with the Gutenberg press.