

## The 2024 Elections and the Disappearance of Adulthood

Stephen Colbert's quip late in the summer when Kamala Harris was rising in the polls, "Well, the latest polls have restored my faith in 49% of the American people," provoked a chuckle for me and then a groan as I wondered where did we go wrong? By "we" I meant myself and the whole education profession. I wondered how we could have let millions of young people graduate from high schools, colleges, and even graduate and professional schools without the basic ability to discern truth from lies, reality from fiction, sincerity from hypocrisy. Deeper reflection, however, led me to the conclusion that the fault does not lie with us. We have been doing the best we can.

I hope some readers will recognize in my title a reference and respectful homage to Neil Postman and his "brilliant" (see the New York Times review if you think I'm exaggerating) 1982 book *The Disappearance of Childhood*<sup>1</sup>. I first became aware of the book around 1987. In my role as Director of the Honors Program at the University of North Dakota, I was organizing an interdisciplinary colloquium on "Television." Neighbor, friend and colleague, Dr. David Kushner, Professor of Early Childhood Education, told me I had to include *The Disappearance of Childhood* in the syllabus. I read it, was disturbed by it, and recognized immediately that David was right, it had to be part of the course. I was disturbed because I realized that Postman was describing more than the disappearance of childhood; he was in fact predicting the disappearance of something very dear to me: a culture of literacy.

For Postman, the golden era of childhood was the period from mid-nineteenth century to mid-twentieth century. During that time, it was generally recognized in western societies that children between roughly the ages of 7 and 17 should be sheltered from certain "adult" knowledge, should attend school, and learn to read. Knowledge was transmitted to children through the printed word and the spoken words of well-educated schoolteachers who sequentially programmed reading material appropriate for the developing intellectual capacities of their students. For Postman, learning to read is a long process that leads slowly but surely to the development of adult qualities; "a child evolves toward adulthood by acquiring the sort of intellect we expect of a good reader . . . the capacity to think logically and sequentially, the capacity to distance oneself from symbols, the capacity to manipulate high orders of abstraction, the capacity to defer gratification." As a result of this process, the child becomes a literate adult. "The literate person must

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/08/28/books/books-of-the-times-child-as-small-adult.html>

learn to be reflective and analytical, patient and assertive, always poised, after due consideration, to say no to a text.”

Postman attributes the disappearance of childhood to the rise of mass media. In 1982, before Al Gore had invented the internet (!) and two years before Mark Zuckerberg was even born, that meant television principally, a medium that constantly bombards us with information, some true, some not so true, and which does not require those “adult” capacities listed above in order to be internalized. As Postman put it, “Television offers a fairly primitive but irresistible alternative to the linear and sequential logic of the printed word and tends to make the rigors of a literate education irrelevant. . . In learning to interpret the meaning of images, we do not require lessons in grammar or spelling. . . Watching television not only requires no skills but develops no skills.” Someone on television (or now social media) can tell us that immigrants in Ohio are eating cats or that Joe Biden did not win the 2020 election, and that information is absorbed as readily as the refutation of those lies.

Postman cites early examples of television’s influence on the political process, as television does what it is designed to do: project an image. Postman reminds us of the impact of John Kennedy’s youthful self-assurance in his debates with a sweaty Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan’s charm and wit outdueling Jimmy Carter; and he seems to anticipate both the manipulation of media as exercised by Rupert Murdoch and the ascendancy of a television performer like Donald Trump. In 1982, Postman could not of course have anticipated that a Donald Trump character would one day be a presidential candidate. However, one can imagine that he had in mind someone like Trump whose antithesis he describes in this passage summarizing the characteristics of an “adult:”

*“Almost all of the characteristics we associate with adulthood are those that are (and were) either generated or amplified by the requirements of a fully literate culture: the capacity for self-restraint, a tolerance for delayed gratification, a sophisticated ability to think conceptually and sequentially, a preoccupation with both historical continuity and the future, a high valuation of reason and hierarchical order. As electric media move literacy to the periphery of culture and take its place at the center, different attitudes and character traits come to be valued and a new diminished definition of adulthood begins to emerge. It is a definition that does not exclude children, and therefore what results is a new configuration of the ages of life. In the television age there are three. At one end infancy; at the other senility. In between there is what we might call the adult-child.”*

If he were alive today (he died in 2003) Neil Postman would not be surprised that in 2016 and 2024, a majority of the American people elected an adult-child to the presidency. Instead of rolling over in his grave, Neil Postman would tell us, “I tried to warn you.”