<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Information, knowledge, wisdom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Postman, Neil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>URL</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10220/3166">http://hdl.handle.net/10220/3166</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thank you. I haven’t had the opportunity to speak to journalists as much as I would have liked to and as much as some people think I have, and I am grateful to you for giving me this chance. The two previous times I spoke to journalists, the audience did not actually consist of journalists, but turned out to be owners of newspapers. Owners of newspapers are to journalists what George Steinbrenner is to a baseball player, which means, he hires and fires them, but has no idea of how they do what they do and certainly cannot do it himself. On both occasions, I made the point that the newspaper industry could no longer rely exclusively on schools to produce each new generation of readers. Throughout its history, the newspaper industry has benefited greatly by the fact that the task of making literate people was done, at no cost whatsoever to the industry, by an unrelated social institution. But it is now clear, I told the owners, that schools can no longer do this job without assistance, and I suggested that newspapers will have to get into the business of teaching the young how to read. I described how this might be done, and estimated the cost to the industry to be about one billion dollars over a period of ten years. Naturally, many in the audience thought my idea impractical, if not lunatic, and it was lucky for me, on both occasions, that I was able to offer a few other ideas to engage their attention and preserve my reputation. This morning, I will do something riskier because I will bring forward only one idea, and in doing so, I am aware that I am addressing a group of broadcast journalists who don’t own very much except, of course, the attention of your respective audiences. In any case, I am hoping that most of you will think my idea has some relevance to the way you think about your jobs as journalists. If you do not, then I fear there is no hope for my reputation.

The idea I would like to propose is not easy to describe in a quick sentence. So I hope you will be patient as I lead my way up to it. I have titled my talk “Information, Knowledge, and Wisdom,” and you can tell from that title that I do not believe information is the same thing as knowledge, and it is certainly not anything close to what one might mean by wisdom, transmission, movies, the locomotive, the steamboat, the x-ray, and the stethoscope, not to mention the penny press, the modern magazine, the advertising agency, and the modern bureaucracy. It is not often noted that there was more technological change in the 19th century than in the 20th century, when we added some important inventions so that the burdens of information scarcity were removed once and for all.

I might add that not everyone understands our situation in this way. And I can’t help thinking that those who enthusiastically promote such things as the information superhighway - for example, President Clinton - strike me as reactionaries who are still trying to solve a 19th century problem that has already been solved. In any case, we may congratulate ourselves on our achievement, but have been rather slow in recognizing that in solving the problem we set out to solve, we created a new problem never experienced before, and which has had a profound impact on the function of journalists. The problem goes by many names: information meaninglessness, information glut, information incoherence. From millions of sources all over the globe, through every possible channel and medium- light waves, airwaves, ticker tapes, computer banks, telephone wires,
television cables, satellites, printing presses - information pours in. Behind it, in every imaginable form of storage - on paper, video and studio tape, on disks, film, and silicon chips - is an even greater volume of information wanting to be retrieved. Whereas information was once an essential resource in helping us to gain control over our physical and symbolic worlds, our technological ingenuity has transformed information into a form of garbage, and ourselves into garbage collectors. Like the Sorcerer's Apprentice, we are awash in information without even a broom to help us get rid of it. What has happened is that the tie between information and human purpose has been severed. Information is now a commodity that is bought and sold; it comes indiscriminately, whether asked for or not, directed at no one in particular, in enormous volume, at high speeds, disconnected from meaning and import.

So let me begin by telling you what I think information is. To put it as simply as I can, information consists of statements about the facts of the world. There are, of course, an uncountable number of facts in the world, and almost all of them go unreported. Facts are transformed into information only when we take note of them, and speak of the, or, in the case of newspapers, write about them. By this definition, facts cannot be wrong. They are what they are. Statements about facts - that is, information - can be wrong, and often are. If we live in an age of information, as people like to say, this means that more erroneous statements about the world are available to the public more than ever before. That, in itself is worthy of a whole speech, and if you ever invite me again, I'll do one for you. In any case, this word information is an important one for all journalists and I have no quarrel with you if you have a different definition. What is important here is that the uses of information have changed over time, depending on how much of it is available and from what sources it comes. For example, up until the early 19th century, all cultures suffered from what we might call information scarcity. No matter how the word may have been defined, there were not enough media available to dispense information and that is why, incidentally, newspapers were so important. They were our main source of public information. But beginning in the 1840's, humanity creatively addressed the problem of how to eliminate information scarcity, how to overcome the limitations of space, time and form. In the early 19th century, for example, a message could travel only as fast as a human being, which, on a train, was 35 miles per hour. Language, either written or spoken, was very nearly the only form in which messages could be codified; and of course most people did not have access to the expanding information being generated in many fields. And so we attacked these problems with great vigor, and triumphed over them in spectacular fashion. As a result, in the 19th century, we remade the world through technology, unleashing a Niagara of information. For those of you unfamiliar with the 19th century, here are some of the inventions that contributed to the remaking of the world-information environment: telegraphy, photography, the rotary press, the telephone, the phonograph, the transatlantic cable, the electric light, radio.

There are those, of course, who were able to see, almost from the beginning, what problems would arise because of information glut. In America, Henry David Thoreau, writing in the 1850's wondered if the new technologies would not make information trivial. In a famous passage in his book, \textit{Walden}, he wrote “We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine to Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate....we are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the old world nearer to the new; but perchance, the first news that will leak through into the broad flapping American ear will be that Princess Adelaide had whooping cough”

Writing much later, in the 1930's, the great American poet, Edna St. Vincent Millay, saw an even more serious problem than information triviality-information incoherence. She wrote a poem about this problem and here is a brief excerpt from it!
Upon this gifted age, in its dark hour
Rains from sky a meteoric shower
Of facts....they lie unquestioned, uncombed.
Wisdom enough to leech us of our ill
Is daily spun, but there exists no loom.
To weave it into fabric.

Ms. Millet is using the word "facts" here as I would use "information" Nonetheless, she has stated the problem precisely. In saying that we have no loom to weave information into fabric, she means, I believe, that while there is an abundance of information, there is a shortage of knowledge. What do I mean by "knowledge"? I define knowledge as organized information-information that is embedded in some context; information that has a point of view, that leads one to seek further information in order to understand something about the world. Without organized information, we may know something of the world, but very little about it. Perhaps I can say it best this way. When one has knowledge, one knows how to make sense of information, knows how to relate the information to one's life. Knowledge helps us to know when information is suspect but also, and just as important, helps us to know when information is irrelevant.

Now is fairly obvious that many journalists- both print and broadcast- are aware of the distinction between information and knowledge. But not enough of them. Indeed, most broadcast news programs still appear to be in the information business rather than the knowledge business; which is to say there are news directors, editors and reporters who do not yet grasp that, in a technological world, information is a problem, not a solution. They will tell us of things we already know about or of things we have no good reason to know about, or of things whose only value are filmable. I'm sure I do not need to labor the point that TV news is dominated by the availability of film footage. So I won't. It is more important to say that very little information is given to providing a sense of context or coherence because many broadcast journalists do not believe they are in the coherence business. Let us suppose for example, that a fourteen year old Palestinian boy hurls a Molotov cocktail at two eighteen year old Israeli soldiers in Jerusalem. The explosion knocks one of the soldiers down and damages his left eye. The other soldier, terrified, fires a shot at the Palestinian that kills him instantly. The injured soldier loses the sight of his eye. All of this we learn of on television or from radio, and the next day we are told about it again in the newspaper. But we are rarely told anything about the meaning of the event or indeed, why this event was included in the news at all. There are at least forty wars going on somewhere in the world, and we can assume that young people are being killed in all of them. Why do I need to know about this event? Why is what happens in Jerusalem more important than what happens in Ghana? Will this event in Jerusalem have an effect on other events? Is this something that has happened many times before? Is it likely to happen again? Is someone to blame for what happened there?

Most newscasts do not answer these questions, and because they do not, the information is useless to me. It is worse than useless. It contributes incoherence and confusion to a mind that is already overloaded with information. after all, the next day someone will be killed in Bosnia, and the after that, in Indonesia, and the day after that someplace else. So what? If I were asked what to say what is the worst thing about television news or radio news, I would say that it is just this: That there is no reason offered for why the information is there, no background; no connectedness to anything else, no point of view; no sense of what the audience is supposed to do with the information. It is as if the word "because"
entirely absent from the grammar of broadcast journalism, we are presented with a world of “ands” nor “because”. But you know as well as I that if you tell me a story, you must also tell me one in another way, why you are telling me the story. If I don’t, that news is very nearly a worthless commodity which is why I think you need to get out of the information business and into the knowledge business. But there is something else you must do for me in a technological age, and this brings me to the one idea that I have to offer and which may strike you as strange. The idea concerns the word “wisdom”. I wish to suggest that it is time for those in the news business to begin thinking of themselves as not merely being in the knowledge business but in the wisdom business, as well.

On hearing this word, wisdom, you may be inclined to think I am going too far. But I wish to define it in a way that will make it seem to you entirely practical. I mean by wisdom the capacity to know what body of knowledge is relevant to the solution of significant problems. Knowledge, as I have said, is only organized information. It is self-contained, confined to a single system of information about the world. One can have a great deal of knowledge about the world but entirely lack wisdom. That is frequently the case with scientists, politicians, entrepreneurs, academics, even theologians. I suppose it is also true of journalists. For example, let us say, you have a story about cloning. It is mere information to tell us that scientists in Scotland have cloned a sheep and that some scientists in the United States claim to have cloned a monkey. You will provide us with knowledge if you can tell us how cloning is done, and how soon we may expect humans to be cloned, and even something about the history of attempts at cloning. But it would be wisdom to advise us on what system of knowledge we need in order to evaluate the act of cloning. Science itself can give us no help in this matter. Science can only tell us how it works. What can tell us whether or not we should be happy or sad about cloning? What can tell us if there are policies that need to be developed to control such a process? What can tell us if this is progress or regress? To begin to think about such questions, we would have to make reference to the body of knowledge we call religion, or the body of knowledge we call politics, or the body of knowledge we call sociology. Knowledge cannot judge itself. Knowledge must be judged by other knowledge, and therein lies the essence of wisdom. There are, I have learned, children starving in Somalia. What system of knowledge do I need to know in order to have some idea about how to solve this problem? I have learned that our oceans are polluted and the rain forests are being depleted. What systems of knowledge do I need to have to know how these problems might be solved? Or the problems of racism and sexism? Or the problem of crime?

If you are thinking that this sort of thing is accomplished on editorial pages or opinion pieces on television, I say it is not. Editorials and opinion pieces merely tell us what to think. I am talking about telling us how we should think. That is the difference between mere opinion and wisdom. Any fool can have an opinion; to know what one needs to know to have an opinion is wisdom; which is another way of saying that wisdom means knowing what questions to ask about knowledge. I do not mean, of course, technical questions, which are easy. I mean questions that come from a world other than the world from which the knowledge comes. And nowhere is this kind of wisdom needed more than in the story of technology itself. That story - the changeover from industrial machinery to electronic impulse- hasn’t been well covered by most journalists, in part because most of them do not have a clue about what questions need to be asked about technology. They seem unaware that significant technological change always involves a re-ordering of our moral presuppositions, of social life, of psychic habits, of political practices. To talk about technology wisely is to talk about what kind of people it makes us become.
The closest journalists ever come to conveying a sense of the non-technological meaning of technological change in their speculations about economic consequences, which I might say, they usually have wrong, mostly because they only consult with economists, but that is beside the point. Wisdom does not imply having the right answers. It implies only asking the right questions. If Bill Gates were a speaker at your conference and you were given a chance to ask him questions, what would you ask? What his latest project is? How does his software work? How much money will he make? What mergers is he planning? How will he defend himself against the charge of monopoly? Well, I would probably ask him the same questions, because judging from his book, *The Road Ahead*, Bill Gates may likely be the last person to have answers to the moral, psychological, and social questions that need to be asked about computer technology. Who would you want to interview about that and what would you ask? I am reminded here of who was interviewed by journalists during the US-Iraqi war. On television, radio and the press, generals, experts on weapons systems and Pentagon officials dominated. No artists were interviewed; No historians, no school teachers, no doctors. Is war only the business of military experts? Is what they have to say about war the only perspective citizens need to have? I should think that weapons systems experts would be the last people to be interviewed on the matter of war. Perhaps the absence of any others may be accounted for by saying, the first casualty of war is wisdom.

Let me begin to draw a close by saying that, although, I thought it was funny, I do not believe that the cartoon in last week’s *New Yorker* about a broadcast journalist is true. For those of you who did not see it, it depicted a man and a woman at the same sort of social event. The man is saying to the woman “I’m really not a journalist, I just play one on the evening news. I once wrote a book in which I took a rather snotty point of view. But I have met too many journalists who believe it now. And I envision a future in which what I have been saying about wisdom will be commonplace in broadcast news. I cannot envision exactly this will be done, although I rather imaging a time when we will have “wisdom sections” in broadcasts-places, times and spaces, not filled by meaningless and forgettable information, but filled with relevant questions about the stories that have been covered, questions directed at those who offer different bodies of knowledge from those which the stories themselves confront. I can imagine a time when the news will be organized, not according to the standard form of local, regional , national and world news, but according to some other organizing principle-for example, the seven deadly sins. Greed, lust, envy, pride, gluttony, and so on. If that would ever happen, I would imagine stories about Bill Gates would fall in every category.

Do I ask too much of journalists? Too much of television or radio newscasts? Perhaps. But I say what I do because we live now in a world of too much information, confusing specialized knowledge, and too little wisdom. You might think it is not your job to offer the wisdom. I say, Why not? Who can say where your responsibilities as journalists end? Well, I can say this, with which case, I will close. I have noticed that much of your conference is concerned with new technologies and how they move information. As your keynote speaker, I believe I have the right to remark that the engineering of information is not the problem, journalists, in the end must confront. The problem as I see it, is how to transform information into knowledge, and how to transform knowledge into wisdom.

If you solve that problem, all the rest will take care of itself.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you.