The Disappearance of Adulthood

Lawrence Quill

Abstract In 1982, Neil Postman wrote *The Disappearance of Childhood*. In that work, Postman recounted the invention of childhood in the modern world and its demise at the hands of, among other things, the electronic media (principally television). In Postman's view, television had transformed education into 'edutainment.' The implications of this loss were devastating. Taking up where Postman left off I wish to reexamine his claim and amend and update his thesis by suggesting that, after the latest electronic turn, we now live in societies where a meaningful conception of *adulthood* is disappearing. It is disappearing, in part, because of an impoverished conception of citizenship. Yet it is additionally undermined because, claims to the ascendancy of the 'knowledge worker' notwithstanding, the fundamental connection between education and employment is unraveling. In this climate, the purposes of education are constantly queried and scrutinized as its *telos* is redefined by criteria external to the practice of education: cost-effectiveness, value-for-money, and so on. I suggest that only be reclaiming a meaningful conception of adulthood can education be defended and only by so doing can individuals hope to understand the world around them.

Keywords Postman · Knowledge worker · Childhood · Adulthood · Universities

'I call him happy who still hopes to rise
To the surface in this sea of error.'
Goethe, Faust, Part I

L. Quill (✉)
Department of Political Science, San Jose State University, San Jose, CA 95192, USA
e-mail: lawrence.quill@sjsu.edu

Introduction

In 1982, Neil Postman wrote *The Disappearance of Childhood*. In that work, Postman recounted the invention of childhood in the modern world and its demise at the hands of, among other things, the electronic media (principally television). In Postman's view, television had transformed education into 'edutainment.' The implications of this loss were devastating.

Postman's thesis was part of a broader critique of society that lamented the demise of a more literate, engaged polity. At work behind the scenes was a commitment to a substantive conception of citizenship something to which the purpose of education was intimately linked.[1] For a variety of reasons, some of which I will address in this paper, I suggest that no such conception is currently available; which is only another way of saying that a certain kind of individualism is no longer available. The most obvious representation of this lacuna occurs (with no little irony) within contemporary liberal theoretical discussions that have, by and large, dropped commitments to substantive conceptions of autonomy in favor of a more minimalist or 'political' conception that betters reflects the 'fact of pluralism' in modern heterogeneous societies. The debate among contemporary liberal theorists of education largely accepts the impasse this has created. As a result, discussions within the leading journals have, for the past two decades at least, focused upon questions of culture, of how far liberalism can or should accommodate illiberal minority groups, the rights of illiberal parents over the education of their children, and, currently, a close consideration of what 'choice' within education actually means. Educational theory within the liberal polity, by and large, plays out against the backdrop created by this cultural pluralism and a commitment to 'minimal autonomy.'

If substantive notions of autonomy and citizenship hold relatively little sway in contemporary debates, an additional area where contemporary liberal theorists are almost wholly silent concerns the relation between education and work. The exclusion of the fundamental connection between education and employment can no longer be ignored at the theoretical level especially at a time when government is attempting to redefine the purpose of education, especially higher education.

For policy experts, the answer to 'what is education for?' has already been supplied. Amidst discussion of 'the new global economy' there is a clear and present need to create a more technologically literate society, a high-skilled society of 'knowledge workers.' Whether such a process is possible or desirable is something I have explored elsewhere (Uluorta and Quill 2009). Yet, for my present purposes, I want to suggest that even if the 'knowledge worker' is the new *telos* of education it still leaves the question of adulthood unanswered simply because it is such a terribly reductive and unimaginative answer to the question 'what is education for?'

Hence, taking up where Postman left off, in this paper I wish to reexamine his claim and amend and update his thesis by suggesting that, after the latest electronic turn, we now live in societies where adulthood is disappearing. It is disappearing because our conception of citizenship, thanks in part to the pluralist thesis and the poverty of discourse surrounding political liberalism. Yet it is additionally undermined because, claims to the ascendancy of the 'knowledge worker' notwithstanding, the fundamental connection between education and employment is unraveling.

To put it crudely, the defining concepts of 'the knowledge economy' and 'the knowledge worker' have arisen, ironically, at precisely the same moment when people no longer

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[1] In other works, notably *The End of Education*, Postman returned to this theme in greater detail.

believe that at the end of their school career they will be able to find employment in the way that, a generation ago, their parents did. This is an all too obvious dilemma. And it is in the context of this 'crisis' that a discussion of adulthood is especially pertinent. It provides an opportunity, in the words of Hannah Arendt, 'to think what we are doing.'

The present discussion is, therefore, a speculative attempt, to turn discussion away from an exclusive concern with the requirements of a 'knowledge economy' and towards those of a 'knowledge democracy.' While the former measures educational success by striving towards the ever cheaper creation of an army of technically literate workers that increasingly find themselves unprepared and overwhelmed by the demands of the market, the latter view conceives a technologically advanced society, and the education within that society, as one that empowers and liberates individuals. To recover adulthood will require us, therefore, to consider the purpose not only of education, but of technology and employment as well. This paper is an attempt to open that discussion.

Childhood's End

The world of the child and the world of the adult are intimately linked but it was not always so. Prior to the invention of the printing press it was far harder to differentiate between individuals and the distinction between child and adult was not *symbolically* important. This is why it is possible to say that with the invention, and subsequent circulation, of printed matter that childhood was invented (Heywood 2002).

> From print onward, adulthood had to be earned. It became a symbolic, not a biological, achievement. From print onwards, the young would have to become adults, and they would have to do it by learning to read, by entering the world of typography. And in order to accomplish that they would require education. Therefore, European civilization reinvented schools. And by so doing, it made childhood a necessity. (Postman 1982, p. 36)

Children were educated to become the sort of people a print culture required, people with a strong sense of individuality and:

The capacity to think logically and sequentially
The capacity to manipulate a high order of abstraction
The capacity to defer gratification
The capacity for self-control—a high degree of concentration and sedateness

Reading is not natural. Printed matter required the regulation of the mind and body if one was to achieve competence. Reading required patience, reflection, and the ability to exercise judgment, to ponder and weigh the validity of sentences: "The literate person must learn to be reflective and be analytical, patient and assertive, always poised, after due consideration, to say no to a text" (Postman 1982, p. 77). In short, education was hard, and this taken for granted assumption was common, suggests Postman, to all philosophies of education that acknowledged the importance of learning sequentially alongside the necessary imposition of restraints (1986, p. 147).

In Postman's view, this 400-year-old literate revolution had come to a staggering end by the early 1980 s and the main culprit was television. While there were many social examples of television's negative effects upon childhood Postman noted that the evidence for this disintegration in the classroom, in particular, was overwhelming. In short, under pressure from television, education was forced to mimic the high thrills approach to

learning or be left behind. Educators were assured that television could be integrated into the classroom to make teaching more efficient. Using television as a teaching tool was popular with students who had grown up on a diet of commercials and television programming. And television was popular with parents who, while they worried about the effects of television on their children, held out the hope that it might teach them "something other than which breakfast cereal has the most crackle" (1986, p. 142).

For Postman, there was a direct connection between the world of adults and the world of the child. That connection was literacy. The proliferation of a non-text, image-based culture challenged that connection. It made childhood meaningless by collapsing adulthood into childhood. As Postman put it: "[i]n a literate world children must become adults. But in a non-literate world there is no need to distinguish sharply between the child and the adult, for there are few secrets, and the culture does not need to provide training in how to understand itself" (1986, p. 13).

While infancy and senility marked the outer limits of human existence in the middle of life a void opened up: the realm of the *adult-child*, "a grown-up whose intellectual and emotional capacities are unrealized and, in particular, not significantly different from those associated with children" (1982, p. 99).

Though clearly polemical in nature, I suggest that Postman's challenge was essentially correct. Just as the invention of television started a revolution in ideas that formed the modern notion of childhood, so new advances in technology at the end of the twentieth century have initiated a new step, altering our understanding of self, relationships, and society. The added ingredient of television, for example, to an environment previously without this element does not equal the old environment plus the new ingredient, but a new environment altogether (Meyrowitz 1986, p. 19). The invention of the telegraph, the newspaper, the radio, and the television altered our habits of mind. The rise of Internet technologies has done the same, in ways that we are only now beginning to understand, changing how we understand the division between 'the culture of the book' and 'the culture of the screen.' In fact, as one leading researcher noted, new technologies are altering the very structure of our consciousness: how we think. Hence, "we should simply face the fact that the new generation of brains will be fundamentally different from ours, in that they will be specifically suited, cognitively and physically, to computers and a cyberworld" (Greenfield 2003, p. 169). In short, we are fast becoming what we have made.

Life on Screen

How schools and universities adapt to the changing circumstance wrought by the new technology and its impact upon our politics, economics and society is, in some ways, *the* key issue of our times. But it is a complicated one. There is a long tradition, particularly within the US, of turning to 'technology' and scientific rationality as a social and political panacea. Indeed, some have suggested that the very nature of modern democracy gives rise to the kind of polity in which both economic elites, because they represent the most influential elements within society, and technical/scientific elites, because they possess knowledge that serves society's needs, provide the requisite political authority in the absence of a meaningful 'public will' (Gunnell 1982). Because of the nature of pluralist politics, and because much of the new technology has a commercial component, it is not surprising, therefore, that many see the field of education broadly as one that can benefit from these technological/commercial advances. As one influential advocate and policy adviser notes:

> …schools are among the last great Fordist institutions, where people go at the same time, work in the same place, to a centrally devised schedule announced by the sound of a bell. In most of the rest of the economy people work at different times, in different places, often remotely and through networked organizations…The bounded, stand alone school, as a factory of learning, will become a glaring anomaly in this organizational landscape (Leadbeater 2005, p. 3).

Changing the landscape of education by making schools and colleges virtual, promoting on-line learning, reducing the length of college degrees, teaching mathematics and science through video games, and 'marketing' education as a 'service' that can be bought and sold internationally are all factors that are widely discussed and in most cases accepted without question in the relevant scholarly and popular literature (Apple 2004, 2007; Apple et al. 2005).

Yet it is precisely because market demand changes so frequently that many who called themselves educators vigorously resisted the idea of modularizing and 'marketizing' the university when similar ideas were first floated in the 1980 s. Mary Warnock, writing in 1989, noted:

> The aim of the universities can never be to follow the market, in the sense of offering whatever it is that students want. Prospective students often do not know what they want, and certainly do not know what, in order to achieve academic goals, they ought to be given. On the contrary, universities must try to remedy the inability to make intelligent choices, forced upon people by their position in the market economy (1989, p. 25).

More recently, the philosopher Alisdair MacIntryre noted:

> It is…a serious mistake for students to approach the study of the liberal arts, thinking that they already know what their studies should lead to, to what ends they should be a means. For to think that is to suppose that they could prior to these studies have made adequately informed and intelligent decisions about what for them constitutes a choiceworthy way of life. But just this mistake is now made by that very large number of American students who approach higher education believing that its overriding purpose is to get them some already identified kind of job… They have made some of their key choices prematurely. And increasingly universities have made a corresponding mistake… But it is a primary responsibility of a university to be unresponsive, to give students what they need, not what they want… (2001, p. 11).

Compare these sentiments with a leading educational expert at the World Bank who summarized his vision for the future recently:

> Imagine a university without buildings or classrooms or even a library, 10,000 miles away from its students, delivering online programmes or courses through franchise institutions overseas. Imagine a university without academic departments, without required courses or majors or grades, issuing degrees *valid for only five years after graduation*. Imagine a higher education system where institutions are ranked not by the quality of teaching, but by the intensity of electronic wiring and the degree of Internet connectivity. Imagine a country whose main export earnings came from the sale of higher education services (cited in Tomusk 2002, p. 343)

Gone from this conception is the notion that education, *pace* Warnock and MacIntyre, is something *permanent*, that it should foster independent and critical thought, be skeptical of authority, and develop the ability to weigh arguments or distinguish fact from fiction. Just those skills, in fact, that one might argue we need most in societies overwhelmed with (often dubious) claims from a multitude of different sources of information (O'Neill 2002). Instead we have a far more exacting image of the university as service provider, often within the context of an international market in educational services and training (Apple et al. 2005; OECD 2008) with the undergraduate freed from the shackles of the classroom and newly liberated as client or customer.[2]

As *The Chronicle of Higher Education* pointed out in a recent report, student life and university structure are likely to be transformed over the next 10 years by technology. Increasingly, students will attend classes online, study part-time, take courses from multiple universities, and jump in and out of colleges. Lectures, and classroom discussion, office hours with a professor, study groups, and papers will all be online. This must be embraced as a new reality, the *Chronicle* argued. "There is very little," they noted, "that students cannot find on their own if they are inspired to do so. And many of them will be surfing the Net in class" (Chronicle 2009). Interestingly, they also note that most jobs will not require a college degree.

The absence of a coherent conception of adulthood makes it impossible to determine whether these advances are beneficial or, indeed, how they might be guided. As a consequence, education finds itself buffeted by the latest trends and unable to withstand the zealous application of technical novelty and market discipline albeit in the name of consumer choice.

Nonetheless, there is a growing concern that the unreflective embrace of information technology and its impact within schools will fail to solve the latest crisis of education (Glazer 2006). There are numerous reports that focus on the declining literacy rates of graduates and the gap between college expectations and the ability of institutions to teach a computer and TV-educated generation that are, in many cases, simply unprepared for college (Goolsbee and Guryan 2006).

Citing a study that examined the habits of Internet users, Bauerlein (2008a) notes that people tend to follow an 'F-pattern' of reading when they read online (fast reading), a manner that differs significantly from the way people read books or newspapers (slow reading). On a web page, people will read the first sentence at the top of a page. But then they will descend quickly, slowing in the middle, then another sharp descent to the bottom ignoring the bottom right hand corner altogether. "People" notes Bauerlein, "scan, jump around looking for keywords, bullet points, pictures, color and typeface variations" (2008b).

The Web has become a major source of 'information-gathering' for young people—averaging 4 hours a day online (Weigel and Gardner 2009)—for entertainment, consumption, game-playing, and social networking. Hence, when students are introduced to a text that requires repeated reading with a steady focus, they are simply unresponsive. As a consequence, the Internet generation is, "no more learned or skilful than their predecessors, no more knowledgeable, fluent, up-to-date, or inquisitive, except in the materials of youth culture. They don't know any more history or civics, economics or science, literature or current events. They read less on their own, both books and newspapers, and you would have to canvass a lot of college English instructors and employers before you found one

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[2] It is precisely this approach that characterizes the recent report from the British Government on the future of Higher Education. See *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education* (2010), especially Chapter 4.

who said they compose better paragraphs. In fact, their technology skills fall well short of the common claim, too, especially when they must apply them to research and workplace skills" (Bauerlein 2008b, p. 9).

The technology, it turns out, isn't the issue. It is our attitude towards it, how it shapes our expectations, and how we use it.[3] Some of these attitudes we already know. We know, for example, that many people display a too ready willingness to trust web sources and a general failure to discriminate among different sources.[4] But, more troubling, perhaps are those things we simply don't know about the effects of intensive Internet use. How might the latter affect the emotional development of individuals, for example? Or one's sense of self? (Greenfield 2003) Or the appreciation of the consequences of one's actions? Or one's relation to others? Or one's ability to concentrate? (Wiegel et al. 2007) Or one's ability to speak? (Williams 2010) Or even one's ability to sit still? (Berk 2002) According to Greenfield, the twenty-first century mind risks becoming "infantilised, characterized by short attention spans, sensationalism, inability to empathise and a shaky sense of identity" (quoted in Wintour 2009). Ironically, Professor Greenfield's contention is that the solution to this pressing social problem can only be resolved by…education. Yet if this is so, then the aims of education cannot simply be identical with the latest technological trends.

The Beginning (and End) of Adulthood

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, while the word adult can be traced back to 1656, 'adulthood' was invented in 1870 as a social category of sufficient importance to require its own definition. The term adult is derived from *adolescere* (to grow up, mature), *adolere* (to make grow) *adultus* (grown). Of course, the idea of a person who was not a child existed long before the category of childhood and adulthood emerged in English, along with a set of ideas that corresponded to what it meant to be an educated person. But, as Blatterer notes in a study of the concept, before the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries you might be considered man, woman, or child. Not an adult. "Adulthood" he notes, "is inextricably linked to processes of individualization, that is, individuals' gradual liberation from the determinants of birth and religious conformity, and the simultaneous charging with an ever-increasing self-responsibility for all aspects of their lives" (2007, p. 11).

In pre-industrial Europe, a child would have assumed adult responsibilities. They would have worn work clothes that were adult in appearance, and they would not have gone to school. Concepts like adulthood and childhood became meaningful as a result of the dramatic changes in technology and society in the nineteenth century, the political revolutions that expanded the franchise, a rising tide of nationalism, institutional transformations that increased the potential for states to collect and analyze data from their populations, and the contributions of biology and the new science of psychology in particular to a deeper understanding of the individual citizen. Combined, these changes prompted policy makers to think afresh about the connection between children, adults, schools, society, and the economy (Coté 2002).

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[3] The fact that so much of the new technology is designed by the young and has been adopted by an entire society should not be overlooked. See Zadie Smith's discussion of the Facebook phenomenon in 'Generation Why?' in *The New York Review of Books*, November 25, 2010.

[4] One study noted that college students implicitly trusted the Google search algorithm's ability to rank results by relevance in response to a query, even if the higher ranked results were less relevant to their initial inquiry (see Pan et al. 2007).

The end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century saw this version of adulthood become the default position. But it was the period after the Second World War up to the oil crises of the early 1970 s that has been called 'a golden age of adulthood.' It coincided with a period of relative economic stability, rising equality, a massive increase in public spending, social security provision and, *crucially*, careers; employment that was permanent, often life-long, where employee loyalty was rewarded with promotion within a company's hierarchy. "For employees and families this meant that there were plannable [*sic*] careers with predictable milestones on the way, a known destination: retirement on guaranteed government pensions…Becoming adult was a matter of following a life course that resembled a veritable march through the institutions of marriage, parenthood, and work" (Blatterer 2007, pp. 14–15).

Of course, not everybody experienced this. The same period was one of gender and racial discrimination. But Blatterer's point is that the normative ideal that was most strongly associated with the white, heterosexual, middle-class-male became the benchmark for adulthood. Hence, "[o]ur contemporary associations of adulthood with stability arose from that generation's experience and expectations" (2007, p. 15).

In the previous section I suggested that a meaningful conception of adulthood was under stress because of the impact of new technologies, principally information technologies. Yet, because technology does not operate in a vacuum, we must account also for how it has fundamentally altered how we work. This is crucial in any discussion of education for the simple reason that education and employment have, hitherto, been fundamentally linked. In fact, we might say that the education employment algorithm has been part of the structure of modern societies.

It is precisely because the nature of employment is changing, in large part thanks to those technologies, that we can say that adulthood is disappearing in this second sense. Consider the following chart, adapted from Mason (2009) detailing the changes that have occurred in the labor market and education over the past 30 years.

Heavy modernity	Liquid modernity[a]
• A stable, predominantly male, manual workforce	• An insecure, temporary workforce, often with women as the majority
• Graduates as a tiny elite of the workforce	The emergence of a mass graduate work force
• Half the world economy dominated by a system of state ownership and bureaucratic planning	• The weakening of the nation state in the face of the globalised economy
• Banks are constrained by strict regulations and are generally subordinate to industry	• The development of banks into global information networks
• Industrial companies influence US politics	• The wielding of more power by banks than industrial corporations
• Computing is located in the corporate sector and in universities	• The ubiquity of standardized and ever cheaper computers
• The industrialist as hero	• The replacement of the industrialist by the entrepreneur as hero

Adapted from Mason (2009, pp. 146–147)

[a] After Bauman (2003, 2005)

The underlying cause of this staggering change of economy and society can be summed up as the effects of the revolution in information technology. As Mason notes: if first there was sail, then steam, then petroleum, "[b]y the same crude technological measure, we are now in the information age" (2009, p. 147).

These changes have altered the economic conditions that confront graduates entering the job market today, and their expectations. They now enter a world with high levels of risk and insecurity, and a generalized inability to plan for the future (Beck 2002). As a consequence, more people stay in education for longer to increase their employment prospects through the acquisition of further qualifications, stay at home with parents or, indeed, return home after graduation or later in life. According to Furstenberg et al. (2004) this trend is so significant that a new stage of the maturation process can now be identified: 'early adulthood.' This period describes a stage of life after adolescence but before 'full adulthood,' which occurs sometime in the late 20 s or early 30 s, after the completion of schooling, establishing a home away from parents, and securing a full-time job; all of which are becoming increasingly difficult to achieve.

The term 'early adulthood' has been supplemented with other concepts that capture the general trend of adulthood's collapse: 'Kidults' (Butterworth 2009), 'Youthhood' (Bly 1997), 'Adultescence', 'Middle Youth', 'Middlescence' and, 'Peterpandemonium' (Furedi 2003). Yet while the trend to move back home is important, the so-called 'boomerang children' phenomenon, it is the trend away from long-term employment that is, arguably, the single most important challenge to adulthood.

Life in Liquid Modernity

Richard Sennett (2000, 2007) has examined the effects of changing employment practices on the lives of citizens, characterizing the change in hiring practices by corporations as 'the end of the career.' There are several reasons for this phenomenon. The first is simply that there are more efficient ways of doing business, particularly the kind of business that used to rely on human interactions. Increased automation saves companies the revenue that they might otherwise spend on employment or on-the-job training, replacing those costs with maintenance costs.

The second reason is the migration of jobs to different parts of the world where labor is cheaper.[5] While this used to be the case for low-skilled jobs, increasingly high-skilled jobs have migrated to places like India, a country that, largely by accident, has found itself ideally placed for an international business environment that persists in using English and has a growing IT sector.

This has a particular bearing on how we understand the notion of the 'high-skills' economy, the creation of 'knowledge workers,' and the role of technology in education and employment. For many policy-makers both here and in other countries, education is regarded as *the* central platform of a strategy that links economic regeneration with the creation of large numbers of technology intensive occupations. As the Spellings Report on US Higher Education noted, "[n]inety percent of the fastest-growing jobs in the new knowledge-driven economy will require some postsecondary education" (2006, p. 1).

Yet, over half of all jobs (55.4%) or 80.7 million occupations in 2004 required only short or medium term training (Uluorta and Quill 2009). The most recent figures produced

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[5] The relevant numbers here are astonishing as the number of employable people has doubled since 1979 to 3 billion (see Mason 2009, p. 130).

by the Bureau of Labor Statistics paint a similar picture. Of the top four employment categories set to expand over the next 10 years, two do not require a college education: Home Health Aides and Permanent and Home Care Aides.[6]

It is only when one realizes that the concept of the 'knowledge worker' was never intended to apply generally to the population as a whole but, rather, to describe an elite workforce comprising a very small percentage of the total population that the discrepancy between educational aspirations and the reality of employment in the US begins to make sense. As Robert Reich noted nearly two decades ago, American jobs in the future would likely be part of an emerging international labor market. The advantages of entering a market place that was now truly global were considerable, providing opportunities for growth and expansion of a kind unheard of before. But it also meant that there would be greater risks, and successes and failures were unlikely to be shared equally by America's citizens. "No longer" he noted, "are Americans rising or falling together, as if in one large national boat. We are, increasingly, in different, smaller boats" (1991, p. 173).

For Reich, there would be three kinds of jobs in the future, a future, which is, arguably, our present. The first category of employment was in "routine production services," the kinds of employment traditionally associated with blue-collar occupations involving repetitive tasks and the enforcement of standard operating procedures. These might include clerical assistants and supervisors, and line managers, but even in the high technology sector there would still be an abundance of these kinds of low-skilled tasks including "stuffing computer circuit boards or devising routine coding for computer software programs," "data processors" (1991, p. 175). Reich noted that "a standard American education" which instilled the virtues of reliability, loyalty, and the capacity to take direction was considered sufficient training for these kinds of tasks.

The second kind of job was "in-person services." This also involved the performance of simple repetitive tasks, close supervision, and little education beyond high school. The defining difference between routine production services and in-person service jobs was the distance involved between provider and consumer of services. The latter were concerned with a particular person or persons: "retail sales workers, waiters and waitresses, hotel workers, janitors, cashiers, hospital attendants and orderlies, nursing-home aides, child-care workers…[even] security guards" (1991, p. 176).

If routine production services accounted for approximately 25% of the total workforce then Reich suggested that a full 30% of all jobs would involve in-person services. Over half the total number of occupations in the US would not require more than a high school diploma and would probably involve a significant amount of on the job training.

The third job category, however, was somewhat different. Although another service occupation the people involved were high skilled and high paid—indeed their skills would be in demand globally. While they shared this feature with routine production services—whose skills could be traded in the open market—what they 'produced' was the manipulation of symbols. These were the people in engineering and consultancy, lawyers, real estate developers, bankers, and a "few creative accountants." These sorts of individuals were graduates from elite universities and they could command autonomous work schedules and large salaries to match.

> Their parents are interested and involved in their education. Their teachers and professors are attentive to their academic needs. They have access to state-of-the-art science laboratories, interactive computers and video system in the classroom,

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[6] http://www.bls.gov/news.release/ecopro.t07.htm.

language laboratories, and high-tech school libraries. Their classes are relatively small; their peers are intellectually stimulating (1991, p. 228)

This kind of education sounds marvelous as, indeed, it is. But it is worth pointing out that it is not a democratic education. It is an attractive description of an elite education never intended for the many.[7]

Outside the minority of elite institutions where future 'knowledge workers' are created, the picture is very different. As Bauman (2003, 2005) notes in his discussion of education in the twenty-first century, the university finds itself caught in the middle of competing and rising pressures: "…from above (from the governments eager to catch up with the volatile and capricious shifts in 'business needs') as much as from below (from prospective students exposed to the equally capricious demands of labour markets and bewildered by their apparently haphazard and unpredictable nature)" (2003, p. 316).

Consequently, what the client wants and what the service provider is competing to provide is a *product* that has much in common with the production and consumption of fast food, "prepared rapidly and eaten fresh, hot, and on the spot…it is currently better to think of every food on offer as a product with an admittedly short shelf-life and a clearly printed 'use-by' date" (Bauman 2005, p. 316).

Whereas acquiring an education used to be regarded as something permanent now having something that stays with you is likely to be regarded as a liability. This might sound counterintuitive. After all, if acquiring the right kind of 'training' were the most important thing, then surely the process of attaining the requisite knowledge would be valued. However, in practice, knowing that what one is learning is likely to be 'useless' in a few years—because of the capricious nature of markets—means being aware that acquiring a skill is only as useful as long as the skill is in demand. Once the market moves, so too does the demand for new skills which will require the individual to 're-skill' themselves.

This process is potentially endless. It is better, therefore, to keep one's learning superficial, as a deep understanding of a subject is likely to hinder rather than enhance career prospects. "Deepening ability through practice sits at cross-purposes with institutions that want people to do many different things in short order. While flexible organization thrives on smart people, it has trouble if they become committed to craftsmanship" (Sennett 2007, p. 106).

The way that we currently embrace technology enhances this superficial approach to learning, at least, for the majority. For the elite, they will face their own challenges and dilemmas. But for everyone else, the moral is surely to learn as quickly and efficiently as possible without investing one's self in what one is doing.

So much is already obvious to many of our students who are baffled at the idea that what they are being encouraged to study might have an effect beyond the end of the semester. Consider the following exchange from a 2009 episode of *The Simpsons*, that cultural barometer *par excellence*. "Who can tell me what the Monroe Doctrine was?" asks the young, hip, substitute teacher in Bart Simpsons' class who has just given him 20 min of 'Twittering' for homework. A bright-eyed student, Martin, replies enthusiastically, accurately, and in rote fashion, only for the teacher to respond: "Are you telling me you memorized that fact when anyone with a cell phone can find it out in thirty seconds?" Martin responds plaintively: "I've crammed my head full of garbage." "Yes you have," replies the teacher (Simpsons 2009).

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[7] A reason, perhaps, why Christopher Lasch lambasted Reich's categories (1995, p. 35).

The moral of the story is not as simple as it might first appear. On the one hand an 'education of cram' as John Stuart Mill once called it, is obviously not the best approach to learning. But the alternative proffered by the young teacher is equally problematic without some guide to discern which facts, out of a mountain of facts, are relevant or applicable. What is required is the development of the kind of judgment about the world and one's place in it that, until relatively recently, defined the purpose of the university and adult life.

Conclusion

Taken together, the combined effect of changing technologies and the impact of global markets upon employment practices and prospects places the concept of adulthood under stress. This is not altogether necessarily a bad thing and it is certainly not my intention to advocate a return to a glorious past.

Rather, as Postman eloquently pointed out in his discussion of the impact of television, the discussion about technology and its impact upon society, and upon education, is always already a discussion about values. What technology does, though not always successfully, is prompt an enquiry into values, into thinking about how we might and should live. In this case, it prompts us to think, also, about what education is for.

At the end of a book called *Understanding Media* written by that prophet of technology, Marshall McLuhan, the author looked towards the effect of increasing automation and the advent of communications technology on education. He noted,

> …with electricity and automation, the technology of fragmented processes suddenly fuses with the human dialogue and the need for over-all consideration of human unity. Men are suddenly nomadic gatherers of knowledge, nomadic as never before, informed as never before, free from fragmentary specialism as never before—but also involved in the total social process as never before; since with electricity we extend our central nervous system globally, instantly interrelating every human experience (1964, p. 311).

It is startling to note how prescient this prediction was. But perhaps more striking are McLuhan's predictions about "the specter of joblessness," the value of information in the new economy, the increased "interdependence" as the "startling fact" of the new world, the "totally new structures" needed to run business and relate those same businesses to markets, and the fundamental shift that was occurring from "the harsh logic of industrial automation" that fragmented tasks into dull, boring, repetitive, mechanistic movements, towards something in the future that promised to be more humane. One thing was certain. Both markets and education, as they were currently conceived, were inadequate and needed to be transformed.

Yet equally surprising, at least from our own vantage point, was his proscription for the future. This new world order could succeed only, he noted, if a liberal education was mandatory. The reason was simple. Human beings in the new world would struggle with a surplus of time. "We are suddenly threatened with a liberation that taxes our inner resources of self-employment and imaginative participation in society. This would seem to be a fate that calls men to the role of artist in society" (1964, p. 310). McLuhan, worried about what people would do with more free time. How, when they were liberated from the mechanical servility of an industrial production process that was rapidly being outdated they would cope with increased leisure.

We do not live in McLuhan's world. Instead of the dilemmas facing a leisure society, we face those of a 'risk society' (Beck 2002). Higher education, for the moment, remains an expected rite of passage for many young people. Indeed, policy-makers pride themselves on the percentage of young people who attain a college education. This is part of the democratic stamp of modern societies; what was once the preserve of the few is now the right of the many. And this attitude explains why, even amidst rising inequality and a decline in social mobility, educational aspirations continue to rise.

Nonetheless, some senior officials and policymakers have begun to think the unthinkable, recommending the rationing of higher education alongside lowering expectations within a 'culture of entitlement' (Shirvani 2009). For those who are convinced that the only conversation to be had about education today is how to transform young people into human capital, the corporate model is likely to be the one that impresses most in the current crisis. This is hardly novel. Indeed, a conflict between those who see the university in crudely 'utilitarian' terms and those who regard it as a separate institution from commerce, but a no less important one for that, has been raging for some time.

One thing is clear, however. Part of the perceived solution to the current crisis is likely to be the increased use of Internet technologies, and the switch to on-line instruction. Yet, any sensible conversation about the use of technology within education must recognize the economic imperative behind it. I don't think anyone is yet saying the virtual instruction is better, only cheaper. Traditional methods of teaching still remain the most engaging form of learning for many students. At the most prestigious universities this is obvious. No one is suggesting that Harvard, Stanford, or Oxford and Cambridge replace personal instruction with an on-line version. Consequently, we might be tempted to say flexing our democratic credentials, that what's good enough for the best should be good enough for the rest (Brecher 2005).

Education, whatever the rhetoric of politicians, is unlikely to be the solution to society's ills. It is a reflection and a symptom of them. More than ever before, education is under scrutiny by 'market forces' in a way that is unprecedented. This is understandable and some reforms are obviously necessary. But there is an important distinction between an educational sector supported by and feeding into an economy and one that is governed by the same ideals as the economy.

What this means in its simplest form is that education must aim at more than the creation of future workers. I don't think we should lose sight of that. Reclaiming adulthood as a meaningful concept is a step towards an alternative, and more humane, vision for both education and for society.

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