

Technology vs Culture

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In a society where the constant progression of technology is heralded with fevered consumption by the masses, few if any people consider those who voluntarily abstain from the “advantages” of these technologies. I am not speaking of the digital divide, those that are unable to participate for reasons of age, education or economic situation, rather I speak of technically literate and skilled persons who have rational and logical reasons for not embracing every wave of advances. Any consideration given to these people dubbed neo-luddites by the technology consumers usually ends with their classification as nutty or backwards technophobes who just don't get “it”. The “it” to which these technology consumers refer is the various abilities and experiences granted to them by their beloved tech gadgets. I will attempt to present the theory that the masses in fact do not perceive the full magnitude of “it” whereas the neo-luddites have a unique perspective on the nature of technology from which we could all learn a thing or two.

The neo-luddites of whom I speak are only descendants in terms of ideology of the original Luddites. Those disgruntled craftsmen who revolted and destroyed textile machines at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Neo-luddites have moral and ethical arguments against the excesses of modern technology [1] but do not eschew all technology and for the most part restrain their resistance to the intellectual and political arenas.

The masses that are consuming technology encompasses a large majority of the people in the developed world and a growing majority in the developing world. For my purposes I will concentrate on those with a dependency on computerized devices, most notably cellphones or portable audio players because these devices are currently the most fashionable.

Given that it is more than likely that you my reader are of the latter group, the technology consuming masses, I don't feel the need to describe in detail the many “advantages” afforded by advances in technology with which you are already familiar. Instead I will list those perceived affordances that have import in my theory: enhanced communication, greater freedom, increased socialization, improved efficiency and security. I aim to show that there are aspects of these affordances you may have never imagined, aspects worth considering the next time you use any form of technology.

If we examine these affordances we will find that there are other less beneficial effects. As the neo-luddite writer Neil Postman [2] is quick to point out most people only discuss the advantages of the technology and rarely voice the drawbacks, perhaps under the assumption that the good so outweighs the bad that the bad becomes a negligible thing not worth discussing. This shows the peoples belief that technological progress is always a fundamentally good and necessary goal. Postman [2] characterizes technology as a Faustian bargain that giveth and taketh away, so we may ask what has been taken away from the technology consuming masses?

What have those users of portable audio players such as iPods and walkmans suffered to lose for their technology? Cultural critic Allan Bloom believes that these people have reduced “centuries of Western cultural progress into “a nonstop...masturbational fantasy” celebrating libertinism” [3]. These people who are empowered to create a soundtrack for their life, who wont suffer to experience the noise of the outside world are shielded by what Thomas

Lipscomb calls an “airtight bubble of sound” [3] that they erect around themselves. But the sonic bubble shields them from much more than the sounds of everyday life. John Zerzan argues that it also withdraws people from social connections [3]. Michael Bull puts it best when he says that the shield “creates solitude in which we all become 'alone together’” [4]. Further Bull describes how these shields come to completely alter the spaces through which we pass such that they “increasingly lose significance for us and progressively turn into the 'non-spaces' of daily lives which we try, through those self same technologies, to transcend” [4].

Now lets ask the same question of cellphones. The most obvious and often discussed drawback of these devices is perhaps the blurring line between being at the office and being off the clock. The promise of the technology was to free the workers time by making them more efficient. But by providing instant anytime anywhere communication many people are becoming overwhelmed by pervasive communications [5]. Even more people agree that pervasive access to the office has negatively impacted their quality of life [5]. The efficiency boost of these devices is also debatable. Reporter Raja Sen [6] reported an increase in productivity after involuntarily giving up her cellphone for a week which allowed her to leave work sooner and get to sleep earlier.

Viewing these pervasive communications outside the office provides a different picture. Here the enhanced communication, greater freedom, increased socialization, improved efficiency and security are never suspect by users. The nature of the disadvantages in this case are for the most part more beguiling, their effects are less likely to be noticed or even cared about. Upon examining the content of the communications so valued by users we find that almost all of it can be classified as unnecessary in the sense that it is not important enough for the people communicating to actually meet face to face to discuss. Gossip, smalltalk and chit chat makes up most of their conversations. The users obviously value these conversations and it can be said to promote socialization but at what cost. This view is similar to the concerns the early telephone companies had when they discovered how the majority of their customers were utilizing their services [7] but I bring it up for different reasons since current telephone companies utilize this as a selling point. Users become so used to pervasive communication that their dependence on it changes their behavior. According to Christine Rosen “the ease of obtaining instant advice encourages cellphone users to respond to any uncertainty, crucial or trivial, by dialing instead of deciding” [8]. She effectively states that cellphones are eroding self-reliance and creating self-doubt. Mark Federman supports this line of thought, “We are less self-reliant than ever, not because we are less independent, but because we are so much more connected” [8]. At the same time users often report a heightened sense of security with cellphones which often causes them to do more dangerous things. Visitors to national parks are more likely to venture out on their own and attempt difficult hikes when they have their cellphone. They do this under the often false belief that help is a call away when in reality reception can be poor or non-existent [8]. The idea of greater freedom can often be just the opposite. Romantically involved people use the cellphone to be able to check up on their partner wherever they are in order to make sure they are not cheating just as parents check up on their kids activities by calling their cellphones. Ken Belson provides a novel characterization of the freedom afforded by the cellphone; “there are experts who say that the discussion of cellphones and autonomy has gotten the cause-and-effect backwards. Autonomy was already an illusion, they say, in a world built on instant communication, whether by telegraph or telephone or fax or e-mail or whatever. Cellphones just add more convenience” [8].

In the context of groups, public spaces and culture as a whole the disadvantages of cellphones are having the most effect on society. The disadvantages stem from a similar altering of the world caused by cellphones as that caused by portable audio players. The idea is that cellphones create a zone of intimacy in public places [3]. Similar to the sonic shield, this private zone of intimacy withdraws the user from socialization in their local area in favor of supporting distant existing relationships. It would appear there is a trend with these technologies which Max Frisch touches on in his definition of technology; “Technology is the knack of so arranging the world that we do not experience it” [9]. But unlike the sonic shields which create completely private experiences the cellphone works to broadcast the private experiences publicly.

The introduction of private space into public space with cellphones comes in many forms and has many consequences. Motorola research has shown that ringing cellphones are disruptive, even arresting as a ringing cellphone will often take precedence over the social interactions it disrupts [10]. Depending on the user of the cellphone Motorola categorized three different responses to the disruption: flight, suspension and persistence. Flight is the least disruptive of the responses where the user will abandon their current situation to handle the call. Suspension has the user staying put but stopping the current interaction in order to handle the call. Persistence has the user stay put and continue the interaction and at the same time handle the call. All three responses cause those local interactors to feel disempowered [10]. The dynamic of the situation changes without their involvement and they feel as if they have been “dropped and picked up by their companion without any chance to negotiate the terms” [10]. The imposition by the person receiving the call also effects strangers local to them. Research by Andrew Monk has shown that strangers found “mobile-phone conversations dramatically more noticeable, intrusive and annoying than conversations conducted face-to-face. While volume was an issue, hearing only half a discussion also seemed to up the irritation factor” [11]. At the same time the person receiving the call has to deal with any number of onlookers and eavesdroppers listening to their private conversations. Although cellphone users appear to have little trouble voicing their private matters to complete strangers anytime and anywhere. Walk down a busy sidewalk or take a ride on public transportation and you are more than likely to learn details of other peoples lives that they wouldn't have otherwise told you face to face. The effects also seem to differ according to culture as Motorola study highlights, “the mobile is more at home in cultures which foster a relaxed attitude to issues of privacy and personal space, than it is in those which prioritise privacy” [10]. They give a most astounding example; movie theaters in Bangkok are alive with the sound of cellphone conversations [10]. Whereas in the US cellphone use in theaters is still very much taboo.

So far I have considered the less tangible arguments against these technologies but there are more immediate concerns worth addressing such as health issues. There is the ever present concern that consistent exposure to the radiation emitted from cellphones may be harmful and lasting exposure to loud music with audio players is known to cause deafness but still there are more pressing issues. Driving while using a cellphone or portable audio player is almost certainly the most immediate danger faced and ignored most often. Attempting to immerse yourself in your private world while at the same time navigating the streets of the public world is a recipe for disaster. Somewhat less dangerous effects were reported by Raja Sen during his week sans cellphone. He contrasts the stress caused by his cellphone with the

newfound peace and quiet and the ability to sleep better which was made available once he disconnected [6]. For others the tables might be turned. In these most alarming cases users form an extreme dependence on their devices that could only be described as an addiction. The Motorola research found some serious cases, “In Tokyo, several teenage girls and boys say they would ‘die without’ their mobiles” [10]. The urge to stay connected is so strong that users change their behavior in order to avoid places where reception is poor; they consciously avoid signal free areas such as basements [10]. These users live in fear of missing a call or losing reception [10]. Solitude has become stigmatized and is avoided at all costs even though it is a valuable psychological state [12]. To examine an extreme case of withdrawal we can look at the incident involving “the world's first cyborg” Steve Mann being “unplugged” in his attempt to board an airplane shortly after the terrorist attacks in 2001. In attempting to board a plane the security personnel at the airport strip searched him, tore the electrodes from his skin, dismantled his equipment and required that some of his equipment travel in the baggage compartment. Without his fully functioning system he found it difficult to navigate and fell at least twice and passed out. Weeks after the incident he still had trouble concentrating and was behaving differently and there was concern his brain had been affected by the sudden detachment. [13]

Is the case of Steve Mann really so far fetched? At the current rate of technological progression who can say what devices and hookups will be utilized by the common consumer in twenty or thirty years. But do we really want to continue down a path that leads to such a future, what Chris Crittenden calls a “technopsychotic annihilation via cyborg” [14]. In order to answer this question we have to better understand what technology represents, we must know the nature of the beast before we condemn it. In the case of cellphones and other communication technologies Stephen Benson has some very interesting insights. “Any form of communication other than direct face-to-face contact is an impoverished form of communication. The fundamental paradox of communication is that the very means and processes of communicating reinforce separation between and isolation of the communicating parties. ... The isolation which in years past was primarily a function of distance and geography is now a function of increased choice” [15]. Stephen Benson also uses the following passage from EM Forsters novel “The Machine Stops” to eloquently describe the shortcomings of electronic communication; “‘I want to see you not through the Machine,’ said Kuno. ‘I want to speak to you not through the wearisome Machine.’ ‘Oh, hush!’ said his mother, vaguely shocked. ‘You mustn't say anything against the Machine.’” [15]. The worry is that communication technology is striving to create a global village at the cost of dismantling local villages.

Stepping up a level we need to consider technology as a whole by examining the lessons of history in order to better forecast the road ahead. Neil Postman has a firm grasp of the big picture and I will borrow liberally from his writings to express my views at this level. Postman observed that whenever technology introduces a new wonder it replaces the old one [2]. In most cases the older item is no longer produced, the demand for it disappears with the introduction of a “better” instrument. These antiques as we call them are still cherished by some and so it begs the question of what value we may have lost in our rush to upgrade. Few people critically examine what they may be giving up in their quests for bigger, better, faster.

Beyond the physical change Postman posits that there are cultural effects present in every wave of new technology [16]. Using the printing press as an example he argues that it

“fostered the modern idea of individuality but it destroyed the medieval sense of community and social integration” [16]. Obviously most of the changes wrought by technology do not occur overnight or else we would heed much more attention than we do now. Rather Postman believes that there are always unforeseen consequences of technology [16]. Consequences in which the “new technology tends to favor some groups of people and harms other groups” [16]. These winners and losers may not always be apparent. In the case of the printing press its inventor Johann Gutenberg was by all accounts a devoted Christian who would have been horrified at Martin Luther's use of the device which brought about a revolution that destroyed the monopoly of the Church [16]. “What will a new technology do?’ is no more important than the question, ‘What will a new technology undo?’ Indeed, the latter question is more important, precisely because it is asked so infrequently” [17].

If we accept that culture always pays a price for technology as Postman believes we should ask what it is in the nature of technology that demands this toll. Postman's provides an answer:

“.. every technology has a philosophy which is given expression in how the technology makes people use their minds, in what it makes us do with our bodies, in how it codifies the world, in which of our senses it amplifies, in which of our emotional and intellectual tendencies it disregards. This idea is the sum and substance of what Marshall McLuhan meant when he coined the famous sentence, “The medium is the message.” [17]

It is a powerful idea, technology changes our behavior, it changes the way we think. I doubt many people like to think they can be so influenced by inanimate objects of which they regard themselves as the master, but the following examples Postman provides are hard to refute:

“.. every technology has a prejudice. Like language itself, it predisposes us to favor and value certain perspectives and accomplishments.” [17]

“To a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail. We may extend that truism: To a person with a pencil, everything looks like a sentence. To a person with a TV camera, everything looks like an image. To a person with a computer, everything looks like data.” [17]

“.. the computer person values information, not knowledge, certainly not wisdom. Indeed, in the computer age, the concept of wisdom may vanish altogether.” [17]

There is another property of technology that may explain its power. Postman argues that technology is not additive, but ecological [17]. “A new medium does not add something; it changes everything” [17]. The printing press, radio, television and the internet are all proof of

this concept.

Ascribing these properties to technology it is no wonder they “tend to become mythic, [using the] word "myth" to refer to a common tendency to think of our technological creations as if they were God-given, as if they were a part of the natural order of things” [17]. Putting technology on such a lofty pedestal is dangerous for the reasons I have already discussed. With people revering technology so it is not “easily susceptible to modification or control” [17]. Postman found that George Orwell touches on an even more interesting comparison:

“he remarked that the average person today is about as naive as was the average person in the Middle Ages. In the Middle Ages people believed in the authority of their religion, no matter what. Today, we believe in the authority of our science, no matter what.” [16]

If science is equivalent to religion we must ask to whom do we pray? What offerings do we give? Is Bill Gates the head of such a religion? (We almost surely pay him tithes) Less glib and more serious is Postman's view:

“What I am saying is that our enthusiasm for technology can turn into a form of idolatry and our belief in its beneficence can be a false absolute. The best way to view technology is as a strange intruder, to remember that technology is not part of God's plan but a product of human creativity and hubris, and that its capacity for good or evil rests entirely on human awareness of what it does for us and to us.” [17]

“In any case, the great strength of the science-god is, of course, that it works-far better than supplication, far better than even Francis Bacon could have imagined. Its theories are demonstrable and cumulative; its errors are correctable; its results practical. The science-god sends people to the moon, inoculates people against disease, transports images through vast spaces so that they can be seen in our living rooms. It is a mighty god and, like more ancient ones, gives people a measure of control over their lives. Some say the science-god gives more control and more power than any other god before it.

But we know, and each day receive confirmation of it, that this is a false god. It is a god that speaks to us of power, not limits; speaks to us of ownership, not stewardship; speaks to us only of rights, not responsibilities; speaks to us of self-aggrandizement, not humility.” [9]

False god though it may be I would categorize science as a subconscious religion that is not exclusive to other religions. I know of no people who openly claim technology as their religion but at the same time most everyone is an adherent of it. Who can deny the power of technology while surrounded by the evidence of its miracles. But Postman calls on us to

examine these beliefs more carefully:

“Paul Goodman called it “technological modesty.” He meant that we must cultivate a sense of the whole and not cede to our technologies more dominion than their particular functions warrant. This is what mathematician Norbert Wiener, founder of cybernetics, meant when he used the phrase, “the human use of human beings.” My own term for this idea is “technological atheism,” by which I mean that we must disbelieve in the divinity of technology. For if we define god, as did the philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich, as that which is our “ultimate concern,” then technology clearly qualifies as America's deity.” [18]

Yet with each passing year we sink farther into a state technological dependency. Technology begets more technology. Even the nature of new technologies is changing. No longer is there an obvious problem solved by each new device and more often than not technology is being used to solve problems of other technologies. One of these problems Postman highlights is the information glut caused by TV, newspapers, billboards, videos, radio, books, internet, photos, spam and others [2]. He laments that “we have directed all of our energies and intelligence to inventing machinery that does nothing but increase the supply of information. As a consequence, our defenses against information glut have broken down; our information immune system is inoperable. We don't know how to filter it out; we don't know how to reduce it; we don't know how to use it. We suffer from a kind of cultural AIDS” [16]. How are we fighting this information glut? It is one of the few problems that you may actually see in a newspaper or magazine in one form or another. Google, MSN and Yahoo! are our answers, more technology to solve a technology problem. “When a culture, overcome by information generated by technology, tries to employ technology itself as a means of providing clear direction and humane purpose. The effort is mostly doomed to failure. Though it is sometimes possible to use a disease as a cure for itself” [9]. If you remember the time before search engines the web probably seemed like a wonderfully boring little place but these new technologies have only exacerbated the “disease”. When was the last time you needed to browse the four billion plus pages Google offers for the term computer. Information has effectively become the garbage of our culture.

What can be said of a culture so enamored with technology. Postman formulates the concept of a “technocracy” in which “tools play a central role in the thought-world of the culture. Everything must give way, in some degree, to their development. The social and symbolic worlds become increasingly subject to the requirements of that development. Tools are not integrated into the culture; they attack the culture. The bid to become the culture. As a consequence, tradition, social mores, myth, politics, ritual, and religion have to fight for their lives” [19]. Or perhaps we are still in an earlier stage not yet too mired in the single-minded technocracy. A culture in which “two opposing world-views -- the technological and the traditional” [19] coexist in uneasy tension. This is the culture “documented in Alexis de Tocqueville's monumental Democracy in America. In a word, two distinct thought-worlds were rubbing against each other in nineteenth-century America” [19]. Could this culture still be prevalent for the last hundred years to survive to this day or has the technological managed to

overthrow the traditional?

The question in either case is how do we practice Postman's proposed "technological atheism" in our times. When our society is so unquestioning of technology what can be done to open their eyes and reveal to them the false god that they worship. "Our unspoken slogan has been "technology über alles," and we have been willing to shape our lives to fit the requirements of technology, not the requirements of culture. This is a form of stupidity, especially in an age of vast technological change. We need to proceed with our eyes wide open so that we many use technology rather than be used by it" [17]. Postman concludes with a bleak outlook:

"It is all the same: There is no escaping from ourselves. The human dilemma is as it has always been, and we solve nothing fundamental by cloaking ourselves in technological glory. Even the humblest cartoon character knows this, and I shall close by quoting the wise old possum named Pogo, created by the cartoonist, Walt Kelley. I commend his words to all the technological utopians and messiahs present. "We have met the enemy," Pogo said, "and he is us." [16]

If we are truly at war with ourselves then we are all the losers. Who among us would even be willing to fight such a war? Regardless it seems as though our path has already been chosen. There will be no such war, the future is in technology. Woe is us the slaves to our own creations.

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