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The Last Page: Technology Rules; We Submit

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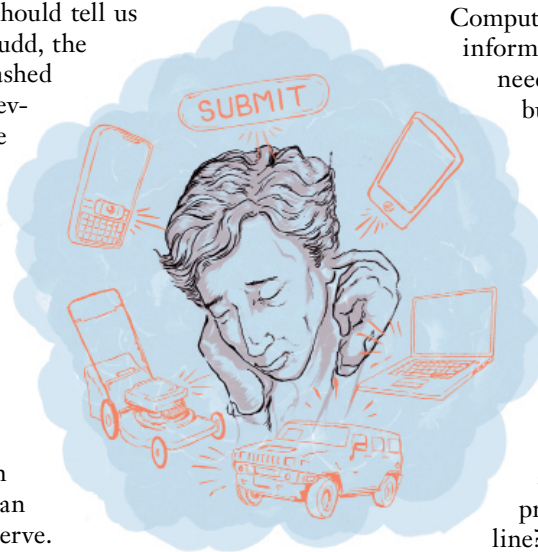
TECHNOLOGY RULES; WE SUBMIT

Fuel-efficient and blazingly fast automobiles, powerful antibiotics, fresh fruits and vegetables year round, high-speed computers—these and other technologies signal the glories of modern industrial life. We live longer, eat better, and move about with fewer restrictions on our aspirations. We apply industrial techniques not only to the production of consumer goods but also to agriculture, forestry, the management of information, even our landscape, hoping for a better life—by which we seem to mean instantaneous access to more goods and services—or perhaps new “apps” on our indispensable iPhones.

Yet, we embrace modern technologies unthinkingly, often at great risk of irreversible social and environmental costs. Inherent in the seeming efficiency of modern technology are leveling of the quality of life, loss of privacy, and profligate use of resources. Repeated recalls of bacteria-tainted foods, destruction of the landscape to serve machines, and the endless accumulation of cell phones and computers that tether us to beeps and emoticons should tell us that technology is hardly a panacea. Ned Ludd, the fictional opponent of the machine age, smashed textile mills at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution. Today’s neo-Luddite hopes that we will slow down, ponder, and hopefully refuse the call for progress if it means the increasing technologization of daily life.

One of the sources of the problem is that modern technology is self-augmenting. Such writers as Rachel Carson, Jacques Ellul, Langdon Winner, and Herbert Marcuse have pointed out that we build technologies to assist technology assuming there will always be a technological solution for technological crises. In the process we have forgotten what is human about technologies and whose ends they serve. We seek a mission to Mars, but we cannot fund public transport. We build nuclear weapons and missile defense systems, and we reject real diplomacy. We look in the mirror and turn to plastic surgery. And then we check our e-mail.

The automobile is a powerful example of self-augmenting technology that requires us to do its bidding. The automobile required the establishment of gas stations, highways, and multinational oil corporations. Governments cannot support social programs or passenger trains, but they find millions of dollars for wider roads that cut swaths through neighborhoods, farms, and forests and call even more vehicles to clog them. The U.S. government has spent over one trillion dollars on highway and airline infrastructure in the last 30 years and less than \$40 billion on Amtrak. On top of this, the automobile creates barriers between rich and poor, white and black, suburbia and the city, driving and walking. Applying Ford to housing, we moved quickly from Levittown to ostentatiously mediocre and resource-consuming McMansions. The result is a fast-food lifestyle that extends from agribusinesses to restaurants and malls. When driving to the athletic facility for our workouts, how many of us chat on the cell phone?



A second example is computers. Touted as labor-saving devices that enable creativity, facilitate efficiency in appliances, automobiles and industry, and serve in many places as the voice of democracy through desktop publishing and Web-communication with a seemingly unlimited audience, in most applications they deaden the senses. They lead to multitasking, with all of us writing papers, checking the weather, answering e-mails, updating Facebook, and tweeting about nothingness simultaneously. Would we prefer a love letter, handwritten, in black or dark blue ink, to an e-mail expressing ostensibly the same views with emoticons?

Too many data are also a very bad thing. Governments, businesses, and insurance companies surveil and monitor us with the argument that the common good overrides individual rights. Shouldn’t database managers—and their employees—be required to ask permission to use information that they assemble willy-nilly about us?

Computers involve the inputting of vast quantities of information, which are then manipulated to serve needs that are hardly objective or value neutral: business, military, political, academic. More power and speed in manipulation do not provide better answers. Today’s computers are far more powerful than needed, and still every few years we pay for upgrades. We push this technology into all forums, assuming it will improve the quality of service. Yet the result is both an industrial ethos and less human contact. Are classroom lectures and discussions better because the room is wired for the Internet? Is PowerPoint the key to a good lecture? Since it can be done, should we require everything from learning programs to course evaluations to be done online? By the way, why do all Web-based forms ask us to “submit”?

Of course no one calls for a return to the preindustrial era, abandonment of the comforts of home, or thoughtless rage against the machine. But a neo-Luddite approach would encourage us to consider environmental and social costs before the headlong embrace of more technology. Here are a half-dozen simple suggestions: 1) every road construction or repair project must include bike lanes and sidewalks; 2) traffic must be calmed through narrower roads and speed bumps, not through building larger swaths of blacktop; 3) turn off your phone and computer, or at least its bell tone, beeps, and whistles (and no downloaded songs to announce to the world that you’re alone); 4) buy local produce; 5) abandon the lawn; and 6) don’t submit.

*Paul Josephson teaches in the History Department and thanks students in his Luddite Rantings course for pointing him in the right direction about the technological future. He is the author of the new book, *Would Trotsky Wear a Bluetooth? Technological Utopianism under Socialism, 1917-1989*.*