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Modern Technology: Triumph and Trouble

Modern-day technology--like the internet---has clearly put a major innovative impact on our current standard of living. It has changed the way we spend money, shaped our thinking, and manipulated the gears of our society. Yet, there is still a constant debate on whether or not technological advancements have a net positive effect on our society. For example, the clash between "techno-skeptics" and "techno-optimists" is something I feel we should be aware of, as certain debatable concepts, and their products, are likely soon to shape our everyday life. Optimists and pessimists, for example, argue over the matter of prosperity, and how technology can either bring catastrophe or economic growth. Previous generations, and "techno-skeptics," may contend that we are being "eaten up" by technology, and that it may lead to human dystopia, because this new, hi-tech age does heavily affect our lifestyle, intelligence, and personality. So, in the final analysis, does innovation bring destruction? Does technology make us dumber? As technology innovates, does society depreciate? There is, undoubtedly, a cause-and-effect, even a "karmic" imprint borne on innovations. And, it is perhaps easy to say that technological innovation brings more benefits to the world; but I believe we need to keep in mind the cons as well. Because, what we do now will clearly shape the future of humanity, and of this planet itself. These are among the questions and issues I will be addressing in this paper.

Moreover, aren't we are all in search of prosperity and a secure self-identity? Yet there are often quite a few obstacles to this search, for most of us. And, with all the gadgets around us, and the general consumerist lifestyle we are leading, it is sometimes hard to clearly see what is going on around us. This can have an enervating or dulling effect on our personality, and even our sense of self-preservation. Two movies that I know of express this concept quite well. The first is "Wall-E," which satirizes the effect of technology on personality by showing how people become "consumed" by the new gadgets. The citizens are all the same, barely have any personality, are fat and constantly looking at a screen, being fed by all the "latest information." The film thus evokes how new gadgets appeal to emotional desires, which exploits our wants, and pulls us into a "hole" that shelters us from the things going on around us. "Idiocracy" is another film that depicts the effect of technology on society. A quick synopsis: the protagonist travels ahead in time by a few centuries. He soon finds out that he is the smartest man in the world; in fact, every citizen is a moron, who has his/her life directly guided by robots. Ironically, this brings up an important question,--"Are we freely making decisions?" As philosopher Martin Heidegger put it, in the 1949 Bremen Lectures, "In the age of technological dominance...the human would merely be a machine" (Harvard iSites).   Yet we obviously can still make decisions, rational or not; but the choices often seem based upon our modern society's supply and delivery system of them. Thus, it often feels as if everything around us is telling us what to do, explicitly and subtly, and increasingly via technology, and social media. Novelist and social prophet Aldous Huxley plainly agrees with this; he declared in a 1958 television interview, that "...there are a number of technological devices which anybody who wishes to use can use to accelerate this process of going away from freedom" (Wallace interview).

Hence, more and more, it's clear we are being inexorably pulled into the computer world, reinforcing the dubious impression that happiness lies in the consumption of technology, and its by-products. And, arguably, there is some truth to that. Because we see the proof of this every day-people clearly deriving pleasure; from video gamers, to social media culture, and giddy phone geeks. In today's so-called digital revolution, our emotions, desires, and self image are clearly being played with, and manipulated. And Apple presents a compelling example of this; yearly, they will show off their new, "revolutionary" product, along with their extremely aesthetically-pleasing advertisement, to suck us into believing that we need the new product, frequently the latest phone "must have."

In sum, technology definitely has its pros and cons, just like most everything else, in this modern age. However, it seems we tend to routinely see past the cons in this area, because the pros are so "groundbreakingly revolutionary," or so goes the hype. Thus, in this paper, my discussion shall revolve largely around the question, "How is technology affecting us?", with some slight emphasis on the internet, of course, because I believe that is a major exemplar, for today's modern technology. Thus pros and cons will be weighed, historical evidence and current events addressed, all to hopefully make us more aware of how things work, and the levels of influence upon us by them. Today, the future, often appears within our immediate reach; and understanding these assorted effects seems, in my view, crucial to our search for prosperity and a stronger self-identity.

Techno-Skepticism

Techno-skeptics agree that the technological revolution will ultimately destroy human society. For example, Aldous Huxley portrays, in his 1932 novel, *Brave New World* a civilization controlled by scientific dictatorship, a clear implication of technological threat. In 1958, he expands on this in a televised interview and addresses the issue of technological freedom. Here is the transcript I paraphrased from the program, with Mike Wallace as the interviewer.

> WALLACE: Are there specific devices or methods of communication which diminish our freedoms?
>
> HUXLEY: Radio and TV used to its fullest extent, can impose a will on an immense mass of people. This has happened again and again in history with technology's advance and this changes social condition, and suddenly people have found themselves in a situation which they didn't foresee and doing all sorts of things they really didn't want to do.

Although this interview was conducted in the late 50s, I would contend that it directly relates to the phenomenon of the internet and media today. As stated earlier, Apple produces well-designed advertisements, and can yearly convince masses of people to purchase, for example, the latest iPhone, trapping some people in a vicious cycle that they didn't really want to partake in; namely, being stuck in a phone contract, and renewing it towards the next "new revolutionary gadget." This cycle shall henceforth be nicknamed the"Apple-effect," for future references. And this is somewhat foreshadowed in Huxley's *Brave New World Revisited*, a social criticism book written almost thirty years after his original *Brave New World*;

in it, he analyzes the effect of technology on society, and contends that "...modern technology has led to the concentration of economic and political power... a society controlled by Big Business [like Apple and Facebook] and Big Government"(19).

Another issue that techno-skeptics like to raise is that of addiction to technology. Kevin Kelly, a modern "cybernetic" journalist, surveys arguments from a wide variety of books on "philosophical technology," and interviews a range of prominent authors, his analysis in a book called "What Technology Wants." When he writes in support of techno-skepticism, he comes up with this hypothesis on the addiction angle:

One theory: In a blind fury to find some kind of meaning in life, we obsessively consume technology madly...needing more and more technology to feel less and less satisfied. 'Needing more to be satisfied less' is one definition of addiction. According to this logic, technology is, therefore, an addiction. (213)

So, with Kelly's theory, today's "Apple-effect," and Huxley's idea that "suddenly people have found themselves in a situation which they didn't foresee and doing all sorts of things they really didn't want to do" (Wallace interview), the idea of technology taking over our lives and freedom becomes further reinforced. This is essentially how Huxley implies the downfall of human society in *Brave New World*, by bringing together the factors or dimensions of technological addiction, and showing us its tortuous path to cultural dystopia, and existential anomie.

Techno-Optimism

By contrast, Matt Ridley, an author and journalist, famous for his evolutionary views on human society, argues the techno-skeptic view in his 2010 book *The Rational Optimist* focusing on the evolution of increasing prosperity through the technological revolution. To him, Huxley is wrong: "Aldous Huxley…[he] was looking the wrong way -- at money and technology, not idealism and nationalism" (289). Ridley also brings up the concept of "collective intelligence," which seems to argue a skeptical view of modern technology--or in this case, the internet. He states in his book that "collective intelligence exchanges things...which encourages specialization, which in turn led to more technological innovation, which led to…progress" (56). One can interpret this as saying the internet is full of information and resources, which if used in a correct manner, can teach the user a lot of useful skills to better him or herself, along with the rest of the world. Ridley expands on this idea in a 2010 *Ted-Talks* lecture, "When Ideas Have Sex," and provides countless examples of how technology will lead us to a utopia. He presents arguments and examples of how inventions throughout history have increased overall prosperity and freedom. One such illustration is the computer mouse [a metonymic] example for the internet], which to him, allows the user to browse countless resources, exchange ideas, and better oneself. He concludes his speech as "technology will advance, and therefore living standards will advance." He also concludes in the final pages of "Rational Optimist", "Technology progresses, prosperity spreads, poverty declines, disease retreats, happiness increases, freedom grows, knowledge flourishes"(359).

Kevin Kelly, the cybernetic journalist introduced earlier, also agrees with this optimistic view of the internet as a "collective intelligence." In his book, *What Technology Wants*, he states-- "Its [the internet's] growing smartness is for all kinds of humdrum chores--data mining, memory archive, simulations, forecasting, pattern matching..distributed intelligence" (332). Thus an obvious endorsement of the use of the internet and technology for the good of mankind. Later, Kelly adds how "...technology increases options for ourselves and for generations to come" (350-1). He sides with the idea that technology increases freedom, rather than the contrary, thus implying a path to a kind of "utopia" via the technological revolution.

Collective Intelligence is Lazy

As mentioned earlier, the movie *Idiocracy*, attempts to combine these various arguments-- the amenable effect of Ridley's idea of "collective intelligence," to Huxley's idea about a path to dystopia. Here's a synopsis of this again:

> The protagonist travels ahead in time by a few centuries. He soon finds out that he is the smartest man in the world; in fact, every citizen is a moron, who has his life directly guided by robots.

A scene in the movie that really stands out in this respect is when a doctor visits, and people are diagnosed by simply listening to a robot's advice, to insert devices in each of their orifices. Then, when the diagnosis is incorrect, and the actual doctor, a human, attempts to solve the error, we see that, in reality, he has no idea what he is doing. This scene implies a depreciation of society by showing how a techno-"collective intelligence" can encourage humans to be more lazy and incompetent, their skills eroding because of over-dependence on machines.

An article entitled "Is Technology Making us Lazy?" approaches this issue in terms of medical terminology. It features a debate between two clinical physicians, Dr. Paul C. Ajamain and Dr. Robert Pinkert, that approaches the problem of new technology replacing or eroding a doctor's skills. Ajamian contends that "we are now training a generation of doctors who won't even care [practices now performed by modern devices]...making us lazy clinicians"(Review of Optometry). To be more explicit, in terms of the internet, I believe this statement relates to what we find on the website WebMD, where the user types in his or her symptoms, and the website returns a diagnosis. Hence, Pinkert agrees with Ajamain that, as this example shows, a problematic laziness can occur with technological innovations; but then counters with the idea that "the clinical benefits far outweigh the risks," and that it ultimately is up to the doctor to fully scrutinize and understand both the innovations and the diagnosis (Ibid).

In terms of the modern day technology rather than medical terminology, I would interpret this as a statement directed to the average user. Namely, that in order to counteract the laziness and incompetence sometimes caused by techno-devices, the user must understand how the device works, along with its pros and cons--with a care and discernment roughly comparable to a doctor's.

Conclusion

In sum, techno-optimist would argue for the Internet's availability to our collective intelligence, for the continued evolution of prosperity through innovations, the delegation of certain tasks, now effectively done by modern technology (e.g., the Internet and other forms of robotics), and for the freedom of choices.

Conversely, a techno-skeptic would consider these points, but suggest that these outcomes come with a price, such as addiction, and limited control over life. As stated earlier, with the "Apple-effect," it can be concluded that advertisers love to exploit the technological optimism view, by promoting positive outcomes from their advertised products, thereby further reinforcing addictions, and limiting available choices for people. In short, these are some of the costs that "prosperity" inevitably comes with. Hence, the overriding question: Is it worth paying, all things considered?

In my view, with today's growing technological innovations, it is up to the user to scrutinize the irony or hypocrisy of "using", as he or she may be the one being used. As Lester Thurow put it in *The Future of Capitalism*, technological innovations are one of the "tectonic forces" that we obey but barely understand. (72) To me, this is a highly relevant statement, as even Ridley and Huxley (rival perspectives) approach this same basic idea in their *Rational Optimist* and *Brave New World Revisited,* respectively. They both conclude in their last chapters with the concept of freedom through education, which I totally support. That is, by being better informed, and then truly understanding the everyday technology that surrounds us, it will become easier to notice the side-effects from "using"; and also allows us to perhaps see the future of humanity, and of this planet, more clearly--more optimally served by the partnership of technology with our oversight same.

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