

Does technology make us faster, stronger or better?

2007. We are over half way through the first decade of the twenty-first century. The world is inundated with technology for the masses. We have the ability to communicate with each other from almost any point on the Earth. Information is disseminated globally every second of every day to homes, schools, offices and mobile communication devices. Technology to self-publish is cheap, if not free, and immediate. Traveling the world is no longer slow and expensive. Does this new technological accessibility liberate us or confine us. Does it make us faster, stronger or better?

There are four inventions that fundamentally changed the world: the printing press (1445) made recording and the quick distribution of ideas and information possible; the telephone (1876) made personal, instant communication over long distances possible; radio (1897) made communication to vast audiences instant; and the aeroplane (1905) made travel over vast areas easier and quicker. It's likely that without these four inventions we wouldn't have television, space flight, satellite communications, the Internet, or mobile phones.

These four inventions have shaped the world we live in both culturally and technologically. What is particularly amazing is the speed in which they conquered the world. Worth noting in today's technological quagmire is that each one's success was based on its inherent function.

Today we are spoilt for choice. Devices multi-task. The modern mobile telephone allows the owner to send instant text messages, record audio and video, take photos, play games, store diaries, and even (surprise surprise) make and take calls (its primary function). We are no longer restricted to scheduled television programmes as we can now build our own schedules or go behind the pre-set and interact directly with a given programme or advertisement by pressing the red button.

Is choice such a bad thing? The writer Barry Shwartz notes that the official dogma of all western industrialised societies is that...

...if we are interested in maximizing the welfare of our citizens the way to do that is to maximize individual freedom. The reason for this is both that freedom is in and of itself good, valuable, worthwhile, essential to being human and because if people have freedom then each of us can act on our own to do the things that will maximize our welfare and no one has to decide on our behalf. The way to maximize freedom is to maximize choice. More choice means more freedom. More freedom means more welfare. (www.ted.com)

But, he concludes, that with so many options people find it difficult to choose at all. Choice causes paralysis in decision-making, escalates expectations and ultimately results in dissatisfaction when that object inevitably fails to live up to such high expectations.

When telephones were simple analogue devices customers were satisfied as long as they were able to connect to the number they wanted. Today, a reliable connection is not the most important issue when choosing a phone. Possibly because it is assumed that a phone *will* connect to the number dialed. Possibly, talking is no longer the primary function of a mobile phone. With the choice available and the special features learning to use the technology is part of the fun. Rather than being simply a functional tool it has become a lifestyle choice. Your phone or laptop says something about you.

Although we have more options when choosing a device, once we own it its technology may retard our decision-making, limiting us only to pre-installed options. Spell-checkers, calculators, diaries, and one-push number connectors mean we don't have to remember anything, or necessarily need mental arithmetic, spelling or grammar thanks to the built in processors.

The internet has made it possible to connect immediately to anyone else on-line. We have at our disposal millions of bits of information at a click of a button. But with all the information available on line how can we sift through it. Search engines, such as Google, have attempted to order the information but, again, with so much choice which do we choose from a search that brings up thousands of

options. Is the first in the list necessarily better than the ones in the middle or the ones at the end? How do we know the information is even correct? Do we sift through all of them and then decide? It's like having access to the largest library in the world without a librarian.

The problem with having these options and having these choices made for us is that, possibly, we won't have options that exist outside that technology. The technology will become its own purpose.

Understanding that technology exists in a greater world is useful in finding a purpose in which to use it. The four inventions mentioned earlier were tools that enhanced human understanding and human communication. Those tools were not self-serving. They served a function in moving information from the few to the many.

Their technological descendants appear to be more inward looking. Perhaps the medium is the message in that we have not yet unlocked the potential of these new devices and we are trying to use them with an old world outlook — a bit like heating a radiator on a coal fire.

But in the world of big business and global media networks can we afford to let the technology fall into the wrong hands. We are being herded into a global village, overseen by mega-rich media tycoons who shape it in their own image and buy the rest. Rupert Murdoch bought my-space and intends to launch a YouTube (bought out by Google in Nov 2006 (www.news.bbc.co.uk)) type website (www.money.cnn.com). He owns Sky and the Fox Network and umpteen newspapers around the world. Strict broadcasting rules in the UK prevent him from doing what his papers and US Networks continually do, push a right-wing, consumerist, capitalist, pro-American agenda. Who's to say the same thing won't be done on-line where it is, so far, more difficult to regulate. With huge chunks of the Internet being controlled by huge media houses maybe the rules might change but who polices the police? Will self-publishing be so easy in the future.

Today's technology has become dependent on itself for moving forward but while it does so it lays waste to important aspects of human culture. Text messaging and emoticons, for example, are eroding language. In an attempt to save as much

valuable text space as possible, words are being reduced, truncated phonetically or replaced entirely by symbols ☺, and the trend is now seeping into usage in the real world.

It's quite acceptable for new words to grow into the language — text is now also a verb — but it is another thing to allow a language to be destroyed or warped. Language, specifically writing with all its conventions is what allows us to communicate ideas and therefore create.

Is technology making us faster, smarter or better? It can, and as we have seen the speed in which technology evolves — sixty-two years from the first controlled flight to men walking on the moon; less than ten years for the world wide web to be a global phenomenon — it is important that it is shaped for specific purposes otherwise it will shape itself for its own sake.

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