

New technology: Does it cost more than it's worth?

Now that the holiday season has finally ended (and most, but not all, of the celebratory lights have been turned off), we can benefit from a bit of reflection on the technologies that surround us. Whether you purchased or received a technological gadget during the holidays, no doubt all of us were conscious of the multitude of technological contraptions that are permeating all aspects of our lives. We now have instruments that will take photographs in deep water, others that will shuttle us along sidewalks in dense rush hour traffic (something Chicago police are doing now on their Segways), and even others that will pinpoint our location on the planet at the spatial scale of a park bench (thanks to the Global Positioning System (GPS)). And while we all appear agog over the changes occurring, as indicated by our ravenous purchasing habits, things might not be so good after all. While we surround ourselves with more and more hi-tech devices and sophisticated information gatherers, does anyone question how they might be affecting our lives and our social and personal relationships? When we do such an analysis, interesting things become apparent.

Certainly, scholars have long questioned the introduction of new technologies for a variety of reasons—Albert Einstein, Jacques Ellul, and Lewis Mumford come to mind. Yet, we don't often see critiques aired in today's centralized media. The cases that do get mentioned focus almost exclusively on one of two areas: (1) potential impairment of human health—as in case of cell phones and brains; or, (2) potential damage to our children's moral compass—as in the case of the Internet. While these concerns are relevant and deserve a hearing, they ignore many of the other costs that we bear because of the technologies that surround us. Further, these two types of concerns often create a hubbub only with a few, select technologies, whereas, the vast majority of technologies get introduced (and many proliferate) long before a serious discussion takes place. Unfortunately, this aspect of our culture may be our undoing, especially if technologies continue to shape and configure our society as they are doing.

In my January 2005 column, I begged the question of whether humans were truly intelligent species. My essay focused on the scientific and philosophical concepts that deserve consideration immediately in order to avoid many of the dangerous, and potentially catastrophic, technologies that we have developed and continue to spread throughout our neighborhoods and landscapes. Here, rather than rehash those arguments, I focus on another extremely important arena of impact—namely, the social and psychological costs of modern technologies.

All technologies have a purpose, although many may have been discovered rather serendipitously. A car carries humans (and their belongings) from place to place. A television serves as a receiver to convey news and entertainment programming to a wide audience. A mobile telephone allows people to communicate across long distances and from remote places. These three technologies clearly serve identifiable and distinguishable functions, ones that many of us have become reliant upon.

Consider, for a moment, how reliant you are on one (or more) of these specific

technologies. How would you cope with having to do without one of them? Consider how much money you (and your family) spend on these three technologies each month. When doing this calculation, be sure to include secondary costs associated with these technologies, which add considerably to the purchase "price" of them—such as, gasoline, insurance, and repair expenses for a car; cable/satellite fees, movie and video game rentals, and electrical bills for a television; and, long-term calling plans, penalties for overuse, and phone accoutrements for a mobile telephone. When you add all these costs, what fraction is this total of your net monthly income? How does this compare to the expenses associated with rent/mortgage and the food that you (and your family) require monthly? Does this amount seem reasonable to you?

Likely most of you realize now, if you didn't before, that we spend ungodly amounts of money so that we can have immediate access to these three technologies. Perhaps some of you are now ready to contemplate whether the social costs of these technologies are high as well. So let's do it, beginning with the automobile.

Barely more than 100 years old, motor vehicles are now ubiquitous in our society. Incredibly, there are now more vehicles in the United States than there are legal drivers (Miller)! Yet, what could be wrong with having too many cars? Isn't the increase in vehicles per household a sign of progress, especially in China where the personal car industry is growing at a feverish pace? Doesn't the increased sprawl that we see in nearly all metropolitan areas, including the home town of this newspaper, necessitate the need for personal vehicles of conveyance? It would seem so, wouldn't it?

Cars are more than mere transportation devices. They have become, as if they weren't originally, prime status symbols in our culture. In the minds of their owners, they do much more than convey people and belongings; they convey ideas of self-worth, class identification, and social status. If they didn't, why would people, rich and poor, spend tens of thousands of dollars more than is necessary (to get a basic transporting vehicle) in order to obtain the latest (and most jazzed up) model? But, so what if people want to spend their extra cash on their vehicle, rather than something else. Isn't that their right to do so?

Unfortunately, the social costs of having personal vehicles should give us caution. Consider that over forty thousand people in the United States die each year in accidents trying to get from here to there on the highways and byways that seem to stretch in all directions. Vehicle crashes are the number one way people aged 6-28 die in this country. (My college of 1,200 students has lost two young people this way, in only the last few months—one was a 2005 graduate, the other was in her first year of school.) How many kids have gone fatherless or motherless because of our addiction to personal vehicles? What about the tens of thousands of people that have been severely injured in traffic accidents? How have their (and their loved ones) quality of life been detrimentally affected?

Beyond death, injury, or family upheaval, there are many other social costs associated with driving. Consider the increasing number

of hours that we spend commuting each day, an amount increasing not only because of sprawl but also because of bottlenecks and accidents due to overutilization of personal vehicles. Time spent in one's vehicle is usually time spent away from family, locked inside a chemically-harmful shell, anxious and stressed out—all things likely to reduce our life expectancies and the quality of life for our children.

Consider, the incredible sums of money that have been spent on building massive highways connecting people from almost all rural communities. (You'll now have to add these taxes (to build and upkeep roads) to the total cost calculation that you performed earlier.) It is foolish to think that roads are free or should be built at any price. It is also wrong to think that this massive amount of money could not have been used to improve our lives in other ways—better and more frequent trains, better schools, more community centers, more chemical-free food, and more poverty assistance here and abroad.

Television is not immune to serious social costs either. We spend inordinate amounts of time sitting on our buttocks watching this box. Not only does that have a lot to do with the grave obesity problem we have in this country but it has a lot to do with why we need constant noise and "action" in order to avoid boredom. Peace and quiet, something once cherished, has now become displaced by multi-tasking.

Since the shows that are aired on television are entirely paid for by the advertisements that skillfully break up shows into short (easily digestible) segments, the goal of the programming is to grab our attention (so we watch the next set of commercials). This leads to our present situation where most shows are seductive but devoid of useful information and where news agencies pander to topics that grab attention (such as violence, accidents, sex scandals, etc.) rather than on items that might make us more active members of our democracy and our communities. Most of us get our news from the major TV news stations and so are extremely vulnerable to the political lethargy that grows on those that are sit idly on their couches.

Also, the commercials on our televisions are perhaps the most pernicious of all. In their quest to sell us the latest gadget, conspicuous (read "status-conferring") items, or high caloric foods, advertisers use highly sophisticated ways to entertain us and make associations between things that humans need to be happy (such as intimate relationships, contact with nature, and feelings of achievement) and things they sell. Unfortunately, we are duped, tricked, cajoled, or manipulated by them—use whatever word works for you. The more images they show and the more associations they make, the more we buy. Not all of us mind you, but enough of us to make it a very, very profitable venture for them and a very debilitating venture for us. The constant bombardment of advertising messages likely leads us to be more individualistic (rather than collective), more materialistic, and more unhealthy (through our food and beverage choices). All of these behavioral traits are not conducive to a happy, supportive, and nurturing planet or community. And, lastly, mobile phones have become indispensable instruments for communicating but not without significant



social costs as well. With the proliferation of cell phones, the amount of money that we spend to call (or page, or send text messages, etc.) has climbed precipitously. And while the upper middle-class can afford an extra \$40-\$100+ bill each month, I suspect that many lower income people cannot. However, the promotion of cell phones has been so strong and convincing, financial limitations doesn't stop many from purchasing personal access to this technology; my recent excursions on Chicago buses convinces me of this. Thus, I ask, how many children go hungry or eat highly nonnutritious food (which tends to be cheaper; see last month's essay) because their legal guardians are strapped for cash because of elevated cell phone (or cable/satellite, or monthly car) bills? We all know how financially vulnerable many of our neighbors are, stories about the extreme debt that Americans face do make the news on occasion. However, is anyone wondering why it is that we increase rates of consumption of electronic doodads while the average debt continues to skyrocket? (Perhaps it is no surprise that we act this way, especially when we our government leaders suffer from the same condition—overspending our tax dollars while the national debt rises to new highs on a daily basis.) And more importantly, is any one wondering what the costs are to our society of children who are underfed, under-read (watching too much TV), or otherwise neglected because of financial troubles faced by their family members? (Just to be clear, I am not wondering if poverty is caused by new technologies, rather, I am concerned whether its effects are made worse by them.)

Why might people act irrationally by buying things they cannot afford? There are two explanations I can offer. Perhaps one or both are playing a role. First, many technologies have become so common place, that in order to survive in this fast moving nation, people require personal ownership of the technologies (such as a car and a cell phone). Second, perhaps the media's representations and images (i.e., commercials) are so successful that people act impulsively (and not thoughtfully) and purchase a one-year contract with a cell-phone company (interesting that this is required, isn't it?) or a lease on a vehicle or stereo, something that will cost them mightily in the long run. I am not suggesting that people are stupid or sheep like, rather I am wondering if we truly understand how easily we can be manipulated by the forces of materialism and commercialism. (I don't accept the view that poor people

are poor because they have bad financial instincts any more than I think people who become addicted to cigarettes are knowingly trying to kill themselves.) Whatever the reason people make bad financial decisions, we need to find out if we are going to understand the true costs of the technologies we allow into our midst.

Cell phones are wonderful contraptions for sure. If one is stranded on a highway or if one is on a passenger plane, cell phones allow for people to connect with others in new and exciting ways. But recognize that we "need" cell phones when we are stranded on the highway because we live in a society where we expect to encounter an evildoer whereas we don't expect a samaritan to help us. (We also need them because most highways have removed their public emergency phones, because, I assume, all travelers are expected to have mobile phones by now.) Apparently, our society is so dangerous that it requires that we spend large amounts of money on a communication device (and a security system and, perhaps, a firearm, etc.) rather than work to create communities where people help each other. (If you are cynical about the realistic nature of these assertions, ask an older person how they survived traveling before the dawn of the cell phone? Did they feel threatened by the prospects of being alone on the highway when, ironically, hundreds of potential helpers drove by them at racing speeds?) The more and more dependant we become on cell phones, the less we rely on our fellow neighbors to be helpful partners in difficult times. And what are the real costs (in terms of violence, depression, and inefficiency) associated with a growing sense that technologies divorce us from any need for community? Does anyone care?

Not everyone has been sold on modern technology. Eric Brende, in his recent book *Better Off: Flipping the Switch on Technology*, describes his eighteen month "visit" to a low-tech community. By slowing down and having to survive without electricity and most energy-demanding accessories, Eric and his new bride have many epiphanies—ones that bear repeating. First, without access to modern technologies, Eric discovered that an interdependence of neighbors was "a matter of sheer survival." In fact, human solidarity, something that seems greatly lacking in our society, may draw impetus from the mutual recognition that the people of one's community are part of one's support structure. Second, Eric found that "by minimizing technology, . . . neighbors maximized human know-how."

Despite having limited "modern" education, members of Eric's new community understood how to solve real problems satisfactorily, expediently, and dependably. The best example might be the simulation of a refrigerator through the storage of winter ice within home walls filled with sawdust. This "old" technology creates an electrical-free freezer and allows for ice cream to remain a mid-summer night's treat. Third, Eric found that slowing life down made him more aware and more appreciative of the world around him—the beautiful natural melodies provided by the insect and amphibious orchestra in the evening, the majestic nightly light show provided by the millions of distant suns, and the vicissitudes of water and energy provided by the seasons. In the end, Brende concludes that it is our arrogance of modernization that prevents us from recognizing that some of the most satisfying relationships and experiences are available to those that choose to recapture their humaneness by switching technology off.

Mr. Brende is not alone when he comes to these conclusions. Many thinkers have found peace and happiness in environments much less technologically advanced and materialistic. Does anyone remember Thoreau (*Walden Pond*) or Mahatma Gandhi? It seems that we live in a society that has adopted an ethos (i.e., guiding belief) which demands gluttonous, uncritical consumption of anything new and electronically-circuited. As shown above, there are significant social costs to the use and continued expansion of these contraptions. When will we begin to contemplate alternative paths for our society? Are we so stuffed with these gadgets that we don't even have the quiet time to consider these issues? I hope not. Perhaps if we turned off the phone, pulled out the plug on our TVs, and walked/biked rather than drove everywhere, we might find the time to do so.

Works cited

Miller, Leslie. (2003) "Cars, trucks now outnumber drivers." *Salon*. Aug. 29.

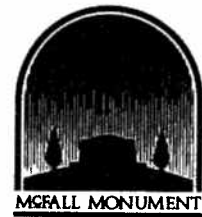
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REAL ESTATE TRANSACTIONS

From records in the office of the Knox County Supervisor of Assessments

Address	Seller	Buyer	Price
(All Galesburg unless otherwise indicated)			
504 N. Washington, Abingdon	Steven & Kelly Batson	Dustin Ryan Hobby	\$500
1553 Cottonwood Dr., Victoria	Sec. of HUD	Patrick Invest. Props. LLC	\$6,375
97 Greenwood Ct., Oak Run	M/M Michael L. Goben	M/M Michael E. Watt	\$245,000
Lot, 143 Lakeside Pl., Oak Run	Linda M. Kemen-Helmert	David D. Hansen	\$8,500
Lot 4-038 Oak Run Dr., Oak Run	Jacki L. Vignassi	M/M Randall Creglow	\$5,500
497 Knox Rd. 600N, Abingdon	M/M Jeffrey L. Wilcoxon	M/M Kevin J. Carlson	\$120,000
40 ac., 400 Ill. Rt. 41, Abing.	Kent A. Armstrong	David & Judith McCrery	\$110,000
388 Lawrence Ave.	Sec. of HUD	James D. Warren	\$26,500
1093 S. Seminary St.	Sec. of HUD	Lewis Rosenberry	\$15,000
4 lots, Blk.2, Santa Fe Addn.	Robt. & Sarah Brown	James & Susan Cordle	\$18,000
.1 ac., Ill. Rt. 8, Maquon	Jennifer M. Lazarz	Ill. Dept. of Transportation	\$300
714 Fulton Ave., Delong	Jill Driessen	Robert & Linda Asbury	\$17,000
862 Monmouth Blvd.	SFJV-2003-1, LLC	Stephen C. Schmalz	\$18,500
239 E. Water St.	Jeannie Cook	Iris Veneracion	\$46,500
183 S. Main St., Wataga	Judicial Sales Corp.	Fed. Home Loan Mort. Corp.	\$67,508
572 N. Broad St.	Judicial Sales Corp.	Fed. Nat. Mortgage Asso.	\$31,839
122 Ohio Ave.	Gwendola L. Hall	Terry N. Purtell	\$40,000
89.6 ac, Knox Twp.	John H. Ruddell	P. Tarcha & E. Cozzi, Trus.	\$276,000
255 Bur Oak Ct., Oak Run	M/M Timothy D. Kneller	Lori L. Gaul	\$23,000
1499 North St., Rapatee	Sec. of Veteran Affairs	Robert E. Lynch	\$38,170
2882 Montague Dr.	Litton Loan Serv., LLC	Richard M. McGee	\$105,000
525 Johnston St.	Derick M. Bacon	Ross Properties	\$40,000
437 W. Fremont St.	Albert T. Townsley	Philip R. Nees	\$40,050
917 E. Knox St.	Harrel & Judith Timmons	Dorothy J. Brandenburg	\$30,000
Lot, North Park First Addn.	LaMorne Schurtz	Michael E. Bern	\$5,500
1456 Brown Ave.	Michael & Patricia Bern	Gregory & Ann Atwater	\$46,000
1079 E. Losey St.	Donnie L. Brackett	Harun A. Dauti	\$75,000
292 W. Main St.	Midwest Bank of W. Ill.	Jason Robins	\$7,000
488 Third St., Yates City	David Strubhar	Eva Burnett	\$43,250
8.625 ac., Cedar Twp.	Harlan H. Bloomer	Rosanne C. Bloomer Tr.	\$26,341
2283 U.S. Hwy. 150N, Wataga	Jose A. Alvarez	Dale Sell	\$142,000
1553 Cottonwood Dr., Victoria	Patrick Invest. Props. LLC	John Chezum	\$17,000
160 ac., Knox Rd. 2300E, Elba Twp.	M/M Raymond L. Wozniak	David Cox, Dennis Headley	\$540,000
80.13 ac., Knox & Orange Twps.	Terry Hoehn	Thomas & Dean Hoehn	\$313,000
80 ac., Walnut Grove Twp.	Lori Lundeen Smith	Michael Lundeen	\$108,000
84.65 ac., Henderson Twp.	Charles & Clark Cummings	Timber Cr.Prop.Manag.LLC	\$181,998
70.154 ac., Orange Twp.	Charles G. Westbay	Charles L. Cummings	\$143,114

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- Full-time special education attendant for instructional support, E/BD program, at Churchill Junior High School. High school diploma or equivalent, NCLB state-approved para-professional certificate required. Salary as per aide/attendant schedule. Apply by January 26, 2006.

- Anticipated full-time special education attendant for instructional support, E/BD program, at Abigdon Middle School. High school diploma or equivalent, NCLB state-approved para-profes-

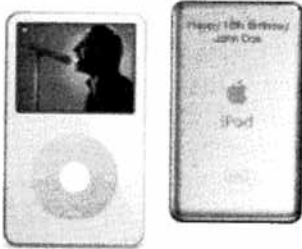
sional certificate required. Salary as per aide/attendant schedule. Apply by January 26, 2006.

- Maintenance specialist, electrician/AC/Refrigeration. High school diploma or equivalent, current electrical license, certificate or experience in refrigeration and air conditioning (troubleshoot and repair). Salary as per maintenance schedule. Apply by February 3, 2006.

Apply to Diane VanHootegem, Director of Human Resources, Galesburg C.U.S.D. #205, P.O. Box 1206, Galesburg, IL 61402. District #205 is an equal opportunity employer and does not discriminate on the basis of sex, age, race, creed, color, national origin or disabling conditions. Members of minority groups are encouraged to apply.

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