

The Technology Resisters: A Reader Survey

Contributed by Peter Crabb
24 December 2009

In the wake of the failure of the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen to deliver anything other than business as usual, questions about the intentions and efficacy of official powers—government, the U.N., nonprofits, and corporate puppet masters—should be foremost on our minds. The conclusion that they won't do what needs to be done to save our planet from anthropogenic destruction seems to be inescapable. So, as Culture Change Editor Jan Lundberg bluntly put it, "The real state of affairs is truly, 'It's up to us.'"

One thing we can do is honestly acknowledge that the root cause of global warming—and the rest of the environmental insults of our time—is the unbridled use of energy-guzzling, greenhouse-gas-emitting modern technologies by a human population that has far outstripped the planet's carrying capacity.

Like it or not, we all contribute to the destruction every day by our use of coal, petroleum, and natural gas to do everything from brushing our teeth to flying to the moon.

But modern technologies don't just impact the environment. They also create all kinds of problems in our daily lives: distress, confusion, pathology, and conflict. And they destroy authentic societies and cultures, as Miguel Valencia observed in a recent Culture Change article about the effects of development on traditional Mexican society. In Jacques Ellul's chilling terms, what used to be known as culture has been replaced with a "technological system."

To get a sense of what people are doing to curb the harmful effects of modern technologies, Culture Change readers were invited back in November to share their stories about technologies they resist and alternative technologies they use instead. The premise for this survey was that while human evolutionary history shaped our Technological Minds to compulsively use whatever tools are at hand, regardless of the consequences, some portion of humankind should be able to recognize harmful consequences and restrain their personal use of at least some technologies.

Readers who responded with their thoughts and experiences were very passionate and articulate about their resistance to modern technology in at least some forms. About 25% of readers said they were proud Luddites or neo-Luddites. They wrote from around the world: Ukraine, Croatia, Australia, Canada, and the U.S. They were equally women and men who tended to be older and of the first generation to grow up with television. It was heartening that at least one college student and several graduate students identified themselves as resisters, too. They tended to have advanced degrees and/or work in professional/technical fields.

The technologies most frequently mentioned as things readers live without were television, cell phones, cars, and gas-powered lawn and garden tools. Here is the complete list of things they reject and the alternatives they embrace:

Readers gave various reasons for using or not using technologies:

"I'm always appalled that the simplest things are the first to go. Everything is digital, everything is complicated. You can't just plug something in and use it. And the more complicated something is, the more likely that it will break, usually three days after the warranty had expired. And since they can't be fixed, they end up in the landfill. Which is an abomination."

"I have not yet given into getting a cell phone . . . I have a hard time figuring out how to use the things, and have a hard enough time programming my landline phone and that's fairly simple. I don't need a phone that can take pictures, make movies, and texting? Come on."

“I create all my work the way I’ve always created it—on my drawing board, not on computer. . . . I just do not want to separate myself from the tactile-ness of a beautiful, textured paper and the ink and/or watercolor gliding across its surface.”

“In addition to people who totally eschew technology (I’m betting there aren’t that many), what about people (like me) who utilize technology but who consciously reject becoming caught up in the maelstrom techno-culture that proposes a technological approach to everything and salivates over every latest gadget (most of which offer fairly small gains in actual usability or convenience, but are ‘glitzy’)?”

“I’m not sure I see any kind of resistance as effective anymore, though it does make me feel better about myself.”

Some readers seemed to feel that they have no choice but to use technologies they’d prefer to live without:

“I try to use as little technology as possible. Unfortunately, being a classical corporate rat, I’m forced to use [a] mobile phone, notebook, and official car.”

“I use [a] bicycle whenever I can (when I go to market, or bakery, or gym) [but] unfortunately it becomes increasingly dangerous to drive [a] bicycle in my town as population (and accordingly, traffic density) ever increases.”

“As a student at a small liberal arts college, much of my life is absorbed by and mediated through technology. . . . To do well in a tough college today you more or less need to be at your computer for 5 to ½ of your waking hours. . . . Universities are some of the chief indoctrinators of techno-worship.”

For another reader, reducing the number of gadgets just didn’t seem to be worth it:

“I could certainly disengage from several of the technologies that I often use. I do not need a microwave, toaster, or teapot, or an electric razor or toothbrush. Nevertheless, eliminating these from my life would have negligible impact on my engagement with modern technology.”

A number of readers mentioned the alienating and dehumanizing effects of technologies:

“I believe that it is important to avoid television because of its demonstrated negative effects on attention span and physical health, and because it is the primary means of advertisement transmission. I believe that cellular phones and portable digital devices should be avoided because they effectively decouple awareness from immediate surroundings. . . . I believe that [mechanical] time-keeping is abused as a method of social control . . . since our society is hierarchical, it is inevitable that time-keeping is abused by persons in power positions . . .”

“I’m pretty sure the internet is doing permanent damage to my mind. . . . The best way I’ve found to combat the negative effects of all this screen time is to head to the woods and just sit in them quietly. The unpredictability is good for your eyes and ears. The differences between the real world and the fake world are jarring, and we shouldn’t ever let ourselves

become unaware of this. The woods will always remind you.”

“I don’t have a car, and I have to live in the megacity, highly packed with SUVs. The air is polluted, and to breath somewhat freely I need to go outside the centre by subway (which is also mind-blowing). My attempts to leave the city behind and move to the country have not yet been realized. But they are always on the agenda.”

“I think technotoys (your term) can well serve to deflect people (namely youth) from really acute problems of pollution, poverty, corruption.”

Not all readers who responded were dedicated technology resisters. A few were skeptical, in different ways, of resisting modern technology altogether. One advocated continued use of modern technologies to hasten collapse:

“I feel that anything industrial is inherently unsustainable because the very nature of industrial culture is rooted in market enterprise (especially Capitalist enterprise) and the foundations of that world view, dependent as they are on perpetual market growth, are necessarily unsustainable. . . . I would say that we might as well all pitch in to consumerism with all our might just because doing so will hasten the collapse of our unsustainable system. . . . We’ll be nine billion by mid-century, and 18 billion within another century or so—I think the problem is taking care of itself. Eighteen billion people won’t be able to own a cell phone apiece, much less a cell phone and a computer . . . I believe that incrementalism (which I guess I feel that resistance mainly is) is futile. If we can’t really bring ourselves to stop using technology (websites, e-mail, blogs, and the rest), then I’m not sure what we really accomplish. We might be dragging our feet, but we’re still hurtling toward the cliff, no?”

This Götterdämmerung argument misses the point that it won’t just be human culture that will collapse. There is a risk that many life forms will become extinct in the process and that the earth’s ability to support human life in any cultural configuration may be impaired. So there would seem to be a moral problem with not at least trying to change course.

Another reader touted the establishment position that technofixes will save the day:

“We nibbled our way into this mess, and we will nibble our way back out, assuming we have the time to do so. . . . it is going to take some new-wave, comprehensively designed and executed tech, not returning to ooga-booga and bamboo harpoons.”

What this perspective overlooks is that engineers and their capitalist sponsors have been tyrannically controlling culture for more than 200 years. How has that worked out?

And another reader sees that humans, not technology, are to blame:

“I see an attack on technology per se as a simplistic analysis of any problems we have. . . . It is not technology that is the villain in the story but greed, a lack of education, an emphasis on consumerism and poor governance that has allowed us to get into our current situation. . . . Technology is merely an aspect of man using his intelligence. It can have positive or negative aspects like every other aspect of human thought and behavior.”

This commonly heard technocentric perspective denies the fact that technologies exert control over users’ minds,

behavior, and quality of life and that they have verifiable physical impacts on the biosphere. This, by the way, is the same viewpoint that gave us the bumper sticker that reads, "Guns don't kill people. People kill people."

Finally, a number of respondents felt pretty much alone with their critical views of modern technology:

"There are so many initiatives to organize and represent people that are opposed to things like climate change, logging, etc. . . . where is the resistance to technology itself? . . . even the good anarchists and other radicals I know don't see the connections between technology and the all-encompassing crisis we face."

"As a life-long environmental activist I have come to a regrettable conclusion that the entire environmental movement is suffused with the same technology obsession as the rest of society is. . . . Challenging technology is harder than challenging growth; both have become archetypal memes."

"I haven't met people around here, or among my former colleagues in academia or research, who had been overtly critical of technology, in any of its manifestations. And this despite the Chernobyl nuclear apocalypse. On the contrary, media and politicians are pursuing new industrialism."

"A problem with focusing on the failure of technology is to gain a Luddite reputation, as if one is a simpleton who suffers a sort of 'future shock'."

"I'm glad to hear that there are others who resist the insanity of our modern lifestyles. There sure aren't very many around here."

"I've often been called a Luddite. A lot of people think I'm weird because I live like this when I don't have to. But I think they're the weird ones!"

To be clear, this was not a scientific sample, meaning that it is not possible to make inferences about how many technology resisters there are in the general population. The sample was limited to Culture Change readers, so if there were really hard-core resisters out there, we wouldn't have heard from them because they wouldn't be tuning into the web!

We can, however, reach a tentative answer to the question, "Is there a technology resistance?" There is no organized movement, at least among Culture Change readers, but there are pockets of resistance around the world and many of these resisters would very much like to connect with each other. They are thoughtful and tenacious folks who have passionate feelings about the direction in which modern technology is headed and who have taken whatever stand they can. My sense from reading their stories is that they are very smart, very hip people who are making their own lives and this planet just a tiny bit better.

Thanks to everyone who participated.

Readings:

"Is There a Technology Resistance?", by Peter Crabb, Nov. 13, 2009: culturechange.org

"Evils of False Progress Interfere in Fight for Climate - Now It's up to Us ", by Jan Lundberg, Dec. 19, 2009: culturechange.org

"Liberating the Social Imagination to Liberate Our Villages", a speech at the Degrowth Seminar, Copenhagen Klimaforum09, by Miguel Valencia, Dec. 11, 2009: culturechange.org

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Glendinning, Chellis. (1990, March/April). Notes toward a Neo-Luddite Manifesto. Utne Reader.

Mills, Stephanie (Ed.) (2007). Turning Away from Technology: A New Vision for the 21st Century. New Catalyst Books.

Sale, Kirkpatrick. (1996) Rebels against the Future: The Luddites and Their War on the Industrial Revolution: Lessons for the Computer Age. Basic Books.

Interview with Kirkpatrick Sale from the Auto-Free Times magazine (now Culture Change) by David Kupfer: Rebel Against the Future

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Peter Crabb is a social psychologist in rural eastern Pennsylvania. He can't be reached by cell phone, but email will work: pbcraab@verizon.net.

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