

Dreams of a simpler future: Exploring the relationship between technological attitudes and general happiness

While Heidegger was asking questions concerning technology in 1949, he could not have foreseen the level of technological development nor the pace of change that the world has witnessed in the 57 years which have passed since then. Only 34 years ago, Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* was examining the impact of up-and-coming technologies. He stated "future shock [is] the shattering stress and disorientation that we induce in individuals by subjecting them to too much change in too short a time" (1970). That sense of shock is one that is often forgotten in the technological debate, where the question asked is more often 'how' than 'why'.

This paper begins by looking at public opinion around the issue of technology and scientific advance, and correlating that opinion to other lifestyle variables such as measures of happiness and religiosity. It then continues to examine the impact of technology on society from a cultural perspective, looking at the broader issues of technological change at a social systemic level, and finally it considers current public opinion data in light of the systemic change issues. Overall the thrust of the paper is to look at some of the social implications of technology rather than technology in itself, specifically in relation to the new media technologies.

Empirical Data

EVS

We begin by looking at some empirical data about people's reactions to technology in general. The European Values Study is a pan-European project which utilises an omnibus survey focusing especially on values associated with work, religion, lifestyles and other issues. Its most recent data gathering exercise was in 1999/2000, the third of its kind and the first EVS to include former soviet-bloc countries. The previous surveys were held in 1981 and 1990. Included in the questionnaire in all three surveys were a number of items related to technology, simplicity of lifestyle and scientific advances.

The first slide shows the Irish responses to the general desirability of more emphasis on the development of technology over the three surveys. Generally speaking the data suggest a rise in the number of people seeing more emphasis on the development of technology as 'a good thing' (62.5% to 69.6%), a corresponding diminution in those seeing it as 'a bad thing' (15% to 9.2%), and a fairly static percentage of around 20% for those who 'don't mind' one way or the other.

In the next slide, we see the corresponding percentage of responses data for the same general question, but this time the specific focus is on the desirability of a simple or more natural lifestyle. Here we see a decrease in the number of people seeing such a focus as 'a good thing' (87.2% down to 83.6%) and a corresponding scale of rise in the number choosing 'don't mind' as a response (9.9% to 14.5%). The overall variation in the numbers seeing a simple or more natural lifestyle as 'a bad thing' is in the region of 1% over 20 years.

The third of these slides shows the responses to a question as to whether scientific advances are deemed helpful or harmful to mankind. Here there is little change in the numbers of people seeing such advances as helpful (41.1% to 39.7%) but there are significant changes in the other two categories. The number of people stating that scientific advances 'will harm' mankind drops (29.9% to 17.4%) with a corresponding rise to the more nuanced response of 'some of each' (29% to 42.8%).

If we turn to the wider constituency of the other nations included in the 1999/2000 EVS data, we get a broader picture. Looking first at the issue of more emphasis on the development of technology, we see in slide 4 the aggregated responses for each nation. Generally speaking, nations from the former soviet-bloc countries seem to be more in favour of such an emphasis than those in the European Union. It is interesting to note that the Irish figures are very similar to those of the overall average of all nations together. Sweden, Denmark, Greece and the Netherlands

have the levels of respondents seeing such emphasis as 'a bad thing', in excess of 25% in each country. Sweden, N. Ireland, Spain, Germany and the Netherlands each have in excess of 25% 'don't mind'.

In slide 5 we see similar data for the various countries based on the response to the question regarding 'a simple and more natural lifestyle'. Russia stands out as the only country with less than 60% choosing 'a good thing' by way of response. Russia, Ukraine, Germany and the Netherlands all have more than 10% of respondents opting for 'a bad thing'. The numbers selecting 'don't mind' range from 22.1% (Russia) to 9.2% (Luxembourg). The Irish figures are broadly in line with the overall average, with a slight difference in the 'don't mind' category

Slide 6 shows similar international data for responses to the question as to whether scientific advances will help or harm mankind. 'Will help' ranges from 66.3% to 30.7%, 'will harm' from 8.7% to 18.4%, and 'some of each' from 25% to 60.7%. It is interesting to note that there is a very strong indirect linear relationship between 'will help' and 'some of each'. Ireland once again is very close to the international average point.

Crosstabulation analyses on the variables indicated weak but statistically significant relationships. Reliability analyses yielded non-significant results, indicating that each of these variables is measuring a different phenomenon.

So much for empirical data. But what exactly do these figures tell us? Essentially, the overall thrust of these figures is straightforward: there are considerable differences within and between countries on the desirability of emphases on technology and simplicity of lifestyle, and the overall effect of scientific advances. The picture is not by any means black-and-white. People are nuanced in their responses, particularly in relation to the issue of scientific advances. The question of the desirability of a simple and natural lifestyle is more marked across nations than it is within. Generally speaking, such a lifestyle is deemed desirable by a majority in every country but almost 20% in Russia deem that changing to such a lifestyle in the future to be 'a bad thing'.

Happiness and Belief in God

It may be useful, therefore, to turn again to the EVS data, in a view to looking at some further data on a wider number of phenomena. As I indicated in the opening of this paper, the EVS contains many variables related to lifestyle and religion amongst other things.

If we look at the responses to the question about happiness, we see the data in slide 7. It is important to bear in mind that the lower the mean score, the higher the level of happiness. Here we see that there is a distinct break between eastern and western nations in Europe, with the western nations indicating higher levels of mean happiness than the eastern nations.

Running a one-way ANOVA on mean happiness with the attitudes to technology as factors yields a significant result ($F=55.27$, $p<.001$). The descriptive data are given along with the Bonferroni data in slide 8. The data indicate that those who see an emphasis on development of technology as good are least happy and those who see such development as bad are the most happy.

A similar one-way ANOVA test on mean happiness with the attitudes to a simple and natural lifestyle as factors also yields a significant result ($F=29.34$, $p<.001$). The descriptive data are given along with the Bonferroni data in slide 9. The data indicate that those who see an emphasis on a simple and natural lifestyle as 'good' or 'don't mind' are happier than those who see such an emphasis as 'bad'.

A further one-way ANOVA test on mean happiness with the attitudes to scientific advances as factors also yields a significant result ($F=13.10$, $p<.001$). The descriptive data are given along with the Bonferroni data in slide 10. The data indicate all three groups are different on the happiness scale, those who see scientific advances as helpful the happiest, and those who see scientific advances as simultaneously harmful and helpful as the unhappiest.

Running the same set of tests on mean responses to the 'importance of God in one's life' yields some interesting results. The outcome for an ANOVA on importance of God with attitudes to emphasis on the development of technology was non-significant, i.e. there were no statistically significant differences between

the groups. Running ANOVA for importance of God with attitudes to simple and natural lifestyle ($F=259$, $p.<000$) and scientific advances ($F=32.66$, $p.<000$) yields the results seen in tables 11 and 12. Those with the highest mean sense of God as important in their lives see a simple and natural lifestyle as ‘good’ and scientific advances as ‘harmful’, whereas those with the lowest mean sense of God as important in their lives ‘don’t mind’ about a simple and natural lifestyle but believe that scientific advances will ‘help mankind’.

These various analyses of variance are simply a statistical way of looking at groups – in our case groups determined on the basis of their attitudes to technology, simplicity of lifestyle, and scientific advances – and seeing where they stand in relation to other variables such as happiness, and importance of God in their lives. While it is important not to derive simplistic conclusions from the statistical analyses, it is clear that the broad trends indicate significant differences between the groupings on the variables measured. But these trends mask underlying complexities. Further analysis, outside of the scope of this paper, should usefully focus on gender and age, as well as individual countries and varying GNP.

Slides on contemporary attitudes (EB) follow.

The impact of technology

Survey questions, however, are a blunt tool at best for examining such critical topics in society, especially where there is such a variation in responses. To suggest that the various attitudes to technology can effectively be garnered along three axes – good, bad and don't mind – may be utilitarian and economic but it does little to advance a deeper understanding of the underlying systemic issues. To focus on partial specifics can result in a failure to direct attention to critical dimensions of the whole.

Neil Postman argues this well in his critique of technology in contemporary society, *Technopoly*. He points out that

technological change is neither additive nor subtractive. It is ecological ... One significant change generates total change. If you remove the caterpillars from a given habitat, you are not left with the same environment minus caterpillars: you have a new environment and you have reconstituted the conditions of survival ... (1993, p. 18).

New technologies have had considerable impact on social and cultural life. The influence of printing, the discovery and application of electricity, the development of mass transport, the invention of birth control drugs, the patenting of gene technologies, and the implementation of new media in society all have profound and far-reaching effects. When new technologies are implemented, they take time before they are fully adopted, but at the outset, the impact of adoption is not fully realised. It is only when a technology is fully embedded in society that its impact begins to become clearer, but by then there is no mechanism for getting the genie back into the bottle. As Postman puts it

New technologies alter the structure of our interests, the things we think *about* (Postman's emphasis). They alter the character of our symbols: the things we think *with*. And they alter the nature of community: the arena in which thoughts develop (1993, p. 20).

Postman certainly has a case to make, and his book is a well crafted response to the issue of technological domination in society today. But he overstates the case. The same problem arises with Bernard Cohen's famous comment on the mass media, that while they may not be successful in telling of what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about (Cohen, 1969). This is the agenda setting hypothesis that enjoys high currency in communications studies courses and one that does have strong empirical support. It does, however, suffer from the same flaw as Postman's 'technopoly' hypothesis in that it fails to take the end user into account.

The Role of Common Sense

We wring our hands, for example, at the crass excesses of the tabloid newspapers, but we also know that most readers are well capable of reading between the lines and are not as gullible as many would have us believe. People tend to exercise common sense about issues in their lives and are not simply slaves to cultural change. This is in direct contradiction to the kind of image presented to us by cult films like *The Matrix* and its sequels. The same is true of issues and concerns related to technological uptake. Most parents, for example, are concerned about the amount of time their children spent in front of television rather than studying

their schoolbooks or engaging in sport and seek to limit the one in favour of the others.

We need to recognise the difference between hype and substance, especially in terms of selective media reporting on aspects of technology. The frenzied reportage about the dangers of the internet to children fails to take into account the role of adult supervision and the inherent unlikelihood of stumbling across child pornography. Interestingly enough, we do not experience the same frenzy about children being killed on our roads, or children dying of malnutrition across the world, or children being exiled to permanent poverty because of inequalities in education, although the numbers involved in these latter three categories vastly outweigh the number of children in danger from the internet. Most people, thankfully, have the wisdom and experience to make such distinctions and are active users rather than passive recipients.

Nonetheless, despite these reservations about Postman's emphasis he does have a valid point to make. Technology is all pervasive and ongoing, scientific advances continue to open new Pandora's boxes on a regular basis, and the possibility of retreating to a more natural and simple lifestyle is increasingly remote, except paradoxically for those who can afford to do it, often with the assistance of the latest technological wizardry. His central thesis is that we are collectively unaware of what is happening. Who or what shall be our guide? Postman's argument is

essentially about the blind leading the blind, all caught up in a technological euphoria that does not allow for the drawing of breath nor pausing for thought.

It is precisely this failure to think critically about the issues raised by technological change that constitutes his primary cause for concern. Todd Gitlin, writing on the power of media in the 21st century, puts it succinctly

I propose that we stop – and imagine the whole phenomenon freshly, taking the media seriously, not as a cornucopia of wondrous gadgets or a collection of social problems, but as a central condition of an entire way of life. Perhaps if we step away from the ripples of the moment, the week or the season, and contemplate the torrent in its entirety, we will know what we want to do about besides change channels (2002, p.210).

This concern is shared by theorists like Paul Virilio, who argues for an apocalypse-termination following a journey along a chronological axis as the inevitable outcome of technological development (1997). Part of Virilio's thesis is that any new technology is always self-poisoned at its inception, containing inevitably the seed and source of its own destruction, such as development of dynamite leading to the bomb or of the train to the train crash; there cannot be one without the other. Similarly, critical theorist Helena Sheehan comes to the conclusion that 'our technology has outstripped our wisdom' (1987, p. 66) in the context of television content being driven by technological capability rather than a desire to communicate or tell a story. These are in stark contrast to earlier theorists like Marshall McLuhan (1964) who saw only the positive benefits to be provided by new communications media in developing a global village.

Conclusion

What we face here, then, is a deeply polarised view of technology, one which sees it as a destructive anti-social force which is inevitably damaging, and the other that sees technology as essentially benign, a boon to the world despite whatever the collateral damage along the way might be. Both are ultimately fatalistic, accepting that technology and its concomitant forces of ongoing change are here to stay, and we can do little to alter that.

The EVS data, on the other hand, do not support such theses at first glance. If the forces of technology are as irresistibly powerful as some seem to think, the evidence for a single common mindset about technological development and scientific advancement across Europe does not exist. Opinions about technology and science would appear to be quite varied and never monolithic. While there are modest associations between levels of happiness and religiosity with attitudes to science and technology, the modest nature of such associations, taken in tandem with the size of the dataset under consideration, does not allow us to draw neat conclusions about a relationship between the one and the other.

In reality, people will continue to **adopt** new technologies and they will also **adapt** to the effects of emerging technologies in society. Most theorists fail utterly to take audiences and end users into account. Despite the nay-sayers, from the Luddites onward, history shows us that society continues to grow and thrive. The real challenge to us in the face of new and emerging technologies is one that has been with us since the dawn of time: how can we, in fact, make this world a better place to live for all the people of the planet? The real risk to us is not technology; it is, rather, the possibility that some would allow themselves to so cocooned and insulated from reality that they would not see the plight of those on the other side. The Dives and Lazarus of our time are separated by more than fine linen and good food.

The greatest challenge to society today is simply to think. Many of our endeavours are geared towards various ends, sometimes with little reflection. We can readily behave like lemmings, following on the example of others for no reason other than the behaviour of the other. Habermas's public sphere (1962, 1991, 1996), arguing for constructive open debate about the core issues by all the members of society, remains something of a dream. Technological comfort can breed ignorance as to the plight of how the other half actually lives. Despite the shrinking of our world by means of technology, we have forged a whole series of individual little worlds, rather than a single open communicating world of equals, a globe of villages rather than a global village. Insofar as technology directs us towards an unthinking acceptance of the status quo, society must be both vigilant and resistant.

An unthinking acceptance of technological change and development (and equally an unthinking rejection of such change and development) does not necessarily move us along as a society. Rather than being beguiled by the detail of the smaller picture we need, individually and collectively, to look at the larger canvas. As people we need to dream the dream of what society can be, not in terms of its technological perfection, but in terms of human freedom and fulfilment. Insofar as technology brings us toward that end, it should be embraced. Insofar as it does it does not, we need to ensure that our embrace of technology is not such as would exclude us from pursuing the core goals of freedom and possibility.

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