Chapter XII

Only Connect? The Impact of the Internet on Lived Experience

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INTRODUCTION: TECHNOLOGY AS PROBLEM FOR EVERYDAY LIFE

Those of us who live in the ‘late-modern’ developed world live in a world that is increasingly technological in character. This is not a new insight by any means; and it is usual to begin discussions of the likely personal, social or cultural impacts of new technologies with some acknowledgment of this fact. However, the commonplace nature of this observation should not be allowed to disguise its significance; and a mere cursory examination of the recent history of our involvement with some of the most significant and broadly used technologies reveals a truly startling state of affairs.

Since the 1950s at least, those living in the developed world have witnessed the arrival of a glut of new technological devices, many of which had only previously existed in the fertile imaginations of modern science fiction writers. Imagine describing the significance of these inventions to a person from the pre-modern past. It might go something like this: at the beginning of the twentieth century, the majority of people have motorized chariots—cars—to take them to and from their places of work. They have ‘far-seeing’ and ‘far-speaking’ devices—respectively televisions and telephones—that enable people to see and speak to absent things and people. Once only the gods lived this way and framing the problems surrounding the nature and significance of technology in this historical way, makes our technological world appear as a modern nirvana in comparison to the world inhabited by those of the pre-modern past.

Clearly then, technology is one of the dimensions along which we can differentiate our ideas of the modern and the pre-modern. The devices referred to above have, without doubt, been one of the key factors involved in modernizing many aspects of everyday life, a change that can only be described as a ‘great technological transformation’ of the everyday world. Many of these technologies—especially those sanitation, culinary and cleansing technologies that have transformed the ‘domestic’ sphere—have seemingly been designed for ‘emancipatory’ social ends, liberating us from the dull and compulsive chores of home and workplace.

However, not all recent technological innovations can be seen as ‘socially progressive.’ Other innovations, especially those that have been designed to take us beyond and beneath the terrestrial world, pose challenges—and in some cases direct threats—to some of our most cherished and deeply held conceptions of the world. Space, nuclear and biotechnologies are species of this genus of technology. Other modern technologies fall somewhere between these two extremes and hence from a moral and political view seem deeply ambiguous (Feenberg, 1990). They offer both profound threats and opportunities. The Internet is an example of this third type of technology and it is a technology whose wider social and cultural significance remains unclear (see Jones, 1997).

The Internet—as a synthesis of existing televisual and telecommunications and computing technologies—can be seen as a new total communication and information environment that has the potential—if used in certain ways—to radically transform what we mean by communication, consumption and entertainment. But it can also be seen—especially from an everyday point of view—as a disruptive, perhaps even destructive force.

The question of the nature and significance of everyday life has come to occupy a prominent position in recent discussion in moral and social philosophy. According to the philosopher Charles Taylor (see Taylor, 1989), it is only within the context of everyday world—the world of productive work and the family—that the old classical philosophical questions about the nature of ‘the good’ make sense. As he puts it:

“[t]his sense of the importance of the everyday in human life...colors our whole understanding of what it is truly to respect human life and integrity. Along with the central place given to autonomy, it defines a version of this demand which is peculiar to our civilization, the modern West.” (Taylor, 1989, 14)

If technology has transformed everyday life, then technology has helped change our definitions of what it means to be in and of the ‘modern West.’ But it would be a mistake—as Taylor does—to see everyday life as something entirely divorced from the technological realm (and only subject to ‘technological impacts’). As phenomenologist of technology, Albert Borgmann has argued, technologies are now both a characteristic of, and a constraining pattern to, the entire fabric of our everyday lives, to such an extent that everyday existence can now almost be defined by the manner in which technology increasingly orders...
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