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Technology Isn't Just for Smart People

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Technology Isn't Just for Smart People

Abstract

"Technology isn't only for those who like studying computers and interacting with the technology that makes them run. Rather, we all use technology, no matter what our given job or profession is. Here are four ways to decipher how best to use technology."

Posting about technology and if it brings us together or pushes us apart from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

http://inallthings.org/technology-isnt-just-for-smart-people

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Technology Isn't Just for Smart People

Kari Sandouka

"What do you teach?"

This is the one question I most often dread when having a conversation. It's not so much the question, as the response that I receive when I give the answer. Nine time out of ten the response to my answer is, "Wow, you are so much smarter than me." In three sentences, I have lost all notion to continue the conversation.

What I do does not make me smarter or better than anyone else. It just means that I have different interests. For instance, I prefer studying computers and interacting with the technology that makes them run, rather than let's say, *people*. Technology is "the use of science in industry, engineering, etc., to invent useful things or to solve problems." This is the definition found in the Merriam-Webster dictionary. Yet, I am finding that most people, including myself, do not use the word technology in the context of its very own definition.
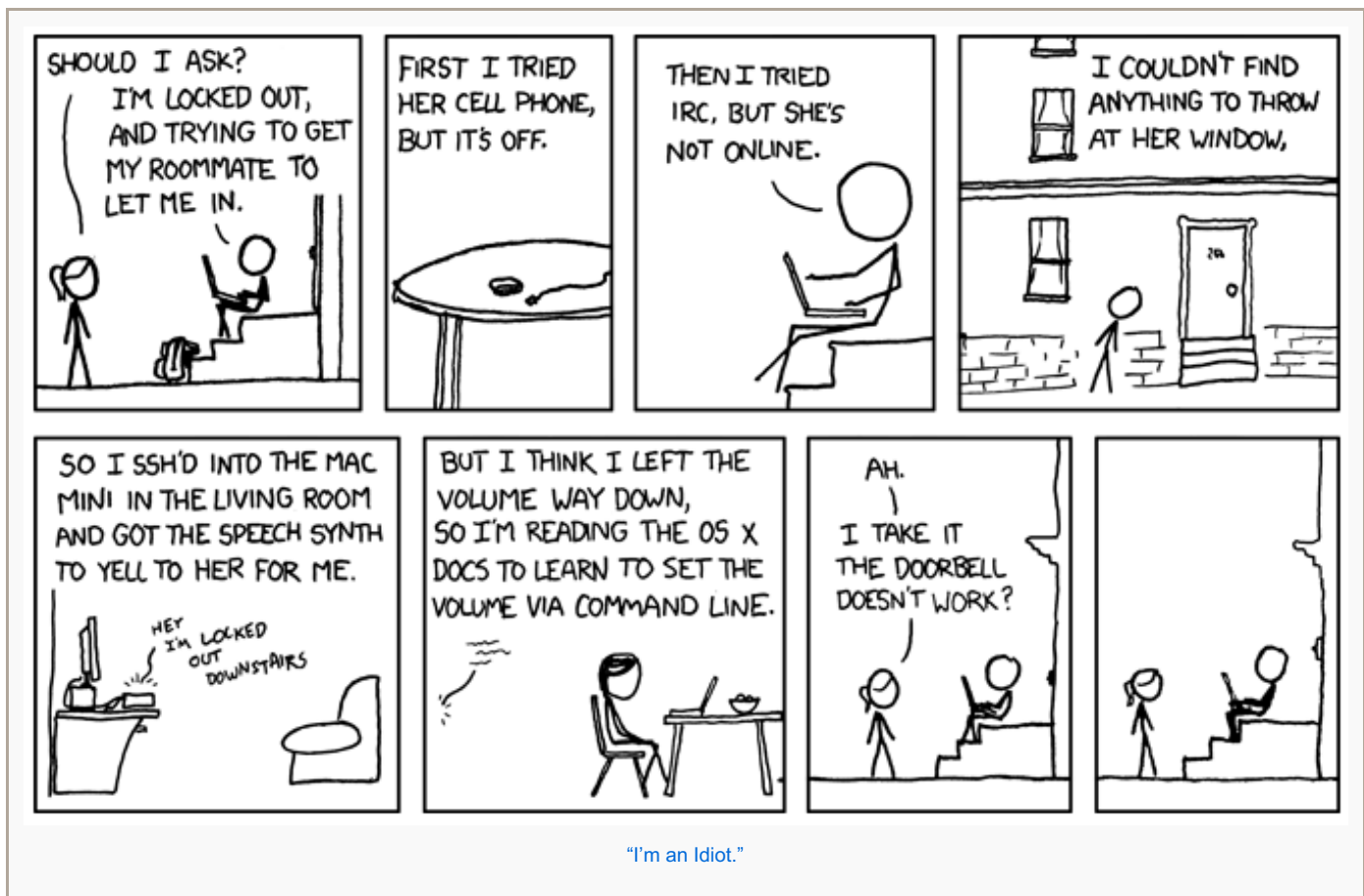
As with most things, we have and use different interpretations of common words and phrases. Technology may mean the laptop sitting on your desk, or the tablet in your lap, or the phone in your pocket. It could be the remote starter on your key chain, the hum of your refrigerator or even the motion-controlled light sensors for your driveway. Technology could also be the way you drive to work, the manner in which you choose which route is best. Most of the technological advances that surround us are computer related and I do not see the trend stopping anytime soon. In a way, we all use technology, no matter what our given job or profession is. The question at hand is: does technology bring us together or push us apart? After studying and working with computer technology for the past fifteen years, I do not think there is an easy or one correct answer to this question. There are four elements that I think would help decipher an answer to the question.

Context

A key component in giving a speech is to know your audience. I think this component is the same when deciding what technology to use. The context in which technology is used, as well as who will be using it, will be key to the success of the situation.

Consider the mechanical clock. Clocks mark, measure and quantify time in any domain. Lewis Mumford writes "the clock is not merely a means of keeping track of hours, but of synchronizing the actions of men. The clock is a piece of machinery whose 'product' is second and minutes: by its essential nature it dissociated time from human events and helped create the belief in an independent world of mathematically measurable sequences." Originally developed to regulate devotional times, they are now regulating work, commerce, and everyday life.[1] Clocks are simply tools that we use, same as technology.

It is up to us to determine when the technology use is appropriate. We must know the situation as well as the audience and determine how to best use technology. Given time, technology could take over and dictate our lives, as much as clocks do now; or we can control the technology and apply it when necessary. Technology might not always be the right answer for a given situation. One of my favorite reminders is this XKCD cartoon, aptly titled: "I'm an Idiot".[2]

Panel 1: SHOULD I ASK? / I'M LOCKED OUT, AND TRYING TO GET MY ROOMMATE TO LET ME IN.

Panel 2: FIRST I TRIED HER CELL PHONE, BUT IT'S OFF.

Panel 3: THEN I TRIED IRC, BUT SHE'S NOT ONLINE.

Panel 4: I COULDN'T FIND ANYTHING TO THROW AT HER WINDOW,

Panel 5: SO I SSH'D INTO THE MAC MINI IN THE LIVING ROOM AND GOT THE SPEECH SYNTH TO YELL TO HER FOR ME. / HEY I'M LOCKED OUT DOWNSTAIRS

Panel 6: BUT I THINK I LEFT THE VOLUME WAY DOWN, SO I'M READING THE OS X DOCS TO LEARN TO SET THE VOLUME VIA COMMAND LINE.

Panel 7: AH. / I TAKE IT THE DOORBELL DOESN'T WORK?

"I'm an Idiot."

Discernment

As we drive a car, we pay attention to what surrounds us. The weather impacts how slow or fast we can drive, maybe even what road we can take. We pay attention to others on the road, whether it is oncoming traffic or those behind and in front of us. We pay attention to cars as they try to pass, or as we try to pass them. We have to be vigilant of creatures on the side of the road, especially if it is at night time. There is a sense of situational awareness or discernment as we drive.

Just as we apply attention to when we drive, we need to pay attention to what we do with computer technology, specifically the Internet. It is not the technology, or the Internet, itself that allows for a connection to others, but yet it's the intent of how to use it. Life will always change. Technology will always change. We have to have a level of discernment to figure out how to be adapt to that change. We have to have the discernment to know what our level of comfort is with the technological advances around us. Not everyone needs a smartphone in their pocket, a tablet in their lap and a laptop on their computer. Not all conversations can be via text-messages or email. Maybe the stories just change: walking through the snow to school up-hill both ways now gives way to traveling across country on airplanes with a pocket full of quarters for pay-phones instead of a cell phone. Who knows what the stories will be for our children, or for theirs?

What we do now and how we set the example is the key to not letting technology dictate our relationships. Neil Postman writes "embedded in every tool is an ideological bias, a pre-disposition to construct the world as one thing rather than another, to value one thing over another, to amplify one sense or skill more loudly than another. New technologies alter the structure of our interests: the things we think about. 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."[3] The use of technology brings about a new way to thinking, a new way of doing things. It is not that the old way is wrong or has to be completely lost, we just have to learn to adapt as well as pass on our own stories.

In 2013, Jared Cohen (Director of Google Ideas) and Eric Schmidt (Executive Chair of Google) released a book titled The New Digital Age. The book is a documented vision from Mr. Cohen and Mr. Schmidt of how technology can reshape our world. It discusses the impact of technology on governments, relationships, and personal identity. While Mr. Schmidt and Mr. Cohen have grand ideas of what technology can do to reshape our lives, they also provide a word of caution. "The Internet is among the few things humans have built that they truly don't understand. It is a source of tremendous good and potentially dreadful evil, and we are only just beginning to witness its impact on the world stage. Technology driven change is inevitable, but we can exert a measure of control over how it plays out."[4]

Availability

We currently live in a networked society, also known as the Digital Revolution or the Information Age. The use of the internet allows us to peruse and use information at a moment's notice. It also allows for us to build online communities with other like-minded people across the globe. However, the use of the Internet is taken for granted. There are certain parts of the world, including within America, which simply do not have access to the Internet. Executives at Facebook and Google, as well as other tech giants, feel that being connected to everyone is key to making the world a better place. Projects like internet.org, Google Fiber and Project Loon are among those trying to get reasonably-priced Internet access to rural and remote areas that currently do not have access. In other words, these projects are trying to bridge the Digital Divide.

The Digital Divide refers to the gap between demographics and regions that have access to modern information and communications technology and those that don't or have restricted access. According to Pew Research, the factors associated with non-use of technology within America include: age, household income, educational attainment, community type and disability.[5] Race and gender do not seem to be factors contributing to the digital divide. Yet age (65 years and older), a lack of high school education and having a low household income (less than $20,000 per year) are the largest contributing factors. In accordance with the Pew Research Center, McKinsey & Company released a report in 2014 titled *Offline and Falling Behind: Barriers to Internet Adoption*. Their report identifies four categories of barriers: incentives, low income and affordability, user capability and infrastructure. The factors within these four categories include: lack of awareness of the Internet and/or cases that create value for the offline users; low income of individuals exacerbated by the high costs associated with providing access; lack of digital literacy; and lack of mobile Internet coverage or network access.[6]

A sense of empathy needs to be developed when consider the use of technology and its impact on society. As technological advances keep evolving and impacting our society, we have to realize that not everyone in the world is connected. We can't just adapt technology and assume everyone else has as well. We need to know how to bridge the gap, as well as know that sometimes technology is just not the answer and look for other ways to solve the problem.

Fear

In 1996, an article was released in the IEEE Spectrum title "Bozos on the Bus". The author, Robert Lucky, writes "The bus is being driven by someone up front whom we can't see and worse yet, we are not even sure where the destination is supposed to be."[7] The use of technology can either be a tale of caution or it can be a tale of adventure. I don't think we should be ruled by our fear of what is to come. I think we need to be cautious with what we do with and how we use technology, but it should not hold us back from moving forward. If we refuse to use technology, then we will be lost as the rest of the world moves forward without us. I'm sure there was a resistance to clocks in the beginning, but today time is taught early on in schools and our lives are run those little increments of hours and minutes. We have the choice: do we let technology rule us or do we rule technology. It is our creation and therefore under our control.

"I have never seen the wind. I see the effects of the wind, but I have never seen the wind. There is a mystery to it." These words were spoken by Billy Graham. I first heard them as the opening to a song sung by DC Talk. To this day, I can't tell you the album or even the song, but whenever I see the trees bending in the wind I think of those words. The wind is a mysterious things, and true we do not actually see the wind. In a sense, the Internet and its supporting technology is the same. We can see the technology, we can use it, we can see its effects, but it still is a mystery. I believe this aurora of mystery is what creates the skepticism of technology. I think the answer to how technology effects our lives lies within us individually. We must choose how we approach and use technology, knowing that it may separate us from others, or it may bring us together. We can't be ruled by the fear of the unknown, but we must apply a level of discernment. We must understand the situation and the context around us before deciding what role technology will play.

Footnotes

1. Derek C. Schuurman. Shaping a Digital World: Faith, Culture and Computer Technology (Downers Grove IL: IVP Academic, 2013) pp. 16. ↵

2. XKCD: I'm an Idiot. Retrieved 6/3/2015 HTTP://XKCD.COM/530/ ↵

3. Neil Postman. Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) pp 13, 20. ↵

4. Eric Schmidt, Jared Cohen. The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of People, Nations and Business. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013) pp. 3. ↵

5. Lee Rainie. The State of Digital Divides. (Pew Research, Nov. 2013). ↵

6. McKinsey & Company. *Offline and falling behind: Barriers to Internet adoption.* (McKinsey&Company, September 2014). ↵

7. Robert Lucky. Bozos on the Buss. IEEE Spectrum 33 no 7 (July 1996) pp. 19 ↵