Musings. 13th Oct 2021

# Technology is a Parasite.

“Perhaps the most ironic aspect of the struggle for survival is how easily organisms can be harmed by that which they desire.” (R. Kubey, 2002)

Remember your first computer? What did you do with it? Play games? Learn to program? Use the Internet?  
I remember my first Computer. It was an Acorn Electron. It had 32k of memory.  
I remember the cursor flashing. There was no GUI, mouse pointer, touch-screen interface, just a cursor. Waiting.  
It didn’t coddle you, showing you how things worked. You had to learn that from the manual: the tome of near-mystical words and symbols that you needed to peck out on the keys for it to perform even the most basic function. It was exclusionary; difficult to decipher and understand.  
By learning the language of the hardware, you were inducted into the mysteries of technology: an edifice raised in service of the machine.  
During the early days of mainstream computing technology, we were told that it would make our daily lives better, more free time with the family. It would open-up job opportunities to us, the technological elite: acolytes and masters of silicon. We were told that the arrival of technology was a good thing, and we believed the message.   
 The thing about technology is that it flatters you, it makes us feel stronger, more intelligent, and more able. This new-found control of our tools can easily lead us into a mindset of complacency, with the tools doing the work for us. A good analogy would be the *Sorcerer's Apprentice*, a Disney short animation that was part of the feature film, *Fantasia*. (Sorcerers Apprentice - Fantasia, 1940) We see Mickey Mouse don the wizard’s hat and brings a broom to life to do all the work he should be doing himself. The Apprentice is saved from drowning by the sorcerer who arrives to clean up the mess. Unfortunately, we do not have a sorcerer to save us from what we've already set in motion.

Over time though, things have changed. The tool that was meant to help us has invaded our lives and changed the world. Hardware and software has infiltrated every aspect of our lives. With the commoditisation and fetishization of technology, the emphasis of technology as an aid has become the language of the drug supplier: you *need* this new mobile phone. How are you going to look to others if you don’t have the newest handset, the latest console, the newest smart TV, watching the trending series on Netflix?  
Technology no longer exists to help us. Technology exists to be *used.*   
The relationship between humanity and technology is not a symbiotic one, but it is now one of enslavement. Humans are needed for the technology to be used, and the way we think, the way we work, the way we experience the world has been twisted in such a way that we are rapidly becoming dependent on technology to simply live. It has become pervasive and invasive: we are actively encouraged to embed even more technology into our lives and seen as abnormal if we do not.

“As the rate of advancing technology continues to increase, so does the amount of concern regarding its increasing hegemony. Technology has essentially spread through society like a virus, a ‘microorganism…[that] cannot grow or reproduce apart from a living cell [6].’ A virus depends on its host cell’s resources to ‘keep itself alive and to replicate…[7].’ The swift and sometimes fatal diffusion of viruses throughout a population may be described as an epidemic, or ‘an outbreak or product of sudden rapid, growth, or development [8].’ Although its evolution is on a much longer time scale than the usual epidemic, in a sense, technology is similar to a viral epidemic─it has circulated through society, invaded humans, and used them as its host...” (Mayer in Robbins, 2018)

Solutions to imaginary problems are invented in order for technology to reach deeper into our lives. As an example, a friend was amazed that I did not have an Amazon Echo, or voice PDA at home, and that the one in my phone was intentionally disabled. They could not understand why I would not avail myself of the ‘convenience’ of an AI to order things, play music, search for subjects online.

Even the ability to think and remember has been taken from so many. This may seem inflammatory, but personal experiences seem to back this up. My students constantly use Google to find information, parroting their findings back verbatim. They have knowledge but no understanding. In fact, they do not even have that. That have knowledge of how to instruct an algorithm to search for something for them. They are no longer students or scholars; they are manipulators of data.

An American evolutionary scientist Jeffrey Wicken noted in his paper, *Evolution and Thermodynamics: the New Paradigm,* that “dissipation through structuring is the strategy of life.” (Wicken, 1998)  
 it would appear that technology has some form of entropy. For it to flourish, something else must be reduced.

Social Media has become a driving force in data mining and cultural manipulation on an incomprehensible scale. Facebook is an egregious example of how vast numbers of people can be manipulated by controlling the content that can be viewed. Created as the Facebook at university, the social media juggernaut now has more than 2.89 billion users (Statistica, 2021)with a revenue in excess of $84.2 billion in 2020 alone. (Facebook, 2021)  
The ease of access of social media on multiple platforms is a testament to how far and how deeply technology has penetrated into modern society. However, Facebook and social media as a whole is one part of the delivery method.  
The prevalence of digital technology as the primary way that people gain information about the outside world is the other. In the 1990’s, the arrival of the Internet was viewed as data and information being free for all and for a brief period, it really was. Then digital piracy arrived and those who uploaded music, applications, images, films, etc. were branded as criminals. The reason? Companies might lose money from lost sales. There was a level of justification, and it gave corporate entities control over their intellectual property.

So we come to a question: why do we keep using technology?  
Quite simply because we enjoy it.  
 it is easy for us to become addicted to using technology in our everyday lives. Smartphone addiction is a recognised disorder, as is game addiction, and not just a video kind. gambling addiction as it relates to slot machines is well known, and the correlations between risk and reward are well known. In 2016, B.J Fogg, the founder of the Stamford Persuasive Technology lab says the following:

“‘We can now create machines that can change what people think and what people do, and the machines can do that autonomously” and “‘Social-media apps plumb one of our deepest wells of motivation. The human brain releases pleasurable, habitforming [sic] chemicals in response to social interactions, even to mere simulacra of them, and the hottest triggers are other people: you and your friends or followers are constantly prompting each other to use the service for longer.” (Fogg in Leslie, 2016)

So it appears that we've become slaves to the machine. in addition to viruses, animals, plants and fungus; Most noticeably the Cordyceps fungus have the ability to take over the functions of others. In this way like the Ant that is forced to climb to the top of a grass stalk we have become host to technological parasite that has taken over our lives and functionality.

The famous biologist Edward O Wilson has undertaken significant studies on the use of master/slave species; specifically Ants. He noted that:

“The evolution of social parasitism in ants works like a ratchet, allowing a species to slip further down in parasitic dependence but not back up toward its original free-living existence.” (Wilson, 1975)

So where do we go from here? do we cast off all technology and return to a pre-digital society? Possibly not. Although the Genie cannot be put back in its bottle, it can be kept under control. However, this means that people must start taking a level of responsibility and criticality as to the user technology in their lives. At the end of the day technology is meant to help humanity, not enslave it.

Whether people are willing to take on this responsibility of self-policing is yet to be seen. Unfortunately, the current generations are the Guinea pigs, and we won't see the results of this experiment for another several decades. The march of technology increases apace and they are enormously powerful interests that do not want that consumers to stop using their products. They do not wish the public to be critical because that damages profits. Yet without a societal recognition the damage that technology can potentially do, the juggernaut will pick up speed and we as a species may be run down by it, or worse, end up being driven by it.

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