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I, USER

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SECTION I: EMBRACING THE BAD

SECTION II: What usability is and why it matters

SECTION III: What is being done and why it doesn’t work

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SECTION V: From users to makers; a shift in the paradigm

CONCLUSIONS

Chapter 1: HELLO, MY NAME IS MADELINE AND I AM A USER.

*It’s nice to meet you, too. What are you in for? Tabletoiditis? Multiple cell phone disorder? Laptop hoarding? Manic online shopper? Don’t worry, we’re all a family here at Users Anonymous.*

We are a society of users, consumers, eaters, drinkers, buyers, wanters, keepers, hoarders, needers. We are the Western world, worshipers of all things “I”, “me” and “mine”. This ideology has been part of our “western” identity for thousands of years, and has served as the theoretical framework for the way we have structured of our social, political, and educational systems and practices ever since. But lately, there’s a new breeze flowing through that is changing the way we interpret our identity as individuals within society. But in the past 20 or so years, a strange wind has been blowing, one that has radically affected our perception of what it means to participate as a member of the western world. HINT: it rhymes with “spchelnology”.

KEEPING UP WITH THE JONES’

Interestingly, the ideology has stayed totally the same – it is how we have chosen to interpret it’s meaning that has done a complete one-eighty. Just 50 short years ago, what it meant to be an “I” and a “me” was to work hard, largely by means of production of goods and services, with the goal of earning the financial means to live a lifestyle that was sufficiently representative of the individual’s relative contribution to the workforce and to greater society. What one put in, one expected to get out. Conversely, what one was able to do financially with what they “got out” of the system was expected to be an appropriate indicator of their ability to “put in” or contribute value to the workforce. Johnny shoe-shiner who never passed the fourth grade probably wouldn’t be able to afford a new caddillac or a house on the good side of town, whereas Mr. Jones, high school graduate and prominent foreman and senior employee at an automotive plant was able to live with Mrs. Jones in a cookie cutter house, support a family, drive a nice car, all of which he placed great value in demonstrating to others.

The phrase “keeping up with the Jonses”, however cliché, is still happening, but in a very different kind of way. Though demonstrating professional status through possession of marge material items (cars, houses, furniture) is still part of today’s society, the advent of technology has changed the game in a serious way. Slowly but steadily it touched every part of our lives, not only changing the way we did things, but changing our perception of those very things themselves. The workforce was transformed as machines either replaced or became critical components in the workspace. Our social behaviors changed as the telephone became a prominent form of communication and television gave us a new way to find company and pleasure. Slowly, technological devices and services started to creep their way into the “Jones factor”, as owning the newest equipment acted as yet another indicator of wealth and power.

Suddenly, Mr and Mrs. Jones no longer had to have the best house on the block and newest model of Cadillac to maintain their image of success as technology became more and more of a household necessity for entertainment and communication. How would Mrs. Jones be able to gab away with Betty Smith about the neighbors without a telephone? What would she do to pass away the time, or quiet the children on Saturday mornings, if she did not own a proper television? Furthermore, what would houseguests think if they were to come over and enter a house without a single telephone or even the most affordable television set? The Joneses would be outcasts, nobodies, or , heaven forbid – radicals of some kind! During the height of the cold war, one can imagine that standing our for any reason, including not following the popular trend, was probably something that was to be avoided at all costs.

And so it began, and the wormhole opened. One by one, we crawled inside, beckoned gingerly by the finger of technological change. Awaiting us on the other side was something that nobody expected, and few would have believed – a society solely driven by machines, wherein success was determined not by one’s ability to produce, but instead, upon their ability to operate and master multiple forms of highly sophisticated technological systems.

Meanwhile, during the time alluded to while trapped in the proverbial wormhole, stuff changed. Like, a lot of stuff. What transpired via technological innovation between the short period of time between the middle and late 20th century was so incredibly powerful that would completely transform the way we interact with the world around us.