LESS FOR LENT

GIVE UP CAPITALISM FOR 40 DAYS

3. TECHNOLOGY: ESCAPE THE ALGORITHM

"The anti-human agenda of technologists might not be so bad — or might never be fully realised — if it didn't dovetail so neatly with the anti-human agenda of corporate capitalism. Each enables the other, reinforcing an abstract, growth-based scheme of infinite expansion — utterly incompatible with human life or the sustainability of our ecosystem. They both depend on a transcendent climax where the chrysalis of matter is left behind and humanity is reborn as pure consciousness or pure capital. We are not being beaten by machines, but by a league of tech billionaires who have been taught to believe that human beings are the problem and technology is the solution. We must become aware of their agenda and fight it if we are going to survive." **Douglas Rushkoff**

COVID-19 AND THE COMMONS

At the start of LESS for LENT, we began a period of voluntary abstinence in order to work towards freeing ourselves from the grip capitalism has on our lives. We are currently, at time of writing, encountering a situation where a global pandemic forces us to radically alter our behaviour in order to suppress a deadly virus. It's tempting to draw parallels between the two – but it's important to resist that temptation. Returning to the Amartya Sen quote from week one: 'there's a difference between fasting and starving': those hardest hit – socially, medically and economically – are not choosing to abstain from anything. We are being tested both individually and collectively and things will not return to the way they were before.

Nevertheless, the truth is that we may now be entering an appropriate time to re-evaluate how we do just about everything, for all our benefit. If you are participating in LESS for LENT you have already started that process. It so happens that this week's theme, technology, is of central importance in our current mandatory reconsideration of work and communication.

WHAT EVEN IS TECHNOLOGY?

For the context of our current inquiry, we'll narrow the definition to mean the tools, machinery and systems devised by humans to further particular ends. The consideration of the moral and philosophical dimensions of technology and its use goes back at least to the classical concepts of 'techne' (craft, art, skill) and episteme (theory, knowledge). We know that technology was and is used in the more-than-human world: other primates, and birds such as corvids and many other species are known to use tools for obtaining food, building shelter or for recreation. But humanity has uniquely created a society in which technology- and for the purpose of our reflection, consumer electronics in particular – not only plays a central role in meeting our fundamental

human needs, but has come to shape our society and culture in unprecedented ways. We often use the term 'Luddite' in a disparaging way to mean a reactionary anti-technologist. In truth, the Luddites were 19th century textile workers who saw that the use of machinery to replace their traditional heritage craft was not to the benefit of the people, but to the capitalist owners of the machinery alone.

Social critic Ivan Illich, writing in 1983 at the dawn of the computer age, wrote that 'computers are doing to communication what fences did to pastures and cars did to streets': in other words, he saw the idea of the commons as being threatened by individualist enclosure which redefines community. He advocated a new politics of self-limitation with regards to technology, viewing it as necessary for people to maintain autonomy – and that decisions on technical changes in the human environment should not be left to 'experts' and the marketplace alone.

There is good evidence that what Illich warned about has come to pass. The promise of technology as liberation- instant global communication and access to information – has become mediated by a handful of global corporations. We use Facebook Messenger to communicate, yet this is subject to our acceptance of terms of service we clicked 'accept' on, probably without reading. The terms of service mean allowing Facebook access to personal data, and direct control over our device. This unprecedented access to our data has emerged faster than the civic and political structures needed to control it – with direct consequences in our politics (via the use of personal data to tailor targeted advertisements during referenda and elections) and many other ways.

It doesn't have to be this way. Early technologists of digital communication were often advocates for user freedom. Take email, the most important and widely used communications medium on the internet. The technical standards for email were finalised in 1977 and have remained essentially unchanged. Anyone can set up an email address with any provider they choose (or host it themselves), which can communicate with any other email address. It just works, and everyone benefits (spam notwithstanding!). Capitalist technologists do not want their products to have open standards like this now, as it means they cannot form monopolies.
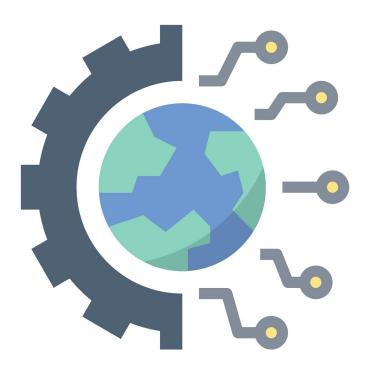
In the time of coronavirus, many of us are having to adjust our working practices to include increased use of technology for communications and meetings online. Much of the software we use for this is proprietary – our use of it is subject to conditions. We do not personally own it to use and modify as we wish. We are so accustomed to this that the strangeness of the arrangement is often concealed. Consider another technology we may use for our work – a pencil, for example. Once we acquire ownership of the pencil from the retailer and manufacturer, it is ours. We can draw or write what we want, sharpen it if necessary, lend it or give it to a friend if we want. There is no reason why freedoms like this should not be available to us with regard to the digital technology we use.

FREE SOFTWARE AND THE RIGHT TO REPAIR

There is a strong movement of folk creating, using and sharing software under 'free' or 'open source' licences. This includes both the programs we use, and the operating system itself. Exploring ways that we can use these kinds of tools instead of proprietary software is a concrete step we can make towards a digital commons, outside of the silos and walled gardens of the capitalist technologists. We encourage you to explore the ways in which you can make use of this technology and offer suggestions below.

How to skillfully use, maintain, repair and dispose of technology is another consideration. Capitalist technologists prefer to sell products that have built-in obsolescence and are difficult or impossible to repair by users themselves. This manufactures demand for up-to-date technology which often has little or no significant improvement upon the earlier iteration. Advocates for the 'right to repair' are beginning to succeed in some jurisdictions in preventing capitalist technologists from preventing self-repair, but work remains to be done.

Taken together, a networked digital commons based on free and open source software, run on hardware designed to be repairable and upgraded as a 'circular economy' (something we will explore in subsequent weeks) goes a long way to fulfilling Illich's criteria for 'tools for conviviality', in which we make and learn things in a personalised way in alignment with our interests and values, resulting in individual freedom realised in personal interdependence. At a time when we may be using our digital devices more than ever, this consideration couldn't be more critical.

ACTIVITY: REASONABLE QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT ANY TECHNOLOGY

For this week's activity, we will take for our subject video conferencing software such as Zoom or Skype. Many in-person meetings that are not happening at time of writing to prevent COVID-19 transmission are now being held on video conferencing platforms such as these. We may be accustomed to using this technology, but we may not have reflected on our use of it, its benefits and costs.

"78 Reasonable Questions to Ask about Any Technology" are from the book *Turning Away from Technology* by Stephanie Mills and originally derived from 76 questions that were written by philosopher of technology Jacques Ellul. The full list of questions can be found at this link: [78 Questions to Ask about Any Technology.](#)

Together, collaboratively we will attempt to answer the questions. We will be using the open source collaborative document software Etherpad, hosted by Rise Up.

Enter your answers to the questions on this document (no login or account required)
https://pad.riseup.net/p/xWm5AInITNG3yL-Pz0mK-keep

Next Week:
The manufacture and use of technology requires significant inputs of energy – as do food systems, transportation and almost everything else. The production of this energy, and the constant increase of demand for it, is a key driver of climate change, extractivism and resource depletion, and is eroding the basis for life on Earth – yet our exponential growth economy depends on it. How to understand this, and find ways towards addressing it, is the subject of next week's LESS for LENT.

Optional Resources for Week 3 of LESS for LENT
[F-Droid - Free and Open Source Android App Repository](#)- free software for your phone
[https://ubuntu.com/community/mission](#)- Ubuntu Linux- free software alternative to Windows
[Free Software Directory](#) searchable directory of over 15k free software packages
[Coronavirus Tech Handbook: Home](#) A crowdsourced set of tech, tools and data relating to the Coronavirus Pandemic
[Self-Repair Manifesto](#) Repair Manifesto
["My Tin Shed Technosphere"](#) Carina Davies
['Tools for Conviviality'](#) Ivan Illich