

Does technology yield more harm or more good in our lives?

[Technology](#), [Mobile Phone](#)



Jim Mannoia found himself stuck in traffic on a Los Angeles freeway, his left leg aching from maneuvering the heavy standard transmission in the stop-and-go traffic, sweltering in the heat because his air conditioner was not working and the vehicle was beginning to overheat at the engine level as well as inside the passenger compartment. Worst of all was that the radio was not working. Feeling rightly miserable, he noticed a BMW in the lane beside him, its windows rolled up tight against the heat while undoubtedly the air conditioner blew at full blast. He could hear the bass lines of the car's stereo and even wondered how the driver could hear well enough to carry on his cell phone conversation. Feeling sorry for himself, Mannoia instantly felt pangs of guilt as he recalls, " I felt envious, inferior, and even a little powerless until I remembered the Mozambican families I had seen sitting stunned and stark naked in the refugee camp that summer of ' 88. They had walked for months through bandit-ridden bush often at the cost of family death and personal mutilation at the hands of bandits. My thoughts of those refugees were interrupted as President Reagan's helicopter convoy beat through the air over our virtual parking lot, enroute from Pt. Magu Naval Air Station north to the ' ranch' above Santa Barbara. As we both sat and watched, I wondered if my freeway ' neighbor' shared my sense of how technology shapes our lives" (Mannoia, 1997; p. Techpap). It was only 50 years ago that we began to have wonderful labor-saving devices to help accomplish all the tasks that collectively constituted the perfect home environment. Sometimes it has the effect of removing all the reasons that everything cannot be done all the time and so results in more work rather than less, but few of us can imagine living without washing machines,

vacuum cleaners or dishwashers—or electricity, for that matter. But in the use of the term "technology" today, there is far more associated meaning than automobiles or washing machines. It has ushered in an entirely new way of working, and in increasing numbers of organizations, increased options of just where work associated with a particular job will be done. More employees than ever have the option of working at home yet still being employed either full or part time with someone else as telecommuting increases in popularity both with employees and employers. The advantages of medical advances are clear. For a full ten years, Toney Kincaid averaged nearly 600 seizures every week of his life. Beginning in his early 30s, the seizures became so frequent and severe that ultimately he lost his job and driver's license and was unable to carry on the shortest of conversations without being interrupted by a seizure. He could not be a father to his three young children and could not even shower unsupervised (Collins, 1993). Toney's life took a decided change for the better after he had implant surgery in 1989. In a highly experimental procedure, a vagus nerve stimulator, a device much like a pacemaker in its design and use, was implanted in his chest and he had been free of seizures at least through 1993. It cost \$50,000 but he went swimming in 1992 for the first time in 10 years (Collins, 1993). Other spectacular uses of technology in health care has been that the isolation of severe quadriplegics has been ended as many of the fully paralyzed are nonetheless able to communicate with those around them through the use of keyboards and other devices, some of which are driven even by eye movement when that is all the movement the patient is capable of generating (Anonymous, 1998). One of the most useful and

lifesaving benefits of medical technological advance is the sophistication of Magnetic Image Resonance (MRI) examination that has eliminated the need for any form of exploratory surgery (Hillman, 1997). Business benefit of the advances of technology also are clear. What business could fathom being dependent on manual systems for keeping their financial, tax and correspondence records? And which could "survive" without access to fax machines or electronic mail? The advance of Internet commerce has been slower than many would-have it be, but it is reasonable to assume that we eventually will be able to accomplish the most mundane of life's tasks, such as order and pay for the week's groceries that are then delivered to the door of the purchaser. The speed at which many things can happen now was unthinkable only a decade ago. Instantaneous communication anywhere in the world either by voice or by fax is possible now with the debut of Iridium global satellite cellular phone, paging and fax service, surpassing even the remarkable ability of courier services to deliver packages to any major population center of the world. There is a negative side to that ability for nearly instantaneous results, however, in that it distorts our sense and view of time. "It is hard to imagine anything more basic to human experience, yet more elusive to our understanding. Still, technology shapes even our view of time. The Swiss or the North American is annoyed when the train or plane is five minutes late. The Zimbabwean is pleased when the bus arrives as promised 'sometime in the morning.' For us, to wait is a form of slavery. Freedom, technology promises seductively, is to control your schedule yourself. The VCR lets us ingest our favorite daily diet of images when WE want to see them. The cell phone lets us call when WE want to talk... Our

western view of time is that it should be controlled efficiently, and that is what technology does best" (Mannoia, 1997; p. Techpap). The extensive databases that have been built over the years also carry with them not only the potential for abuse but there have been documented cases of such abuses. Encryption technology attempts to stay ahead of the hackers that see breaking security codes as a form of entertainment, but the encryption experts have difficulty in keeping any semblance of upper hand in opposition to determined hackers. Simple entry into sensitive computer systems can be no more menacing than a dare to go ring the strangest neighbor's doorbell and then run away before he can answer the door, but it carries the potential of literally ruining an individual's life. The more liberal of our population claims that the unfairness of access to information is nothing short of immoral in that the most marginal of us have no hope of having equal access to the information contained in the more public sections of databases. At some point, the rights of individual privacy meet the societal necessity for information, and it can be at this juncture that the clash between the two becomes most obvious. Gould (1989) says that it is that juncture that needs study for the purpose of determining boundaries and for exploring the principles of ethics that should be applied (16). Who should be determining those boundaries and who should be specifying which ethical principles should be found to be applicable is not clear, but in Gould's defense, the range over which abuses could occur is so broad that the issue would indeed present a daunting task. What Gould does conclude is that there should be free and informed consent involved in any dissemination of information and she believes that there should be free and equal access to the information

that is determined to be ethically available to all. It is clear that there are both advantages and disadvantages to the entire issue of technology's role in our lives. Mannoia (1997) says that it is " both product and process. As product, its most familiar face is the " stuff" of 20th century North American suburbia. It is laptop computers, cell phones, GPS receivers connected to digital maps, aerodynamic cars equipped with hi-powered stereos racing across 12 layers of stacked freeway overpasses... But process technology runs much deeper. It is what Jacques Ellul calls " technique," a way of systematizing human production, relationship, and even inquiry to make it mechanical" (p. Techpap). In either view, technology itself is neutral and is neither good nor bad. It is our use that determines the worth of it, and only we can determine whether that use will be beneficial or for harm. In what can be accomplished through its application, the ultimate conclusion is that its benefits far outweigh its potential for and history of abuse. References Anonymous (1998, June 23). Keeping in Touch With Americans: New Survey on Attitudes About Messaging Technologies Finds More Hope Than Hype About 'Overload' Problem. Business Wire, p. PG. Anonymous (1998, January 12). Quality of Life Executive Summary. At <http://www.supportinc.com/Outcomes.htm>. Collins, Sara (1993, June 7). Saving lives isn't cheap. U. S. News & World Report, p. 56. Computerworld Staff (1994, June 6). High-tech Heroes. Computerworld, p. 119. Gould, Carol C. (ed.) (1989). The Information Web: Ethical and Social Implications of Computer Networking. (Boulder, Colorado : Westview Press). Hillman, Bruce J. (1997, September 6). Medical imaging in the 21st century. The Lancet, vol. 350, p. 731. Mannoia, Jim (1997, May 15). A philosopher looks at the effect of modern technology

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