

Follow the signs: technology's effect on society



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Don DeLillo's modern classic, *White Noise*, examines a so-called normal family in 1980s America to demonstrate the pervasive nature of technology in contemporary society. Technology and media have become a staple in the everyday life of the average American, and its prevalence in peoples' lives continues to grow the more advanced it becomes. In his novel, DeLillo indicates the way in which modern technology is interlaced into his characters' lives as a reflection on similar habits within the lives of his readers, including how technology has become an unavoidable and, at times, unintentionally used influence on society. He wrote his novel as a warning about the dangers of such a reliance on technology, for he mourns for a time when people were not so controlled by it, and he sees technology as a true menace to society.

DeLillo employs his protagonist to demonstrate the danger of seeking identity and reassurance through technological means. Jack is a rather insecure character and is unsure of his identity. Rather than simply going by his name in his professional career, he goes by a series of initials, J. A. K., which causes him to feel like a "false character that follows the name around" (17). So, when he goes to the bank one morning and sees a monetary amount accompanying his name and personal information he feels "support and approval" from the machine. Through this transaction with the ATM, Jack felt as though his identity "had been authenticated and confirmed". Furthermore, the machine confirmed Jack's estimate about the amount of money in his account, which fills him with "relief and gratitude", as well as a sense of accomplishment, as the number on the screen is seen

by Jack as a direct result of his hard work at the University. In that way, the ATM interaction “blessed [Jack’s] life” (46).

Though this novel was written long before the emergence of smart phones, worldwide internet access and social media, DeLillo knew even then the potential dangers of such institutions. Finding one’s identity through technological means is not an uncommon feature in current culture, as many people feel defined by technology in one way or another. Most often nowadays, people feel defined by their social media and other online accounts. Some people feel their worth is weighed on the number of followers on their Instagram accounts, just as Jack felt his identity was solidified by the numbers on the ATM machine. DeLillo foresaw such a future, which is why this novel was penned in part to warn about technology’s dangers, for though Jack is comforted by the ATM “at least for now” (46), the author hints that this symbiotic relationship between man and machine may be short lived, for Jack and for the readers, and could lead to disastrous results.

Heinrich, Jack’s son, showcases how such involvement with technology can taint one’s mind. Heinrich has incorporated technology and modern media into his life far more so than his father, but he is reliant on media to a fault, so much so that when he hears the radio report rain scheduled for that evening, he refuses to accept that it is raining earlier than when the radio had previously reported. Jack pushes his son on this, arguing that he can “see it’s raining” (24). Heinrich, however, refuses to admit that it is raining and he launches into an account of epistemology, describing how it is impossible to know whether or not it is truly raining, despite what his senses

may lead him to believe. Although he witnessed the rain, Heinrich continues to deny its existence, though he had no problem proclaiming that it would undoubtedly rain that evening, because this is what he learned through the media. With this scene, DeLillo highlights how media consumption, facilitated through technology, can warp people's grip on reality. It is the tendency of humans to believe what they hear on the radio, see on television, and read online without question, and accept it as the honest truth- as Heinrich does with the weather forecast. This is a dangerous habit, for one can be easily convinced of a lie if he blindly believes what he learns from the media. This begs the question, if it does not rain that evening, will Heinrich still believe it does, because that is what the radio told him would happen? This is root of the problem when technology is so deeply assimilated with culture, the inability to know anything for oneself, but rather, to trust only what is learned from technology.

In addition to the mental distortions of technology within Heinrich, his very existence proves a physical pitfall of technology. This is discussed when Jack muses about the premature receding of his young son's hairline. Jack wonders if he unknowingly raised his son "in the vicinity of a chemical dump site, in the path of air currents that carry industrial wastes capable of producing scalp degeneration" (22). Jack considers the possibility that a toxic environment, resulting from technological advances in fields such as energy production or nuclear weaponry, is the cause of his son's hairline aging before its time. This thought embodies a great problem in the advancing of technology, that so much of it operates outside the control of men. The more this industry grows, the more people will be unable to control how it grows

and things will spiral in a dangerous direction which could result in catastrophic consequences for mankind.

The novel's title, *White Noise*, is a hint at how integrated technology and the media is in everyday life- its "noise" permeates through everyday life and provides the soundtrack to modern life. Through Jack's narration, the readers see just how much DeLillo believes technology intrudes on people's lives. One afternoon while the Gladney family was eating lunch together, their smoke alarm began to sound on the second floor. Jack assumes the device was beeping either because "the battery had just died or because the house was on fire" (8). The family was unperturbed at the possibility of the latter and they finished their lunch without interruption. Jack's two possible explanations for the smoke alarm testify to the author's opinion on technology- either he sees it as something unimportant, like a dead battery, or as a great danger, like in the instance of a house fire. DeLillo has no capacity for positive thoughts when it comes to technology- this is due to the fact that he sees technology's presence as plaguing the modern world. Technology's music is omnipresent in the lives of the Gladney family throughout the novel. One night, when Jack and his wife were in bed, "someone turned on the TV set at the end of the hall" and Jack unintentionally absorbed the television's content (29). This is dangerous because it exposes the imposing nature of technology and media and how it impacts people even when they do not actively participate. Instances wherein the characters experience the "white noise" of technology in the background of their daily lives occur throughout the novel. DeLillo uses these details to illustrate that, even when one does not directly use technology, its influence is unavoidable

in such an advanced society- and it has since become even more of an issue, as it is near impossible to escape from all forms of technology and the media's clout.

In *White Noise*, author Don DeLillo examines the way technology has shaped contemporary society and the significant effect it has had on the way people in a society communicate and connect with one another, as well as the harmful yet common habit of using technology to shape their own identity as well as their perception of others. Such a dependence on technology- for standard operations of everyday life, seeking identity, and communication- is the hamartia of modern society and, in DeLillo's opinion, fails to contribute anything but turmoil, and therefore should not be such a vital aspect of daily life.