

# Technology – the dark side

[Technology](#)



Almost everyone believes that technology has made life easier and more comfortable and that it has enabled us to perform tasks that we could not do otherwise. A list of the benefits of technology would be very long. Indeed. However, as with almost everything we human beings have created, technology has a downside. There is, we might say, a dark side to technology. For starters, technology does not necessarily make life simpler: rather, it tends to make life more complicated. Nowadays, for example, nearly every discussion of the "wonderful power of technology to enrich our lives" mentions the cell phone.

Certainly, the instant communication brought about by the telephone has been a boon. It was originally a rather simple device that anyone could learn to use in a matter of minutes, and we soon began using phones to make and receive phone calls, usually about matters of some consequence. Recently, however, we have enabled these devices to perform a ridiculous number of irrelevant functions. One needs a thirty-page booklet to learn how to use them. Anyone who enters a phone store today seeking a phone that simply sends and receives phone calls is likely to be looked upon as a refugee from the Dark Ages - or from another planet.

Furthermore, we have millions of people walking about or driving their cars while talking on cell phones, usually discussing matters of no importance whatsoever. If an alien civilization were to tap into our phone lines, its inhabitants would think that everyone on our planet was insane, and they wouldn't be far from wrong. In a sane world, would almost all of its inhabitants carry complex, multifunction gadgets that are used primarily to

engage in trivial chatter - and use them in ways that are socially annoying and unsafe?

Another example of the complexity of modern technology is the computer. Again, nobody can deny that computers have enabled us to share information, process data, and perform numerous other tasks with speed and ease that, as recently as a generation ago, we would have thought impossible. Computer technology has been advancing so rapidly that new applications are discovered faster than anyone can keep pace - and that's a problem. Even the experts understand only a fraction of what these machines do (just ask an expert for help when a computer malfunctions).

Although most users can and do master some of the basic operations, most computer wieners cannot use many of the functions that are built into computer programs. Much has been written about how the younger generations who have been brought up in the computer age know intuitively how to use these machines. However, considerable anecdotal evidence suggests that they learn only what amuses or entertains them. Most haven't the patience or the desire to go through the complicated process of learning more utilitarian programs.

Furthermore, they tend to use computers rather than their own brains for many tasks that they should be able to perform without mechanical assistance. It is possible to argue that the invention of the calculator is largely responsible for the inability of many people to do and may always be, imperfect) has created at least one generation of individuals who cannot spell and know nothing about the logic of language. Complexity is not the

only downside of computers. They have created an even greater gap between the rich and the poor, the educated and uneducated.

To use these devices, one needs both experience and education. Lacking computers at home (even if they can access them at school), poorer people do not have the opportunity to gain much experience with them. Even as the computer becomes a commodity (something to which virtually everyone has access), the pace of technology is so rapid that these individuals are light years behind the more fortunate people. Furthermore, since computer skills must be learned (this knowledge is not as intuitive as some people would have us believe), less educated individuals have an insurmountable disadvantage.

Educated individuals can use computers to expand their knowledge; uneducated or less educated people are stuck where they are. The gap widens. Finally, with respect to computers, many of the advantages have spawned a astigmatism array of problems. While technology has now given us the ability to shop from home, it has opened a whole new frontier in which con artists can conduct scams - a frontier that authorities admit is impossible to police. While it has enabled us to bank by mail, it has brought on a wave of identity theft such as we have never before seen.

While it enables banks and other organizations to process data with lightning speed, electronic processing creates greater opportunity for error. One incorrect keystroke can set in motion an automated series of mistakes that are not easily detected or corrected. Every day there is a report of some mass mailing, system glitch, or loss of data brought on by a single and very

simple human error that spun out of control when a mindless computer took over and ran with it. Speaking of mindless computers (and the telephone), consider automated answering systems.

The only individuals who see any benefit in these systems are executives who, with their eyes on the bottom-line, look upon them as a cheap way to reduce or eliminate customer service personnel. These systems create the illusion of offering customer service when, in fact, they have practically eliminated customer service altogether. Automated answering systems constitute an area of technology that symbolizes what happens when tasks that only a human being can perform effectively are relegated to machines.

Customers universally hate these systems because they provide little or no service, waste time, and often put the customer into an electronic loop that leads nowhere. The worst of these systems are those that provide voice messages in which a machine pretends to be a real human being (CB. Verizon). While we may find definite advantages to almost any technological advancement, it is very difficult to find anything good to say about automated phone yester. In contrast, few of us question the value of technological advances in transportation - further and faster than anyone a century ago would have imagined possible.

However, even here technology has its downside. We live in a more dangerous world, not only because cars, trucks, and airplanes can kill but also because the ease and speed with which we can get from one place to another has made national borders more porous. The same technology that can deliver us to Grandma's house halfway across the world can also deliver

an explosive device that can obliterate Grandma and a few thousand of her neighbors. In addition, we have been seriously depleting the Earth's natural resources to run these machines and have appreciably hastened global warming because of the gases that they emit.

On a simpler level, too, we may perhaps question whether it is necessarily desirable to go further and faster. Is it always better? Do we enjoy the trip more, or has the process of getting there (albeit very quickly) become a hassle? For what are we saving all this precious time - to have more time to watch commercials on TV, many of them promoting technology that we don't need? Entertainment is probably the one area in which technology has had positive effects with very little negative impact. If the content of television is mediocre, we can't really blame that on technology.

If the music that people listen to on their various gadgets is trash, we can't blame the gadgets. If we are spending more time being entertained because we have, thanks to technology, a wide variety of entertainments to choose from, that is not necessarily a bad thing. We can complain about the intrusion of too much marketing in the entertainment media, but that is not the fault of technology. Indeed, with television, there's a quiet little war going on between the genealogy that subtly (or not so subtly) tries to sell us products and the technology that enables us to bleep out the advertisements.

To be objective about it, the so-called downside of technology - real as it is - represents more what's wrong with us than what's wrong with our creations. We are making them complicated, often more than they need to be, because

we arrogantly believe that man will always be the master of the machine. We turn the cell phone into a public nuisance and a safety hazard instead of a useful tool because we are too foolish to use it wisely. We cause sporadic outbreaks of massive " computer errors" because we are stupid and careless; what we call computer errors are, in fact, idiotic blunders made by human beings.

We are the self-destructive species who turn machines for transportation into weapons of mass destruction. The real issue regarding technology is not whether it is good or bad but whether we are grown-up and mature enough to use wisely what we have created. The evidence suggests that, on the whole, we are not. Indeed, we have never been - ever since we created a tool by fastening a pointed rock to a stick and then decided that it could also be used to smash the skull of someone we didn't like.