Technology Traps

Contributed by Peter Crabb
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In public debates about the issues of our time -- climate change, peak oil, economic collapse, and militarism -- there is an elephant in the room that no one seems to want to acknowledge. Perhaps that is because the elephant is not an elephant at all. It's the disastrous technological way of life humans have been pursuing since at least the dawn of agriculture 13,000 years ago.

We won't hear it from the mainstream media, but the technologies we have come to depend on are actively distorting our sense of reality and are rapidly rendering the planet unlivable. Contrary to the portrayal of HAL, the murderous computer in 2001: A Space Odyssey, the situation is much more subtle and insidious than evil machines running amok. What is happening is that every day we humans freely choose to use technological devices that make us feel good when in fact these devices are not good for us or the planet at all.

In our blind pursuit of immediate gratifications from our countless gadgets, we have run headlong into a number of "technology traps" that are destroying human potential and the prospects for sustainable cultures.

• Children are put under the spell of technology shortly after birth. They are taught that sitting in front of screens for hours on end is legitimate human activity. No value is assigned to exercising the body or going outside and immersing oneself in the natural world. The comfort of tv, video games, computers, and cell phones shields kids from any contact with the real world of wind and sun and plants and animals. Most kids who have grown up in this world of technological distraction probably wouldn't know a bird from a bee, let alone that humans share an essential interest with other life-forms in preserving the planetary ecosystem. They certainly have no reason to care about the planet if the most rewarding thing in their lives has always been to turn on a screen and slip into a trance.

• Daily use of technologies that focus attention on "me" and "my feelings" and "my needs" continues into adulthood and distorts the development of personality. Cell phones, text messaging, and iPods conspire to infantilize adults. Those technologies of comfort are no different from the baby's cherished blanket, bottle, or thumb. "MySpace" is an ironic icon of our time because, while the focus appears to be on "me," the reality is that it isn't my space at all, but rather a corporate trap that saps people's time and cognitive energies. With the emphasis on "me," it seems unlikely that people will be of a mind to take effective action to solve problems out there in the real world that threaten their own well-being.

• Given all of that daily technological activity, how useful are the skills people must learn to operate those gadgets? What passes for competence has been degraded to the most superficial recipe knowledge about pushing buttons in the right sequence on devices contrived by engineers in corporate R&D labs. Education and business have uncritically adopted the model of the student, the worker, and the consumer as button-pushing drones. Witness the impact of the microwave oven on Americans' ideas about what is acceptable food and how food should be prepared. People no longer own authentic, useful skills, and they do not even understand how the technologies they depend on work. How will they fare when the electricity goes out?

• With the help of human enthusiasts and enablers, technology creates its own self-affirming ideology. It is widely believed that technology is infallible. Technology must not be questioned or criticized. Human needs are subordinate to the needs of devices and systems. If something goes wrong, it must be due to "human error." The solution to technology-induced problems is always more and better technology. In fact, every arena of human activity is always improved when the latest, most complex technologies are applied. As a consequence of the ascendancy of technology, humans have become demeaned and powerless--second-class citizens in their own societies.

In the natural world, Darwinian natural selection would weed out tendencies for an organism to be destructive of itself and its habitat. But the technological way of life has uncoupled human behavior from natural selection pressures. The harms that result when we use destructive technologies are dispersed in space and time and are difficult to detect. The air pollution and petroleum depletion caused by driving a car don't immediately feed back to the driver and make her question her use of her car, just as a drink from a plastic bottle of spring water flown in daily from the South Pacific gives no clues about the many harms caused by the bottled water industry. Our present-focused brains just don't get the harmful consequences of our technological activities.

There is no easy way out of these kinds of traps. Even when people recognize that technology can be problematic, most do not have the luxury of just saying "no." Some people do without tv or cars or cell phones or the Internet, but the impact of a few conscientious objectors is probably negligible. What is needed is a wholesale ratcheting-down of culture to small, low-tech communities that live harmoniously and respectfully in local ecosystems. Unless the human species can find the courage and wisdom to reshape the ways we harness finite resources to solve the basic problems of survival, we will continue down the road to certain disaster.

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Further reading:

Ellul, Jacques (1990). The Technological Bluff. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Kipnis, David (1990). Technology and Power. New York, NY: Springer-Verlag.

"Fall of the technological world", by Jan Lundberg, Culture Change Letter #204, Oct. 7, 2008: culturechange.org

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