Challenging the Dominant Culture's Insidious "Screenism"

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
25 January 2015

"Screenism" -- it is pervasive except among the very, very young, the very old, and the nature-dwelling primitive. It began with television over one half century ago, for those who had time for hours of passive entertainment. It was also for the electronically babysat, and still is. Except, now hand-held mobile telephones, "tablets," laptop and desktop computers are "essential," and billions of the most active people on the planet depend on them as well as upon digital technology in general. Everyone but a Rip van Winkle knows that far more kinds of imagery than TV, along with maximized communicating and information manipulation, have taken over society and lifestyles.

Meanwhile, scientific warnings against children's using screens have gone largely unheeded. The objections center on child development and health, although concerns over radiation emitted are addressed separately by different kinds of scientists and advocates for children (and adults). Before covering these issues, let us tell the story of intrusive, invasive technology mostly embraced by an unquestioning, consuming public not protected by government agencies or mainstream education.

Other kinds of technology were intruding on modern life when television became ubiquitous: cars, nuclear energy and nuclear weapons, and perhaps the most lasting: plastics. Consumerism's role as the reason for modern economics (i.e., profiting) was cemented, and only abates minimally through recessions. It does not abate nor is threatened by alternative philosophies or lifestyles. Yet, the critique of consumerism, television and the "Plastic Society" commenced and flowered in the 1960s not long after imposing technologies that pacified and minimized human-to-human interaction took hold.

In October, we discussed "globalization for an unprecedented number of technologically dependent humans"1

The role of high-tech disempowerment in health and sustainability

I have increasingly sensed that mass consumption of high-tech communication devices mostly disempowers people, especially the young. This is because they have no memory of what was simply and easily used by previous generations rather sustainably. The young consumers of high-tech are actually sold helplessness and hopelessness under the guise of independence and mastery. The glamour of the advertising and corporate social pressure offers the false and unobtainable: a life without nature and its light and darkness, its warmth and cold, life and death, decay and rebirth.

"Hyper-connection equals isolation after all." - Roger Cohen, New York Times op-ed columnist writing "A Climate of Fear" on Oct. 27, 2014.

Let us now examine the "unintended consequences" of runaway technology. Or perhaps not: if you're not already living next to a cellphone tower, go ahead and do that if you believe that whatever today's generation of humans is doing is just fine and dandy -- even if our grandparents and all our ancestors led more natural, untainted lives. Were they deprived, or is it us? Today's consumers seem to fail, by definition, to engage in self-reflection to the point of questioning out loud what is being promoted and foisted. Do we not have masters, if we can agree that most of us "lucky" to have jobs are slaving our lives away largely to be able to buy things? Is not the perfect slave the one who has unwittingly given over his or her mind?

Science as a tool of mega-corporations, as more and more of us know, is proving to be an incalculable disservice to humanity and nature. So is the innovative advent of most modern technological systems, as we see as evidence mounts. Mistakes, well-meaning or not, are always part of being human, but writ large and relentlessly perpetuated they cannot be ignored or excused indefinitely. Examples are greenhouse gas emissions, the plastic plague, depletion of aquifers for agribusiness, paving paradise, ad nauseam.

I predict that Facebooks' founders, Henry Ford, Dupont's plastics inventors, and others will not go down in post-consumer history as heroes or geniuses but rather as overall misfortunes to everyone and everything. The aftermath of technological "progress" is the growing need to reverse technological dehumanization.

Facebook and the like as an exclusion of direct human communication is not a positive development for humanity or for the natural world, when we absolutely depend on the natural world increasingly raped and receding. It does little good to state this on "Fakebook." The medium is the message, and so the sound-bite message and simplistic graphic sloganeering for the short attention span must be vacuous or unreal. Similarly, attempting to spread truth and expose society's lies and scams via total reliance on the Internet is a distracting substitute for better organizing. Many observers have pointed out the paradox of massive dependence on electricity-demanding gadgets and using jet fuel, to fight both the effect of those innovations and the system that places them above human value. Yet practices do not change, as we feel the need to graduate to better, faster technology.

Efficiency has increased almost exponentially in terms of the amount of information processed and the speed of processing it. Big users benefit the most, such as the Pentagon and transnational corporations. Waste has increased similarly in terms of toxic junk for landfills and elsewhere, partly due to planned obsolescence in the cellphone and computer industries. The electric power demand for gadgets, equipment and applinces is massive and largely unquestioned.

What to do about our historic wasteful, toxic, and radioactive dilemma seems off-limits or unfathomable even to people who acknowledge the general dangers. But if we can begin to minimize dehumanization by technology by maximizing direct human communication, by strengthening family, community, and connection to pristine nature, we are on a path to reverse lethal trends such as climate destruction. In so doing we may also more successfully end and avert war, as well as reverse reckless "development," i.e., big-business assault on people and the environment for private profit and power.

Specifics for a safe path include radical conservation, permaculture, bicycle culture, sail transport, removing roads and other asphalt, resurrecting traditional skills, engaging in resistance to the corporate state's oppression, and fostering freedom of expression and creativity. These are well-documented and nurtured, for a small minority so far. They are suppressed but irrepressible factors for sustainability, and they enjoy some popularity, exploration, and furtherance by many talented, devoted practitioners.

During this time of life-and-death struggle for a sustainable future, it is vital to question the basis of Western Civilization and "progress" based on growth and mass control. Without frank discussion of overpopulation, the realities of energy and petroleum, the demise of the consumer economy, questioning inequitable social relations, and grappling immediately with rapid climate change, it is possible that many activist efforts to ameliorate our situation and plight will remain too isolated -- despite electronic connectivity. Unity beyond clicking, Tweeting and gazing must also be based on principles of seeing wealth not as money or property, and embracing what nature offers without over-manipulation. This may make the difference for a mass movement to successfully strive for an evolved world consciousness.

To move forward, we will have to let go of certain conveniences that recently latched onto people's lives. As we discover that agribusiness via petrochemical and mechanical intervention for short-term advantage is poisoning and weakening us, and as we learn that antibacterial soap, for example, is a negative for daily use, and as we learn that the medical industry and insurance are not the main key to individual healing and public health, we find we have really not deprived ourselves, nor romanticized the more natural or primitive past. Rather, we instead liberate ourselves and take more control over our lives.

The idea of a break with entrenched conventions and today's dehumanized system can be most daunting, as socioeconomic collapse invokes for many a fear of complete chaos, repression, strife and loss. But as society has almost consistently evaded reasonable planning and simple changes for general welfare and stability of the biosphere, TUC -- time of useful consciousness, the high-altitude pilots' concern whenever Murphy's Law appears -- is dwindling fast.

Yet, there are signs that questioning the force of popular technology is gaining ground. A New York Times op-ed recently posed a question in its headline: "Can Students Have Too Much Tech?" Writer Susan Pinker posits that the wired classroom may actually widen the learning gap.

In another example of a possible turning tide, a celebrity regularly "fasts" to break from computers and artificial connection one day each week.

Tiffany Shlain insists that her family, for one day each week, ditches their smartphones and tablets to indulge in a simpler life... to unplug, relax and reconnect with her humanity. In her mind, technology's enormous power for good is great, but it's also dangerous -- shortening our attention spans and sending our amygdalae into overdrive. She believes that it won't be long before people swing back the other way and fall back in love with wooden gadgets like her new ukulele.

It should be self-evident that the computerization of society, including the internet and cell phones, are mostly about profit and mass control. These global-warming pollution-boxes' usefulness for communicating radical or dissident ideas is secondary, and do not undo the damage done by computerization and constant "connectivity" on a global scale. On balance, the information-access and communication enabled by computers and their infrastructure often help environmental campaigns, for example, but overall the polluters' ability to manage data and communications outweighs the ability to fight the polluters' destruction. And how did computers and the internet ever ensure privacy, other than some activists' and whistleblowers' attempts to thwart encroachment on privacy? They have not.

But a skilled techie responded to a draft for this essay with these points:

- Why do you avoid talking about the great things Internet communications have done for the people and environment?

- How about a realistic discussion of leveling the playing field with democratic Internet media?

- Replacing the corporatist media.

- Ad-free reader-supported media.

- Public media (KQED, NPR, etc.) that is sponsored by Koch polluters, automobile corporations, etc.

- Real-time coverage and global response to corporate and government crimes.

- "Don't watch the media, BE the media"

- I say keep incessantly hitting the comment boards and social media accounts of corporate media and polluter corporations with alternative news links and calling them out on their corrupt activities.

- This from a Tweeter with 17K tweets; the things you can do if one doesn't waste time drinking and playing music. [editor's note: ironically, this respondent is also a fine musician with acoustic instruments and makes fabulous paintings and drawings.]

Good points, but it seems that at best we fight fire with fire when fully engaging in high tech and various machines made of toxic materials that burn electricity. To begin with, it would have been nice if the "unintended consequences" of technologies' proliferation and market-driven ethics had been throughly debated and subject to everyone's approval. Now we are left to wonder exactly how harmful cellphones, cellphone towers and wifi really are. The attempt to apply the precautionary principle and to inform consumers is met with industry clout to suppress any questioning or resistance.

Evidence pops up but is soon forgotten in the rush to sell, buy and use questionable technology: a widely reported story in 2007 was that "People should avoid using Wi-Fi wherever possible because of the risks it may pose to health, the German government has said." (Germany Warns Citizens to Avoid Using Wi-Fi, in Truthout.org on Sept. 28, 2007)

A few years ago the telecom industry pulled its lucrative convention from the City of San Francisco because of the rather mild local labeling law for any cellphones sold, because they emit heat or radiation (Specific Absorption Rates, or SARs). One might have passed this off as some mistaken paranoia on the part of excessive liberal politics. But many governments, including Finland, Israel, Russia, China, France, Sweden and India recommend that children simply not use cellphones. Brain tumors and lowered sperm counts are high costs to pay for always being able to connect with a screen/pollution device.

Two medical science websites reported late last year that cellphone use presents a risk of brain tumors. The headlines:

"Brain Tumors And Cell Phone Use Found To Be Linked (Again)" from
medicaldaily.com: "A study has found that cell phone usage may be linked to a higher risk of developing glioma, a type of brain tumor that is often deadly." (12 Nov. 2014). And,

"Long-term Cell Phone Use Linked to Brain Tumor Risk" from Medscape:
"Long-term use of both mobile and cordless phones is associated with an increased risk for glioma, the most common type of brain tumor, the latest research on the subject concludes. The analysis included 1498 cases of malignant brain tumors; the mean age was 52 years. Most patients (92%) had a diagnosis of glioma, and just over half of the gliomas (50.3%) were the most malignant variety — astrocytoma grade IV (glioblastoma multiforme). (13 Nov. 2014)

Studies that show cellphones and cellphone towers to be virtually harmless usually have industry backing. Cellphone towers are claimed to be safe compared to cellphones, but it cannot be denied that the towers spread the cellphone use.

In 2012, Asian News International (ANI) reported via Yahoo News,
Doubts cast over "no cancer risk for kids using cell phones"
(04/06/2012): "Scientists have raised doubts over a study published last year that did not succeed in finding a link between mobile phone use and brain tumours in children and teens. They have asserted that the study actually indicates that cell phone use more than doubles the risk of brain tumours in children and adolescents. The concerns come from the Environmental Health Trust, a group whose stated mission is to promote awareness of environmental issues they think can lead to cancer."

Perhaps more far-reaching than preventing consumer warnings, was that during the Clinton Administration, the construction of all cellphone towers was protected by a law that made any opposition by a community be based only on aesthetic objections, and never matters of health or environmental impact. Why was there such concern about what was being done by those doing it -- was it a kind of admission of suspected danger and damage?

Privacy objections are mounting, from the standpoint of how much watching is being done by powerful corporations. The New York Times ran the story "F.T.C. Says Internet-Connected Devices Pose Big Risks," by Natasha Singer who reported that "The agency said the devices, which make up the so-called Internet of Things, also raise serious security and privacy risks that could undermine consumers' confidence." This concern reveals that the main priority is for consumers to keep spending, not necessarily to protect health or encourage people to "plug in" with real human interaction.

Thanks to Edward Snowden and others, countless people now have an idea of how much surveillance is carried out by governments and contractors, whether legal, illegal, known or secret. But for the technologies and laws involved to be made more secure for the user, in terms of freedoms upheld, must the downsides of computerization and radiation-emitting connectivity, along with dehumanizing machine-linking via screens, remain unaddressed and ever more out of control?

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Notes

1. Before the Ebola Factor: Instability of Technological Infrastructure amidst Potential for Healing, by Jan Lundberg

Further Reading:

Mander, Jerry, Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television. Harper Collins, NYC, 1978

Full Signal (EMF documentary) Sends a Signal / San Francisco and Maine Signal Cell Phone Warnings, by Chellis Glendinning

The Problems With Smart Grids: Dumb and Dangerous, by B. Blake Levitt and Chellis Glendinning

Peter Crabb's essays on technology proliferation and its effects on students and society, in Culture Change.

10 Reasons Why Handheld Devices Should Be Banned for Young Children: the-open-mind.com.

Related: drparvincarter.com.

"Good evidence suggests that screen viewing before age 2 has lasting negative effects on children's language development, reading skills, and short term memory. Researchers at Princeton University reported that exposure to television during the first few years of life may be associated with poorer cognitive development... Use of technology under the age of 12 years is detrimental to child development and learning (Rowan 2010)"

China's massive toxic lake will make you question buying another electronic device, by Colin Payne, 04/03/15 April 3, 2015
video:
YouTube

Note: this Culture Change article also appeared on Resilience.org.