The Technological Hegemony: Promoting Ethical and Socio-Cultural Awareness

This paper, as the title suggests, is built upon particular assumptions about technology and its influence on society and culture—particularly here in the United States. It is rooted in personal observations and reflections about the way I am and think and act and feel. It stems from my dad's enthusiasm as an amateur photographer and a trip-altering experience when my brothers and I decided to hike the Virgin River narrows without our backpacks and cameras. It grows out of my trying to understand how honest, hard working students still fail to format their papers correctly and who have such difficulty doing for me what they do so much already in their own lives.

The attempt here is not to definitively quantify the hegemonic control of technology, but to describe its influence over the way we think and act, our social and cultural values, and our definition of humanity itself. The hope is to provide a revised framework for discourses on technology and to encourage a renewed investment in a discussion of human ethics here at eh beginning of the twenty-first century.

Defining Technology

"[H]istorians of technology have long maintained [that] technology must be defined broadly enough to encompass the full range of human experience, from chopping with stone tools to cooking in microwave ovens" (Lerman et al. 1997, 2). Technology is how humans make and do things. It is our species using mechanical devices and processes to change our physical and social environment. In today's world of cyberspaces and global networking, the domain of technology expands into the computer-mediated cyberspaces of the Internet and the human mind.

In defining technology many scholars also consider the socio-cultural contexts in which it is developed. As Steven Lubar suggests, "[t]he style [design] of technological artifacts reflects the cultural values of the people responsible for inventing, shaping, and using those artifacts" (1987, 254). Function and necessity are not the sole determinants of technological invention. The personal knowledge, skills, and acquaintances of the inventor; economic contexts including supply and demand, but also the costs of labor and material; corporate contexts such as business strategy and the organization of design, manufacturing, and distribution; and other social contexts—political, legal, and geographic (Lubar 1987, 255).

Acknowledging socio-cultural contexts allows researchers and historians like Lubar and Sebastian De Grazia (1967) to better appreciate technological innovation in the nineteenth century pin-making industry. It is an important assumption for Robert B. Gordon and David J. Killick (1993) to suggest that just because one culture develops a technology (like iron smelting) more efficiently than another, one should not assume that that culture is more advanced or intelligent. The different cultures simply have different values (tradition and the passing down of knowledge vs. mass productivity and capitalist competition) and these values significantly affect the way technology is used and developed.

People value human life and so spend significant amounts of time, effort, and resources on technologies like medicine, chirurgical procedures, genetic mapping, emergency response transportation and coordination, etc. As societies, people look for improvement and innovation and so develop sewage systems, public transportation, environmentally-friendly energy sources, etc. While technology is affected by socio-cultural

contexts, it also affects the habits of mind of the society using it. When the use of

technology becomes more a part of daily life, the values fostered by the technology persist

and permeate society, as individuals adopt the habits of mind needed to use the technology.

That this occurs is most easily seen when looking at how technologies are spread from

culture to culture and how many cultures may reject proffered technologies from others.

Oriol Pi-Sunyer and Thomas De Gregori observe:

"When we try to diffuse this technology outward into other areas, we not

only encounter cultural resistance to specific material traits, but also people

lacking the habits of mind accompanying Western technological development.

To ignore these non-technological factors is to limit our ability to improve the

economic situation of the technologically less developed portions of the

world" (1964, 253).

More than describe the socio-cultural context of technology, this statement demonstrates a

cultural and technological arrogance at play. That these two authors from the twentieth

century recognize the cultural differences between the U.S and other cultures is important.

That they assert the need to not ignore non-technological factors is even more so. But

rather than accept that others might simply not want our technology, the implication is that,

if we focus on eliminating the non-technological factors, technology can go forward.

Replace the term 'technology' with Christianity, capitalism, or democracy and it is not

difficult to see a system of power being established—one that is as problematic as the

spread of the Greek and Roman Empires, British Imperialism and European colonization.

In a post-9/11 society, the U.S. is more conscious and careful about imposing U.S. standards and vales on others. But few are concerned with the fact that in our rush to aid democratic revolutionaries we give not only political support and funds, but technologies that make it harder for other cultures to find their own democratic systems without being made in our own image.

This paper is not about the effect of technologies on others, but the effect of technology on ourselves. The technological hegemony at work in the U.S. makes it difficult for us to see helping others without technology and impossible for us to fashion our own future without it. In our culture the technological hegemony preserves the values of our ancestors and produces habits of mind in our descendants that often contradict our present values in ways so subtle we hardly notice.

Technological Hegemony

Hegemony. The term, as it is most often used in academic discourse, refers to the control exercised by a dominant group over a subordinate one. Hegemony is maintained by controlling economic and cultural methods of production. Hegemonies result in a society that is divided into the haves and have-nots, but with the have-nots being more willing to accept the disparity because the socio-cultural values uphold the system of power. For example, due to Christian and Classical roots in the U.S. culture, a patriarchal hegemony standardized the role of men in politics, community, work, church, and home in positions of dominance over women.

Western imperialism and colonization was also supported by hegemonic systems that defined European society and culture in dominant relationships with the rest of the

world. White was good, Christian, civilized, technologically advanced, and everything else was Other, bad, heathen, uncivilized barbaric. The fact that most social forces/privileges (money, voting, representation, education, etc.) also followed these clearly demarcated cultural distinctions, merely supported the hegemony's power more forcefully. Hegemonic power is maintained because it is so prevalent, largely unnoticed, and excepted as a natural condition—in line with the value systems of the culture and the laws of the society.

Although using different terms (bipartisanship, nepotism, social injustice) and labeling different groups as dominant, society today is pretty conscious of privileged positions that are based on hegemonic systems of power. The media and the Internet make attempts to oppose that control by drawing attention to it on a national and international level. The increasingly interdisciplinary methodology of current scholasticism also helps confront hegemonic influences in today's society. Because hegemony operates just below the social conscious its control can significantly decrease when its influence is exposed, questioned, and opposed. At the beginning of the twenty-first century we can easily recognize shifts of hegemonic power throughout society: from patriarchal dominance to feminist liberation, literary canons to cross-cultural curriculums, and from industrialization to eco-friendly energy and production. In the U.S. we are fortunate that our system of governments allows us to withstand these kind s of hegemonic control.

Popularly, globalization and its supporting technologies are heralded as our greates weapons against hegemonic ideologies. There are many like Donna Haraway (1991) and Dinesh Sharma (2004) who see the twenty-first century as a future full of promise as our technologies help us finally break down "the old dichotomies about how the world is

constructed in our minds and theories" (Sharma, 5). Sharma even goes so far as to suggest

that computer and Internet technologies today make it impossible for us to "think of the

world as parsed into two or three neat categories, such as East-West and the 'Rest,'

developed-developing- underdeveloped, and traditional-modern-postmodern" (2004, 5).

But there is good reason to pause and consider this reading of our relationship with

our technology. Cynthia Selfe questions whether we as a society are even capable (or at

least willing) to allow our technologies to so drastically improve our lives. She argues that

individuals "fear the effects of technology and the potent changes that it introduces into

familiar systems" as strongly as they believe in the promised benefits of new technologies

(2008, 784). Through her analysis Selfe identifies the inconsistencies in propaganda and

practice that suggest society is far from using technology to its full potential. We sell

technology to ourselves saying it can unite the human family and shatter social

discriminations. But the reality is very different. For Selfe this is largely due to human nature,

an unwillingness to change when it involves discomfort or uncertainty—a willingness to

wish everyone could live like us, but a disinterest in giving up enough to improve everyone's

lives.

My argument is that there is more going on than human nature. What is happening,

and what has been happening ever since the first prehistoric man or woman produced fire,

is that a technological hegemony is shaping humane nature. In ways as potentially beneficial

or destructive as any hegemonic power confronted in the twentieth century, the

technological hegemony affects our lived experience and our perceived humanity. Within

the U.S. it promotes the development of habits of mind that favors some values over

others—even when they seem to contradict with what we tell ourselves is most important to us.

I can see three ways that the technological hegemony is and might be investigated. The first explores how systems of power are favor smaller, dominant groups that possess technology at the cost of larger, subordinate groups without or with less sophisticated technology (think Patriot Act in US, recent control of Internet in Egypt, Chinese use of technology to ensure/guarantee culture and political power).

The second approach assesses the prevalence and influence of technology in society. Most current research technology investigates the extent to which technology dominates our methods of economic and cultural production and distribution. Each year a number of my students research how cell phones and texting technologies affect communication, how socialization is influenced by online social networks, and how privacy, national security, violence, rules of engagement, body-image, etc. are all problematized because of modern technologies. However these investigations primarily treat technology as a medium, a tool, capable of good or evil but only in the hands of the user (as in the case of nuclear energy technologies.

The final approach which the rest of this paper will follow acknowledges that technology that persists in society eventually ceases to be a tool, but an integral part of human living. It not only helps us achieve our goals, but influences the goals we set for ourselves and our posterity. For those technologies that do persist (and another paper might pursue why certain technologies persist and others do not) habits of mind are created and values defined in deference to a technological hegemony. This third approach does

more than recognize how technology changes the way we eat and move from place to place. It demonstrates that technology influences how we think about eating and moving, and why we place the value we do on certain ways of eating and moving over others.

Acknowledging the Technological Hegemony

I suggest that the relationship between humanity and technology becomes hegemonic when our reliance upon technology loses its transparency even as it affects the way we think and live. When the values imbedded in our technology begin to conflict with other socio-cultural values, a technological hegemony is also at work.

Technologies lose their transparency as they become commonplace. Written language; commerce; paper currency; and the transportation, communication, and power infrastructure of the nation; are examples of technologies that have evolved along with humanity for long enough that they hardly register in an individual's conscious thought although he/she uses these technologies everyday. Obviously I do not think that in order to oppose technological hegemony we need to somehow sustain the initial awe of flipping a light switch or composing an email that can be transmitted and understood by a person across the country within minutes. But we should realize that without transparency, it is not long before a society moves from thinking that composing a written message is something an individual could do to the idea that human beings communicate through written messages.

The Way We Think

In *Of Time, Work, and Leisure* Sebastian de Grazia (1979) traces the evolution of Western Culture's ideas about time, work, and leisure. In doing so he recognizes the

significant effect of technologies on these elements. In three chapters particularly relevant to the discussion of technology ("Toward the Work Society," "Time Given, Time Taken Away," and "Free Time and Its Uses") de Grazia demonstrates how the developments and improvements in industrial machinery caused people to organize work differently. Generally speaking the concept of work changed from mastery of a particular trade or craft to specialization of a skill within an assembly system, to the manipulation of machinery, to the maintenance of that machinery, and ultimately to managing others maintaining the machinery. While the social forces that Lubar (1987) describes were pushing the innovation and invention of technology, that technology was in turn affecting the way that people thought about work—what the term meant, when work was being done, and when it was not. According to de Grazia, people began to associate their time spent at an office or industry with the idea of work more than their 'free' time spent doing such things as shopping, yard maintenance, etc. that required just as much (often more) time, energy, and effort.

In the chapter "Free Time and Its Uses" de Grazia (1979) argues that technologies also dramatically changed the way that people thought about and spent their leisure time. He looks closely at the invention and proliferation of radio and television as technologies that more strongly correlated leisure or free time with being entertained and being free of much physical and intellectual exertion. At the same time technologies began to take up more significant amounts of our free time too.

In a more recent example, technology—specifically the Internet—affects the way that our society think about originality and authorship. Susan D. Blum (*My Word! Plagiarism*

and College Culture, 2009) investigates the increasing number of cases of plagiarism in colleges across the United States and the causes that are responsible for this increase. Blum suggests that some of the responsibility lies with students' increased familiarity/use of the Internet—though not simply because the Internet makes it easier for them to pass of others' work as their own (2009, 3). Her research shows how Internet technologies are changing the way that they think about texts. The Internet allows students to engage in intertextuality in ways that show "verbal sophistication, memory, and sensitivity to context and appropriateness" (Blum 2009, 4) but also foster "profoundly different values concerning boundaries and originality and individuality" (Blum 2009, 5). In other words, students are already doing much of what college professors want them to, but ignorant of academic conventions.

Of course there are still students who plagiarize intentionally or who struggle with the minutiae of academic citation. However, Blum's (2009) research strongly suggests that when students ask, "What's the big deal anyway?", they may be doing more than questioning tradition. In my own classes I have seen many students who understand the importance of citing the use of someone else's words, however they rarely recognize the need for citation when the words are their own—even if the ideas, observations, or statistics come from another source.

Students—born into a culture of assimilation, absorbed in social and media intertextualities, and plugged into technologies that facilitate interconnectivity—are adopting perceptions of originality and authorship that reflect their lived experience. Individuals today live in a post-multicultural movement society where individual identity

itself is fluid, subject to interpretation and re-presentation. Asserting one's self as a unique individual with inimitable ideas or experiences, is far less important than it has been in the past—during which laws and policies regarding authorship and copyright were instituted.

Communication technology in particular fosters these values and forces changes within the habits of mind of individuals today. Hypertext—the blue, underlined, clickable words all over the Web and other digital texts—does more than reference, it brings users to the originating source. Even when this site is not the original source, it too contains links that can be followed but with the intent of making money through Google Ads or supporting fellow websites more than crediting an original publisher. The increasing unobtrusiveness of hypertext technology and the speed with which users can now surf the Web make it easier to see these texts as extensions of one another more than as autonomous, original sources demanding credit and distinction.

Could hypertexting technology also keep track of its own referral trail? Sure they can. Many sites use technologies to trace how users end up on their websites. And products like Microsoft's Office OneNote are capable of including the web address of information copied/pasted from the Internet. But the point is that it does not, because the technology designers are either unfamiliar with or do not value imbedded sourcing technologies. And, because it does not, there is little reason for users to be overly concerned over authorship either—especially since millions of people post ideas, videos, and information anonymously online.

Communication technologies like emails, cell phones, text messaging, Twittering, Face-booking, and emoticons also affect cultural ideas about authorship and originality.

These technologies first affected our methods of communication and then the when, why, and with whom we communicated. After these technologies moved us online and 3G, they facilitated written communication that was easy and often conversational. Written technologies more closely mirrored verbal communication in that it could be effectively instantaneous, 'heard' and commented on by multiple audiences, and, through emoticons, emotional states usually understood by facial expression and tone could also be communicated.

Of course there are many results of such adaptation, but one pertinent to this discussion is a cultural equivalency of verbal and written communication not really experienced before the twenty-first century. Whether through text messaging or using online communication tools, individuals are increasingly involved in written communications that are nearly as simultaneous as verbal communication. This leads people to expect and value simultaneity, of course, but it also begins to blur the distinction between verbal and textual communication. With this blurring, it becomes much easier to see written words and ideas the same way that one would a verbal conversation in which multiple participants listen to and respond to one another's ideas without particularly paying attention to where the idea originated as much as where the conversation/idea is headed or being directed.

Obviously this does not excuse students from plagiarizing the words and ideas of others. But it does provide a telling example of technology exerting greater power and influence over our thinking. There are many other technologies that undoubtedly affect the way we think and that also deserve attention. Frontier technologies that map, construct, and defend geo-political borders likely affect our ideas about physical and social mobility,

international interdependence, and shared/cross-cultural inheritance. Transportation technologies not only affect how we think about moving through spaces, but our personal and shared connections with the spaces in which we move (consider Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, steamboats on the Mississippi, Route 66 vs I-15, etc.). Architectural technologies define the spaces in which we spend most of our time, help us arbitrate our sense of the individual and the communal, and mark out our relation to nature. Fashion technologies control the ways we dress and thus the boundaries we set between our inward and outward selves.

The above examples suggest how technology's influence affects the way that we think. But hegemony would also affect the way in which we live and what we do as human beings. The examples above attempt to identify how using technologies affects individual habits of mind and socio-cultural values. Of course, there is an important reciprocity between thought and action, and it might be difficult to distinguish between the order and importance of cause and effect. But, I suggest that doing so is a bit like debating the origin of the chicken or the egg. Below are examples of technology affecting our actions—even if it is a bit too early to figure out/hypothesize the effect of these technologies on our thinking. These examples have been chosen primarily because they are prevalent enough in society to merit attention, even if their effects on socio-cultural values or habits of mind are not yet apparent.

The Way We Live

Nicholas Carr is the mainstream critic of the modern technology industry who has written *The Big Switch: Rewiring the World, from Edison to Google* (2007) and *The Shallows:*

What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains (2010). The premise of his research is that our

society's increasing use of Internet technologies is changing the way our minds process

information—both biologically and intellectually. For Carr, Western ways of thinking have

been linear and literary since the popularization of printing press technology: the Western

mind "has been the imaginative mind of the Renaissance, the rational mind of the

Enlightenment, the inventive mind of the Industrial Revolution, even the subversive mind of

Modernism" (*Shallows* 2010, 10).

    But he warns that "[the Western mind] may soon be yesterday's mind" (*Shallows*

2010, 10). Carr observes that the first evidence of technology affecting the mind occurs as

sustained reading and reflection become more difficult than they had once been. For this to

happen, his claim is that, bio-chemically, the way that the brain works has been changed—

"demanding to be fed the way the Net fed it" (*Shallows* 2010, 16). The book provides

observations from himself and others, as well as the support of various research studies that

investigate how the brain's neurological pathways process information differently with

Internet use being a principal cause. The research, though not yet conclusive, is highly

suggestive.

    In *The Big Switch* (2009), however, Carr discusses an effect of the technological

hegemony on how we in the United States and other countries live that is irrefutable. Carr

identifies a "technological imperative that has shaped the Western world," that has

persisted because of technology's positive impact on human standards of living, and that

has made it impossible for individuals and extremely difficult for societies to do other than

embrace new technologies (2009, 21). Because industrial corporations valued efficiency,

technologies for the past three hundred years have become extremely efficient. The effect

of that efficiency is most strongly felt, according to Carr, in the competitive marketplace

economy where costs of production and consumer habits of demand make it very difficult to

compete without adopting/adapting to new technologies.

Carr provides examples of this technological imperative (hegemony) in relation to

the development of the electric utility—which shifted money and jobs from on-site energy

production to centralized energy distribution in the nineteenth century. In the twenty-first

century, Carr looks at dot.com companies that have similar impacts on the national economy

to the point of creating a "new economics of doing business" where many services which

were expensive and created new opportunities of employment are now provided without

significant financial cost (*Big Switch* 2009, 234). The immediate effect of these technologies

was an improvement in the standard of living for a great number of people in the United

States. Internet services made communication easier in many ways with services like email,

blogging, online dating, and video chat; provided entertainment and increased cultural

awareness through websites like *Napster*, *YouTube*, *TED*, and *Hulu*; and even increased the

consumer base of companies that could tap in to the users of *AskJeeves*, *Craigslist*, *Amazon*,

Google, and *Snapfish*. Dot.com companies flourished because there were so many things

that people did from day to day that could be done faster and cheaper online. Not only are

these services less expensive, but they are well suited for adapting to better address and

direct their customers' needs.

But, for Carr, the effect of dot.com companies on the national economy is little more

than a silver lining. The dark cloud underlying the success of these companies has been a

"thinning out of the professional workforce" in the industries that used to provide these services locally (*Big Switch* 2009, 235). Carr's analysis of the 2007 U.S. Department of Labor's Statistics found that close to 150,000 jobs were lost since 2001 in the publishing and broadcast industry when businesses and consumers were moving online (*Big Switch* 2009, 135). Most alarmingly however, there was also a drop of 29% in online employment during the same time period (*Big Switch* 2009, 135). Not only were computers and online networks able to perform tasks more efficiently than their human counterparts, increasingly human beings were being used to help complete tasks that computers could not and without compensation. Carr gets his readers to look again at companies like YouTube and Amazon which owe a lot of their success to the videos and product reviews that people submit— either for free or with compensation usually in the form of services provided by the company (*Big Switch* 2009, 135-7).

While there are other social and economic factors involved, Carr's argument that technology is having its effect on the economy and the jobs it creates is persuasive. The causes, effects, and significance of these changes are, for now, open to discussion. I for one, will continue to use Internet technologies—and not just because I have to as part of my profession or because my brain is somehow addicted to the Web. Plenty of technologies like the printing press, the telephone, and online social/gaming networks have all been the subject of suspicion and criticism. Each of them also motivated significant changes in people's thoughts and behaviors. Eventually religious and political powers found a way to embrace the print medium that had once threatened their authority. Most people have not significantly suffered socially or communicatively because of the telephone and its successor

technologies (any many ways it expanded our ability to communicate). Even online social networks are adapting to users that, for all of the media-hype, are much more aware and selective in their social habits both online and off.

However, there are other technologies (together with social, political, cultural, and economic forces) that deserve the same amount of attention as given to the more tantalizing technologies in our society. For the moment, many of the issues faced by our society and by the global community do not recognize the technological hegemony affecting such mundane actions as the clothes we wear and the medical attention we receive to our society's valuing of national security and human life.

The apparel industry plays a critical factor in our everyday experience as a society prone to identify and relate based on what a person is wearing. Dr. Michael Fralix, president of *(TC)*[2], a consulting firm for the textile and apparel industry specializing in technology development, argued back in May 2006 that the apparel industry could and should take advantages of new technologies. In particular, he encouraged the adaptation of distribution techniques and technologies used by airline, newspaper, music and movie industries for the apparel industry. In addition to the automation of clothing manufacturing, despite the off-shoring and economic factors in opposition, Fralix encouraged the development of digital technologies that could enhance the major steps in designing, marketing, manufacturing, and delivering products to consumers.

Various designers and manufacturers make use of technologies to promote their materials and designs on sites like the *Fashion Industry Network* and television series like *The Fashionista Diaries* and *Launch My Line*. In "Cyborgs, New Technology, and the Body: The

Changing Nature of Garments," Anne Farren and Andrew Hutchison (2004) investigate the imminence and ramifications of clothing that make use of technologies. They discuss technology in the nineties that allowed cables and silicon chips to be woven into jackets, to more recent fabrics that use fiber optic technology to change colors and shapes (466), to gene (467-9) and nano- technologies (469-70) that make fabrics water- and wrinkle-resistant. Farren and Hutchison even suggest that technology may eventually lead to biological clothing/plastic surgery that integrates with the human skin.

An important, if less dramatic, use of technology in the apparel industry that $(TC)^2$'s website makes available to clients is the SizeUSA database. This database is based off of 3D, digital measuring of adults and is meant for assisting in designing the fit of clothing. This technology is even available to consumers in some stores where an individual can have an avatar made to their measurements and assist them in trying various apparels from their home computers ("SizeUSA" 2010).

These plans for technology in future of the apparel industry and its current role can be exciting, especially if one is already on board with the multiple ways that technology is shaping humanity for the better. However, there is room to question and doubt as does Kate Kennedy (2009) in "What Size Am I?: Decoding Women's Clothing Standards." Her analysis and comparison of sizing standards in Australia, Europe and the U.S. raises questions about the accuracy of the scanning technologies used by databases like SizeUSA (2009, 520). As an example, consider the fact that this database was begun in the Summer of 2002 and is promoted as having scanned "nearly 11,000 individuals in 12 locations across the U.S." on the $[TC]^2$ website ("SizeUSA" 2010). According to the 2002 Census of

Governments ("Number of Cities" 2011), that means 12 out of 19,429 possible locations with municipal governments and 11,000 out of an estimated U.S. population of 281,421,906—3.91% ("Annual Estimates"). Kennedy also suggests that, even though scientific methodology has been used for establishing industry standards, clothing sizes are very often used as a marketing strategy—with one company choosing to follow one set of standards to give women the feeling of bigger bust sizes and another using a different standard to flatter the waist (2009, 517-9).

So we have technology being used in a way that is convincing and exciting, but misleading. We also have technology that is not really being used at all for the sake of product marketing. More importantly, these are more recent technologies that are being touted and ignored. But what about the technology that underlies them all?—mass-production plants that, regardless of how technology-infused they become or the size printed on the inner label, will continue to produce standardized clothing for the sake of manufacturing efficiency and the bottom line. I suppose for the 4% of Americans who share similar body-measurements, the hegemonic influence of technology is not felt. But for others, shopping for clothes will continue to be a gamble—this shirt with the arm length that's about an inch to short but with a nice cut at the waist or that one with the snug collar but nice color that flatters my eyes.

Reclaiming Ethics

Perhaps these concerns are misplaced. The way that technology shapes the apparel industry may be a good way to manage the population's weight gain as we all try to fit more comfortably in our clothes (rather than have our clothes fit comfortably). But the news

abounds with reports that obesity is on the rise in the United States and increasing numbers of retailers are adding to their stock of plus sizes—from Wal-Mart and Target to JC Penny and Forever 21 ("Clothing Industry," 2009). And, although it would not be accurate to blame clothing manufacturers for our having to try on successively larger sized clothing, having to do so usually has a negative impact on an individual's self body-image.

Situations like this one make it obvious that our society is facing a moment in which the values that have long been in-grained into our technologies—efficiency and accuracy and cost effectiveness, ease of use, etc.—are increasingly coming into conflict with other treasured social values like feeling good about ourselves and job security. Perhaps this situation can be easily resolved by new technologies that help us control our weight better or that project programmable images outward from our own skin of how we want to be perceived. But what about the number of retail jobs lost in moving the apparel industry online? Dilemmas concerning our social values may not be so easily resolved by our technologies.

Consider how much our society values privacy for the individual citizen and yet expects the federal government to guarantee security for the entire nation. These issues have been discussed at length in the news and in academic discourse because where to draw the line between protecting the individual and protecting the nation. The first passing and renewal of the Patriot Act did not meet too much resistant since people were genuinely horrified by the events of 9/11. Tightened airport security, wider surveillance of communications, and stricter travel and immigration laws were actions citizens could get behind. But as the initial impact faded and the United States asserted its strength against

terrorism, people's anxiety over national security also abated. More importantly, people began to better understand exactly what the government was capable of doing with new technologies in the name of national security.

Movies like *Eagle Eye* (2008) the Bourne *Ultimatum* (2007) captured a growing sentiment that if a normal citizen could use Google Earth to see their house from space, turn-by-turn GPS systems in their cars, and the Internet to find just about anything a person could want to know; what might the government be capable of? The issue is only more complicated by technologies of increasing sophistication and a generation of technology users who willingly post, twitter, blog, text, and email the intimacies of their lives on networks spanning the globe—often without even pausing to think about where that email went between send/receive, how many times it was saved to a server, or by whom it might have been intercepted.

Millions of people enjoy the ease and selection of online businesses like *Amazon*, *EBay*, and *Photo Bucket*. Technology allows people to have access to more products than they could ever have imagined in the days of mail-in catalogues and Mom & Pop stores. Consumers can avoid lines and taxes and often find a better deal since retailers now have a national market to compete with. Amazon Marketplace and Google Shopping allow small town businesses access to this same market—often for free. But is this a boon for enterprising individuals and small business or is it an affront to the basic makeup of society—the intimate interaction of individuals?

I will not argue here that people cannot have meaningful interaction without face-to-face contact or through the mediation of technology. Nor am I hailing the end of civilization

and U.S. society. But I will suggest that as a society we still value face-to-face interaction even without our technology. People still go to theme parks, gather in the local bar, attend sporting events, hold family reunions, and commemorate special cultural events in humongous crowds. Of course we also experience road rage in snarling traffic and exasperation in long customer service line. But rather than use these experiences to defend how technology can remove these aggravations, maybe we should recognize that these more frustrating, impromptu social gatherings are also more mediated by technology than the others.

Some of our favorite cultural symbols—even the corporate ones like Disney, Budweiser, and Wal-Mart—are deeply entrenched in valuing people coming together. Some of the longest running and re-running television shows are the ones that viewers connect with because of the social interactions and misadventures played out in *The Simpsons*, *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, and *The Office*. Even the popularity of reality television shows suggest how much our society values real people in real situations (as opposed to the virtual ones).

And yet technology pushes our time and money more and more towards those activities that significantly affect our socialization as human beings. More and more of our lived experiences, alone and with others, happen in front of a screen or connected to a computer of one sort or another. We look at nature through the lens of a camera or the back of a 3" LCD screen. A child's school recital is broken up by our rummaging for the extra battery. Rather than use our money to travel and be with our families, we send them new gifts of technology and chat with them via *Skype* (Or we do both and get ourselves and our nation into debt). Whether these changes are necessarily negative is difficult to determine

and perhaps too relative. But that does not mean that we should not try. Our social values

are less based off of tradition or religious values than by the experiences that shape

individuals' identification of good and bad—or at least worse and better. This is why we

cannot live in society and simply live and let live. Otherwise, if we as a society do not

securely identify and preserve our shared values our technology will do it for us—as it has

done for centuries.

Why this could be a concerns is most easily demonstrated by considering the current

development of artificial intelligences whose programming allow computers to search and

make connections much like humans process information. The technology sounds

wonderfully useful and effective. But which individual and which socio-economic or -political

environment decides how a computer will make those connections and which human

intelligence it will mimic? Already employers and governments are using artificial intelligence

programs and databases to make extremely important decisions about who to hire as the

best applicant and who to arrest as the most likely terrorist. But to do so, the intelligence

has to be programmed to prioritize and evaluate information according to the parameters

set by his programmers. The significance of this use of technology becomes a bit clearer

when we think about how Lincoln might have had people search out and identify

terrorists—or Carnegie, or McCarthy, or Ghandi, or Hussein.

In less obvious ways the technological hegemony creates an impasse of social values

between the values of the past and those of the present. My last example draws from the

medical field and its miraculous technologies. These technologies are imbedded with the

elemental/primal value of protecting and preserving human life. Within the past couple of

centuries, technologies have been developed that allow medical experts to diagnose and treat an amazing number of diseases, illnesses, disorders, and conditions. Unfortunately, because these technologies have made such obvious improvements to the human condition and because they are associated with such a strong and universal human value, the possible effects of a technological hegemony are largely ignored. But they do exist and the effects are both distressing and detrimental to our ability as human beings to hold on to our humanity and lay claim to our ethical standards.

In an emotionally tense moment of *I, Robot*, Will Smith's character gives vent to his frustration that a robot had saved his life over that of a child. He expresses the social value that the life of a young child—regardless of its chances for survival—was of more importance than that of a middle-aged man. Bridget Moynahan's character in the film and the audience in the movie theater seem to agree, even though they are happy that Will Smith is still alive to take on the heartless, artificial intelligence. But does our society really value the life of a young child that much? Parents seem to be sending more time away from their kids and seeking for divorces despite the impact on their children. Municipal, state, and federal governments continue to cut school budgets. Beauty pageants, Halloween costumes, and pop teen idols seem to be pushing children as quickly to adulthood as possible. At the same time adoption agencies, juvenile detention centers, and abortion clinics are not exactly going out of business.

I cannot argue that technology is making people duplicitous in how they really care about life, but I feel that we have been telling ourselves and our technology for so long that we value human life that society has forgotten why. More importantly, our medical

technologies are indiscriminate in their saving of human life—and sadly I think that society has become indiscriminate too. Technology saves human lives when it can and when it cannot (and someone is willing to foot the bill) new technologies are developed to make up for the deficiency. As a society we save human lives because we can and because having our technology makes us feel as though we should. Yes, perhaps there is a strong religious imperative against murder and for charity that influences our actions. But just as strongly, a technological hegemony has made it unethical/immoral for society to not preserve life when it can.

So we save premature babies and invalid geriatrics, the insured and the uninsured, the adventurous thrill-seekers and the attempted suicides, the intoxicated catatonic and the criminally insane, the victim of rape and the soldier of war. And this is definitely a good thing, a characteristic of an enlightened civilization, and a sympathetic society. But what happens in a society of healthy, long-lived individuals? Without question there is plenty of good. But there are also students and workers who cannot afford to stay at home when they are sick because the system is structured for efficiency—which means healthy workers and undistracted/alert students. There is a preoccupation with not only staying alive, but staying youthful. As a society there is an expectation for longevity filled with 'coming of age' moments, and an inability to cope when those moments do not arrive as expected. Like our technology, there is a strong emphasis on staying healthy and alive, without much to guide us on what is really special about the lives we are trying to preserve in the first place.

Sadly, a technological hegemony—like any of the ideological, social, or political hegemonies of the past/present—is not likely to provide us with any real answers. There are

easy answers: Long life. Cell phones for everyone. Free global communication. Durable and inexpensive clothing. Renewable energies. Work smarter not harder. The greatest good for the greatest number of people. But these values, like the religion of Marx's economy-based system of power are perhaps little more than a distraction from the realities of human experience and humanity its' self.

Conclusion

Humanity is defined by the thoughts, values, and knowledge that a society/culture chooses to believe in and to act on. Over thousands of years societies/cultures separated by language and geography have developed crucial ideas about what it means to be a human being. The culture of the United States, like the culture of ancient Rome has been a cosmopolitan locus of cultures and has valued the assimilation of socio-cultural ideas and values as much as anything. However, finding common ground upon which such disparate cultures can live together in one society is not quite the same as establishing a shared definition of humanity that allows society to persist.

Perhaps ours is an information age because so many of us in society feel that there is something we are missing—some crucial element of our humanity that has been misplaced somewhere along the way. Unfortunately, our technologies cannot really help us since we have never really seen them as more than tools. As a society we have not questioned just how often our technologies were making crucial decisions for us according the decision made by some one or some small group decades before.

We need to take back responsibility for our choices, to recognize that they have an impact on others in ways we cannot imagine—especially in terms of our technology.

Reclaiming ethics is not simply about finding God or socializing our government, it is about sitting down without our technologies turned off and reflecting inward to decide what is most important to us as human beings. What value do we place on life stripped of technology? Which of our technologies really embrace those values in their entirety? As a society we cannot continue to embrace one technology that makes holiday shopping easier if it means some people do not have the jobs to take holidays from. At least, we should not if we really value hard work and equal opportunity.

Again I am not suggesting that we turn away from technology entirely, but that we pause to sift through those values that most important to us as human beings and not simply forced upon us by our technologies. Humanity is about being able to value our experiences, to find the similarities between us as individuals despite the obvious differences, and to distinguish ourselves as individuals by the choices we make. The technological hegemony asserts its own values, standardizes for efficiency's and marketability's sake, and eliminates so many possible choices to make. As human beings we can always take back our humanity. But we have to want to do so and really value our humanity. Otherwise we might as well be satisfied with ourselves as a species where the most technologically evolved survive and hope we make the cut.

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