Head to Head: Does technology help or harm?

Technology becomes a crutch

Zach Vicars

There's a war being waged between man and machine. And the machines are winning.

So begins every sci-fi thriller of the last decade. We've all heard the story before: Humans surround themselves with technology until the toaster ovens rise up and the apocalypse ensues. It's an old, worn-out tale, but there's some truth to it.

Honestly, most of us have more electronic gizmos than we can count, ranging from laptop computers to automatic kitchen thermometers. And maybe that's not a bad thing. After all, countless medical advances have been made thanks to technology, and some parts of mundane life are even improved by the cyber-age — just think of the peace of mind that comes from being able to contact a loved one in a time of emergency. But does this luxury come at a cost? I certainly think so.

Because most of us don't treat technology as an accessory, it's more of a crutch. We can't go anywhere without our phone or spend a weekend without checking our e-mail. We might as well admit it: Our lives are governed by technology. From alarm to alarm, every day is mapped out by little battery-charged conveniences.

One of technology's greatest woes is that it's robbed our generation of much of its potential. For example, drop the average 20-something in a remote location, and unless he/she has a laptop computer, a GPS and a cup of Starbucks coffee, chance of survival is very bleak. So that's a bit of a ridiculous scenario — we don't live in the Wild West anymore — but seriously, it's worth examining our pathetic dependence on technology. Take just a day at school, for instance. On a light homework day, you might have one homework assignment to print off, another to finish up, a third waiting to be downloaded on Blackboard and some extracurricular social networking that just has to be done. Can you imagine completing all those tasks without access to a computer? Of course not. By definition most of those tasks would be impossible without a speedy wireless connection and a hi-resolution screen. And that's just the problem with technology. We young college students with able bodies and sound minds can't seem to get anything done without it.

But let's also consider the culture that technology encourages. In America today, if a TV isn't 1080p with surround-sound, Blu-ray and 8,000 channels, then it's simply not worth watching. And a car without heated seats, climate control and roadside assistance? Why even bother. And if the phone you're using can't access the Internet, find the closest chic restaurant and give you daily yoga instruction, then you might as well keep a telegraph instead. The continual change in tech trends has left Americans eager to spend their time, energy and resources on meaningless things and grasping for the next best gadget to hit the market. Because of our obsession with silicone and steel, hours of grilling out in the backyard with family and friends have sadly given way to hours of waiting in line for the newest gaming console.

Pro-tech campaigners are jumping all over this report of a man who successfully administered first aid to himself after downloading an application from his iPhone. I think that's a lovely story. One man saved by a cell phone. But consider the hundreds of people who are injured or killed every year because of cell phone-related auto accidents. And beyond that, think of the kids who turn into complete social outcasts because of their pathological addictions to World of Warcraft and the like. Even worse, consider the families that dissolve into dysfunctional shouting matches because of the recent American reality: The TV dinner. While technology might have helped one man in Haiti, it doesn't seem to be helping anyone else.

So what is this, just another column trying to push your buttons and change your world view? I hope not. All I'm saying is we need to take a long look at the role technology plays in our lives. We need to stop falling asleep with the TV on and waking up every hour to a new Tweet. We need to take back the upper-hand in the war between man and machine. We need to make sure that the next time we boot up our PC, it's us using the technology, not the technology using us.

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Technology saves and enhances lives

Alex Boles

Too tired to do your homework? There's an app for that. Bleeding from the leg and head after a massive earthquake? There's also an app for that.

I'm sure the first statement is only one version of the iPhone away, but the second statement actually came true for a Colorado man trapped in a hotel in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

After the Hotel Montana collapsed, Dan Woolley used an American Heart Association iPhone application that he previously downloaded for treating wounds according to an article on CNN's Web site. The article also stated that Woolley set the phone's alarm clock to go off every 20 minutes to make sure he did not fall asleep in case of shock — directions he read off the iPhone app.

The first time I read the article I imagined tiny hands with medical equipment coming out of the phone to patch him up or the equivalent of OnStar with a nurse-on-demand who talks you through bandaging your own wounds. An absurd thought, but I'm sure even that type of technology will be available someday.

It's amazing how technology is being utilized. Think about what would have happened if Woolley had not previously downloaded the health app. Yes, he might have survived after more than 60 hours of being trapped in the rubble, bleeding out of his head, but I'm willing to bet that technology prevailed in this case and potentially was the reason this man is alive today. Many people theorize that technology is taking over our lives, complete with online dating and cars that talk to us, but not all technological advances should be viewed as the Artificial Intelligence stepping on society. Technology has made parts of life a little better in some cases. Global Positioning Systems give men another reason not to stop for directions, Smart Boards and computer capabilities offer advancements in education that weren't even thought of when we were kids and even advancements in newspaper production are worthy of celebration. I know a few people who are glad to be rid of the literal cut and paste style of production and more than happy to accept the "control-C" and "control-V" shortcuts on the keyboard.

I think there are limits to where technology should be advanced and utilized, however. Most every opinion has an exception, and this is mine: I dislike society's dependability on technology for interpersonal communication, and I think there needs to be more face-to-face interaction, definitely with dating. I love technology and love what it has to continually offer, but it should not be used to replace interpersonal communication.

I'm annoyed with the people who refuse to accept the advancements in technology as a good thing. I've grown to understand that people tend not to like something until they are put in a situation where they need it or are confronted with the necessity of using it. For example, someone despises the use of stem cells until they need them to save their life or the life of a loved one. Guess what? Technology will only improve, and if you're not on the bandwagon now, chances are you will be either forcibly or willingly converted in the near future.

I'm not sorry to say that cars will not stop talking to us — hey, maybe you need to know that your trunk is ajar. You don't want to be driving down Normal Street with your trunk bobbing up and down. And I'm not sorry to say that technology will continue to improve in the classroom and, I think, most importantly, in the medical field. Go ahead, hate technology now, but when you need that vaccine or that breathing machine, you'll be worshiping those who slaved away to save your life — even if it is an iPhone app.

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AROUND THE QUAD

What technological advancement are you looking forward to?

"I hate technology."

Craig Becker
senior

"Tablet PCs."

Shane Bernard
junior

"No particular one, technology is just exciting to me."

Nick Burg
senior

"I just got a Netbook, and I love it."

Danielle Hagemann
senior

Populist groups create stir

Connor Stangler

There's something about a good populist crusade that invigorates the deepest recesses of a democracy. Even those members of the body politic who find it hard to get excited about governmental doldrums can feel the thrill of a coordinated mass mobilization.

Recently, the conservative "Tea Party" movement — a grassroots political movement, characterized by large public demonstrations, that protests government taxation, big government and, most recently, the policies of President Barack Obama — has fancied itself one of those rare occurrences. It wants to join its historically significant namesake event as one of those times in American history when the people stood up to the Leviathan. But as much as these true patriots believe they are the successors to the Sons of Liberty, their ethnocentricity has done nothing but contribute to the chaos. Their agenda champions impulsive and radical behavior, while the solution to the economic and political problems lies in prudence and cooperation.

Now this "populism" has subtly crept into the hallowed halls of the most dignified assembly in the United States: the Senate. While usually a bastion of reason and discriminating practicality, the venerable body has fallen victim to the whims of an impressionable, lawless force. Several prominent politicians have sacrificed their principles and those of their constituents to avoid being blacklisted or thought of as an enemy of Main Street. Democratic Senators Barbara Boxer and Russ Feingold withdrew their support for Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke to serve another term, citing Bernanke's ties with the Wall Street fat cats as antithetical to this nation's values of public trust and support. Like the Tea Partiers themselves, they have yet to suggest an alternative and instead are interested only in opposing him. Both Boxer and Feingold saw the signs, they heard the angry cries and they forfeited reason accordingly.

The Tea Party movement wants revenge. It wants to spill the blood of those who got us into this mess. It attempted to cleanse the Republican Party of its impurities by abandoning one of its own in the New York 23rd Congressional District special election, but instead succeeded only in splitting the party and handing the election to the Democrat. Recently, it sacrificed Martha Coakley on the altar of partisan democracy. But it still wants more. The citizens of Main Street will revel in the sight of a fatigued Bernanke, the symbol of the indulgent Wall Street lifestyle, pleading for mercy at the feet of a panel of Senators that is simply the agent of justice, the voice of the people. The crowd will storm the Capitol and demand that Bernanke answer to them. Consent of the governed.

Passionate unrest must have something, or someone, to unite against. It must be public, it must be visible and it must be nominally, if not deceptively, blameworthy. Bernanke is now the perfect target. He is the face of the recession — the guy who dropped the ball. In reality, a combination of bad loans, wasteful spending and reckless speculation was the root of the recession. Bernanke certainly made some missteps along the way, but he was not the only one and definitely is not the man who should pay for this. And if Bernanke's re-confirmation is declined, and Obama rebuked, what then? Who replaces him?

The problem with plucking an outsider from Main Street and throwing him or her into the mayhem of Wall Street is that this is a game of experience. The best candidates for the job are those who also may be seen as entrenched robber barons. Other notable economists probably all will be categorized as part of the establishment. In the eyes of the Tea Partiers, they are tarnished.

So what now populism? The Tea Partiers have successfully boarded the ship of big government and jettisoned the tea of Wall Street. It is a destructive movement, and after there are no others to blame, it will slowly deteriorate. That, however, is the fate of most anarchic populist movements. The thing about anarchy is, before long, there's nothing left to destroy.

I am surrounded by incredibly involved and motivated students. They are hungry for activism, and when they are exposed to this democratic perversion, it falsifies American values. We are here to build, help and enrich, not sabotage. These Tea Partiers are not patriots. They are interested in one thing: telling you who is to blame. They claim to fight for the land of the free. I have hope in campuses like Truman and that the people here know what that fight is actually supposed to look like.

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Census lacks political correctness

Molly Skyles

Do you say gay or homosexual? Native American or Indian? Keeping up with what is politically correct isn't easy. In fact, it is a hassle, and there is practically no way not to offend someone. Some person somewhere will always have a problem with something, and the United States Census Bureau understands that.

The use of the word "Negro" in the U.S. Census questionnaire is under review, according to Time.com. In the 2000 Census, more than 56,000 people in the country wrote in the word Negro to describe their identity as opposed to checking an already designated box. So, the plan for the 2010 Census is to send a slightly different questionnaire to 30,000 households to see the differences that arise in what people claim as their race affiliation. Changes in these separate questionnaires include the deletion of the words "Negro" and "race" from the questionnaire altogether. Also, there will be more places for people to write in their own answers.

Censuses have been in the U.S. since before the Constitution's ratification, and they represent the changes in not only population size but also social standards. For example, the first census asked about one race only: Caucasian. During those days, race was all about status, and the white race was known as superior. So to make sure whites remained at the top, the category of "mulatto" was added to the census in 1850 as a distinction between white and mixed people.

Today, however, there are many different ethnic group options in the census that a person can identify with. In fact, there is a completely separate question asking about Hispanic ethnicity apart from race. This stand-alone question takes us back to the 1800s and creates a difference between race and ethnicity. While ethnicity is a product of culture, race can mean something entirely different. By using the term race, characteristics or stereotypes of a particular ethnic group are unintentionally reinforced.

A study was conducted by New York University in 2006 on 138 censuses from around the world. It found that only 15 percent of censuses asking about origin or ancestry used the term race, and almost all of those that did were former slave nations. Therefore, using the word race in the U.S. census is simply another way to emphasize differences and create labels. Utilizing the word Negro is also a step in the wrong direction.

Ask anyone, black or white, who grew up 50 years ago, and they might refer to a person of African-American descent as a Negro. It's the term that was socially acceptable in their day. The word was used with little thought by both black and white people in the eras prior to the Civil Rights movement. Times have changed, however, and today, Negro can be a derogatory term that takes us back to the times of slavery and segregation.

So, using the term in a census that every household in the country is supposed to fill out will not go over too well. I may never really know what it feels like, but I would be personally offended and have no desire to complete a questionnaire that used an offensive term to describe me and my ethnicity and made me feel like a second-class citizen. Yeah, it may not be the intention of the U.S. Census Bureau to make black people feel unworthy. However, it is their job to produce an accurate compilation of the country, and using a term thought of by many as a racial slur is no way to inspire anyone to fill out a questionnaire.

Therefore, deleting the word Negro from the questionnaire and adding places to fill in your own answer is the best method to avoid offending anyone. So maybe people still will write in Negro as their race, but who cares? It might take the bureau a little extra time to compile an accurate tally, but at least no one will be personally insulted or have a legitimate reason not to fill it out. If people today still refer to themselves as Negro, that is their own right, but it is unfair to include such a term that will harm more people than it will help. After all, the majority's feeling and opinion is what should be given the most consideration.

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