

Technology Matters: Questions to Live With

By David E. Nye

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Ask an executive in Silicon Valley whether technological advances over the last two decades were beneficial and they would likely answer in the affirmative. Ask Second Circuit Judges deciding the extent of personal jurisdiction in an internet domain name trademark dispute, however, and the answer reveals less enthusiasm: “attempting to apply established trademark law in the fast-developing world of the internet is somewhat like trying to board a moving bus.”¹ And ask a university psychology professor researching behavioral patterns of today’s youth and she will suggest that current technology such as MySpace and YouTube have helped give rise to the most narcissistic and self-centered generation in history.² The internet is only one example of technology that raises probing issues. Military warfare has become increasingly more sophisticated, modern PDAs allow for ubiquitous online connectivity, and NASA has been successful in sending numerous rovers and orbiters to Mars. In the midst of such progress which may seem both exciting and chaotic, David Nye asks that we take pause to consider the economic, social, environmental and psychological impact technology has on human lives.

¹ *Bensusan Restaurant Corp. v. King*, 126 F.3d 25, 27 (2d Cir. 1997) (Circuit Judges Van Grafeiland, Walker and Leval).

² David Crary, Associated Press, *Study Finds Students Narcissistic*, Boston Globe (Feb. 27, 2007) available at http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2007/02/27/study_finds_students_narcissistic/ (study conducted by Professor Jean Twenge, a psychology professor at San Diego State University).

A Professor of Comparative American Studies and History at Warwick University, Nye's publications include equally probing examinations of technology in history, including *America as Second Creation: Technology and Narratives of New Beginnings*, *Consuming Power: A Social History of American Energies*, and *American Technological Sublime*. His latest work, however, appears his most philosophical, asking such questions as, can we define technology? Does technology control us? Nye's roots as a historian are not lost in his approach to the questions posited, and this is certainly one of the strengths of the book. Each question is met with an objective historical survey of technological and human development that describes the context out of which various inventions were created. Defining technology, he argues, must not fail to incorporate the details of human evolution, because even the creation of the earliest tool tells a story of humankind's desire and ability to change its circumstances. Technology, he further asserts, is essentially a social construction that does not exist outside of or independently from us. Indeed for Nye, invention is the mother of necessity because the existence of a tool often precedes its best (or worse) use. This fact drives his fundamental denial of technological determinism, a pervasive theme that he no doubt also deems a moral imperative.

Through examples of technological development spanning a multitude of cultures, disciplines and time periods, Nye forces the reader to equate present technological developments with those in the past. The most interesting and supportive of his position are those examples in which technology was developed to solve a particular problem but subsequently had important unforeseen uses and social implications. This tendency cuts both ways, however, and where the bicycle encouraged women's liberation, the use of

asbestos to make buildings fire resistant took a deadly toll on those exposed to it.³ Nye's writing style often reads like a historical point-counterpoint in which he presents the reader with evidence of technological steps forward that she must also view in light of an undeniable step backwards. His reluctance at feeding our assumption that technology is necessarily beneficial leaves the reader with a growing unease, and this is no doubt intentional. Nye's ultimate challenge to the reader is to deny technological determinism and to make informed decisions about the impact technology will have on his or her life.

Nye compliments his historical accounts with philosophical references to, among others, Foucault, Heidegger, Marx and Thoreau. In this way, his concrete historical examples include a theoretical context and provide depth to what otherwise may be a less forceful survey of events. Nye resists the trite question of whether humans would be better off living apart from technology, noting for example that while Thoreau questioned the material emphasis of urban life, he embraced technology and invented (among others) a machine for pencil making while living in Walden.⁴ This anecdote and others emphasize Nye's fundamental premise that being human is inseparable from the development and use of technology. Suggesting resolution to the chicken and egg question in favor of inventions over their applications, he urges us to remember that while technology may have unforeseen uses and impacts, we remain in control.

While Nye's historical accounts are accessible to the history novice, they may tend to distract from his subtle call to action to some modern readers. He counters this, however, by incorporating unique discussions about the internet. He devotes a chapter to the question of whether technology is, in practice, increasing productivity, efficiency and

³ Nye, pp. 52, 165.

⁴ Nye, pp. 102.

leisure time.⁵ While the internet makes it possible to work from home, he notes that common practices in Silicon Valley include longer hours and an almost “ascetic” lifestyle based primarily around work.⁶ These and other examples lead to the conclusion that while technology eliminates some mundane tasks, it also has the potential to create new tasks and even increase one’s workload. Even readers uninterested in Henry Ford’s Model T or World War II battle tactics may see the relevance in engaging this timelier question. Nye also asserts that technology has the potential to homogenize its users, citing the internet as a catalyst for globalization. He notes in his point-counter point style, however, that not all of the world’s population has access to the internet, and therefore severe diversification is also possible. Nye’s goal is obvious: that modern readers ought to equate the Model T or the telephone with today’s internet and read lessons about our past into our future. But while he lays subtle hints about what these lessons may be, he leaves it to the reader to shape the ultimate direction.

The book is both accessible and enjoyable to the history and technology novice. It provides a unique lens through which to view human development and asks probing questions in the face of exciting technological change. The tone remains objective with the exception of Nye’s continued denial of technological determinism which is threaded throughout. The reader may be disappointed that in light of Nye’s expertise in identifying and framing the issues he does not suggest a course of action. This is, however, the very force of the book. He asks the reader to take an active role in shaping the development and use of technology. I would recommend the book to anyone

⁵ See Nye, Chapter 7 “Work: More, or Less? Better, or Worse?”

⁶ Nye, pp. 133.

interested in gaining a better understanding of human technological evolution and open to the notion that he or she may play a role in how it shapes the future.