

Technology's Role in Environmental Destruction

Griffin Kiegiel & David Skrbina

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Human beings are unfortunately cursed by an extremely limited perspective. On the scale of the planet, and especially the universe, our meager 80 year existence is staggeringly insignificant. Tracing the effects of causes within our own lifetimes have historically proven challenging, let alone tracing the results from actions of previous generations. And even if one were to ignore our species' temporal limitations, we remain restricted by our position in the solar system and the vast oceans of nothingness that exist between us and the next hypothetical advanced civilization. We continue to push these limits however, never letting perceived obstacles keep us from moving forward and continuing to amass knowledge that may ultimately lead to answers to our most haunting questions. However, in our ever increasing efforts to progress as a scientific civilization and move forward as a technological species we have neglected to look around at what has been lost as a result of this mindset. As David Skrbina states in his book "The Metaphysics of Technology", "The power of modern technology is, of course, also the power of collective suicide," (Skrbina 65). Ever since the introduction of advanced technology into our society, we have been creating problems of which the results are only now being more accurately understood. The largest of these problems, due to its implications for our future survival rate on this planet, is undoubtedly the environmental crisis. Technology is one of the biggest causes of the worsening ecological disaster both in the way it has changed our psychological condition and in how it has necessitated a modern industrial civilization that relies on environmental destruction.

When it comes to the relationship between human beings and technology, people tend to approach the subject with a very small amount of concern because they view the relationship as a one-way street. Technology is just a benign tool for us to use as we see fit, which when combined with science tends to be either the raw accumulation of knowledge or the creation of a solution to a problem that was originally caused by technology itself. It is difficult for modern individuals to perceive technology as something that even has an effect on them, let alone can irreparably harm them, because they only imagine the moral quality of the use of technology to be determined by the user. For example, most people would not consider a specific Sony television to be immoral for showing violent images to children, it is the broadcasting companies or the parents that are held accountable for allowing it to occur. A phone is similarly not treated as a criminal if a bomb threat is called into a school, nor a stun gun feared as evil for incapacitating a nonviolent protestor. While these examples involve many arguable variables, the point remains that technology itself can do never do any wrong in the eyes of modern humanity, thus leading to our apparent disinterest in analyzing how its use has disrupted our psychological processes.

Ted Kaczynski however, infamously known as "The Unabomber", has noticed this phenomenon and in his manifesto "Industrial Society and its Future" he explains the way in which the Industrial Revolution (the turning point of technology's takeover of civilization) doomed our civilization by creating a world that does not allow us to effectively fulfill what he describes as the "power process",

“...for most people it is through the power process – having a goal, making an AUTONOMOUS effort and attaining the goal – that self-esteem, self-confidence and a sense of power are acquired. When one does not have adequate opportunity to go through the power process the consequences are (depending on the individual and on the way the power process is disrupted) boredom, demoralization, low self-esteem, inferiority feelings, defeatism, depression, anxiety, guilt, frustration, hostility, spouse or child abuse, insatiable hedonism, abnormal sexual behavior, sleep disorders, eating disorders, etc.” (Kaczynski p. 50)

Many of the negative consequences, depression especially, that Kaczynski lists are things which most people today would recognize as unfortunate realities of the world that are to be avoided if possible. But they are not realities, they are consequences of a lack of fulfillment of the power process on a species-wide scale. There was a time when no one had heard of depression because it simply did not exist in pre-industrial civilizations.

Technology as a concept is chiefly characterized by methods and inventions that are believed to make a particular task easier for the user, hence the belief that it is a benign tool. But in our endless pursuit of an easier life we have in fact restricted ourselves in such ways that create intense cognitive disturbances which eventually evolve into “psychological disorders”. To be a citizen of the United States that does not take some sort of daily medication or consider themselves to be suffering from some arbitrarily defined psychological condition is a rarity in modern times, and yet very few of these individuals believe that technology has any responsibility to bear. This is because every new advancement seems like it is making our lives better when viewed in the short term, but the long term frequently brings consequences that are unforeseeable and subtle. Kaczynski provides the excellent example of the motorized vehicle which was initially introduced as an optional method of high speed transportation but is now basically required if one desires to be a productive member of society. It is now also known that the dominating use of motorized vehicles across the globe has contributed greatly to the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere which threaten to destroy our protective ozone layer and render the planet incapable of supporting our current lifestyle. It is easy to see all of the positive aspects of a new gadget because the negative effects have a tendency to show up only after the technology has become integrated into the system. Kaczynski goes on to explain how looking at the big picture reveals the true effects of technological integration into our society.

“While technological progress AS A WHOLE continually narrows our sphere of freedom, each new technological advance CONSIDERED BY ITSELF appears to be desirable. Electricity, indoor plumbing, rapid long-distance communications...how could one argue against any of these things, or against any other of the innumerable technical advances that

have made modern society? It would have been absurd to resist the introduction of the telephone, for example. It offered many advantages and no disadvantages. Yet, all these technical advances taken together have created a world in which the average man's fate is no longer in his own hands or in the hands of his neighbors and friends, but in those of politicians, corporation executives and remote, anonymous technicians and bureaucrats whom he as an individual has no power to influence," (Kaczynski 76-7).

Technology is not only responsible for taking away our freedom because society requires its use, but also because it has gradually created the dominating capitalist western culture which keeps individuals that may disagree with it from ever voicing their opinions and leaves the decision making to the wealthy few that only value the number of dollars in their wallets. Some people see the atrocities that the government is rigorously supporting (deforestation, livestock, industrial pollution, etc.) and make attempts at fighting against the system through various channels, but there is a significant lack of recognition of the role that technology has played in restricting our freedom and depressing the masses to the point of resigned obedience. They may choose to attack the system in an illegal way by sabotaging logging machinery or setting fire to a slaughterhouse for example, but they are quickly labelled as terrorists and either persecuted to the full extent of the law (which they tend to redefine in order to suit their needs) or killed in some variation of "unfortunate circumstances". The alternative then is to attack the system legally by engaging in non-violent public protests, but not by coincidence are they also the easiest for the government to ignore. Derrick Jensen and George Draffan discuss in their piece "Strangely Like War" their struggle in attempting to stop mass-scale deforestation the legal way. "We are 'allowed' to 'speak truth to power' all we want, but everyone knows that those in power will ignore these truths and go ahead and do whatever the hell they want...This way we can all happily pretend the system works. Unfortunately—the system *does* work—in fact all too well—but never the way we were told," (Jensen and Draffan 141). Ultimately environmentalists feel trapped in this technological society that leaves them with little ability to change the way in which nature is valued. For as long as those in power are only concerned with the profits coming out of the logging, livestock, fishing, and all of the other major industries, the forests, plains, oceans, and air will continue to suffer.

This learned helplessness that has been exhibited by modern civilization is something that Theodore Roszak notices in his attempt to understand the way in which people cognitively approach the ecological crisis. At this point in time, especially for those that believe in science's ability to express the objective truth of the world, it is undeniable that the future of human beings on Earth is not a joyous one if we continue along the current route. People are becoming much more aware of the ecological crisis, yet despite the plethora of statistics and scientific observations that prove our society's effect on the planet, people remain inactive.

“[A] common response that I elicited was the sense of being trapped. People inherit a way of life; everything about that way of life is interconnected. Tell them that they have to throw out the whole social order by next Monday morning, and they cannot help but be stunned. If they ever stop using their automobile, they will lose their jobs...and their homes. If everything on sale in the supermarket is toxic or environmentally incorrect, what will they eat? Even if the situation is that bad, it is fruitless to ask people to change too much, too fast, and worse than useless to blame them for global catastrophe,” (Roszak 213).

The interconnectedness of the system which Roszak observed highlights another very important aspect of technology: the good parts can never be separated from the bad parts. Even if one accepts that technology is the main problem contributing to our current level of moral consideration for nature, it is so heavily rooted in all aspects of our daily lives that it is virtually impossible to keep only the perceived positive aspects while getting rid of the perceived negative aspects. Medical advancements such as the polio vaccine and MRIs are frequently cited as positive aspects of technology because they have allowed us to live longer healthier lives. However, as Kaczynski states in ISAIF, “Even if medical progress could be maintained without the rest of the technological system, it would by itself bring certain evils,” (Kaczynski 74).

The most notable of these evils is the way in which longer lifespans have contributed to the population crisis. As we rapidly approach a global population of nearly 9.7 billion by 2050, we are quite simply running out of space and resources on the planet, and so actions or inventions that facilitate the exponential growth rate are detrimental to the goal of saving the environment and the species. George Bateson in his piece “The Roots of Ecological Crisis” observes this interaction between technology and population claiming that “the increase of population spurs technological progress and creates that anxiety which sets us against our environment as an enemy; while technology both facilitates increase of population and reinforces our arrogance,” (Bateson 220). As the technological system slowly robs humanity of its freedom and ability to live naturally, it simultaneously allows the population to grow at an exponential rate leading to even more ecological instability. Starvation seems to be a fairly plausible prediction for the future of humankind as we either destroy all of the arable land or reproduce to the point that there will not be enough arable land to feed the number of existing people.

Bateson also asserts that “every solution we can imagine is made difficult or impossible by the thinking and attitudes of western culture,” (Bateson 221). America thrives on the destruction of the environment, and our current standard of living actually necessitates it. Unfortunately, technology has also trapped us into believing that it is the only way we are capable of living. When our civilization decided that technological progress was to be the core driving force for the foreseeable (and unforeseeable) future during the Industrial Revolution, we restricted our perspective of the world to one that views the Earth as simply a machine. This “Mechanos” worldview is synonymous with

the “western”, “dominant”, or “modern” worldview, and it is seemingly derived from the secularization of the world. When before the dominant worldviews involved myths and gods which implied a sense of respect and moral obligation to the natural world, the worldwide embrace of science as an absolute bastion of truth has stripped us of any type of reverence towards Mother Earth. Not only that, but many ecologists as well as Bateson agree that technology and science push us further away from any type of communion with nature. Sociologist Max Weber is quoted by Bill Devall and George Sessions in their book “Deep Ecology” describing this phenomenon as “‘the disenchantment of the world’ as conditioned by the rise of ‘instrumental rationality,’” (Devall and Sessions 45). Devall and Sessions themselves go much deeper in their analysis of the west’s stance on the environment.

“In this worldview, the Earth is seen primarily, if not exclusively, as a collection of natural resources. Some of these resources are infinite; for those which are limited, substitutes can be created by technological society. There is an overriding faith that human civilization will survive. Humans will continue to dominate Nature because humans are above, superior to or outside the rest of Nature. All of Nature is seen from a human-centered perspective, or anthropocentrism,” (Devall and Sessions 43).

The anthropocentric quality of which they speak is believed by many ecologists to be the key element in the dominant worldview that necessitates the ongoing active destruction of plants, animals, and land. This selfish aspect of the worldview is what Bateson identified as the arrogance or “hubris” that separates the concepts of humanity and the natural world in the minds of the world’s leaders. It operates on the foundational assumption that humans themselves are special and different; there is human beings and then there is the rest of nature. Somehow, even with the well accepted theory of evolution that is derived from scientific observation, we are able to maintain the belief that we are not natural. Many believe that this concept is derived from the Judeo-Christian belief in Earth as man’s dominion over which he has complete control to use in the fulfillment of his desires. Regardless of the origin however, it remains a defining quality in the way we treat the natural world today. “We like to think that we are making things “better” by draining wetlands, converting “useless” land to agriculture, and otherwise maximizing the use of the Earth. In fact, we are drawing down the biocapacity of the entire planet for the sake of increasing our numbers and our material standard of living,” (Skrbina 237). This to me seems to act as a good representative for immoral action.

There may be a silver lining in this analysis however, for in discovering that anthropocentrism is one of the core tenets of the dominant worldview, it provides an avenue of possible solutions to the technological system. According to Kaczynski, because technology has been so deeply ingrained in the foundation and every other aspect of modern society, the only possible solution is to burn the entire system to the ground.

This is of course one of the more radical approaches to the issue, but even he agrees with most other ecologists that an alternative worldview is required in order to do this whole civilization thing correctly (whether it follow the destruction of the current society or not). Members of the deep ecology movement (Devall and Sessions to name a couple) assert that even the majority of ecologists today are guilty of subscribing to an anthropocentric approach to the environmental crisis. In valuing nature instrumentally as anthropocentrism implies, it allows those that are concerned about climate change to only be worry about it because of the implications for the well-being of human beings. This does not seem like a terrible belief, but if somehow the environmental crisis were to be avoided there would be a high probability that we go right back to consuming resources on a mass scale under an anthropocentric worldview.

“If that is so, then reason and logic on their own cannot solve our dilemma. Some greater force within us, some instinctive loyalty to the living planet, will have to be invoked,” (Roszak 214). With this statement Roszak refers to the need for a worldview that values the natural world intrinsically rather than instrumentally. We need to love the trees not for their wood, not even for their beauty, but for their essence. We need to appreciate the fact that an infinitely complex system of biological processes exists in such a way that has facilitated the evolution of the unique organism known as a human being. If we are able to take our focus off of technological progress with its endless fulfillment of arbitrary goals and instead see the biosphere as something worthy of respect due simply to its existence, then maybe our species will have a shot. Whether we deserve a second chance could be debated given all of the damage and death that we have caused, but luckily the Earth is not known to judge.

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