

The iPhone X proves the Unabomber was right

Steve Chapman

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The introduction of the new iPhone X — which features wireless charging, facial recognition and a price tag of \$999 — appears to be a minor event in the advance of technology. But it's an excellent illustration of something that has long gone unrecognized: The Unabomber had a point.

Not about blowing people up in an effort to advance his social goals. Ted Kaczynski's campaign to kill and maim chosen victims with explosives was horrific in the extreme and beyond forgiveness. But his 35,000-word manifesto, published in 1995, provided a glimpse of the future we inhabit, and his foresight is a bit unsettling.

"The Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race," it begins. Among the ills he attributes to advances in technology are that they promise to improve our lives but end up imposing burdens we would not have chosen.

He cites the automobile, which offered every person the freedom to travel farther and faster than before. But as cars became more numerous, they became a necessity, requiring great expense, bigger roads and more regulations. Cities were designed for the convenience of drivers, not pedestrians. For most people, driving is no longer optional.

Smartphones have followed the same pattern. When cellphones first appeared, they gave people one more means of communication, which they could accept or reject. But before long, most of us began to feel naked and panicky anytime we left home without one.

To do without a cellphone — and soon, if not already, a smartphone — means estranging oneself from normal society. We went from "you can have a portable communication device" to "you must have a portable communication device" practically overnight.

Not that long ago, you could escape the phone by leaving the house. Today most people are expected to be instantly reachable at all times. These devices have gone from servants to masters.

Kaczynski cannot be surprised. "Once a technical innovation has been introduced," he noted, "people usually become dependent on it, so that they can never again do without it, unless it is replaced by some still more advanced innovation. Not only do people become dependent as individuals on a new item of technology, but, even more, the system as a whole becomes dependent on it. (Imagine what would happen to the system today if computers, for example, were eliminated.)"

The problem is hardly a new one. In his book "Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind," Yuval Noah Harari argues that the agricultural revolution that took place 10,000 years ago was "history's biggest fraud."

In the preceding 2.5 million years, when our ancestors lived as hunter-gatherers they worked less, "spent their time in more stimulating and varied ways, and were less in danger of starvation and disease" than afterward.

Farming boosted the population but chained humans to the land and demanded ceaseless drudgery to plant, tend, harvest and process food — while making us more vulnerable to famine, disease and war. People who had evolved over eons for one mode of life were pushed into a different mode at odds with many of their natural instincts.

But it didn't matter. Eventually, those who preferred to live as foragers — such as the American Indians — no longer had a choice. In the 21st century, such a life is almost impossible. Kaczynski retreated to a remote cabin, off the grid, but 325 million Americans couldn't do likewise even if they wanted to.

Computers and smartphones are also a Faustian bargain, in Harari's view. Instead of saving time, inventions like email "revved up the treadmill of life to ten times its former speed and made our days more anxious and agitated."

It's easy to romanticize the lives of ancient people while ignoring the perils and hardships they faced. And neither Kaczynski nor anyone else has a way to reverse history. Few of us would be willing to give up modern shelter, food, clothing, medicine, entertainment or transportation. Most of us would say the trade-offs are more than worth it.

But they happen whether they are worth it or not, and the individual has little power to resist. Technological innovation is a one-way street. Once you enter it, you are obligated to proceed, even if it leads someplace you would not have chosen to go.

Once the latest iPhone is in stores, some consumers will decide they simply can't live without it. The rest of us may eventually find that whatever our preferences, neither can we.

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