

# Are We Luddites or Cynical Consumers?

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From 1811 to 1816, the Luddite movement of the British working class systematically destroyed textile machines, mills and factories that were threatening the social fabric of individual craftsmanship and self-sufficiency on the commons (fields, forests and wetlands used for growing crops, gathering firewood, pasturing domestic animals, fishing and hunting).

The Luddites cost the industrial wage slave system about £1.5 million—more than \$50 million today—in direct damage and in the costs of security, counter-insurgency and prosecuting Luddite cases. They accomplished this in only 15 months, with more than 13 percent of that economic loss resulting from direct property damage alone.

The Luddites also brought about an increase in wages, Poor Law rates and food allowances, the closing of at least one factory and the generation of a National Association for Relief of the Manufacturing and Laboring Poor. They slowed down the adoption of new machinery and stopped the hosiery industry from following the cotton and wool trades' wholesale change from cottage to factory. The Luddite movement led to broadened parliamentary representation, electoral modifications and economic reform through unionism and workplace improvements.

It is true that the Luddites were seeking systemic change in order to keep their identity and way of life, not the renewed reform that spelled the death of radicalism. The industrial future, with all its squalor, privation and abandonment of skilled craftsmanship, was not averted. That's a challenge that remains for us to complete, and now the stakes are even higher. Nonetheless, tangible improvements were made in democratic participation and in people's lives through Luddite resistance. It is noteworthy that the political scramble to establish these gains was brought about through insurrectionary sabotage, not through reformist lobbying.

## Lessons of the Luddites

The Luddite movement challenged the supposed primacy of technology over people's needs with a strength and persistence that puts to shame most activists' ready acceptance of any ecologically and socially destructive invention that offers comfort and convenience—or even just amusement or popularity. The Luddites forced a broad spectrum of society to consider significant questions that are barely even debated today, such as: Who would determine the technology of production (and now communication)? By what criteria would they decide? How would the consequences be judged? The Luddites took charge of their own self-governance by acting to resist destructive technological change.

We should be aware enough of Luddite and other history by now to recognize that:

- Technology is not neutral.
- That which benefits corporations is usually not good for people or the environment.

- New technology does not necessarily lead to a net increase in jobs or wealth over the broader population. In fact, it often has the opposite effect.
- Many technological developments are antithetical to real democracy and community, disconnecting us from each other and the common good.
- New technology tends to increase the stress and pace of modern life, as well as increasing ecologically unsustainable consumerism.

As a Luddite pamphleteer put it, “Unrestrained technology demoralizes society and substitutes idleness for industry, want for competence, immorality for virtue... and unless restrained, will ere long involve this country in every horror and calamity attending the bursting of all bonds that hold society together.” Although some of our values and our sense of “virtue” may be different now, this warning is still relevant to the perils of unrestrained modern technology, such as nanotechnology, genetic engineering, surveillance systems, military robots and yes, personal conveniences like SUVs, disposable everything, home computers and cell phones. Kirkpatrick Sale, author of *Rebels Against the Future: The Luddites and Their War on the Industrial Revolution*, points out that “the simple, overarching fact is that technology always has consequences, far-reaching consequences, usually more so than anyone can predict at the time.”

## Toward a Neo-Luddite Manifesto

We’re well overdue to start critically investigating new technologies at the onset of their development. By the time they are introduced to the market, technological developments are usually far more difficult to reverse.

In her “Notes Toward a Neo-Luddite Manifesto,” psychologist Chellis Glendinning articulates three principles that should spur useful critiques of new technologies:

- “Opposition to technologies that emanate from a worldview that sees rationality as the key to human potential, material acquisition as the key to human fulfillment and technological development as the key to social progress.
- “Recognition that, since all technologies are political, [those] created by a mass technological society inevitably are those that serve the perpetuation of that society and its goals of efficiency, production, marketing and products.
- “Establishment of a critique of technology by fully examining its sociological context, economic ramifications, and political meanings... from the perspective not only of human use, but of its impact on other living beings, natural systems and the environment.”

Glendinning envisions a future that would include the dismantling of nuclear, chemical, genetic, electromagnetic, television and computer technologies. Conversely, it would include the creation of new technologies by those who would use and be affected by them. These technologies would promote “political freedom, economic justice and ecological balance” and would be community-based, decentralized, organic and cooperative. It may sound like a lot of work, but it should be obvious that it is *necessary* work. It’s always been easier to prevent damage than to restore ecological and cultural integrity after destruction.

For instance, how will we ever be able to end corporate rule and warmongering as long as the public is addicted to corporate and imperialistic propaganda on television? How will we reverse the long-term ecological effects of unnaturally high levels of electromagnetic radiation without ending the development of the technology that emits it? When will environmental activists put the planet and each other’s health over the convenience and pseudo-social stimulation of cell phone use? If *we* don’t, we can’t expect others in society to abandon Nature- and health-destroying technologies, which are simply the logical outcomes of the same “corporate profit first” mentality behind cell phones.

We would not be alone in our resistance. Claude Alvares, an East Indian-born journalist and farmer, notes the growing Luddite response of the Third World to “the dual oppression of science and development.” Third World resistance rejects the “scientific rationality” of the West and opposes the “further colonization of popular consciousness.” Are we going to leave those most oppressed by these technologies to fight them alone?

Charles Cobb, an economist with the Society for a Human Economy, observes that, “Neo-Luddites are concerned about the way in which dependence on technology changes the character of an entire society... They are asking us to reflect on the entire configuration of modern technology instead of isolated pieces of it.” I’m opting to join the neoLuddites. How about you?

*Wolverine lives with no electricity, except for a phone and a truck, and does not own or commonly use a computer or cell phone. Wolverine has been an active part of the Earth First! movement since 1984 and has been a fulltime activist since 1980.*

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