

DISCOURSE PAPERS

ELLUL AND I “CONNECTED”: A TECHNOLOGIST’S RESPONSE TO A PHILOSOPHER’S PROPOSITIONS CONCERNING LINKEDIN

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Discourse Paper (DP) No. 3

<http://www.brianrhall.net/discoursepapers/DP3.pdf>

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ABSTRACT

Technologists and philosophers are generally ambivalent toward each other and concerning technology. Though technologists and philosophers are likely to view technical progress differently, agreement is possible in some cases. This paper is a methodical examination of four propositions posited by the philosopher Jacques Ellul accompanied by a technologist’s reflection on the propositions concerning the technique/technology LinkedIn.

KEYWORDS

Technical progress, Innovation, Technique, Critical theory of technology

Introduction

An academic life as a mildly critical technologist is a precarious situation. At one moment I may be writing a computer program and the next moment criticizing the thing I just created. At one moment I may be teaching an engineering principle and the next moment scrutinizing the engineering profession. There are many technologists, but a minority has literacy in the humanities. There are many philosophers, but a minority has a technical background. A technologist is likely to question a philosopher pontificating upon a subject they do not technically understand. By the same token, philosophers are likely to contend that a technologist has no business discussing philosophical views. So, what happens when the twain meet in person or *in person*? Would the individuals or mindsets agree with each other? In general I suggest agreement is unlikely. However, agreement is possible. To illustrate this concept I present a philosopher's propositions with regard to a technical innovation and a technologist's response.

In his book *The Technological Bluff*, Jacques Ellul (1990) suggested four propositions for analyzing the ambivalence of technical progress.

- 1) *First, all technical progress has its price.*
- 2) *Second, at each stage it raises more and greater problems than it solves.*
- 3) *Third, its harmful effects are inseparable from its beneficial effects.*
- 4) *Fourth, it has a great number of unforeseen effects.*

The purpose of this essay is to consider a technological innovation in terms of Ellul's propositions. The innovation I have chosen to analyze is LinkedIn. The organization of this essay is as follows. First, I briefly discuss Ellul's definitions of technique, technology, and ambivalence. Then, I provide my definitions technique and technology, which will help provide context for the deliberation and grounds for agreement or disagreement with regard to Ellul's propositions. Second, I briefly discuss LinkedIn as a technological innovation and clarify the reasoning for choosing LinkedIn. I then use Ellul's propositions as a framework for analyzing LinkedIn. For each of the propositions I explore LinkedIn with examples similar to those used by Ellul in his writings. Some observations are simply stated, while others are more developed. Based on the analysis, I

either agree or disagree with the propositions. Lastly, the conclusion summarizes the themes of the essay and presents final thoughts.

Context

To properly understand Ellul’s propositions they must be presented within the context of his definitions of technique, technology, and ambivalence. Ellul (1964) has defined technique as “the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency in every field of human activity” (p. xxv). Subsequently, he defined technology as the study of technique (Ellul 1990, p. xv). Thus, when Ellul stated the first proposition, “all technical progress has its price,” he did not directly mean devices (physical objects) have a price, but that the technique, the method of rationality with regard to a particular *progress* (innovation), has a price. Ellul (1990) also argued that technical progress is ambivalent (p. 38). By this he did not mean ambiguous as though technical progress is vague or confused, but he used ambivalence for its implication of opposing orientations. This approach resulted in the four offsetting propositions for analyzing the ambivalence of technical progress. Again using the first proposition, technological progress can reap rewards, but at a price. It is the outcome of technical progress that is ambiguous and unpredictable (p. 39).

Though I am inclined to acknowledge Ellul’s definitions of technique and technology, I often define them differently, but with a similar differentiation. My definition of technology stems from the word *techné*. *Techné* is a mode of behavior, a way of thinking and doing, which humans tend toward. This way of thinking and doing culminates in a skilled, efficient, or repeatable way of doing, what I would call *technique*. Technique then becomes materialized and often commercialized, a physical manifestation that I define as *technology*. Thus, technology in its purest form is an object of technique resultant from a *techné* mindset.

Regardless of the fact that Ellul and I define the *tech* terms differently, we come to the same conclusion: Tech-society is oblivious. For purposes of illustration, I use the technological innovation discussed in this essay as an example of Ellul’s overall argument in *The Technological Bluff* and compare it to my viewpoint. This is important when contemplating agreement or disagreement with the propositions. Ellul (1990) argued that the discourse on technique, defined as technology, is a bluff that makes us believe anything and changes attitudes toward technique (p.

xvi). The argument in relation to the first proposition when applied to LinkedIn is that LinkedIn may yield benefits, but at a cost. The discourse on the LinkedIn technique, the technology of LinkedIn, is a bluff. The technology leads society to believe that LinkedIn does not have a price, particularly for humanity. If Ellul’s argument is applied in light of my definitions, the discourse on LinkedIn, defined directly as discourse on a technology, is a bluff. The discourse, in a general sense, leads society to believe that LinkedIn does not have a price. Our conclusions are agreeable.

The Technology

LinkedIn is a professional social network and also claims to be the largest with 161 million members as of March 31, 2012 (LinkedIn n.d.). As a website utilizing the Internet, it officially launched in May 2003. As a technological innovation it allows members to establish connections with other members in order to maintain professional relationships, build a network of support and references, post resumes/CVs, post education/skills, follow organizations/jobs, attract employers, and other professional tasks. I have chosen LinkedIn as the technological innovation to discuss in this essay because it illustrates both technique and technology and works well for the differing definitions. LinkedIn can be viewed as a method (technique), as a technology (object, means, setting), and there is plentiful discourse surrounding it. For supplying examples of *public* discourse about LinkedIn throughout this essay, I use examples easily found within its shared domain, the World Wide Web. LinkedIn also has a specific draw to technological society and technological members, who view it as technical progress.

Though I have stated that LinkedIn is the chosen technological innovation for this discussion, I use the word “innovation” with reservation. Often, “innovation” carries a positive overtone, but I emphasize the neutrality of the word. I would not argue that LinkedIn is a positive innovation until it could be proven that LinkedIn is progress, specifically progress for humanity. Based on Ellul’s writings I think he would agree. I state this to differentiate between technical progress and progress. Though a technique might be or facilitate a new method of doing, a next step in doing, “innovation” does not necessarily imply *progress* as betterment. This brings us to Ellul’s propositions.

The Propositions

Proposition 1: All technical progress has its price. The ambivalence this statement addresses is that although technical progress can result in various benefits, what might be thought of as profits, they come at a price. And all technical progress has a price. LinkedIn may provide various benefits for its members, but it comes at a price for both members and non-members.

When investments (e.g., time, energy, money) are made in LinkedIn, return is expected, but not guaranteed. In a purely economic sense, LinkedIn may not remain profitable for stakeholders. Concurrently, we must consider what LinkedIn is replacing as a technique or product. For example, as LinkedIn becomes a de facto characteristic of job applications or job seeking, what is happening to the other methods or products that LinkedIn is replacing? It is devaluing other products, more traditional methods of résumé building and the job application process. A 2012 report claimed 79% of U.S. jobs were posted on at least one social networking site and 77% of those were on LinkedIn (Bullhorn Reach 2012). This replacement also has an effect on potential applicants. For example, think of unsupported languages on LinkedIn or those applicants without sufficient access or bandwidth to create or regularly maintain a LinkedIn account.

Another tradeoff is the employment that results from the use of LinkedIn versus the unemployment or inability to gain employment brought on by its use. These costs could be due to inappropriate behavior on the social network, misguided information posted, or the lack of connections or references that are interpreted as good or relevant by hiring managers. Also, if an organization decides to only post positions or seek candidates on LinkedIn, then non-members are excluded from possible employment. This raises the issue of equal opportunity employment.

LinkedIn has the potential to contribute to the construction and destruction of certain worker types as technically oriented professions continue to replace and take precedence over less-technical professions.¹ The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) realizes this potential in its reports. Compare the wage percentage increases in the “computer systems design” (+3.9%) and “employment services” (+2.1%) sectors to the wage percentage decreases in sectors such as “manufacturing” (-2.2% average) coupled with an employment growth rate of -4.0% from 2000-

¹ I use the term “less-technical” to mean less concerned with the understanding and application of information and communication technologies. This usage applies throughout the paper.

2010 and -0.1% projected for 2010-2020 (BLS 2012a). Or consider the 2011 mean annual wages of “computer occupations” versus “production occupations,” \$78,730 and \$34,220 respectively (BLS 2012b). Less-technical sectors may continue to have more positions in raw numbers, but the positions are not economically competitive.

A professional social network profile also demands constant attention and upkeep, which can lead to stress, exhaustion, and time dependencies. An outdated or sub-par profile may result in an incorrect or unintended impression of the member. A related consideration is if the professional network continues to grow, what will be the price of its support, particularly for abandoned accounts? LinkedIn is also becoming a limiter of choice, a deterministic social construct that technical employers are beginning to demand of their applicants.² Employers risk losing qualified talent if they limit their pool to LinkedIn members and applicants risk employment options if they refuse to join. And the determinist reality is that neither employers nor applicants were involved in the creation of LinkedIn.

Ellul’s goal with regard to the first proposition is to warn us of the deceitful discourse that would lead us to believe that such a technological innovation comes at no price. Often, the discourse surrounding LinkedIn does not preach the cost, only the benefits, and suggests that it is “free” or “low cost” (Vanover 2009). Though LinkedIn may lead to employment or create a sense of professional community, it comes at a cost. I agree with Ellul that technical progress has its price. Specifically, LinkedIn has a price.

Proposition 2: At each stage it raises more and greater problems than it solves. The ambivalence this statement addresses is that although technical progress can solve various problems, it creates additional problems and those problems are more significant. And all technical progress is conflicted by the resolution and creation of problems. LinkedIn may provide various solutions for its members, but it creates other problems for both members and non-members.

First, I want to recognize a few problems that LinkedIn resolves. LinkedIn provides a mechanism by which people who are professionally related may maintain their relationships. It provides employers and job seekers a setting for networking. It is a medium for companies to

² The use of social technologies in recruiting employees is discussed in detail in books such as *The 2020 Workplace: How Innovative Companies Attract, Develop, and Keep Tomorrow’s Employees Today* (Meister & Willyerd 2010) and regularly in web posts on job portals such as <http://www.job-hunt.org>. This is also based on personal communication with multiple high-tech employers who require or prefer employees with LinkedIn accounts.

advertise and professionals to market themselves. It streamlines document and reference management for job applications. But for the problems it solves, others are created. Some of the problems have already been discussed in response to the first proposition, so although there are some similarities, I will focus on additional problems, specifically those of a technical nature.

LinkedIn creates new possibilities of professional harm. A profile may give the wrong impression of an applicant if the information is incorrect or minimal. References may be inaccurate or unresponsive. There is the need for security and maintenance to protect against malicious activity such as hacking, identity theft, and fraud. The confirmed theft and dissemination of approximately 6.5 million LinkedIn user password hashes reported in June 2012 exemplifies an additional problem that can lead to even greater problems for members than the problems solved by using LinkedIn (Silveira 2012a, 2012b).

Complexity becomes an issue, from supporting the server infrastructure on which the site runs to developing the user interfaces for the LinkedIn site and applications. Complexity ties into the pace of change. As technologies progress, LinkedIn and its members must adapt to the tools (e.g., software, hardware) and their capabilities. Complexity and pace of change can also be a problem for job seekers as they are required to learn new methods of marketing themselves and keep pace with the way the job market and its settings (environments) work.

When seeking a job or applying for a job, what may have been less-technical problems before become more-technical problems. For example, no longer is applying for a job a matter of filling out a paper application form, printing a résumé and delivering the documents to an organization. The new process requires access to and an understanding of the complexities of LinkedIn navigation and profile upkeep. This is the problem of mechanization, and in an attempt to make something helpful or a process easier, there is the overhead of complexity and the adaptation to more and more tools. Happiness may suffer as a result of complexity. Additionally, the inability of LinkedIn to meet the professional needs of an individual or the exclusion of groups caused by its use are negative realities. LinkedIn contributes to the virtual world and the virtualization of identity, what I call virtualism. This promotes the separation of members from their real identities and humanity.

LinkedIn also contributes to the problem of information overload by being another source of information to input, output, and process. Ironically, in a LinkedIn study 89% of professionals

claimed that they do not accomplish their planned tasks in an average workday and that distraction is a major factor (Williams 2012). Of course this “discourse” or “technology” also proposed that the best strategies for improving this statistic are to use the LinkedIn Tools (e.g., LinkedIn Today, LinkedIn Group, LinkedIn Answers). At the same time, blame for low professional productivity is placed on inefficient meetings, lack of networked knowledge and disparate news sources (LinkedIn 2012). However, based on the same study, the most productive and the least distracted professionals are those in an industry likely to be more disconnected from LinkedIn technique or similar information and communication techniques: agriculture (Williams 2012).

Ellul’s goal with regard to the second proposition is to warn us of the deceitful discourse that would lead us to believe that such a technological innovation creates no problems, but only solves them. Often, the discourse surrounding LinkedIn does not readily admit to the creation of problems, only how LinkedIn solves problems (Kawasaki 2007; Howes n.d.; GordonBDM n.d.). Though LinkedIn may connect applicants with employers or provide document management, it creates problems, some more significant than those that existed before LinkedIn. I agree with Ellul that technical progress creates more complex problems than it solves. For example, LinkedIn allows networking with potential references, but re-enforces the virtualization of identity, a more complex and serious problem.

Proposition 3: Its harmful effects are inseparable from its beneficial effects. The ambivalence this statement addresses is that technical progress inherently causes both good and bad effects, apart from human intervention (Ellul 1990, p. 56). Technical progress is conflicted by simultaneous positive and negative outcomes. LinkedIn may provoke good outcomes, but at the same time it provokes bad outcomes for both members and non-members. These outcomes cannot be separated.

LinkedIn allows members to connect with references, but at the same time this results in more work for those acting as references. Also, being a reference or recommending someone may reflect positively or negatively on the recommender. LinkedIn allows job seekers to market themselves, but increases the amount of public electronic information about them available on the Internet. Maintaining a LinkedIn profile gives people an activity to do, a task to complete, but also

takes time. This time spent may not result in tangible value and it may begin to command more and more attention from a member.

A few issues related to this proposition have already been stated or alluded to, but are worth revisiting. For example, LinkedIn is another source of information, a way for members to keep up-to-date with jobs and professional relationships, but this contributes to information overload. Public discourse claims that LinkedIn is the new standard in recruiting and that “we must adapt to it” (Chau 2012). LinkedIn is a “new” technique, but requires the ability or willingness to learn and adapt, thus it provides *and* deprives choice and opportunity. As LinkedIn progresses, new features will be implemented, hardware and software will evolve, all adding to the complexity of the technique. Also, as LinkedIn advances in “positive” respects, such as features or device support, the dangers increase. For example, as various mobile devices gain popularity with managing services such as those provided by LinkedIn, the likelihood of theft and identity theft increase.

Ellul’s goal with regard to the third proposition is to warn us of the deceitful discourse that would lead us to believe that the effects of such a technological innovation are independently positive or that the innovation is neutral and tied to the way in which humans use the innovation. Often, the discourse surrounding LinkedIn emphasizes its beneficial effects and some academic discourse suggests that such instruments are neutral (Elad n.d.; Tiles & Oberdiek 1995). The discourse also deceitfully suggests that negative effects are not inherent to the innovation, but result from its non-use, thereby disconnecting negative effects from positive effects (Chau 2012). Simply put, using LinkedIn yields positive effects, while not using LinkedIn yields negative effects. Yet, LinkedIn’s inherent outcomes are both beneficial and harmful and it is not possible to separate them. I agree with Ellul that the effects of technical progress are both positive and negative and these outcomes are inseparable.

Proposition 4: It has a great number of unforeseen effects. The ambivalence this statement addresses is that all technical progress has both foreseeable and unforeseeable effects. Ellul (1990) described the categories of desired, the foreseen, and the unforeseen, which can be expected or unexpected (p. 61). Technical progress is conflicted by desired and undesired effects, foreseen and unforeseen effects. LinkedIn has a number of unforeseen effects for both members and non-members.

Some of the issues discussed in the preceding propositions are unforeseen or perhaps unrecognized effects. Examples are information overload and virtualism, effects that will only become more problematic with technical progress. Technologists developing innovations such as LinkedIn or those using it do not consider or expect these effects. In fact, in many cases technologists would likely shirk such propositions as a non-reality or ridiculous. Yet, the fact that such effects are unforeseen or unrecognized does not make them less possible or less real. Even technical effects can be unforeseen or unrecognized, such as transmission of user data from iOS devices to LinkedIn servers via the LinkedIn iOS application (Amit 2012; Sharabani 2012). Another effect that I believe falls into the unforeseen category is the requirement of LinkedIn when applying for a job. Some tech companies will only hire or prefer individuals that have and maintain a LinkedIn account, primarily because they want the types of employees that use such technologies. The negative implications of such a requirement are vast and who would have thought such a requirement would ever exist.

Looking to the future and possible effects brought on by LinkedIn, I think it is possible that it will become further engrained, affecting the operation of the job market and changing how jobs are sought and obtained, particularly in high-tech. LinkedIn will likely affect future professional social networks, though what those are or what they will be like remains unknown. Or society could recognize that LinkedIn is an unnecessary technique, resulting in the collapse of the company, which would affect the stakeholders, employees, and active members. Another possible effect due to the proliferation of LinkedIn could be the youth in the United States and other countries perceiving the importance of gaining and maintaining education, skills, and connections. The point is that these effects are conflicted possibilities.

Ellul’s goal with regard to the fourth proposition is to warn us of the deceitful discourse that would lead us to believe that the effects of technological innovation are always controlled and expected or they are at least positive. The discourse surrounding LinkedIn typically emphasizes what is desired, foreseen, and positive (Scott 2012). However, LinkedIn has a number of unforeseen effects. I agree with Ellul that technical progress harbors a number of unforeseen effects, both positive and negative.

Conclusion

Though Ellul the philosopher and I the technologist define the terms technique and technology differently, we arrive at the same conclusions with regard to the technological bluff and the propositions for analyzing the ambivalence of technical progress. I have provided examples to substantiate agreement suggesting that technical progress, specifically LinkedIn, has a price, raises more and greater problems than it solves, has inseparable harmful and beneficial effects, and has a number of unforeseen effects. The discourse about technical progress is deceiving in the sense that it often attempts to mask these propositions. This leads society to blindly believe in technical progress and feel comfortable with all technique. LinkedIn is one example of this advancing condition. What may help is raising awareness, the infusion of critical analysis in the process of innovation, and in the study of technique and technology. This applies to the fields of philosophy *and* technology.

As a final thought, one intriguing issue with this essay is that if Ellul (1990) was correct and someone cannot evaluate technique with technical thinking (p. 93), I must ask myself if I am thinking within a technical frame and if so, this evaluation is moot. The scenario is even direr if technique is simply defined as method, as my approach was methodical in the construction of the essay (as was Ellul’s approach). The evaluation of LinkedIn via technical means, such as typing on a computer and publishing this essay online, would also be impossible. Thinking these evaluative thoughts is progress (specifically for me), yet communicating them via technique and technology may not be progress. Is that agreeable?

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