

Explorations in Media Ecology
Volume 15 Numbers 3 & 4

© 2016 Intellect Ltd Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/eme.15.3-4.243_1

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Jacques Ellul and the inefficiency of friendship: Social life and *The Technological Society*

ABSTRACT

*The difference between a technocrat and a technophobe is easy to discern. One celebrates the progress of technology as panacea for societal ills, clearly believing that human conundrums caused by its progress will be eliminated as the technologies mature. A technophobe, on the other hand, is reticent, even fearful of the changes brought about by technology, uncomfortable and uncertain about how these changes will affect the world. What is not as readily discernible is whether the bulk of those adopting new technologies give a second thought to either stance or whether the culture-shaping power involved in using them ever registers in their awareness. Jacques Ellul's seminal work, *The Technological Society*, addresses this power through careful and constructive analysis. With particular attention to the emergence of social media, this article explores Ellul's sociological reflections in regard to friendship in the technological society – its inefficiency, its efficacy and its ultimate place in the formation of all that it means to be human.*

KEYWORDS

friendship
human communication
Jacques Ellul
technique
philia
social media
efficiency

'Friend me!' This phrase has quickly become a common one now that Facebook has taken the special relationship between companions from the street to the screen. The process of 'making friends' has long resisted quantification. Now, however, with the worldwide proliferation of social media, the propensity to check one's profile and glow with pride over reaching 1000 friends – or fall deeply into the pit of depression when not one of them 'likes' your status update – has become the new normal for more than 1.01 billion people (Facebook 2016). Indeed, social media have changed the world, but as monumental as these phenomena may be, the changing tone and experience of the way friendship is experienced is nothing new. Yet, throughout the ages and various cultures, the meaning and focus of friendship has not been static. There are many levels of relationship that are considered friendship – some are casual, others platonic and others like that of Jonathan and David, whose relationship is described in the Old Testament book of Samuel as 'souls ... knit to each other'. Different dimensions and depths of friendship are seen throughout literary works, such as in the affection between Diana Barry and Anne Shirley of *Green Gables* or the companionship of Frodo and Sam in Tolkien's middle earth fantasy. Countless films extol the glory of friendship as well. From *The Shawshank Redemption's* gritty version of it to *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid's* tale of adventurous outlaws to the portrayal of feminist road-tripper friends in *Thelma and Louise* and the sister-friends Elsa and Anna in Disney's production of *Frozen* – popular culture is replete with the subject. Set these depictions against the casual alliances in the modern workplace or the interactions between those who have never met but are engaged in cross-continental e-mail discussion groups, and the picture of friendship takes on a quite variegated hue.

Subject of scholars as well, the mystery of friendship has been addressed but never 'solved'. Cicero aligned friendship with virtue, extolling its value in *De Amicitia*, his dialogue on the subject. The Roman orator asked the pertinent question, 'Is not prosperity robbed of half its value if you have no one to share your joy?' (Cicero 1909: 15). Twenty centuries later, C. S. Lewis counted friendship as one of the most significant types of love one person can have for another. He explains that friendship is the least natural of the loves and this is its glory. Because friendship is unnecessary to human development and well-being, as is the need for art or philosophy, choosing to spend time with a friend makes the relationship even more significant (Lewis 1998: 69–71). It is not a relationship chosen for you, such as the love between family members. Even in community, though cooperation is necessary, friendship is not implicit (Lewis 1998: 70). 'It has no survival value; rather it is one of those things which give value to survival' (Lewis 1998: 71). The Greek *philia* connects the feelings of joy and freedom with friendship. St. Augustine of Hippo concurs when he takes instrumental friendship to task. He writes:

The first thing, you see, that your graces should observe is how the love involved in friendship ought to be gratuitous. I mean, the reason you have a friend, or love one, ought not to be so that he can do something for you; if that's why you love him, so that he can get you some money, or some temporal advantage, then you aren't really loving him, but the thing he gets for you. A friend is to be loved freely, for his own sake, not for the sake of something else.

(Augustine 2010: Sermon 385)

Though seventeen centuries apart, Lewis and Augustine both conflate friendship with love.

Aristotle, whose *Nicomachean Ethics* dedicates two whole chapters to the subject, did not perceive friendships of utility as problematic. Rather, the usefulness of a friend appeared to be one of the three components of his definition of friendship. In his treatise, the Greek philosopher includes a taxonomy of what he believes constitutes a fulfilling life, and clearly, a life that is flourishing, satisfying and happy must include friendship. Indeed, it is a necessary feature of the good life (Aristotle 1985: 1155a3, 1156a16–1156b23). Aristotelian ideas about friendship are clearly woven into the over-arching Greek premise known as *eudemonia*, a state of being that entails happiness and is associated with morality. Socrates, Aristotle's predecessor, believed that *eudemonia* was only possible through a virtuous life. It is right behaviour that leads to personal happiness. Within each of the above contexts, friendship is understood philosophically. However else it is described, the relationship between friends is part of a moral life – part of what leads to human flourishing. It may not be biologically necessary, but without the richness of friendship, an individual's life is likely to be dull, dismal or worse – diametrically opposed to a life that flourishes.

In observing some of the contemporary expressions of friendship, it is important to consider whether the experience of having a friend is qualitatively different here in the twenty-first century or whether it is simply being similarly enjoyed in different (digital) environments. Grappling with this idea, one must ask several questions, namely to discover if (and how) *eudemonia* can continue to be associated with the digital exchange of information and images, otherwise known as contemporary friendship. How might these ancient and diverse thoughts about friendship inform a discussion of contemporary trends, particularly the trends in friendship practiced through social media? Is it those who have much in common who share the strongest friendships or those who complement each other's strengths and skill? Are those who respond with a ready click of the mouse to 'like' the post of another interested in genuine friendship or does this behaviour amount to nothing more than curiosity, or a novel way to gossip? Surely the number of names one accrues on platforms like Facebook or Instagram does not indicate depth of relationship, but perhaps the most disturbing aspect of social media lies in a question that will not be answered until the future: Will finding the most efficient means to interact ultimately bring about a foreclosure on friendship as we know it? This is where the work of Jacques Ellul helps appropriate meaning. His ideas about the effect of *technique* on social interaction are laced throughout his wider corpus but are explored in more concentrated form within the pages of *The Technological Society*. It is here that Ellul unfolds the meaning of *la technique* – that totalizing force that translates and shapes human perception, values and behaviour through the various media of technology. It is this very idea that will serve as a means to inform this inquiry.

A strong example of *la technique* at work in the twenty-first century is the massive reach and proliferation of digital technologies, particularly through social media such as Facebook, Instagram, SnapChat and Twitter. We will thus attend to the nuanced friendships discovered and maintained through these technologies, with special attention to Facebook, the most popular and successful platform, but first – *the text*.

THE TECHNOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Jacques Ellul (1912–94), the French social critic, philosopher and theologian, was professor of the History of Institutions at the University of Bordeaux. His seminal work, *The Technological Society*, was written in 1954 and addresses the powerful force of technological advance that winds its way through the world in unrestrained and uncritical acceptance. This phenomenon is not the tools of technology, *per se*, but the wind that blows into the room with their use, a force he calls *la technique*. This, the book's central premise, is most explicitly defined in the author's introduction as 'the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency' (Ellul 1964: xxv), but the concept easily remains in the category of oblique philosophical abstraction if one is content to allow this short translation to define its meaning. This is because Ellul's definition of *la technique* is more a description than strict definition. He uses the word to describe the consequences of post-industrialized society, the results of which have shifted sociopolitical action. From strategies that might improve everyday conditions by applying the most efficient means of accomplishing tasks, sociopolitical action has shifted to the elevation of efficiency as the premier value. One may even describe this dynamic by saying that the rhythm of *technique* is driven by the heavy beat of efficiency – Efficiency with a capital 'E'. This dynamic is all-encompassing, a concept to which we will attend shortly.

Ellul's view is ensconced in rich, historical context that must be taken into consideration if one is to gain a broader understanding. Reaching back to the emergence of the public clock, he cites this period as a major turning point in the natural milieu. Prior to the end of the fourteenth century, when church bells helped regulate human activity, the pace was slower, and human consciousness was different. The bells regulated daily life but followed a more natural rhythm than a strict delineation of minutes and hours (Ellul 1964: 329). With the clock, human beings underwent a dramatic change in thinking about time, work, meals and relationships. Giving up the freedom to set schedules according to biological rhythms or the more natural rhythms of sun and moon, human beings gained the ability to better organize their days through the synchronization of time. Emergence of the clock also began to set an arbitrary quantification of the passage of time, bringing our species into obedience to it, rather than it to us. Ever since that period, and particularly on the heels of the industrial revolution, 'technique has penetrated the deepest recesses of the human being. The machine tends not only to create a new human environment, but also to modify man's very essence' (Ellul 1964: 325). Here, we land upon a basic Ellulian premise: *Technique* shapes human perceptions, values and beliefs, transforming human consciousness as the methods or means of accomplishing any task move from the position of 'helping' or assisting towards a position of ruling as a new normal. These new methods may appear as shortcuts, but they corrupt more significant elements of what it means to be human.

Drawing insight from multiple corresponding aspects of the modern age – industrialism, mass media and psychology – Ellul sees *la technique* as an all-encompassing force that works to shape and form attitudes, values and beliefs in a given culture. This idea has more to do with the emergence of the technical mandate and mindset that has developed over the past 150 years than with technology in the abstract or technologies in particular. And while there have long been inventions and technologies developed to ease the human

condition, the tidal wave of *technique* was held back in the past by the strong roots of tradition and the dominance of community, commerce and family that was situated distinctly in the local. Because of these factors, the means by which human ends were apprehended were held in check. While primitive techniques did little more than mediate the space between humans and the environment, today *technique* is its own substance; it 'has become a reality in itself' (Ellul 1964: 63).

Ellul's ideas pre-date but deeply resonate with those of Marshall McLuhan, one of his contemporaries who approached the study of technology as a way to understand what it means to be human, perceiving technologies as extensions of the human body. Among the many things he wrote about this connection, McLuhan described the technological phenomenon thusly:

In the electric age, when our central nervous system is technologically extended to the whole of mankind and to incorporate the whole of mankind in us, we necessarily participate, in depth, in the consequences of our every action. It is no longer possible to adopt the aloof and disassociated role of the literate Westerner.

(McLuhan 1964: 2)

The idea that 'it is no longer possible' is one that echoes Ellul, in that once a new technology is adopted, the means and methods made possible by such a technology become a necessity, encroaching upon human freedom in the same way the ocean encroaches upon the shore, eroding the very ground upon which we stand. An example of this may be found in the phenomena known as 'phantom vibration syndrome', an occurrence of vibration many people experience in their thigh or leg that is akin to the ringing of the phone, even though the phone is not there (Rosen 2013).

To fully understand Ellul's concern about the demise of freedom requires a willingness to think about the emergence of technologies within their historical context and the loss of human agency once said technologies are adopted and pervasive. This is not usually easy to perceive in the midst of a technological revolution, but in the case of today's digital landscape, signs of it abound. Facebook, currently the most pervasive platform for social media, is just one example, a phenomenon which we will more fully explore shortly.

Related to the retraction of freedom is another aspect of *technique*: that it 'always gives rise to an aristocracy of technicians who guard secrets to which no outsider has access' (Ellul 1964: 162). That is, what might begin as a useful means to a specific end becomes the end itself, indubitably reshaping the human function to fit the method of its expertise. A current example of this is Facebook, the most popular network for social media, used by 1.09 billion active daily users (Smith 2016). The site does not cost average users any money, but because it has become so ubiquitous, the people who use it inadvertently trade in their personal information, which becomes part of a giant database, inadvertently surrendering privacy and providing access to the technicians who created the technology. Moreover, the rules, settings and policies put into place by those who create the Facebook code change regularly according to the best interests of the company.

This aspect of technique reveals another element of technique – the unforeseen ways in which face-to-face communication is diminished. Once technique is set in motion, it opens up a Pandora's box of unforeseen consequences, mainly because the tools emerging from human creativity are

enmeshed in all that it means to be human. The flawed, frail and limited being known as the *human* is swayed by his environment. Thus, the propelling force of *technique* does more than accomplish its intended purpose. As its rhythm of efficiency churns, both intended and unintended changes mould the very environment that then moulds the human. For example, the invention of the car made it possible for people to keep extended families intact while living much farther from each other, but it also resulted in the breakdown of close community and 'the neighbourhood'. A more current example of this is the rapid rise of the cell phone. At its start, the mobile phone was hailed for use in emergencies or special situations that warranted immediacy. If a car broke down on the highway, the cell phone was an invaluable tool to contact a mechanic or tow service. Today, these purposes have been swallowed up almost entirely. While the digital devices remain useful in the same situations, the mobile phone has become an extension of the self (McLuhan 1964), a lifeline that many keep turned on 24 hours a day, checking it ten – and even twenty – times an hour. Recent statistics involving the use of the texting feature suggest that people in the 18–24 year old demographic exchange 109.5 texts a day. This is much more than the average older adult, who sends and receives only 41.1 messages daily (Smith 2011). The quick, unobstructed access to one another has morphed in short order from something used occasionally into the dominant mode of communication, often eclipsing the natural reaction to have a conversation or spend time together. Beyond its initial useful purpose of safety, the cell phone has become the *de facto* mode of social relation for people all over the globe. The end is lost in a sea of means. This is *technique* at eye level.

Another example comes from a limited study that I recently conducted on the Palm Beach Atlantic University campus, in which 39 out of the 39 students queried reported that they check their cell phones multiple times each hour. After undergoing a 24-hour fast from all their digital devices, all expressed regret at the loss of one specific digital item – their cell phone. While they had other positive experiences, all 39 reported fear, trepidation or anxiety about being unable to use their mobile phones. In fact, more than any other item in their cache of media, students listed their cell phone as the most difficult to do without. Most admitted to sleeping with their cell phones so that an incoming call, e-mail or tweet would not be missed. No matter how trivial, distracting or upsetting to what is happening in the present, just *having* the mobile phone has become an end in itself. It matters less what information is shared or the reason for which it is shared than that the ring tone, when it chimes, be answered.

Additional evidence of this may be seen almost anywhere in public in the United States. Many mobile devices (cell phones and tablets) now embed the latest social media applications so that Facebook can typically be accessed from anywhere. Thus, more and more people, both young and old, often seem oblivious to the person or activity they are with at the moment. In the supermarket line, over coffee and conversation, going for a jog or on a dinner date, the sound of an incoming message beckons and begs to be answered.

Where once the mobile phone was a means by which human contact could be made when distance would otherwise prohibit it, today the mobile phone has become an end in itself, and this is precisely how *technique* works. The full force of its power eclipses human ends, allowing means to rule. This, because of the layered demands and intersecting needs of mass media, propaganda and popular culture, allows for no counterbalance (Ellul 1964: 301). From the wheel, to the clock, to the typewriter, *technique* remains in operation,

but as modern institutions capitulate to its demands, its rhythm of efficiency undermines the moderating factors that once held it back.

There are numerous other important ideas threaded throughout the body of *The Technological Society*. One is that the breadth of *technique* extends beyond institutional efficiency, that its dehumanizing properties may be seen in the totalizing effects of numerous contemporary problems. From the hyper-assessment mandates in higher education, to the necessity of having a computer to search for government medical coverage, to the near-necessity of using social media for business networking, to the necessity for churches, schools and businesses to have a web presence – all these and so many other human needs are being catalysed and captured by *technique*. This dehumanizing effect was of central concern to Ellul, and as time has carried us into the digital age, we can see increasing signs of this dehumanization.

Whereas technical necessity was once applied only to scientific or technical methods, today it is at work undermining the mystery of what it means to be human. In fact, for Ellul, one of the most significant problems associated with the technological society is the end of personhood. What it means to be a person cannot be ignored without dire consequences. The reason for this bypassing of personhood is likely due to the pervasiveness of our technologies, initially with the emergence of mass media and even more now with the mobile revolution. The main problem is not the use of them, but that their ubiquity allows for no counterbalance (Ellul 1964: 301). Whenever technology is used to solve a human need without taking personhood into account, the result is the same. 'Moreover, it leads to an exaggerated, unbalanced emphasis on magnitude, control, uniformity, and vertical integration. [...] This narrow view pushes out other significant dimensions in our decision making. Moral purpose is sacrificed to technical excellence' (Christians 2002: 39). While lapses in moral judgement and behavior have plagued human behavior as long as its history, morality issues seem to have reached a new height in the digital revolution. This has been exhibited through identity theft, misrepresentation of oneself, scams, cyber-bullying, online pedophilia, cyber warfare and 'flaming', just to name a few of the examples of the moral decline that has emerged in the wake of the Net.

To be sure, Ellul's dialectical approach to understanding the challenges faced by human beings living in a world of advanced technology provides more questions than solutions. In spite of this, he succeeds in thoroughly stirring the minds of his readers. Ellul's systematic approach helps the reader understand that *la technique* has touched all spheres of life. Along with a strong case against the loss of freedom, he bemoans the way human subjectivity, mystery and beauty have become subservient to technical necessity and particularly how these very elements of what it means to be human counteract the thinking that 'technology will fix itself'. This thinking is at work in the ideology that fosters *technique*, but history has revealed that this solution is not credible, for the problem with *technique* is not inherently technological but is rather a matter of ontology.

Ontology, that part of moral philosophy that deals with the study of being, is closely linked to the notion of personhood. Perception of what it means 'to be' has long been shaped by innovation; it is so with all tools of human construction. Historically, technological backlash always exists in the face of innovation. But while reactions to the technical demands of the technological society may be typical of innovation in general, this particular era of digitality seems to have increased the anxiety exponentially, perhaps because it is

advancing so quickly (Postman 1985). This expands to a similar idea threaded throughout *The Technological Society*, one that involves the termination of human presence. Ellul writes,

The important thing, however, is not that work is in a sense harsher than formerly, but that it calls for different qualities in man. It implies in him an absence, whereas previously it implied a presence. The absence is active, critical, efficient; it engages the whole man and supposes that he is subordinated to its necessity and created for its ends.

(1964: 320)

These words were written long before the personal computer became a household reality in the 1990s. They were written long before online college degrees distanced professors from their students, long before children played games with each other in the solitude of their rooms through screens and long before interactions between friends would be enacted through wireless technologies on a screen. When he penned these words, Ellul had no direct knowledge of the coming technological phenomenon that is currently in operation, but clearly, his ideas were prescient.

In understanding the relationship between technique and friendship, one must not miss the fact that ontology and media are part of the mix. Time spent managing our social networking sites, e-mails, websites, discussion lists, tweets and blogs creates a new social environment that displaces interpersonal communication with writing, images and de-contextualized relationships void of human presence. In fact, human absence is implicit. For online social networking to work, people *must* be absent from each other. Distance is a necessity. Essentially then, a different kind of man is produced which ultimately, Ellul maintains, is the real problem. This is especially important to note: *technique* is not the subversive plan of a wicked or evil dictator, but rather, the 'technical phenomenon is impersonal' (Ellul 1964: 387). No one sets out to dissociate man from himself; instead, we end up bringing it on ourselves because there is no clear reason not to choose the most efficient means of accomplishing any given task. In fact,

In investigating (*technique's*) preferred loci, we find man himself. This man is not the man in the mirror. Nor is he the man next door or the man in the street. Proceeding at its own tempo, technique analyzes its objects so that it can reconstitute them; in the case of man, it has analyzed him and synthesized a hitherto unknown being.

(Ellul 1964: 388–89)

Throughout *The Technological Society*, Ellul opposes those who dreamily project a 'golden age' of technology that will address all human limitations, accusing such thinkers of lacking in substance and trading in platitudes. He chides those who answer these concerns with mere abstractions about the need for technology, such as the goal 'to render human nature nobler, more beautiful' through technology, and responds with tongue firmly in cheek, saying, 'What on earth can this mean? What criteria, what content do they propose? [They say] "to eliminate cultural lag". What culture? And would the culture they have in mind be able to subsist in this harsh social organization?' (Ellul 1964: 434).

In the final chapter of *The Technological Society*, Ellul offers some thoughts about the future. Still concerned about the enormous diminution of ends, he suggests that human beings will be reduced to 'pure appearance', 'abstraction', even mutation. His tone takes on certain incredulity when he poses the rhetorical question:

Who is too blind to see that a profound mutation is being advocated here? A new dismembering and a complete reconstitution of the human being so that he can at last become the objective (and also the total object) of techniques. Excluding all but the mathematical element, he is indeed a fit end for the means he has constructed.

(Ellul 1964: 431–32)

As the book comes to a close, he repeatedly wonders how these quandaries will be addressed and is disturbed by the fact that in the thick of innovation, so many unresolved answers to human problems are 'conveniently left unformulated' (Ellul 1964: 433). He opines with seemingly great angst in chapter six, 'A Look At the Future':

The new milieu has its own specific laws which are not the laws of organic or inorganic matter. Man is still ignorant of these laws. It nevertheless begins to appear with crushing finality that a new necessity is taking over from the old. It is easy to boast of victory over ancient oppression, but what if victory has been gained at the price of an even greater subjection to the forces of the artificial necessity of the technical society which has come to dominate our lives?

(Ellul 1964: 428–29)

And what happens when this artificial necessity begins to make its demands in the social sphere? This leads us to more closely explore the Facebook phenomenon.

FACEBOOK IN THE TECHNOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Just what *does* it mean to be a true friend? Is it the same in 2014 as it was twenty years ago? Is the online friend synonymous with or an adequate substitute for the friend who lives down the street? What responsibilities does the online friend accrue, and are they the same as one finds in anchored community? Questions about friendship that arise as a result of the pervasive digital media environment do not exist in a vacuum. They affect work relationships, family life, religious institutions, education cohorts and numerous other social interactions. In fact, nothing is exempt from the influence of online social relations. Let us look further at the aspects of technique and consider how they might apply to what's happening on Facebook.

The most popular social networking interface, Facebook is one among many social networking sites such as MySpace, LinkedIn, Instagram and many others. Facebook, however, is the most robust network and has enlarged the circles of friendship for over one billion average daily users throughout the world (Facebook 2016). This and other online social networks are gifts and assets for those who are housebound, disabled or living in remote locations. From sharing music on YouTube or listening to scintillating Ted Talk speeches, messages of encouragement stream across the globe. As we embrace these

media, different qualities are called for in both men and women. Facebook describes the creation of a new way of thinking about social relations as part of their mission. They explain: 'Facebook is defined by our hacker culture – an environment that rewards creative problem solving and rapid decision making' (Facebook 2016). Thus, the first new quality may be described as the ability to avoid reflection, or slow reasoned responses to others.

Another 'new quality' may be described as numbness to human sorrow and violence. The magnitude of messages clamouring for attention requires that we turn down the compassion meter in our hearts, for the ability to reach and effectuate change in the lives of an increasing circle of 'friends' is still limited, our increasing exposure notwithstanding. Neil Postman refers to this as the information/action ratio and suggests it creates a psychological imbalance (Postman 1985). All of the new information coming from the far corners of the globe through the television creates underlying stress and anxiety in the average person because of an inability to put into action the emotions one feels when hearing about the bad luck of others. Callousness may be too strong a word for it, but we might say that the new quality required in the age of social networking is numbness to human suffering.

Another quality is multitasking. This may be seen in every corner of daily life in the ability to relate to several people simultaneously across multiple mediums, such as while texting and driving, or just while checking out in the supermarket line. But relationships are not tasks on a to-do list, nor are they the sum of the information we exchange. What this type of communication behaviour has led to is something researchers, following Linda Stone, have been calling continuous partial attention, or CPA. It is a way of being busy and interacting with one's media environment rather than relating. CPA suggests communication behaviour that is 'always-on': scanning, scrolling, seeking to know and be known. CPA has become the default communication mode of the Internet generation (Stone 2008). Over time, this misuse of our media may be particularly problematic, for as we become more accustomed to giving partial attention to people, we lose the important focus necessary to truly connect and commune with others. Instead of texting or e-mail communication being an exception to our normal mode of relating, it becomes a regular feature in our lives and, consequently, partial attention becomes the 'new normal'. Deep listening, reflection, reasoned response, dialogue all suffer as friendship is reduced to the flow of text in someone's newsfeed.

Along with believing that we can multitask our relationships, several other unexpected challenges arise from our growing dependence upon personal mobile media for friendship. One of these challenges is found in dealing with something we might call a *hyper-knowing* of others. It is that tendency to be much more open with those we do not live with, sharing personal (and increasingly private) information about ourselves with those with whom we have no primary responsibility or actual embodied experience. Even with those who attempt to 'keep it real' by posting actual, untouched photos as their Facebook profile picture or by sharing real-time status updates that convey sorrow, angst or anger instead of unbroken positivity, the danger of deception and illusion press hard against our psyche simply because we are 'seeing' through layers of screens, platforms and symbol systems. As it is, we know that we already 'see through a glass darkly'; adding one more layer between ourselves and another human being makes it that much more difficult to break through appearances to the heart of the person communicating.

To be sure, there are numerous factors that impact why so many people feel the need to maintain a presence on the most popular social networking site. Part of the reason for the unguarded captivation with Facebook is undoubtedly due to its ubiquity, but the foremost reason is that human beings are intrinsically social, and just as social occasions and events have always changed according to cultural mores and protocols, today it is no different. People still need and want to connect with others. Finding oneself – the search for identity – *always* involves the other; it always involves communicating with that one who, acting as a mirror, reflects and responds to what is being communicated about the self. When the word is spoken aloud, it is necessarily spoken to another, and it continues until meaning is reached. Thus, personal identity is wrapped up in the dialectical nature of language. Ellul explains a bit of the process here as two meeting to discuss an issue use speech to mediate the differences in each other's perception:

Finally the moment comes when understanding takes place, when language is understood after so many setbacks. From the level of being and of the heart, language proceeds to the level of intelligence, and finally it is understood, beyond and because of the repeated misunderstandings which have been progressively eliminated.

(Ellul 1985: 21)

Concern about the threat to authentic personhood and the speed with which we are moving towards simulated reality is not top priority in most contemporary technologists' research. However, those who are versed in the history and philosophy of the technology age understand that 'mechanistic techniques are applied not just to nature but to culture and our understanding of personhood' (Christians 2002: 41). This is difficult to perceive while it is happening in our midst; nevertheless, 'our threat does not come in the first instance from lethal machines and the apparatus of technology. Our authentic humanness is being leveled and reduced' (Christians 2002: 44).

Next, let us consider Ellul's ideas on the loss of freedom. As the technological mindset takes root, *la technique* becomes further entrenched and that much more powerful. For a young person to function in the social milieu, it becomes (nearly) a necessity to have a Facebook presence, for instance. Many users feel as though they *must* be 'on Facebook' in order to conduct their social life. To test this notion, I conducted numerous interviews and solicited responses from small focus groups to explore the reasons so many felt compelled to conduct their friendships through the site. This study was conducted between the years of 2010 and 2014; over 200 young people were queried, all between the ages of 17 and 27. Although their responses were nuanced with a wide variety of reasons for Facebook's use, there were several underlying similarities. With the exception of five students, all reported the same general feelings about Facebook: One, in spite of sometimes checking their Facebook news-feed ten times a day, they would rather go out with friends and spend time together than simply interact online. And two, they interact with their friends there because they have no other choice but to 'be on Facebook'. Some of the reasons noted involve what they call the 'fear of missing out [FOMO]'. Like adolescents before them, they do not want to be left out of the circle of friendship or neglect hearing about 'what is happening' in their social circle. What is happening is that their social circle has vastly enlarged. This unintended

consequence of social media can lead to a diminishment of relational richness in the smaller circle. Instead of having one or two close friends and several brothers and sisters whose birthdays it is our duty to remember, our reach has expanded to many times that number.

Kenneth Gergen, social psychologist and Swarthmore University professor, bemoans the loss of 'genuine friendship' and sees it as a result of 'social saturation', suggesting that this phenomenon represents a crisis in intimacy and commitment. Just as Ellul points to how artificial demands are imposed on human beings through the clock, so also the proliferation of posts and images on Facebook poses unreasonable and unsettling demands on friendship. Social saturation is exacerbated. Gergen explains:

Many try to develop 'best friends' within their communities, who can be fully trusted or relied upon during a time of need. Yet it becomes difficult indeed to define a relationship as 'closest' or 'best' when for weeks, even months, the participants are both in motion. Both may long for lazy and undirected hours, when each nuance of experience is examined with careful attention, and chance comments open new vistas of fascination. But consider the difficulties of locating such hours, when you take your work home with you almost every night, you know you must have more exercise, you visit your parents on the weekend, a spouse and/or children are craving for more quality time, [...] your support group absorbs your Thursday evenings, and there are numerous books, games, concerts, and exhibits that are not to be missed. Under these conditions, meandering moments are seldom found, and because this is so, the very concept of 'closest' or 'best' friend undergoes a sea change. Rather than a communion of souls it becomes an occasional and compressed 'catch-up'. From a traditionalist viewpoint, we lose the capacity for genuine friendship.

(1991: 175)

These words were penned in 1991, years before cell phones and social media became ubiquitous communication tools. This scenario typifies the way *technique* encroaches upon the very enjoyable and human experience of friendship.

For friends to experience the full dynamic of what it means to be a friend, the relationship must be anchored in time and space. Because these technologies allow immediate connection to a friend across the sea or in another state, it may be difficult to discern the need for close physical space. So much can be shared as trans-continental e-mails, tweets, posts and cell phone calls that it may not be easy to perceive the loss of close friendship and may only be rectified when we are intentional about our daily choices of interaction. Fiction is often the best vehicle for truth. In Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*, a mid-century novel about a New Orleans man who seemed to chart his life by the films he viewed and their significance, the protagonist writes: 'There is a danger of slipping clean out of space and time. It is possible to become a ghost and not know whether one is in downtown Loews in Denver or Suburban Bijou in Jacksonville' (Percy 1961: 75). And so, the tough question must continue to be asked: are friends who once were keenly intentional about taking time to be together opting instead for the convenience of 'catching up' through images and posts on Facebook?

This question brings to light one of the most significant aspects of *technique*: that tendency to truncate the basic premise of human relations – presence – for

the sake of a more efficient means of dealing with the other. While social media allow people to be co-present (i.e. present to each other simultaneously in different time zones and locations), the absence of one's physical presence leaves a friendship (or any relationship) in a precarious situation. The inability to act towards or touch another creates a situation that is emotionally sparse, certainly lacking in relationship richness. Connecting with others online, over time, creates a normalcy for absence. Instead of getting over social awkwardness or the intense 'stranger danger' that has all but taken over the minds of parents, young people have reached out en masse through social networking. It appears to be safer than the 'hanging out' in public practiced by earlier generations, but the flickering blue light of countless computer screens does not adequately reflect the light of a friend's eyes when surprised with a gift, a hug or a kind word.

Whether it is Facebook or the countless other Internet-based role-playing games and forums, the sense of personhood is being approached, experienced and managed in numerous new ways. The simulated social environments foster a wide range of social dynamics involving anonymity. As increasingly more aspects of friendship are lived out in the virtual sphere, the very idea of friendship must come under new scrutiny. A look at one Hebrew word may help us understand this dearth. The word that signifies speech in Hebrew is *dabar*. It is an interesting word for it encompasses speech and action. One cannot say *dabar* without implying both speaking and acting. It literally means 'word event'. This dual characteristic of the word suggests responsibility in our interpersonal communication, a part of the strength of friendship that cannot be denied without damage to the relationship. A friend is, and *does*. As more and more of our experiences of friendship move to Facebook, human action is separated from speech, thereby creating an environment that is conducive to deception and illusion rather than truth and reality. Does this mean that Facebook users are forced to deceive and misrepresent? Absolutely not. Nor does it mean that the same thing does not happen in traditional friendships that are anchored in time and space. Certainly, lying is not a new phenomenon, yet the digital environment fosters a culture of deception due to lack of accountability and low risk. There is little sense of responsibility towards the other when distance prevails, and human presence is not necessary.

Friendship is more than sharing commonalities or fond affection. The love of a friend involves the embrace of the other; it is the very 'nemesis of technique' (Lovekin 2008: 13). Friendship entails a responsibility towards the other, something technique cannot provide and that technique actually works against on Facebook. In their book *Communication Ethics Literacy*, Ronald Arnett, Janie Harden Fritz and Leanne Bell suggest that the Hebrew word *Hesed* may help us understand that responsible interpersonal communication is necessary to maintain friendship (2009: 129). *Hesed* is a word 'that suggests something must be done for the good of the community' (2009: 128). In much the same way the telephone or the television separated human speech from human presence, social networking does the same for human friends. Although any single member from one's personal list of friends on Facebook can comment or react to a piece of self-disclosure, in general, media distance us from the other. Posting on social media allows a certain kind of connection that would otherwise not be possible but eliminates both the nonverbal nuances that provide meaning as well as the urgent sense of need to be with one another.

Words are magnificent gifts to help human beings make meaning, but words are not sufficient without action to back them up. Words alone too easily mask our real needs and motivations, and masks must be removed for intimacy to grow. It is *shared life* that has the greatest potential to reveal who we really are and what we can be. As we transfer more and more of our human exchange to mediated environments such as Facebook, we inadvertently limit our ability to grow in relationship. Instead of diving into the depths of a relationship, we are more apt to wallow in relationships that are sparse, superficial and unsatisfying, convincing ourselves that they are genuine. It takes much personal bravery to remove the masks worn by our illusional self. Trust, loyalty, faithfulness all are developed in an environment that is tangible, actual – a place where people are meeting face-to-face, sharing life together through words *and* deeds.

One of the most unsettling developments in the rise of technique within the social sphere is in the way friendship is acquired and perceived. Among the many issues that arise are concerns regarding honesty, authenticity and the matter of representation. Because nonverbal communication is not available online, deception is rampant. Deception in friendship is nothing new, but face-to-face it is easy to tell whether someone is engaging in a boldface lie. On Facebook, where there are an estimated 140 million false accounts (Protalinski 2014), a lie is much more difficult to discern. Unfortunately, the lack of anchored space to enact the friendship along with Internet anonymity provides a hotbed for deception.

SUMMARY

The Technological Society is not an especially positive book, but within it is contained much needed insight into the advancing trend that reduces all things human to their technical end. Through careful, constructive analysis and six lengthy, often verbose, chapters, Ellul attempts to dispel the illusory way science has traditionally approached the idea of ‘technology as solution’. Throughout the text, his primary goal is to engage his reader in sociological reflection. To do so, he first situates the technological phenomenon in its historical development and then proceeds to explore its influence on the economy, the state, institutions in the service of *technique* and finally, social relations. Contrary to what it might seem after a cursory gloss, the book is not about the horrors of technology or nostalgia for earlier eras of simplicity. It is largely about the loss of human agency. Ellul is no technophobe, but he does refuse to turn a blind eye to the uncritical acceptance of technology. His critique is by no means a definitive acceptance or blanket rejection of technology. Rather, he is concerned with the ways society adopts new technologies with little or no awareness of the consequences that emerge as a result. Ellul’s main target appears to be the lack of any limitation on technological change and the runaway train that it has become in this late modern era. He explains:

A technique without limits is not in itself disquieting. If we look at our technical society without our idealist spectacles, what seems most disquieting is that character of *technique* renders it independent of man himself. We do not mean by this that the machine tends to replace the human being; that fact is already well-known. The important thing is that man, practically speaking, no longer possesses any means of

bringing action to bear upon *technique*. He is unable to limit it or even to orient it.

(1964: 306)

Today, we see this principle operating in the seamless, highly efficient relational functionality of social media. In the busy, over-booked world of twenty-first century Americans, Facebook meets an important need. In fact, it has become a social lifeline – a technical necessity – but like other technologies, there are unforeseen consequences. Facebook giveth and Facebook taketh away, as Neil Postman might have said had he been around to see the latest expanse of mass media.

Although over 60 years have passed since the time of his writing, Ellul's ideas have proven prescient and are needed to help navigate our way through the twenty-first century love affair with 'all things digital'. In exploring the ways Facebook is changing the tone and experience of social relationships, it is disconcerting to consider that friendship may soon fall prey to technique's control. As Ellul explains: We are at the

stage of historical evolution in which everything that is not technique is being eliminated. The challenge to a country, an individual, or a system is solely a technical challenge. Only a technical force can be opposed to a technical force. All else is swept away.

(1964: 84)

The reality of friendship risks being overrun by the easy and efficient process of 'friending' someone on Facebook. People perceive closeness or acceptance, believing that they know the one who has 'accepted their invitation' to friend, and this assumption is not generally true. As this becomes the norm, the experience of friendship is diminished and the relationship is debased. Today, the full force of *la technique's* power eclipses ends, substituting the means – or methods – for the more important human purposes at hand. In fact, because of the tremendous blind force of technique, human ends have become completely subverted. Ellul suggests this is one of the chief characteristics of technique:

Our erstwhile means have all become an end, an end, furthermore, which has nothing human in it and to which we must accommodate ourselves as best we may. We cannot even any longer pretend to act as though the ends justified the means, which would still be recognizably human, if not particularly virtuous.

(1964: x)

Just what is at stake here? Friendship is but one of the precious human relationships that makes life more livable; what is at stake is much greater than friendship. Ellul is precise in his critique and should have the last word:

At stake is our very life, and we shall need all the energy, inventiveness, imagination, goodness, and strength we can muster to triumph in our predicament. While waiting for the specialists to get on with their work on behalf of society, each of us, in his own life, must seek ways of resisting and transcending technological determinants. Each man must

make this effort in every area of life, in his profession and in his social, religious, and family relationships.

(1964: xxxii)

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Bennett, S. (2016), 'Jacques Ellul and the inefficiency of friendship: Social life and *The Technological Society*', *Explorations in Media Ecology*, 15:3&4, pp. 243–260, doi: [10.1386/eme.15.3-4.243_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/eme.15.3-4.243_1)

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