

Towards a methodological luddism for ICTs

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Thematic thread: Building a social and ecological economy / The role of ICTs

Long abstract - 1.200 words

This presentation stems from the need for an experimental and reflective method that will allow us to reevaluate the structure of humans' relationship with certain technologies. Considering how technological innovation has been boosted by contemporary capitalism, it could be useful to dismantle or switch off, in a conscious manner, a technological system as an experimental means to discover what aspects of technology we would miss, what effects the removal of these aspects would have in our lives and in society and which dimensions of the technological system do we really need for social functioning.

This “switching off” could create a much needed space and opportunity for learning. The type of questioning involved we might call a “luddite methodology”, inspired by Langdon Winner's concept, developed at the end of the 1970's.

Luddism as a method should not be confused with its original meaning – the destruction of machines and equipment -, but understood as a means to examine the conditions that certain technologies impose on social life. The voluntary and conscious disconnection of some technologies and equipment might provoke an experience of abstinence in individuals and institutions in view of our dependence on these apparatuses. The observation of these “needs” or discomforts arising from the abstinence would allow us to examine the structure of humans' relationships with the technologies and, from thereon, investigate whether or not these relationships should be restored and, if yes, what form they should take (Winner, 1977).

In our present-day world, most of our ever expanding human activities can be construed as *technical-human co-actions*, inserted in networks and technological systems that have been implemented by the new information technologies (hardware, software and the Internet). These technologies have the capacity to coordinate other diverse technological systems; they have considerable influence on the construction of our current cultural context; they constitute one of the fastest-growing new economic hubs through the so-called Internet giants (Google, Facebook, Microsoft, etc.); they have become a fundamental factor in the globalisation process, including the globalisation of markets; they have changed the formats of public debates and political mobilisations; and at the same time they are charged with much hope in their potential role in the construction of the common good and citizenship.

Indeed, the Internet was seen as a facilitator for the participatory democracy that many believed was in the making in the 1990s. It was expected to change the balance of power in both national and global governance, enabling the bypassing of traditional power centres by making broadcasting affordable and accessible. It has certainly provided a platform for the discussion of alternative discourses on the governance of our common resources, and facilitated the organisation of social movements that clamour for a voice in global decision-making and wish to engage the public. It also appears as a conducive medium for propagating competing discourses and stimulating public debate, theoretically giving all online participants an equal voice and leaving many to believe in its promise of an expanded public sphere where rational-critical citizen discourse might thrive.

But the problematic effects of ICTs cannot be ignored today and demand strong public recognition and mobilisation. ICTs, and in particular the Internet, have produced a strange combination of power, money and promises. Without a doubt, ICTs such as the Internet have expanded very rapidly. If in 2000 approximately 50 million people had access to Internet services, this number grew to 1.5 billion by 2012 and is expected to reach 5 billion people soon, making the Internet the most planetary information and communication technology in human history. When focusing on the effects of the Internet in terms of inequalities in access, we must bear in mind the digital divide both between and *within* countries: between social-economic classes, age groups or generations. The digital divide still excludes most people from developing countries and many people from poorer backgrounds in developed countries (Of COMscore's 2012 estimates of approximately 1.5 billion Internet users worldwide, no more than 135 million users are from the Middle East and Africa) and that even when inequalities in access are cancelled out, digital literacy separates users with the skills to locate and evaluate the vast amounts of information the Internet offers from those that lack these skills and use the Internet mostly for entertainment or commercial purposes (DiMaggio et al., 2004; Hargittai, 2008). Even in the USA, at least twenty million people are not connected to the Internet for economic reasons. The most noted discrepancy between “developed” countries has been between generations, especially between so-called “digital natives” and those that have had to adapt to new technologies with a certain delay or with more limited capacities.

Besides the digital divide, today we can also speak of an actual digital risk in terms of a threat to freedom. Digital risk possesses a logic that is very different from other technological risks because the way it can undermine our liberties is much more surreptitious. Democratic nation-states, in league with large corporations, have allowed the violation of civil and political liberties in return for a promise of national and

international security. On the other hand, the large majority of users are employing the new means of digital communication with very limited knowledge of the structure of these technical means, sacrificing, often unconsciously, a significant part of their individual freedom and private sphere. It has been found that Internet users tend to reproduce offline inequalities in the online sphere. Among other examples a small percentage of users accounts for the majority of content that is shared on the networks, creating a self-sustaining minority whose members constantly refer to each other (Fu et al., 2008); users tend to connect to people they already know and perceive as similar to them, gathering in “communities of affinity” (Bittle et al., 2009); and users with high social capital have a relative advantage over others, accounting for most of the active contributions (Burke et al., 2010).

The problems of the digital divide and risk are but two of many reasons that could propel us to include ICTs within the scope of a luddite method relative to current information culture. Methodological luddism would have as one of its main tasks the training for information in today's society, which is neither the training of technical experts nor the technical training of users, but rather involves the questioning of technological systems, not excluding the possibility of rejecting or even eliminating some of these systems. The objective of such an epistemology would be to understand the mechanisms that produce the unforeseen and potentially negative consequences and related sub-products of technical-human co-actions for the societal and human world, and for the extra-societal world. It would also clarify the global human and historical meaning of these processes. The luddite methodology does not necessarily require a direct action, but rather a serious inquiry into entirely new forms of social-technical existence. In this way a field of possibilities opens up in which ICTs can be transformed into a true means for communication towards an end instead of, as they tend to be today, informational instruments at the service of whatever end.