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Modern Day Luddites

Life of the Luddites

Imagine living in England during the early 1800s when your King was considered a madman, Napoleon was waging wars throughout Europe, local and foreign trade had come to a halt, and wheat cost 155 shillings - the most expensive it has ever been and most likely will ever be. Under these conditions, the English people struggled to earn wages to put food in their stomachs and a roof over their heads. Jobs were scarce, trade guilds overcrowded, and people had no money to spend on non-essentials which resulted in stagnant markets. One of the biggest employers at the time was England's textile factories; however, due to the Industrial Revolution, the installation of new automated textile equipment threatened the livelihoods of skilled workers as these machines had the power to produce more textiles at a faster and cheaper rate. With no new jobs to acquire, a group of people known as the Luddites began their quest. They would smash the new automated textile machines in the factories of surrounding towns – to ensure the security of their jobs. Their reasoning was one of 'if you can't beat the machine, break it', an ignorant way of thinking, but without education and perhaps the tools necessary to adapt and push on, death was the fate of the Luddites.

Since the attack on the English textile machines in the 1800s, the name the "Luddites" has been used to refer to groups of people who oppose the development of technology and the modernization of practices. Looking back at the original Luddites, imagining them smashing machines with hammers is comical, yet people today (the modern Luddites) continue to smash technology both figuratively and metaphorically. What people cannot understand, choose to not

understand, or are just fearful of, causes uproars of panic when instead people should be using that energy to embrace technology in ways they best see fit.

Black Mirror *Nosedive*

Black Mirror is a Netflix series that takes our modern society and frames it as a dystopian society, or at least a society with dystopian tendencies. In the episode *Nosedive*, the audience follows a young woman through her daily life, observing the importance that social media has in her life. Daily interactions require constant approval from people as seen in the start of the episode when the woman enters a coffee shop and rates the barista on his friendliness and the barista rates her back on her friendliness. Every encounter people have in this society requires a rating, and these ratings create a caste system. Those with low ratings are ignored by people with higher ratings and lose access to certain privileges. For example, to rent the newest style car, you need a rating of 4.2 or better, otherwise you have to use an older car and if you are seen using an older model of the car, it's social suicide because other people fear talking to you for the sake of lowering their own ratings. As the episode progresses, we watch the woman with a 4.2 score drop to 2.6 – she once lived a luxurious lifestyle but is now ostracized by her society. The episode ends with the woman in jail, stripped of her technology as a societal punishment. Instead it serves as her own personal liberation.

Once again, technology is depicted as the enemy - the woman could not experience true freedom until she removed herself from her technology and destroyed it. It is important to note that she on her own did not destroy the technology; it was done for her, which suggests that technology users are blinded and have only the possibility of experiencing the world without technology until it is taken away. While in the real world we do not rate people on a social media app after our every interaction with them, we *do* use ratings to determine people's

standings. For example, credit scores are used to determine your eligibility for buying a house and GPAs are utilized for college admittance and job offers – ratings were pervasive before social media, and social media is yet another form of rating. I believe technology at its core being to be neither good nor bad, and only in its use can it be determined. Therefore I find anti-technology in pop culture to be misinterpreted. I believe stories like the one in *Nosedive* are cautionary tales that foreshadow the possibilities of what can happen if technology is used for the wrong purpose, but all too often do people interpret these cautionary tales as the newest technology being “the end of society as we know it”. Like any technology, social media has brought its advantages, as well as its disadvantages, but that’s as with any person as well – we all have our good and bad, no one person can be all good or all bad. In society we tend not to ostracize people the same way we do technology. Social media connects people all over the world and provides instantaneous interactions between people who might not have ever met if it wasn’t for social networking. Social media enables the sharing of ideas, of current news, of support to people who might not have that luxury within the physical community that they live in. And yes, of its negative effects, social media (without citing specific studies) has been a source for online bullying and a cause of depression. However, this was not the intended use of social media, and instead I view it as an opportunity for people to rise to the occasion to work to improve the areas of social media that are lacking and continue to enjoy its benefits.

Trust in Good, Have Hope for the Future

Unfortunately, many people do not rise to the challenge to educate themselves on technology and dissipate their fears. Recently I watched the movie *Hidden Figures*, it’s the story of three African American women and their contributions to NASA’s space program during the space race. As a NASA employee, Dorothy Vaughan was a supervisor for the computing

division; this was the division that did the math calculations by hand for the engineers. The significance of this is that near the end of the movie (and in real life) NASA introduced IBM 7090 electronic computer that was meant to replace Vaughan's computing team because it could complete computations much faster than the women mathematicians. Unlike the Luddites, Vaughan realized there was greater worth in learning to program the computer rather than destroying the computer – she learned to adapt and taught Fortran to herself and to her team; she became the new programming supervisor at NASA. Vaughn's strategy was not to try and beat the computer, but to learn how to manipulate the computer. Not only did she save her job, but she also became a pioneer in the computing industry.

New technologies cause people to feel uncertain because nobody can predict exactly how this new technology will function, if its intended purpose will be satisfied, and how exactly it will influence the people utilizing this technology. To avoid becoming a modern day Luddite, educating oneself is key to adapting the technology and progressing with the new advancements. It is still important to question technology, because without questions and challenges, technology will not iterate and evolve to be its best form. Therefore, like Vaughn, it is essential to view new technologies optimistically and the future will continue to be a hopeful place of modernization and advanced thought.