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Editorial

The Technological Society

Michael Trimble

Another year, another issue, another lockdown. At one point it seemed as though we were going to be like the people of Narnia under the rule of the White Witch, where it was “always Winter and never Christmas.”¹ But Christmas has come and has now passed.

The coronavirus has again, inevitably, slowed the process of getting the journal to press. It is sobering to think how much our lives have changed since this time last year when there were early reports of a new viral pneumonia occurring in China. As astonishing as any other aspect of this new situation, has been the ways in which society has adapted to the restrictions and requirements of social distancing. Undoubtedly, one of the success stories arising from the crisis has been the adoption of technological solutions to aid communication. Before Covid-19, I expect for many, the only experience of online meetings had been the occasional Skype call. But now we are all expert at using number of platforms from Teams to Zoom. Certainly this has been a boon given the restrictions on face-to-face meetings but I would hate to see it become the new normal. And yet, it could so easily become so for technology has a way of setting the agenda.

In his classic study *The Technological Society*,² French philosopher, sociologist and theologian Jacques Ellul argues that modern society is dominated by *technique*. Technique is more than simply the application of technology as to achieve an end. Technique is ultimately focused on the concept of efficiency, creating an artificial system which “eliminates or subordinates the natural world.” Instead of technology being subservient to humanity, “human beings have to adapt to it, and accept total change.” An example, offered by Ellul is the diminished value of the study of the humanities within a technological society as people begin to question the value of learning ancient languages and history, things which do little to advance the good of the technical state. In the end, technique trumps all other considerations whether political, social or moral. Rather than ask whether a technological advance should be made, philosophers, ethicists and politicians usually find themselves fighting a rear-guard action after the announcement of some new technology, asking instead how the new discovery should be best utilised. A recent example is given by Judith Woods writing in the *Daily Telegraph*³ regarding the case of Molly, born in February 2020, but conceived by IVF in October 1992 having spent 27 years frozen at the National Embryo Donation Centre in Tennessee, waiting for someone to choose her. Woods discusses the ethical issues raised by

freezing embryos and the questions to which there are, as yet, no answers. In the USA, there is no time limit on freezing embryos. In the UK, they may be kept for 10 years. Embryos stored for medical reasons, for example cancer treatment, can be preserved for longer. In light of advances in freezing techniques, the Government has launched a consultation in conjunction with the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority on whether to extend the period for everyone. For Woods this smacks of the *Brave New World*⁴ described by Aldous Huxley. (Interestingly, it was Huxley who brought the French edition of *The Technological Society* to the attention of an English publisher, and hence to English readers.) My point here is not to debate the ethics of embryology (that may come later) but to illustrate Ellul’s point that the technological development often precedes adequate ethical and sociological discussion regarding its desirability.

And so, back to the more mundane question of communication technologies. There is no doubt that online meetings are efficient. I can move from the virtual classroom to the faculty meeting and then on to a tutorial without leaving my desk. There is no time wasted in journeying from office to lecture theatre. For the university there are obvious savings in staff time and doubtless also potential savings to be made in terms of buildings and accommodation. Yes, certainly the new order is *efficient* but at what cost? Looking at this solely from the perspective of the teacher, I find I miss the social aspect of teaching, both with students and other members of staff. There is no longer the opportunity to do the business between business in committee meetings. We have lost the craic and camaraderie. In the quote above, Ellul was concerned that *technique* meant we had lost sight of the importance of the humanities; I worry if it means we are in danger of losing sight of the importance of our humanity itself. Perhaps I am exaggerating, but then again, perhaps not. In a future editorial I plan to look again at this topic from the perspective of the students but for now this will suffice.

Finally, to close the loop between Lewis, Ellul and Huxley, Lewis and Huxley were Oxford graduates and both wrote dystopian novels about the future – Huxley’s *Brave New World* and, perhaps not so well known, Lewis’s *That Hideous Strength*⁵. Lewis’s book also warns of the dangers of an uncritical adoption of science (represented by a shady, quasi-governmental organisation that goes by the acronym NICE!) Both men died on the 22nd November 1963, but news of their deaths was overshadowed by the assassination of President John F Kennedy.



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1. CS Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Geoffrey Bles, 1950
2. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, Vintage Books, 1964
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4. Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, Chatto & Windus, 1932
5. CS Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, The Bodley Head, 1945

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