
Eric Brende

Better Off

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Q: What did you hope to achieve when writing *Better Off*? Now that it's published, is the impact what you thought it might be?

A: My hope was nothing less than to try to subvert the prevailing technological monopoly in America what Neil Postman has called "Technopoly" a way of life that seeks technological answers first before other means, or even before thinking through the questions. To do this, I "infiltrated" the very Citadel of Technology MIT and tried to use technological reasoning when I could to short-circuit technological abuse. You may notice that many of my conclusions boil down to this: that excess technology fails on technology's own grounds. That is, it fails not because of some side-effect, like pollution or social fragmentation, but because it cannot fulfill its stated purpose.

As for the impact, I must say I had no idea there would be so much media coverage. And I believe that this translated into a strong, steady readership, which may slowly grow over time. The sales were not bestseller caliber, but then the people interested in the subject tend to be frugal and borrow or lend books to friends and family, or check them out from the library. The Madison, Wisconsin public library, alone, reported having 125 people check out the book in ten months, and I hadn't even made a personal appearance there. A friend of mine in St. Louis said she was 70th on the waiting list to read my book. Now that the paperback is out, I hope that the frugally-minded will maybe relax a little and go to the bookstore.

Another promising sign is that I have received word that several college-level courses will be including my book on their reading lists in the fall. This means it could influence students in their most questioning years.

Q: For most people caught up in a commute-work-commute rat-race, your life right now seems so idyllic you have time with your family, work you enjoy, and peace of mind. What do you think are the fears that keep us so attached to our machines? How do you get by without contemporary work-based benefits such as health insurance and social security?

A: History shows that social norms do not necessarily coincide with common sense, yet those norms, being what they are, tend to constrain our choices. Little unites our diverse society today but an unflinching reverence for new technology, and for many or most, cutting back rather than ratcheting up, represents a break in faith in "Progress" in what may be the last shred of a common creed binding the rich and poor, black and white, men and women, city folk and country folk. The major fear, in short, I believe is of committing heresy.

I don't advocate going without health insurance. It's just that the best health insurance is a healthy lifestyle and not only because it's the cheapest. It also gets the best results. Those who say they dare not live as I do for fear of losing health benefits and continue sitting at a desk all day are literally killing themselves to make their health payments. Admittedly, not all health problems are lifestyle-related, and for those a low-cost, high-deductible plan is the best. A group called "Christian Medi-Share" has one of the best and cheapest programs going, for as low as a couple of hundred a month. As for social security, anyone who earns money gets this, as we do. But not everyone will have the social security of children who will grow up physically and mentally adept and used to helping their parents for the greater good of the household. I'd rather age frugally, with family around me, than in luxury, alone.

Q: What would you suggest to readers who might like to scale back the use of technology in their own lives? What's your rule of thumb on whether a machine or piece of technology is worth using?

A: Does the technology complement, or compete with, a vital human activity? The bicycle allows me to go to the post office, grocery store, bank, and library efficiently but without sacrificing exercise and a sense of connection to the neighborhood, the outdoors, and passersby I might meet on the way. It complements my daily routine. The automobile performs the job of transportation alone, forfeiting all the other benefits. It competes with my vitality.

Q: Do you find that your remarkable education and academic achievements have helped or hindered your search for a more satisfying life? Escalating tuition fees seem prohibitively expensive to someone pursuing a simpler life would you encourage your own children to pursue higher education?

Advanced education is very much a mixed blessing. For many including probably me it is a way of postponing growing up, and many academics may spend their whole life in a kind of arrested developmental stage, like larvae. What was wonderful about our experiment was how it enabled us, and especially me, to burst out of the intellectual cocoon, and at the same time validate theories I had been cooking up inside it.

Q: Are you working on another book? If so, could you tell us a bit about it?

A: I have a couple of ideas which I'm toying with. One is of a sequel to *Better Off* talking about our adventure flipping the switch in the city. Another, which I might collaborate on with my dad, a psychiatrist, is on the sly and self-deluding motivations behind so many of our daily technological choices. That could be a fun one, as even I catch myself trying to "cheat" in various and sundry ways, and have to really be vigilant not to revert to some self-serving and inevitably self-defeating technological rationale.