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Columns

Comment: Broken down in the barnyard of free expression

13 Mar 2007

[Rehman Rashid](#)

HE was named Ned Ludd, he lived in 18th-century England, and he is my hero.

This is because he did to sock-making machines what I would dearly wish to do to the devices of information & communications technology, that is, destroy them.

Ned Ludd is said to have gone on a rampage in 1779, smashing a new invention that could knit stockings quickly and cheaply and thereby ruin the livelihoods of human knitters.

His berserking quickly caught on among the working populace of Britain in the throes of the Industrial Revolution, and soon there were mobs of "Luddites", as they came to be known, who set themselves to wrecking all the newfangled gadgets and gizmos that were coming online and putting people out of work.

How I wish I could emulate them, no matter how futile it would be to take a sledgehammer to my computer or see how many pieces my cellphone would form when flung at a hard surface with all my might. I would only inconvenience myself while doing nothing to stem the ICT tide that is ruining my life and probably yours, too, whether or not you know it.

This is not to say I am anti-technology, any more than Ludd was. He was, in fact, pro-humanity, as I am. Technology offers definite advantages. Indeed, I admit, my own life and career would have been impossible without technology.

Two inventions in particular have enabled life as I know it. The first occurred around 1450, when Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press. The second, and the last time technology intervened in my destiny in any meaningful way, took place around 1870, with the invention of the typewriter.

More than a century later, the typewriter was still around to see me through into my chosen profession of journalism. No sooner had that redoubtable machine ushered me to my first editorial floor, however, when it was unceremoniously booted out by the computer, which, as we all know, has had to be re-booted innumerable times since then.

How I miss the typewriter. It weighed about 3kg, which was less than most so-called portable computers today when you include the plugs, cables, chargers and fancy bags without which they do not work. And a typewriter didn't need plugs or chargers, electricity or batteries. It worked just as well everywhere, even where there was no other technology to speak of or write with.

A typewriter could withstand total immersion in seawater, as long as you rinsed it, dried it and installed a fresh ribbon. It could be dropped from lofty heights onto hard surfaces. If it got bent, you could fix it with a hammer. And it cost about a 10th of today's cheapest notebook PCs, those capricious, demanding, fickle things.

We had no choice but to get with the "program", so to speak. Information technology was here to stay, and we were officially ordered to love it.

Thus it came to pass that I have successively lost the bulk of my life's work, rendered irretrievable when 5½-inch floppy disks were replaced by 3½-inch ones, and then by CD-ROMS, and then by optical disks, and then by flash drives, all while the software wars raged about my collapsing universe.

And then came cellular telephony. Since the dawn of humanity until scarcely a decade ago, it was impossible to conduct two separate and unrelated conversations without being in the physical company of the people with whom you were conversing. The cellphone, particularly with its ability to send text messages, has now made infidelity, treachery and deceit commonplace, if not inevitable.

Human intercourse has, therefore, changed utterly, and irrevocably. And continues to. A little while ago, carrying two or more handphones meant you had two or more Significant Others. Now it's possible to have two or more phone numbers in the same handset.

What text messaging has done to literacy is well documented (or maybe not) but while the cellular masses have dumbed themselves down to lives devoid of vowels, the Internet revolution continues apace. There is now a place called the "blogosphere", touted by its denizens as a Utopia of freedom of expression.

In my opinion, what they've really done is prove why freedom of expression was a really bad idea. In this country, a host of folk who never had a hope of getting published are now proving why not.

The local blogosphere is the domain of life-challenged grumblestiltskins and disenfranchised pundits whose asinine maunderings only show why they should never have had day jobs in the first place.

Rumour, innuendo, half-truths and damned lies are their stock-in-trade, and previously sacrosanct standards, principles and ethics are now laughable.

Are they not entitled to their opinion? Of course they are, as much as everyone else is entitled to ignore them. I would venture, however, that everyone has an opinion and a rectum, and not that many seem capable of telling one from the other.

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But no, it's all good. Let a hundred thousand million flowers bloom: let all voices be heard, in however fractured language, whether or not they have anything pertinent to communicate or any information worth more than spittle to offer.

There's no stemming the ICTide. Those of us whose love of technology began with Gutenberg and ended with E. Remington & Co. can only carry on as best we can, our antediluvian sensibilities drowned in the great braying barnyard of modern communications.

My house was struck by lightning last weekend. My computer was fried. To write this article, therefore, I have had to resort to two other inventions: technology not a century old, not five centuries old, but 2,000 and 5,000 years old respectively: Pencil and paper.

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