

Opinion

I've always loved tech. Now, I'm a Luddite. You should be one, too.



By Brian Merchant

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I test drove the first-generation Tesla Roadster. I once lived on Soylent powder shakes for a month. My Twitter account is almost old enough to drive. I wrote a book about the iPhone.

Also, I'm a Luddite.

That's not the contradiction that it might sound like. The original Luddites did not hate technology. Most were skilled machine operators. In the early days of the Industrial Revolution, what they objected to were the specific ways that tech was being used to undermine their status, upend their communities and destroy their livelihoods. So they took sledgehammers to the mechanized looms used to exploit them.

It is that spirit that I've come to appreciate in the age of tech monopolies and generative artificial intelligence. The kind of visionaries we need now are those who see precisely how certain technologies are causing harm and who resist them when necessary.

I didn't always feel this way. As a teenager in the '90s, I was captivated by the way the web connected me with friends, enabling us to build our own sites and chat into the night. Apple made gadgets cool. Google let me summon far-flung information. Amazon brought hard-to-find books to my doorstep. (Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon, owns The Post; Patty Stonesifer, The Post's interim CEO, is a member of Amazon's board.)

The Luddites would have had few, if any, problems with all of that. And neither did I.

At the start of my career in the 2000s, tech, it seemed, was building the future. Silicon Valley's suite of smartphones, social media networks and sharing economy apps promised connection, discovery and efficiency. Tech companies were expanding, consolidating and accumulating power. Apple was on its way to becoming the first trillion-dollar company. Uber began raking in an unprecedented war chest of \$10 billion. By the 2010s, however, there were plenty of signs of the costs. As Amazon grew, stories emerged about grueling conditions in its warehouses. Google used its monopoly power to strangle competitors' products. A suicide epidemic swept an iPhone factory. Predictions mounted that AI would soon replace tens of millions of human jobs — that the rise of the robots was at hand.

The Luddites would have had a problem with all of *that*.

That's what I realized one long Labor Day weekend in 2014, when I stumbled on an academic work that examined the Luddites and their struggle against the tech titans of their day. As someone raised on the idea that technology is the engine of progress — that to say otherwise is taboo — learning the true history of this movement has been a revelation.

The Luddites were not, contrary to popular belief, idiots who broke machines because they didn't understand them. They were cloth workers who once led comfortable lives, working at home or in small shops, on their own terms and schedules, with freedom and dignity.

When entrepreneurs tried to move their jobs into factories by using power looms and wide frames that did similar work faster, more cheaply and much more shoddily, the Luddites protested. These workers first sought compromise, dialogue and a democratic way to integrate new tech into their communities — to share in the gains. They were ignored. So they rebelled.

To this end, the Luddites were innovators. They pioneered a way of staging a popular, decentralized resistance to technologies that were "hurtful to commonality." They organized under the banner of the apocryphal Ned Ludd, sending threatening letters to entrepreneurs who invested in automation; they raided the factories of the most hated bosses in town, smashing only the machinery that "stole their bread," as the Luddites said. For a while, they became folk heroes of England — championed by poets such as Lord Byron and cheered on by the working class; they were bigger than Robin Hood.

Sadly, the Luddites' plight is as relevant as ever. The parallels to the modern day are everywhere.

In the 1800s, entrepreneurs used technology to justify imposing a new mode of work: the factory system. In the 2000s, CEOs used technology to justify imposing a new mode of work: algorithmically organized gig labor, in which pay is lower and protections scarce. In the 1800s, hosiers and factory owners used automation less to overtly replace workers than to deskill them and drive down their wages. Digital media bosses, call center operators and studio executives are using AI in much the same way.

Then, as now, the titans used technology both as a new mode of production and as an idea that allowed them to ignore long-standing laws and regulations. In the 1800s, this might have been a factory boss arguing that his mill exempted him from a statute governing apprentice labor. Today, it's a ride-hailing app that claims to be a software company so it doesn't have to play by the rules of a cab firm.

Then, as now, leaders dazzled by unregulated technologies ignored their potential downsides. Then, it might have been state-of-the-art water frames that could produce an incredible volume of yarn — but needed hundreds of vulnerable child laborers to operate. Today, it's a cellphone or a same-day delivery, made possible by thousands of human laborers toiling in often punishing conditions.

Then, as now, workers and critics sounded the alarm.

In the 1810s, no one in power listened. A fierce, popular rebellion broke out. England was pushed to the brink of civil war. The military was called in to put down the uprising — it was the largest domestic occupation in the nation's history. Scores of Luddites were killed and hanged. The factory system took root and brought prosperity for some, but it created an immiserated working class.

The 200 years since have seen breathtaking technological innovation — but much less social innovation in how the benefits are shared. That's why, in the age of AI and augmented reality, electric vehicles and Mars rovers, levels of inequality again rival the days of the Industrial Revolution.

Resistance is gathering again, too. Amazon workers are joining union drives despite intense opposition. Actors and screenwriters are striking and artists and illustrators have called for a ban of generative AI in editorial outlets. Organizing, illegal in the Luddites' time, has historically proved the best bulwark against automation.

But governments must also step up. They must offer robust protections and social services for those in precarious positions. They must enforce antitrust laws. Crucially, they must develop regulations to rein in the antidemocratic model of technological development wherein a handful of billionaires and venture capital firms determine the shape of the future — and who wins and loses in it.

The clothworkers of the 1800s had the right idea: They believed everyone should share in the bounty of the amazing technologies their work makes possible.

That's why I'm a Luddite — and why you should be one, too.

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