A Being *On* Facebook but not *Of* Facebook: Using New Social Media Technologies to Promote the Virtues of Jacques Ellul

by Brian Lightbody

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In this paper, I wish to show how new technologies come to alter one's initial enjoyment and comportment towards a hobby. What I show is that new technologies serve to transform leisurely activities into a technique, in the Ellulian sense of the term. I begin from the outside in, as it were, by first articulating what I take a hobby to be. Secondly, I then examine the time-honoured pastime of fishing to show that new technologies, if utilized, either cause the hobby to take on aspects of traditional work or in other cases, causes the hobbyist to quit the activity because the hobby is now deemed undesirable; the technological advancement makes the hobby too easy. Thirdly and finally, I turn my attention to another kind of hobby or leisurely activity, which some have called "Facebooking." Looking at Facebook through an Ellulian lens, there are, to be sure, some rather unsettling aspects of the activity, but despite this, all is not lost; Facebook may be used as a tool to practice the Ellulian virtue of non-selectivity.

Ellul uses the term "Technicality" to refer to the increasing encroachment of technologies on all aspects of life.[1] New technologies are developed with one purpose in mind: to make work, in all forms, more efficient. More production, more efficiency, less time seems to be the battle cry of both technocrats and the average person on the street. Efficiency is no longer attached to some goal, but indeed becomes a goal in itself.

At times, Ellul thinks of "Technicality" as an autonomous yet dynamic entity. It is self-propelled and self-regulating as it is always geared towards maximal efficiency. Human beings cannot help but get caught up in this system as a technical improvement in one area leads to an improvement in another and so on. As a result, all members within modern societies are increasingly controlled and limited by a web-like system of interconnected technologies, practices and policies.

Ellul was not the first thinker to have noted the progression and detrimental effects of what the Frankfurt school called "instrumental rationality" in all sectors of society. But what I think is most interesting about Ellul's work, is that technicality doesn't simply dominate work life, but indeed comes to exercise control over every aspect of leisure time. The traditional contrary form of activity to that of work, as affirmed by most scholars in the Leftist tradition, has been that of leisure, but not idleness. It is fair to say that a traditional conception of leisurely pursuits is where one is free to pursue a hobby. Indeed some Frankfurt philosophers, such as Marcuse, believed that technology was a god-send as it allowed us to further control nature so that we could pursue activities that were enjoyable in themselves.[2] A hobby provides one with the means to while away time without being bored; one derives pleasure from engaging in one's chosen hobby and as one's skill level increases, more pleasure is derived. Fishing is a perfect example of such an activity. It is an activity that is pleasurable, requires skill and has a definite aim—progress may be tracked

by the number and size of fish caught, but one usually is not required to catch anything. The time spent engaged in the activity is pleasurable in itself.

Minimally construed here, a hobby is an activity that one enjoys doing, but where one is not reduced to or identified with the activity itself. In *The German Ideology*, Marx confirms this idea, namely that a hobby is very different from work provided that it is freely engaged in for its own sake, and that the one who engages in the hobby is not identified with it. Marx writes: "In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity... society regulates production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic."[3] What is key here is that one does not become a fisherman: one is not identified with his or her job. One is free to pursue other activities as he or she sees fit. Secondly, it is important that fishing does not become work. In other words, in order for a hobby to remain a hobby, it is crucial that a hobbyist is not expected to produce x number of fish in a given day; for such requirements turn one's hobby into work: one's production output is measured over time.[4]

However, there is something missing in Marx's analysis so Ellul would argue. What Marx perhaps only implicitly realized, but was fully demonstrated and understood by Ellul is the following: technological advancements turn such traditional leisurely activities into productive practices and what's more, these practices, when enframed in terms of production output, are shot through with measures of efficiency. What turns such hobbies into technical activities? New advances in technology. Again look at fishing as an example. Gone are the days of loading up a rowboat with fishing gear, rowing to one's favourite fishing hole and hoping for the best. Now one uses sonar. Sonar provides anglers with a simulated underwater representation of the water they are fishing – one can determine the depth of the body of water and indeed know both the number and size of fish in one's fishing hole. And, when sonar is combined with GPS, anglers are at a further advantage: one can mark the most productive spots in a lake, for example, and navigate to the exact location in the future. Indeed the very notion of a finding a good fishing hole is exploded with these new technologies. A hole denotes both presence and absence: one cannot measure the precise circumference of a hole as the very boundaries that mark the hole are themselves not strictly part of 'it,' whatever this 'it' may be.[5] Likewise, a fishing hole is by its nature inexact; it is its very approximation that makes it a magical, sacred place. Indeed, a fishing hole is often passed on from father to son or mother to daughter as sacred knowledge.

This idea of passing on sacred knowledge to those deemed worthy, however, is completely undermined with the advent of GPS technology. The device does all the work: all one has to do is link up with another person's unit, receive the precise coordinates and the gates of the kingdom as it were, are opened. Ellul's insight is that these so-called 'technological advancements' turn what was once a hobby or a skill into a technique. The hobby is increasingly desacralized: the hobby is now caught up in a productive circle. In spending money on these devices, an angler expects them to work and this work is measured in terms of production. What's more, new devices are measured against the only metric the angler has available, namely, the size and number of fish caught. The technological advancements themselves force one to take a technical approach to the hobby he or she once loved and, in so doing, the freedom one experienced from practicing the craft now feels more like an exercise in production.

Peter Ludlow, a philosopher of technology and cyberspace, explores the desacralization of leisure activity in a recent article in *The Atlantic* magazine. Using Ellulian insights, he produces some rather disturbing if interesting conclusions from his analysis regarding how the internet has made some hobbies too efficient such that the joy that once was found in the hobby simply vanishes. He shows that the idea of producing, what economists call "frictionless areas of consumption," has infiltrated all aspects of modern living from stamp collecting to dating. The Internet has, single handily, radically transformed these areas of activity.

In the article "The Many Problems of Online Dating's Radical Efficiency" Ludlow persuasively argues that all aspects of human behaviour are continually and consistently viewed from the standpoint of economics where the goal is to decrease "friction" that is, to bring consumers and producers together as efficiently as possible.[6] The goal of this frictionless model of consumer interaction is to remove pesky middlemen who stand in the way of consumers and the items they wish to consume. MOOCS or Massive Open Online Courses, for example, are another technological godsend according to such economists because universities, as physical institutions, are nothing more than an obstacle to learning or so it is argued. One may agree or disagree with this assessment, but in any case, Ludlow demonstrates how the application of this type of thinking to other areas has some rather surprising and depressing results. He shows that when this penchant for "radical efficiency" is applied to hobbies like stamp collecting and more interestingly to dating, that the frictionless method breaks down—the best means to the end, leads to the dissolution of the end itself. The end, in other words, is no longer deemed worth pursuing. He writes:

> Let me illustrate this point with an example that has nothing to do with dating. It is a deep dark secret of mine that I used to be a philatelist—yes, you can denigrate that fine hobby by calling it stamp collecting if you wish. I collected certain kinds of 19th-century postal history (mailed envelopes) and I used to enjoy travelling from dealer to dealer digging through bins of musty postal history looking for the items that I collected. And then the Internet happened.

> Collecting postal history has gone from a labor of seeking out interesting shops and sales and digging through musty boxes to one of logging on to eBay, typing in a search request (19th-century postal history), and clicking on whatever envelope covers catch my eye. The search process has for all practical purposes become frictionless, and the net result is that it just isn't fun anymore. My collection has been placed in a storage locker. I'm done with it.[7]

Why is Ludlow "done" with stamp-collecting or more accurately, envelope collecting? The answer is that radical efficiency has snuffed out the flame of desire. In a perplexing move, the technology used to make stamp collecting more efficient eventually foreclosed on the hobby itself. The internet rendered the entire hobby undesirable because the aims of the hobby were too efficiently arrived at. I suppose the same result would occur if any activity was made too easy: no adult, after all, wants to play the fish pond game at a carnival because the end result is "a winner every time."

Ludlow then applies this lesson to another fishing hole as it were: online dating. Frictionless methods of maximal efficiency, Ludlow argues, are taking all the fun out of this sphere, too. E-harmony, for example, virtually guarantees match-making success by subjecting users to a thorough and intimate questionnaire developed by a stable of psychologists. Another popular dating website, aptly called Plenty of Fish, allows users to input a wide array of filters to ensure that one is connected with the perfect person or, at least, the perfect 'hookup.' But again what Ludlow shows is that the fun of dating has evaporated with

these more efficient means of meeting like-minded individuals. In a sense, Ludlow complains that the entire activity has become all too easy: the service finds 20, 30 or maybe 40 perfect matches each of whom have the same interests and hobbies as I do. What's more, introductions are already made by the program—a ranked list of the newest and most compatible profiles is emailed to your account on a daily basis.[8]

The most intriguing and illuminating content in the article in my opinion, however, was found in the comment section. The comment section to this article overwhelmingly substantiates Ellul's insight that technology not only desacralizes in the name of efficiency, but that once the activity has been viewed in terms of maximal efficiency, there is in some sense no going back: new technologies will be developed that will make the hobby even more efficient until, I suppose, there is some kind of "efficiency death" a la stamp collecting. Some commentators pointed out that that they would go on two or three dates a night, all with individuals who shared common interests and hobbies. One user remarked that he would give a date 45 minutes to entertain him; if after 45 minutes he found he was bored, he would end the date, go back online and arrange for another date within a few hours. What I find interesting, (although deeply disturbing) is that the above commentator's reasoning is perfectly sound if unforgiving: 'Why waste any more time with an individual who does not interest you?' 'Surely it is easier to find someone new who is more attractive, more entertaining, and who shares more of my interests and hobbies?'

I now want to turn to a final source of leisurely activity, namely, that of "Facebooking." Facebook is interesting from an Ellulian analysis for two reasons: first, a user is responsible for enframing herself. What is interesting about this phenomenon, is that it is usually the Other (with a capital O) who is enframed—I view the stranger as a means to my end. Sartre, for example, discusses this tendency in terms of his notion of the "instrumental complex"—I cannot help but view the world, including the people within it, as objects of use for me.[9] I absorb them as part of my totality of narrative as Levinas might say. Of course there is a dialectical dimension to this relationship between self and Other as Sartre well-understood: "Hell is Other people", Sartre wrote because they enframe us as well.[10]

Ellul, too, is of course interested in establishing communities whereby we treat each other as neighbours and not as useful strangers who simply do things for us within the system. Facebook, I think Ellul would argue, does nothing in removing my perceived strangeness to others. If anything it acts as a powerful reductive agent in that I am become best known according to the pictures and comments I have made online. And certainly many corporations agree: scanning a job candidate's Facebook profile has become a better interview tool than the interview itself.

A second interesting aspect of Facebook and the hobby of "Facebooking" itself, is that text is clearly subordinate to the images contained within a person's profile. Most profiles simply consist of pictures with brief comments. Facebook, I would argue, is carving out new and mostly icon driven forms of subjectivity for 21st century persons. One presents one's totality as it were as an avatar---an artificial character created through uploaded images, comments, as well as 'likes' and 'dislikes' which is then interpreted and judged by others, namely, 'friends.' But the consequence of this technology, I am sure Ellul would argue, violates the sacredness of the word. Pictures are substituted for description. And acronyms like lol, omg etc. are nothing more than canned expressions that are substitutes for real dialogue. Facebook, as a technology, would appear to be a form of social media that Ellul would abhor.

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So what is to be done? Should one simply turn off and tune out from all forms of social media? Are we to retreat into some Luddian silent utopia?

I would suggest that "Facebooking" does have one advantage: it accelerates Ellul's call to practice non-selectivity. Non-selectivity is the act of seeking out others, very different from oneself and engaging these others in dialogue. In *The Ethics of Freedom*, Ellul writes: "We always meet those who resemble us, but the commandment…to love even enemies deconditions us. If we become capable of encountering and receiving all sorts and conditions of men, if we become capable of taking the initiative with all sorts and conditions of men, this can happen only if we are free enough not to select whom we will meet, not to pass prior judgment on whom we can meet and not to decide in advance whom we cannot meet.[11]

 Depending on the security settings for a profile, Facebook may be used to peer into very different worldviews. Indeed such behaviour, of looking at some stranger's profile has its own name. It is called "creeping." I think it is fair to say that most creeping is simply an exercise in idle curiosity.   The intention, in most cases I would suspect, is to peer into the 'world' of some other being. To have in a sense a God's eye view of a fellow person. We turn such a person into the Other. And the word, "creeping" corroborates this sense of otherness: I can see what you are up to, but you cannot see my profile and you do not know that I am spying on you. But notice the following phenomenon: the term reinforces the behaviour. If I am viewing someone's else's profile then I am aware I am "creeping" this person and therefore whatever pleasure I derive is derived once again from this taboo pleasure I receive from seeing while remaining unseen. I objectify the Other, just as I objectify the other by staring at someone getting dressed from the Sartrean keyhole.[12]

With all that said, an important question remains: is it not possible to creep without engaging in creepy behaviour? If I am using Facebook to peer into life-worlds very different from my own, not for the sake of puerile entertainment, but for the sake of really trying to understand someone I normally would not associate with, then am I not, in some minimal way, practicing non-selectivity? Furthermore does not this activity allow me to establish a closer tie with this person? Is it not the case that I am seeing that this person too has his or her ups and downs, her personal struggles, her triumphs? And while this idea, namely that others are like me, they too are struggling in this world and have the same fears as I do, is known, it is known very often in an abstract way. Viewing someone's profile in the above manner, however, somehow concretizes their identity and mine as well. I am drawn closer to my fellow human being. Such creepy behaviour allows me to bond with others whether they be friends or strangers insofar as I can see myself in their struggles and triumphs. The anonymous mass of individuals that Ellul greatly and rightly feared can be disassembled by "Facebooking" in this way, or so I suggest. And although this practice does not transform this mass into a community, still the world becomes a little less Other a little less strange for it is slowly transformed into a world of known strangers who are just like me.

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[1] For a succinct analysis of Ellul's view on technology, see Darrel Fasching, *The Thought of Jacques Ellul* (Toronto: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1981) chapter 2.

[2] For a succinct overview of Marcuse's position on technology, see Brian Lightbody, "Can We Truly Love That Which Is Fleeting? The Problem of Time in Marcuse's Eros and Civilization" in *The Florida Philosophical Review*, Summer Vol. X Issue 1, 2010 25-42.

[3] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, in *Karl Marx Friedrich Engels Collected Works* (Vol .5) (New York: International Publishers, 1976,) 47.

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[4] For a more detailed analysis of the activity of fishing as a hobby, see William James Booth, "Gone Fishing with Marx: Making Sense of Marx's Communism", *Political Theory*, Vol. 17, 2 May 1989. 205-222.

[5] For more on the ontology of holes, see David Lewis and Stephanie Lewis, 'Holes' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 48, 2, 1970, 206-212.

[6] Peter Ludlow, "The Many Problems with Online Dating's Radical Efficiency", *The Atlantic*, Jan. 2013 http://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2013/01/the-many-problems-with-online-datings-radical-efficiency/266796/

[7] Peter Ludlow, "The Many Problems with Online Dating's Radical Efficiency"

[8] Peter Ludlow, "The Many Problems with Online Dating's Radical Efficiency"

[9] Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. trans. Hazel Barnes. New York: Philosophical Library, 1956

[10] See Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit*

[11] Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom,* Translated and Edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976, 326.

[12] See Sartre*, Being and Nothingness*, 259.