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Technology in American History

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The Everlasting Two-Step

“As the desert thus announced the arrival of the *fin de siecle* with a staggering overture of bulldozers and gunfire, some old-timers – contemplating the rapidly diminishing distance between the solitude of the Mojave and the gridlock of suburban life – began to wonder out loud whether there was any alternative to Los Angeles after all.” (Davis). This quote, from City of Quartz: Excavation the Future in Los Angeles, addresses the idea of progress and technology in suburban life, and the role each plays in that life. Progress is inevitable; no matter how hard we try, humankind will progress throughout the ages. The word progress has a positive connotation; however, progress that has developed as a result of technology has not had entirely positive results. This essay will discuss how the impact of technology has impaired progress in the home and community.

Washing machine, dishwasher, vacuum cleaner, television, electric lamp, canned food, pre-made clothes, refrigerators. These are just a few of the inventions which changed the way humans interact with their house. There is no possible way to tell how all of these inventions changed the home in this short essay. However, it is possible to discuss the ones that describe the argument of progress the best. The home is a place of residence, a place where we go to relax, eat, sleep, and ironically go to work. In the book More Work for Mother, by Ruth Schwartz Cowan this topic is discussed very thoroughly. The author writes, “Most of the people who do housework do not get paid for it despite the fact that it

is, for many of them, a full-time job” (5). The author goes on to describe this sort of job in detail. “The housewife is the last jane-of-all trades in a world from which the jacks-of-all trades have more or less disappeared; she is expected to perform work that ranges from the most menial physical labor to the most abstract of mental manipulations and do it all without any specialized training” (5). The inventions that were mentioned at the opening of this paragraph were created with the idea of making a difficult job easier on the person doing them, but to no avail. All the inventions did was make it possible to do more things in a given time. Is this progress? The answer so far is maybe. The inventions did make the task at hand easier, but the inventions as a whole made many tasks that had never been required in the past come to fruition.

In today’s world a normal day at home would be as follows: Get up, take a shower, make breakfast, wash the clothes, vacuum the carpet, mow the lawn, drive to the grocery, make dinner, wash the dishes, and go to bed. Whereas in the past most of this would have been impossible or unneeded. A shower would be very difficult because there was no running water in houses. Taking a shower or a bath was something that was done infrequently and when it was done the whole family would take one at the same time, because it was a great deal of work to carry all the water into the house and heat it up. Washing clothes was something that was done maybe once a month because of the all work that was involved in keeping them clean. Vacuuming the carpet would be impossible because there was no vacuum cleaner; moreover there was no wall to wall carpet to keep clean on a daily basis. Mowing the lawn would also be unnecessary because a beautiful, green, fertilized lawn that must be kept in good order was not an issue. A drive to the grocery store, wow, where to begin with what is wrong with that concept? First of all,

there would have been no car to spend hours on end in traffic each week going from store to store. Even after the food from the grocery was purchased, there was no place to store it since refrigerators had yet to be invented. Most importantly, there was no canned food, TV dinners, or other pre-made storable food available. This is just a short list of the things that have changed over the years in a normal house worker's life.

It is obvious to see that no matter how much easier one of these tasks became, another one or two would show up to fill the free time which had been created. For every step forward there was one step back. Ruth Schwartz Cowan saw this occurrence as well and states, "We try to obtain the tools that will do the jobs that we want done; but, once obtained, the tools organize our work for us in ways that we may not have anticipated. People use tools to do work, but tools also define and constrain the ways in which it is possible and likely that people will behave."

The house is not the only place where technology has impacted human lives and progress; it is also evident in the community in which houses reside. The most influential of these technological advances is the automobile. This doesn't mean that the automobile by itself is the most influential. The technology that came along with the car, like roads and highways, was just as important. The automobile has brought cities to the brink of extinction, brought the United States of America to its knees because of the reliance on foreign oil, and helped destroy communities. Once highways were built, people could commute to work which meant it was possible to move away from the city and out into the suburbs. In these suburbs it was no longer commonplace to see your neighbor walking by to go to the store or to go to work. It was now more common to see them driving by in

their car with all the windows up to close off the outside world. The sense of a community was now gone in this fast paced world.

This universal sense of the un-community can be seen, for one, in the way the designs of houses have “progressed.” Back in the days of old, houses were designed for outside use, and outside involvement. There were large front yards for playing, large porches for sitting and talking to the neighbors, and walkways up to the house. Since the automobile has become an integral part of daily living, the habits for interacting in a community have changed. Today houses have small to no front porch, large rooms meant, not for living, but for storing automobiles, and large back yards for playing away from the dangerous, busy streets where the automobile resides. Interaction with others is no longer commonplace but unusual. The only time neighbors see each other is when they are pulling their cars into the garage and before the garage door closes, keeping the seclusion even more prominent.

It can be argued the things which have been described in this essay are a perfect example of progress. What was once impossible is now possible. What was once hard is now easy, but is it really? While technology of the past has changed life, it has not progressed it. For every step forward there is one step back. A step forward in saving time, a step backward in tasks to be done. A step forward in transportation, a step backward in social interaction. Technology and progress are forever caught dancing an unbreakable two-step danced to the “overture of bulldozers and gunfire.” While the dance of the ages continues to the overture of technology and progress, humankind is stuck in the middle waiting for one of them to lead.