Trickster Fiddles with Informatics:
The Social Impact of Technological Marketing Schemes

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ABSTRACT

"Information is power if and only if you have the knowledge to know what it means, the will to use it, the ability to apply it, and access to a channel of communication" [1]. We see this in current fields of research as varied as Marketing, Philosophy, and Communications Studies, and in current issues about who owns and controls technology. But a character from a far older tradition helps explain many problems in society today with technology: Trickster, the mythical character who confuses fact with fiction, makes good use of *Technoism*, a term coined by Davis [2] in 1999 to denote suppressed skepticism and blind compliance with the chaotic and uncontrolled progression of technology in our lives that leads to a dangerous split between the "haves" and "have-nots" of the technology world. This paper will discuss the use of Technoism to give the public and users of technology a false sense of power and control over their lives when in fact they are being duped into a financially motivated campaign of consumer exploitation. The paper makes some recommendations for establishing a conscience in the use of technology.

INTRODUCTION

Trickster, a character who appears in different forms in most mythologies, is usually a mischievous deity who breaks the rules. Deliberately confusing fact and fiction, Trickster makes of the world an opportunity for artifice and recreation to suit his purposes [3]. It can be difficult to distinguish between the myth of crafty Trickster and the reality of clever Marketer promoting to an unsuspecting public as we watch the tyranny of technology as a survival necessity convince us that we must have the latest gadget and supposed time-saver, assuring us that we will be losers if we do not invest in the most up-to-date technological wonder. The latest example of this can be seen online in Apple's iPhone, "combining three amazing products – a revolutionary mobile phone, a widescreen iPod with touch controls, and a breakthrough Internet communications device with desktop-class email, web browsing, maps, and searching – into one small and lightweight handheld device. iPhone also introduces an entirely new user interface based on a large multi-touch display and pioneering new software, letting you control everything with just your fingers. So it ushers in an era of software power and sophistication never before seen in a mobile device, completely redefining what you can do on a mobile phone" [4].

If U. S. President John F. Kennedy was right forty-five years ago that technology has no conscience of its own, it is even more so today, with increasingly complex and able machines available to process the increasing amount of information now deluging us. As we manipulate e-mail, a cell phone, instant messaging, and a Blackberry while simultaneously signing on to check out Face-Book and You-Tube and Google a quick definition, interrupted occasionally by the ringing of the landline telephone while the television competes with the stereo for our attention, we may perhaps be forgiven for forgetting that technology's ultimate purpose was not to be an end in itself. Indeed today's elaborate division of labor has been said to have the purpose of keeping any one worker in the technology sector away from any sense of responsibility for its impact on the final user [5].

Technology has good and powerful uses, particularly with respect to information processing in an age of too much information, and it will continue to affect our lives in a positive manner, but its impact on those lives when exploited by clever marketers reminds us of the dark side of the proliferation of information and the accompanying increase in the use of technological gadgets to try to gain a sense of control. This paper will discuss Trickster's use of the term *Technoism* hand-in-glove with Marketer to give users of technology a false sense of control over their lives when in fact it is the marketers of technologically-based consumer goods who are in control. The paper

makes some recommendations for establishing a conscience in the use of technology.

TRICKSTER TOYS WITH TECHNOISM

Beverly Davis introduced the term Technoism to the business world at the 2001 conference on *Emerging Issues in Business and Technology* [6] and the authors have explored its use by Trickster at an EIBT conference. The term derives from the same family of "isms" that includes racism and sexism, and denotes a suppressed skepticism and blind compliance with the chaotic and uncontrolled progression of technology that leads those who "have" the latest technological gadgets to look down on and discount as less able in all other areas of life those who "have not" such gadgets. Trickster's role, working with Marketer, is to convince an unsuspecting public that they will be left behind if they do not purchase the latest gadget, silencing any critics of uncontrolled technological progression by creating a fear that they will be ostracized by the techno-savvy if they dare to raise a voice of criticism. Slade called this the *social cascade*, where "a few people engage in certain acts and then other people soon follow these leaders … either in an effort to be right or simply to gain social approval [and] eventually a majority of the population commits to the new behavior" [7]. Technoism becomes a great tool for Trickster because through its use, he manages to convince us that as human beings we can transform the chaotic into a normalizing and comforting illusion [8].

This is not a rant against technology, for in an age of information processing as complex as we face today, technology is a necessity in our lives. Where we see the work of Trickster is in what marketing professionals have taught us to accept as normal: poor product quality, unreadable instructions, excessive packaging, non-recyclable components, non-interchangeable parts, and a pathetic lack of customer service. Furthermore, these expensive gadgets often require acquisition of further technology in order to use them properly and are often outdated at their time of purchase. Meanwhile, marketers delude us in captivating television advertisements with a comforting promise of how technology will save us time and help us gain power and control over our lives. Trickster and Marketer convince us that technology offers a normalizing of chaos when in actuality technology has become the source of much of the chaos in our lives, often simply adding another layer of useless information.

One of our most valued commodities today is time, and Trickster and Marketer try to convince us that we can manipulate time with technological products. Common marketing ploys found in the *Fortune Technology Guide* taunt readers with phrases such as: "Power and Productivity" ask, "When is good enough not good enough?" and convince us that "What You Want Is What You Need." Marketers define those things without which we will lose out in the game of life in terms that promise Groundbreaking Innovation, Impressive Performance, and Extreme Systems. They use increasingly complex phrases, meaningless to the general public, like Digital Zoom and Hyper-Threading Technology, hoping to overwhelm us with a sense that we must get to the store and buy whatever it is that is being advertised [9].

Trickster and Marketer also convince us that technological products are the answer to our need for control. A simple radio is now advertised to let you "Stay one step ahead of Mother Nature." It is no longer enough to have a remote control; we now need an "infrared remote extender." No longer happy with just a television and a DVD player (Trickster assumes you are not so far behind that you still use a VCR), you now need a Bell ExpressVu Model 5800 that "combines an integrated digital satellite receiver and a Personal Video Recorder so you get the most out of your TV viewing" [10]. One ad even tries to excuse its use of such phrases with the clarifying statement, "In plain language, it means your [product] will deliver amazing performance" [11].

Trickster does not limit himself only to technology in technological devices. Advertisements for products in current magazines show us a hardware store that no longer has a paint counter but a "Color Solutions Center," a moisturizing cream that uses the technology of lipids, an anti-aging cream whose ingredient that stimulates the synthesis of collagen has been proven through "in vitro" tests, and a refrigerator that talks, with the reassurance that now we can "keep everybody in the loop at the touch of a button."

TRICKSTER TACKLES PRODUCT LIFE CYCLE

As competition increased dramatically in the 1990s and consumers became better educated, knowledge-based industries particularly sought new ways of conceptualizing competition [12]. One solution was to know what consumers would need before they knew it themselves. Researching why marketing research tends to play such a small part in new product development, the Marketing Science Institute concluded that one major reason is that consumers cannot ask for products they do not know exist [13]. In his recommendations for finding "really new products," Lehmann comments that although "the best technology is unknown," once found, it will "spawn new markets for add-ons, supporting products, and accessories," making the search worthwhile [14].

Trickster watched this search and found an exceptional new toy in the personal computer. Like technology itself, the personal computer has been a boon to life-style improvement in the last thirty years, but it also has brought us to a state where we frequently are unable to

function without it. Donald Norman, a cognitive scientist who has made a career of examining technology from the point of view of the everyday user, offers as examples people's increasing lack of ability to do basic arithmetic skills because of the electronic calculator [15, p.75], and the plane that can no longer be landed when its high-level systems fail [16].

Traditionally, as product life-cycles evolved, we expected and usually received better quality, more focus on improvement, and more value for our consumer dollars [17]. Yet technological innovation seems to violate these principles as Trickster and Marketer continue to sell us newer, faster, more complicated products. Walter Kirn put Old Economy products into New Economy terms when he asked us to consider what it would be like if "One-inch-thick steel would only be one-inch thick on weekend nights and holidays. During weekday business hours, it would only be one-third of an inch, and if one carried the steel outside one's own area, it would cost six times as much. Refrigerators would chill eggs and butter for only three or four hours before they crashed and required a call to an 800 number" [18].

The average age of durable goods in developed countries has been declining over the last decades, mainly due to deliberate reduction of product age through reduced durability, difficulty of repair, and obsolescence brought about by the very technology that created the products in the first place [19]. For most products, lifestyle changes lead to a demand for better quality goods and a greater emphasis on environmental issues of recycling and pollution. But the lifestyle for innovative goods is one of "fast consumption and quick replacement" [20]. The consumer decides to get rid of a product not because it is no longer reliable or efficient but simply because a newer product is being introduced, and the consumer's perception of that reliability and efficiency is greatly influenced by the marketer, whose main job often appears to be to get consumers to discard and replace goods.

All this is rich territory for Trickster who delights in disrupting the life-cycle of technology. In a traditional product life-cycle, Innovators and Early Adopters [21] are the first purchasers, willing to pay more to be first to experience it. Later Adopters wait until the product is a little less risky, not quite so expensive, and provides more value and convenience. With technology, however, the cycle never completes. Technology innovators continually seek to meet Early Adopter needs, and technology process improvement is never achieved. Rather than making a product that will truly meet the needs of the customer, quality and customer satisfaction are sacrificed for a continuous flow of "gotta-have" gadgets.

The effective component of this disruption of product life-cycle is the Late Adopter, who typically waits until a product is proven, considerably less expensive, and much more convenient. But Trickster uses the Technoism phenomenon to encourage Late Adopters to buy products with little value and quality that are out-dated as soon as they leave the store. Faced with the threat of being left behind in the fast-paced technology age, most typical Late Adopters jump on board without considering proven functionality, quality issues, or value.

TRICKSTER AND TECHNOLOGICAL CHAOS

With the media convincing the public they need every possible technological tool to stay in the loop and each tool being touted as better than the last, some have pondered whether technology exists "solely for its own sake" [15, p. ix]. For example, the top of the business ladder of success is achieved only by those climbers who conform and "stay in the loop." Technoism silences the ambitious who are now wired to the office "24/7," creating a blind compliance with the concept that in the new economy, everyone must be connected to work at all times. Here Trickster tricks us twice: employees are convinced they must be available through technology at all hours in order to serve the customer, yet customer service is at an all-time low. The American Consumer Service Index is down to 72.9%, as customer service becomes a tangle of telephones, e-mail, and websites where the customer feels lied to and betrayed [22].

In a survey of 27,000 *PC World* readers about PC support [23], satisfaction was at an all-time low, with the majority of complaints centered on longer waits on hold and less knowledgeable technicians. Technoism flourishes here as the public, now dependent on technological advances, accepts poor service as a fact of modern life and assumes that any problems in its use arise from their own lack of expertise. Ellen Goodman, a nationally syndicated columnist, complained recently that it has come to the point where every upgrade actually downgrades the quality of life and where watching television now requires the training and skill of a pilot at the controls of an Airbus [24]. Dell Computer reports having many more novice users requiring more assistance with more complex computers [25], yet customer service appears to be deteriorating as the Austin Texas Better Business Bureau reports a 48% increase in complaints about Dell's technical support [26].

Trickster grins ear-to-ear as Marketer convinces more and more low-end consumers, Late Adopters, to upgrade to new and better products, and to attribute any problems they experience to their own personal lack of technical knowledge. Goodman suggests that perhaps technology should be making equipment to fit the consumer instead of the other way around, but this would violate principles for marketing scientific goods set out as early as 1933 at the Chicago World's Fair, where the motto was, "Science

finds, industry applies, man conforms" [15, p. ix]. It would leave no motivation for marketers whose main task seems to be to continue to encourage us to purchase new technology to manage our old technology, a concept known as "buying up" and observed in "Technology-on-Technology" (T-on-T) purchases. Trickster laughs again as we continue to purchase more technological goods to manage already existing ones in order to make our lives even more efficient. There is no better example of this than the e-mail phenomenon. A typical worker, from receptionist to CEO, handles an average of 204 messages per day in e-mail, answering machine, and voice-mail [27]. One CEO admitted he deletes 80% of his e-mails without reading them.

Trickster laughs up his sleeve as he mixes us up, gleefully watching as Marketer claims that technology will save time and help us gain power and control over our increasingly technologically controlled lives, while all the while the increase in technology itself contributes hugely to our feeling out of control. With wireless technology (T-on-T) tying us to the office or to using our home-time to answer e-mail, as many CEOs confess to doing, the exploding use of wireless e-mail devices generates even more e-mail which creates a need for T-on-T-on-T to manage the explosion of the additional e-mail created through T-on-T [28]. Marketers now even offer ways to control our lives electronically while driving our cars, including dashboard PCs. There are now so many electronic gadgets in cars that there is talk of legislation to limit them for the sake of road safety.

NORMALIZING, COMFORTING ILLUSIONS

The feeling of loss of control over circumstances can be frightening. Technology was supposed to make our lives easier. Marketers promoted Personal Data Assistants and other planning devices as a way of organizing our lives. Automated operator systems were designed to improve customer service so we would spend less time "on hold." Laptop computers promised us "24/7 take-home-work" capabilities so we could gain control of our work projects. Technology has transitioned us into a "knowledge era" where almost limitless information is at the fingertips of anyone, anywhere, anytime, yet given the small black transformer necessary to connect each of these devices to a source of electricity, we often cannot even find wall space to plug them all in [15, p. 66].

Again we find Trickster working with Marketer to create an illusion of gaining control by acquiring more goods. Too many e-mails? Switch to virtual private networks to make communications even faster. Too many voice-mails? Purchase the Voice-Mail Notification System. No time to visit aging parents and let them hear their grandchildren's laughter? Purchase a picture frame from Radio Shack with a built-in ten-second computerized

message. Trickster is right there, using Technoism to put fear into the hearts of anyone who might question whether faster technology is the answer to the stress in their lives, silencing critics and tricking the public into faster lifestyles requiring the consumption of more goods and convincing any wary consumers that they will be seen as techno-phobic if they do not buy those goods.

It is no wonder that health care systems are staggering under the costs of treating stress-related illness and companies are losing millions of dollars each year in person-hours as employees take off sick or succumb to alcoholism and drug abuse. In many ways, today's excessive stress is about too much information from too many sources, and the subsequent sense of loss of control. An astonishing fact in a 2002 American Demographics survey is that 69% of 1,300 full-time working adults admit to staying in contact with the office while on vacation. Whether at work, at home, or on vacation, corporate ladder-climbers, even while complaining about the stress and increased workloads attributable to technological advancement, accept each new and improved technological intrusion into their personal lives as a normal part of how a society functions. Technoism imposes a deafening silence on those who might complain, and Trickster once again helps Marketer to allow consumers to help exploit themselves.

Somewhere during this massive transformation, technology managed to gain for itself the control we sought over our lives. Our gadgets require constant attention, from changing batteries to synchronizing all our various electronic toys [15, p. 70], and the very tools we embraced to help us maintain power and control in our lives have turned on us and now control us. Trickster, hand in hand with clever Marketer, has turned the tables on us while we were busy answering our e-mails.

NEED FOR EVALUATION OF TECHNOLOGY

Technology has enriched our lives in many ways; few could dispute the technological benefits of communicating globally in seconds, accessing the world through the Internet, or being able to process the amount of information we are required to process every day. Without critical assessment of its development, however, technology becomes a chaotic intrusion in our lives offering us only an illusion of control and normalcy, an illusion never challenged by skepticism because Trickster continues to use Technoism to fool us into believing that we are keeping ahead of the game. But just as the Industrial Era ushered in workplace regulation and union demands for safer and healthier environments, so too might InfoTech pollution actually help to highlight employee well-being issues that never existed before, such as computer stress and the incredible current level of invasion into our private lives [29].

In 1972, the U.S. Congress established the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) to help deal with problems of adaptation to technology but it was shut down by downsizing in 1995. There are movements now to revive a similar kind of office [30], and we recommend this for all countries: a workable technology-assessment process that can effectively bridge the gaping chasm between science/technology and policy. Vary Coates, former Senior Associate for the Office of Technology Assessment, predicts growing public indignation about technology's unanticipated effects and suggests that people will eventually become unwilling to leave all decisions to technical experts and will increasingly expect governments to intervene on their behalf [31]. Would a technology assessment system reveal the deception of Trickster and his embrace, and ours, of Technoism? Will exploitation by Marketer be managed and regulated? Will critics be allowed to speak out against workplace intrusion in private lives through technology? Will this lead to the end of Technoism? A strong government-backed office may be our best hope.

CONCLUSION

Technology has a powerful and positive effect on our lives, but its impact when exploited by clever marketers shows us the dark side of the technological world. Trickster has been enjoying our preoccupation with new technology for a long time. Pascal noted as far back as 1670 how intrigued humankind is with new things. Thomas Beddoes wrote in 1832, "Consumption may be regarded as a vast pit-fall, situated on the high road of life, which we have no sense enough of our common interest to agree to fill up, or fence round; heedless fathers and mothers are for ever guiding their sons and daughters directly into it" [32]. By the end of the 1800s, people already were complaining of information overload as "a serious problem" [33]. Maslow observed in his studies of Sociology that once basic needs were met, it was possible for people to buy more goods to satisfy higher level needs. Vance Packard had already noted in 1955 the "over-consumption and the anti-durability bias of a mass consumption society" [34].

Technology started as soon as our earliest ancestors picked up a stone to use as a tool. It is important to remember the actual meaning of technology. Even technology-driven Wikipedia defines it as "a species' use and knowledge of tools and crafts" [35]. It is not technology itself that is to be feared but what we as societies make of it, and, while recognizing the tremendous contribution of technology to our lives, we need to recognize that somewhere on the road of technological advancement, we have allowed technology to take control of our lives, bringing about the very chaos we once attempted to control through its use. Trickster

uses our fear of technology and of being seen as technologically ignorant to work with clever and exploitative Marketer to convince us that we must have the newest and best technological gadget simply to keep up. Early Adopters need little convincing but the typical Late Adopters are foregoing quality and value and embracing the inundation of technological progression in a rush to avoid being seen as ignorant of the great gifts of technology. It is all-or-nothing with Trickster, who uses Technoism not only to convince an unsuspecting public that they must purchase more goods, but also to silence critics with the fear of being labelled techno-phobic when these digital purchases turn out to offer poor quality and substandard customer service.

Technology is barely sociable now [15, p. 134], and if we are going to live in harmony with it as the gadgets gain even more power over our lives, there must be methods to assess it. Voices calling for government-backed offices to adequately assess technology must be heeded. The public must overcome the effects of Technoism and speak out for more evaluation and regulation. We need formal processes by which to examine, analyze, anticipate, and offer guidance to the public so they can utilize positive examples of available technology and make educated decisions about technology in their lives. Successful evaluation and regulation of technology render Trickster powerless by exposing Marketer's exploitation of consumers and by demanding quality technological products while making his friend, Technoism, a thing of the past.

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