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Slaves to Technology March 08.

In an earlier life amongst other follies I used to write computer programs. Partly I did it as an ego-trip; I also did it out of frustration, because the available software programs were quite inadequate. One particular thing that riled me was that to run a membership program for organisations I was a member of one could only get a program called D-base which was horribly inflexible and even with only a handful of entries took ages to run. There are lots of vastly better ones available now.

I still run one group of my own programs now, because they happen to do exactly what I want and because I can adapt them to new requirements with reasonable ease. With new or recent computers they run quite fast. Most users don't realise. however, that many if not most of Microsoft's programs are still based on their original systems which were first introduced 30-odd years ago.

After this tedious introduction, let me tell you my gripe. Recently when running one of my database programs, it stopped in the middle of whatever it thought it was doing and told me "permission denied" Just like that. Now, if you were told this by a cop or a shopkeeper, depending on your size and his, and your state of health, you would offer to punch him on the nose. "Permission denied", indeed. Why do I need to ask for the permission of a machine to do what I told it to do, and what it had done many times before? And that isn't the only insult these machines will hurl at you. Whenever the machine feels like it, it tells me that "This program has performed an illegal operation and will be shut down". I was brought up to think that an illegal operation always referred to an abortion, and telling me this amounted to suggesting that I had got the silly machine pregnant.

Whatever goes wrong with these machines, the suggestion – no, the insinuation – is always that it is the user who has done something unspeakable and that he/she should have known better. For instance, the most common problem is that the silly machine hangs in the middle of doing something and you can only get out of it by pressing the reset button. But instead of apologising to you, it gives you a longwinded set of instructions as to how you can avoid getting this message next time. No wonder users tend to want to commit violence on this otherwise dumb machine. Most of the time you know perfectly well what happened, such as a power failure, and the superfluous instructions only serve to get your back up..

Getting back to the story of the denied permission. Every novice computer user knows that if such a hang-up occurs you should shut the program down and try to restart the machine . Not me. Having got the annoying message, I insisted on finding out just why this monstrosity was denying me permission, and what the permission was that I had to apply for. To do this took me three hours. I then found there was a program called an "Unlocker" that would do it for me. By this time it had got late and I decided to shut the thing down and get on to the problem next day.

When I got back next day, the problem was no longer there. You might have guessed it. Shutting the computer down for the night had actually cleared the fault. Yes, I know, that's what any novice could and would have told me, and I probably would not have believed it. It would be silly to say that I will know better next time, because in the back of my mind I seem to remember that I had the same problem years ago and found the same remedy, but that was then and this is now.

So far I have mentioned only trivial things. There are, I believe, much more serious examples where the existence of machines has profoundly changed people's attitudes.

It seems that we will let machines or inanimate objects insult us where we would never permit people to do this. I remember how during the massive Moratorium demonstrations sometimes tens of thousands of people were brought to a halt by a red traffic light even though the streets were not functioning for road traffic. Even more ludicrously, I remember, during one of the early women's demonstrations, a long queue of women outside the women's loo in the Carlton Gardens while the men's toilet stood deserted. In this case I had to point out to women in the queue that some of the facilities in the men's' were quite suitable for women, after which they took over. All that had stopped them was this magic board labelled "Men". In each case the inanimate authority of a label, no matter how inappropriate, took precedence over people's very real needs.

Actually, you could make use of this deference to authority. In one demonstration against ASIO we blocked access to their street with "Road Closed" signs and council barriers. To our great satisfaction and amusement we watched (from the sidelines) he powerful ASIO bureaucracy detailing some of their personnel to divert ASIO traffic into side streets while their underground garage stood empty. The date we chose was April Fools day, but the guardians of Australian security didn't twig the hoax even when all the television crews turned up to film the shemozzle. These people from a so-called Intelligence agency didn't have the intelligence to ask themselves or the television crews where they got the information about the road closure hoax. This means that in any future revolution rather than form human barriers against police and army. It would be far more effective to divert the tanks and armoured vehicles with "Road Closed" signs.

What has all this to do with technology ? It is my firm belief that the almost limitless alienation which now pervades society is almost directly related to the new superstitions related to the decline of common sense. Whereas the original Luddites had no compunction about smashing what they considered counter-productive technology, the thought of damaging machinery nowadays is beyond the pale. Whenever there is a demonstration somewhere, a broken window rates far more highly than a broken demonstrators arm in media reports. Indeed the very word violence is used to refer to "violence" to property rather than violence against a protester.. This is well known to all of us who have seen violence inflicted on human beings by the forces of law and order.

Violence is nowadays inflicted on dissenters by technological means rather than old-fashioned brutality. Starting with rubber bullets which can knock out your eyes and kill you, and the use of capsicum sprays in confined spaces, a favourite with Australian police forces, we move to electrical torture routinely applied and water torture favoured by the CIA, sensory deprivation which was widely used against Irish Republican prisoners as well as intolerable white noise, there is a whole gamut of technological horror inflicted on helpless victims.

This technological violence is backed up by an entire science which comes up with ever new inhumanities. As was shown in the Nazi death camps, there is nowadays no limit to the extent in which the very humanity of perceived enemies can be denied by technological means. And a population which can accept thousands of deaths and mutilations by motorcars, constant surveillance by closed-circuit television routine telephone tapping for no reason and the wiping out of men, women and children from the air with the pretence that they are evil terrorists has now been made accomplice in an alienated world in which technology turns terror into a video game.