

## Response Paper to *Technology Matters: Questions to Live With* by David Nye

~4 page response paper (not including references), double spaced

The purpose of this assignment is for you to consider thoughtfully the arguments and ideas put forth by Nye in *Technology Matters* and for you to articulate and support your own independent assessment of the ideas and how they relate (or no) to the “real world” (your world!). *Simply summarizing or restating Nye’s ideas is insufficient.* In other words, you need a thesis.

Then you need to support your thesis using evidence. *Simply stating an unsupported opinion is insufficient.* Evidence can come in the form of quotations or paraphrased examples from the text, counter-arguments/examples/quotations from other sources (from other classes?), including your own life experiences, among much else. The point is that the reader needs to know what you are basing your conclusions/opinions/arguments on, can evaluate whether the evidence itself is valid, and can evaluate whether they would interpret those same pieces of evidence in a similar manner.

You are not required to consult sources other than the text, but you are free to do so. You may, for example, use other academic/scholarly sources, journalistic media, etc. You may use books you are reading for another course. Generally, avoid blogs and other personally published material, unless you can verify the identity, expertise/professional experience of its author and deem the author trustworthy. If you include others’ ideas, quotations, examples, etc., you must cite them.

Choose one of the following ideas presented by Nye on which to focus your thesis. I have provided some **broad ideas**; you will need to define your focus/thesis **much more narrowly.** It’s a short paper – take a small bite and chew it well!

- a) “Technology,” Jose Ortega y Gasset argued, “is the production of superfluities – today as in the Paleolithic age. That is why animals are atechanical; they are content with the simple act of living.” Humans in contrast, continually redefine their necessities to include more. Necessity is often not the mother of invention. In many cases, it surely has been just the opposite, and invention has been the mother of necessity. When humans possess a tool, they excel at finding new uses for it. The tool often exists before the problem to be solved. (Nye, p 2)

*Brainstorming: You might consider cases where this seems to be true, why new needs are created, the notion of “need” vs. “want”, the environmental impacts of superfluities, ...*

- b) “Much of what seems the venerable survival of ancient customs turns out to have been shaped or even created wholesale by nineteenth-century nationalists intent of establishing a pedigree for a certain cultural group... Technologies are related to this process in several ways. First, it is often the case that technologies have been used to disrupt the social fabric and to undermine customs, creating a need for new, invented traditions as substitutes for lost routines and undermined social patterns. Indeed, Hobsbawm and Ranger argue that the invention of tradition will “occur more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which ‘old’ traditions had been designed.”” (Nye, p 85)

*Brainstorming: You might consider what individuals or societies might “get out of” invented/ing traditions in the face of rapid change, the motivation for modern interest in older traditions, current examples of technologies that have been used to disrupt customs, disrupted traditions you have tried to recapture or will try to propagate (e.g., with your children), ...*

- c) “We need to consider the questions that technology raises because we have many possible futures, some far less attractive than others. We must “try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue.” As Rilke suggests, we

may then “gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answers.” By refusing to let any ensemble of objects define our world as already given, we can continue to choose how technology matters.” (Nye, 226)

*Brainstorming: You might consider whether and who has choices (individuals, towns, countries, corporations, noone), if/why choice matters, whether/how you make choices about technologies, the notion of an ongoing discourse involving “living with” (far into some distant day) questions, whether the important questions about technology have changed over time, ...*

- d) Wolfgang Schivelbusch presciently observed that “the more efficient the technology, the more catastrophic its destruction when it collapses. There is an exact ratio between the level of the technology with which nature is controlled, and the degree of severity of its accidents.” The railroad usually is safer than most forms of travel. But when a speeding train goes off the track, the passenger has little chance to avoid serious harm. The greater the speed, power, and steam pressure, the more destructive a malfunction becomes. If an axle breaks on a farm wagon, it may cause minor injuries; when an axle on a railway engine broke outside Paris in 1842, many passengers died.” (Nye, p 163)

*Brainstorming: You might consider cases where this seems to be true, people’s perception of risk where accident probabilities/frequencies are low but severe when they occur (e.g., train, airplane) as opposed to situations where probabilities/frequencies are much higher but often less severe (e.g., automobile), ...*

- e) “We can distinguish an invented online personality from a personality developed and shared with relatives and close friends. One need not be a trained philosopher to grasp the difference between building a wood fire and relying on automatic heating. The widespread yearning for contact with remote and uninhabited places or with wilderness strongly suggests that millions of people do not snuggle comfortably inside the cocoon of a technological world. Rather, they oscillate between embracing its conveniences, even wallowing in its pleasures and fleeing its sensory overload or rejecting its inauthenticity.” (Nye, p 207)

*Brainstorming: You might consider this tension, whether it is necessary, who feels it/who doesn’t (if you’ve never experienced remote places/wilderness, would you be drawn there?), whether technology is increasingly blurring the real and the virtual, whether/why blurring occurs differentially for different people, ...*