

Winston Churchill and Technology
“Mankind is Confronted by One Supreme Task”
by Winston S. Churchill • *News of the World*, 14 November 1937
A lesson plan by Christopher M. Schwarz

Class time: two class periods

- Objective 1:** Students should be able to list specific benefits of modern technology according to Churchill.
- Objective 2:** Students should be able to list specific potential dangers of modern technology according to Churchill.
- Objective 3:** Students should be able to summarize Churchill’s arguments as to whether humans have the ability to control technological change.
- Objective 4:** Students should be able to compare and contrast Churchill’s views with those of other writers on technology and its impact.
- Objective 5:** Students should be able to explain their own views about the benefits/dangers of technology both orally and in writing at the end of this lesson.

Guiding questions:

What were Churchill’s views on the benefits and potential problems of rapid technological change in the world?

Does humankind have the ability to cope with the change? Why or why not? Compare Churchill’s view with those of other writers on the role of technology in our lives. (suggested readings listed below)

MATERIALS

Photocopies of Churchill’s article, “Mankind is Confronted by One Supreme Task,” pp 5-8

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE LESSON PLAN:

- Part 1: Introduction to the lesson plan
- Part 2: Background for teachers
- Part 3: Preparation for teaching the lesson
- Part 4: Suggested activities
- Part 5: Assessment
- Part 6: Extending the lesson
- Part 7: Student handout of Churchill’s article on pages 5-8

PART 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE LESSON PLAN

While Winston Churchill is best known as the leader of Great Britain during World War II, he was also a well-known writer who commented on a variety of different issues including the role of technology in modern life. The purpose of this lesson is to investigate and to discuss Churchill's views on technological change in his lifetime and to ponder whether he felt technology is beneficial for humankind or a serious threat to our existence. This is a discussion-based lesson using a series of questions about Churchill's article *Mankind is Confronted by One Supreme Task* (see p.5).

PART 2: BACKGROUND FOR TEACHERS

From the earliest stages of industrialization and rapid technological change in Great Britain and subsequently the United States, there were voices of concern and dissent regarding the impact of these changes in everyday life. In the first decade of the 19th century in Great Britain, a group of loosely organized anti-industry men, largely made up of weavers who had lost their livelihood to the faster production of the machine, violently opposed the new factory system in England. Known as the Luddites, these groups attacked factories and sometimes factory owners in areas of England. See the following documents for an overview of the movement:

<http://town.hall.org/radio/LuddLand/whatsa.html>

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/What-the-Luddites-Really-Fought-Against.html?c=y&page=2>

Even in modern society there are authors and professors who actively question and sometimes oppose the increasingly rapid technological change in our society. These writers and teachers are sometimes referred to as *Neo-* (or new) *Luddites*. See the following document for an overview of the movement written by one of the foremost *Neo-Luddite* thinkers, Kirkpatrick Sale:

<http://greenfield.fortunecity.com/crawd/213/lessons.html>

Churchill's article *Mankind is Confronted by One Supreme Task* is attached to this lesson, see page 5, below.

PART 3: PREPARATION FOR TEACHING THIS LESSON

Teachers should familiarize themselves with the history and philosophy of the Luddites and Neo-Luddites using the sources listed above. Teachers should be able to summarize the critical aspects of each group's arguments in a brief note-taking activity to introduce Churchill's ideas before assigning his essay on technology. If primary source analysis is not commonly practiced

in your lesson plans you may want to refer to the following sites to help your students incorporate the necessary skills for document analysis:

<http://memory.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/>

or

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/browse/makesense/>

PART 4: SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

First, teachers should present the basic arguments of the Luddites or Neo-Luddites. This could be done in a half-period lecture or note-taking session. Or, teachers could create a document paraphrasing the key Luddite/Neo-Luddite arguments and hand it out to students. The teacher can then clarify the key points of the documents through a question and answer session. Teachers can tailor the amount of information used from the documents above to the ability/reading level of their students. The key ideas could easily be summarized to suit various grade levels. Teachers should take care to assure students grasp the essential points prior to the next step.

Second, Churchill's article *Mankind is Confronted by One Supreme Task* should be assigned as outside reading for the next class period. Again, the whole article could be assigned for Honors/AP level students. For regular level students, portions of the article that encapsulate his view could be assigned. Teachers can list the questions that appear in the *Guiding questions* section of this lesson plan to direct the student's analysis of the essay. Third, the next class period should be devoted to a discussion of the article in response to the *Guiding questions*. Teachers should encourage students to refer to specific passages from the essay as they discuss benefits, dangers and future uses of technology.

PART 5: ASSESSMENT

An in-class or homework assigned essay should assess the student's knowledge of the key elements of Churchill's view of technology and its relation to *Luddism/Neo-Luddism*. Can Churchill be considered to be a Luddite? Additionally, the assignment should require students to explain their own views on these various arguments and discuss whether they view rapid technological change in the same manner as Churchill and the *Luddites/Neo-Luddites*. For regular level students, the essay could require a comparison of Churchill's views to real world issues resulting from continuous rapid technological change.

PART 6: EXTENDING THE LESSON

Ironically, the internet is a treasure-trove for anti-technology writings. A simple Google search on the keyword “Neo-Luddite” returns nearly 400,000 hits! Students could be required to visit one of these sites to assess the information and views provided on the role of technology in modern life. Additionally, the topic of technological change and its potential positive and negative impacts on society is a near daily topic in American and British newspapers. Students could be required to find an article and explain its relation to Churchill’s views.

Thoughts and Adventures, a collection of Churchill’s essays brought back into print in 2009, contains three related essays: “Mass Effects in Modern Life,” “Fifty Years Hence” and “Shall We Commit Suicide?”

Churchill, Winston. *Thoughts and Adventures: Churchill Reflects on Spies, Cartoons, Flying, and the Future*. Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2009

PART 7: STUDENT HANDOUT OF “MANKIND IS CONFRONTED BY ONE SUPREME TASK”

The article begins on page 5.

MANKIND IS CONFRONTED BY ONE SUPREME TASK

By Winston S. Churchill

New of the World, 14 November 1937

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In an earlier article I have tried to outline some of the more formidable scientific powers which now rest in the hands of man, or are about to be seized by him. Clearly, if things go on as they are, the human race is about to be subjected to processes of change more rapid and more fundamental than anything that has occurred in all history. In the next fifty years mankind will make greater progress in mastering and applying natural forces than in the last million years or more. That is a fearsome thought. And the first question we must ask ourselves is, 'Are we fit for it? Are we worthy of all these exalted responsibilities? Can we bear this tremendous strain?'

Hitherto everyone has eagerly welcomed scientific discovery. We see the mass of the nation in the enjoyment of so many comforts and facilities of which the rich and powerful never dreamed a hundred years ago. We travel with incredible speed. Already we grumble if aeroplanes only go at 120 miles an hour. We speak to each other across dark distances by waves in the ether. Millions of people own and enjoy motor-cars and motor-bicycles. The poor man in his cottage can hear each night concerts or news from every capital in Europe. The cinema not only presents the millions with lively amusement, but also revives the pageant of the past and portrays the finest stories the world has ever told.

Behind these incidents, which could be multiplied indefinitely, lie grand, marvellous discoveries like chloroform and antiseptics, and all the other improved methods of preserving health and curing disease. Naturally, we have sat grateful to science for these inestimable gifts, which increase the pleasures and reduce the pains of human existence.

But science does not only concern itself with beneficent discoveries. The whole apparatus of scientific slaughter on a vast scale is being perfected and expanded day and night. The wars of the future will involve whole nations. Men and women, young and old, all will be under the flail. Not only shells and bombs will fall upon our heads, but poison gas will burn and stifle us. Even pestilence may be spread far and wide, and met by preventive inoculation. A hideous kind of warfare may be waged by scientists commanding armies of innumerable microbes which will fight for and against us in the battlefield of our own unhappy bodies.

When we reflect upon these shocking possibilities we may not feel so proud and happy about all that science has done and is going to do in the lifetime of most of those who will read this page. The achievements of science in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were not necessary to the happiness, virtue or glory of mankind. Endless possibilities of moral and mental improvement were open to us without any of the blessings or

conveniences which we now enjoy. It is above all essential that the man and woman of today should realize upon how much lower a plane science stands than that of manners and morals. It is far more important, for instance, to speak the truth oneself than to possess the most wonderful wireless set. It is much better to be kind and merciful than to whirl about in our fastest motorcars. It is far more splendid to keep one's word and be considerate towards other people than to be able to fly. Justice ranks far above steam. An upright, fearless judge renders a more exalted service than the cleverest inventor. Freedom is worth far more than electricity. The rights of the individual, a happy home and family, such as have existed even under hard, bleak conditions, are incomparably more precious than any amount of wonderful organization.

In so far as we can have both these sets of alternatives which I have contrasted, let us rejoice; but we shall fall indeed on evil days if we are forced to lose the old for the sake of the new. All this terrific material progress is really only valuable in so far as it liberates the innate goodness of the human heart. It would be not a blessing but a curse if it rolled forward uncontrolled by the moral principles of simple decent men and women. It can never be our salvation. It may be our doom.

Take this wonderful conquest of the air. Men able to fly! The dream of thousands of years realized! The magic carpet of the Arabian Nights in full activity at reasonable prices. We are forced to ask this question - Will the aeroplane end war, or will it end civilization? Are we the children of a glorious epoch advancing into the fullness of our inheritance, or are we simply a gang of squalid mischievous urchins who have got hold of firearms and raided the local laboratory for some tubes of typhus bacilli! Are we moving forward into a paradise of earthly delights where there will be enough for all, where the load of carking care about the means of existence - food, shelter, and clothing - will be lifted from the whole human race; or are we simply plunging into a senseless hell where all the treasures and joys of ordinary life will be calcined?

Broadly speaking, this is the supreme issue which now confronts us. We ought to think about it. Is it our power to decide? In my browner hours I sometimes doubt it. But then, one must always hope; for there is nothing so useless and so cowardly as despair. One must always try. It may not be in our power to decide the immediate future of the world, but it is our right and duty to choose - and to choose well.

Clearly we are beset by strange, unexampled hazards. I recur to this potent aeroplane from which will fall either blessings or cursings, glory or shame. In twenty years if there is no war, perhaps sooner, mankind will have found a way to control and destroy the raiding aeroplane. The ground will be stronger than the air. States will no longer quake at the whirring of these anarchist engines. We shall sleep as safely in our beds as our grandfathers were wont to do. The noble side of science will have caught up its criminal

side. By many kinds of devices now being groped for we shall claw down from the skies the flying miscreant.

But shall we have the time? Never was such a near-run race, and never were the stakes so high. War in the next few years might easily lead to a few wicked men being able to destroy wisdom, culture, tradition, and all the material prosperity we have been able to build. But if there is no war for ten or fifteen years it is my firm conviction that the peril from the skies will be averted, and that the discovery of the art of flying will be inscribed among the great advancements and triumphs of mankind, instead of being its ruin. But are we going to have this ten or fifteen years?

The story of the human race is war. Except for brief and precarious interludes, there has never been peace in the world; and before history began, murderous strife was universal and unending. But up to the present time the means of destruction at the disposal of man have not kept pace with his ferocity. Reciprocal extermination was impossible in the Stone Age. One can not do much with a clumsy club. Besides, men were so scarce and hid so well that they were hard to find. They fled so fast that they were hard to catch. Human legs could only cover a certain distance each day. With the best will in the world to destroy his species, each man was restricted to a very limited area of activity. It was impossible to make any effective progress on these lines. Meanwhile, one had to live and hunt and sleep. So on the balance the life-forces kept a steady lead over the forces of death, and gradually tribes, villages, and governments were evolved.

The effort at destruction then entered upon a new phase. War became a collective enterprise. Roads were made which facilitated the movement of large numbers of men. Armies were organized. Many improvements in the apparatus of slaughter were devised. In particular the use of metal, and above all steel, for piercing and cutting human flesh, opened out a promising field. Bows and arrows, slings, chariots, horses and elephants lent valuable assistance.

But here again another set of checks began to operate. The governments were not sufficiently secure. The armies were liable to violent internal disagreements. It was extremely difficult to feed large numbers of men once they were concentrated, and consequently the efficiency of the efforts at destruction became fitful and was tremendously hampered by defective organization. Thus again there was a balance on the credit side of life. The world rolled forward, and human society entered upon a vaster and more complex age. It was not until the dawn of the twentieth century of the Christian era that war really began to enter into its kingdom as the potential destroyer of the human race.

Certain sombre facts emerge, solid, inexorable, like the shapes of mountains from drifting

mist. It is established that henceforward whole populations will take part in war, all doing their utmost, all subjected to the fury of the enemy. It is established that nations who believe their life is at stake will not be restrained from using any means to secure their existence. It is probable - nay, certain - that among the means which will next time be at their disposal will be agencies and processes of destruction wholesale, unlimited, and perhaps, once launched, uncontrollable.

Mankind has never been in this position before. Without having improved appreciably in virtue or enjoying wiser guidance, it has got into its hands for the first time the tools by which it can unfailingly accomplish its own extermination. That is the point in human destinies to which all the glories and toils of men have at last led them. They would do well to pause and ponder upon their new responsibilities.

Death stands at attention, obedient, expectant, ready to serve, ready to shear away the people en masse; ready, if called on, to pulverize, without hope of repair, what is left of civilization. He awaits only the word of command. He awaits it from a frail, bewildered being, long his victim, now - for one occasion only - his master.

It is evident that whereas an equally-contested war under such conditions might work the ruin of the world, and cause an immeasurable diminution of the human race, the possession by one side of some overwhelming scientific advantage would lead to the complete enslavement of the unwary party. Not only are the powers now in the hands of man capable of destroying the life of nations, but for the first time they afford to one group of civilized men the opportunity of reducing their opponents to absolute helplessness.

In barbarous times superior martial virtues - physical strength, courage, skill, discipline - were required to secure such a supremacy; and in the hard evolution of mankind the best and fittest stocks came to the fore. But no such saving guarantee exists today. There is no reason why a base, degenerate, immoral race should not make an enemy far above them in quality the prostrate subject of their caprice or tyranny, simply because they happened to be possessed at a given moment of some new death-dealing or terror-working process and were ruthless in its employment.

The liberties of men are no longer to be guarded by their natural qualities, but by their dodges; and superior virtue and valour may fall an easy prey to the latest diabolical trick.