

Doing Time Has Kept Me Behind the Times

By J. Michael 

I am a technological Luddite.

This is not an ideological stance as much as it's an empirical reality. That is, I am not necessarily opposed to technology; I am simply unfamiliar with it. After more than 30 years in prison, I've been left behind.

In 1992, for example, few working-class people had cell phones or knew anything about the Internet. We didn't have digital tablets, GPS, streaming video, iPhones or blogs.

You know you're getting old when you start sentences with "Back in my day...", but, back in my day, we listened to music on cassette tapes or on round, plate-like discs called records. Crazy, right?

Back in my day, a tweet was a sound a bird made, and telephones had cords—or long, retractable antennas. When we needed to call someone, we had to use a landline, only we didn't call them landlines; we simply called them "phones," and they were only available in people's homes and at places of business. "Payphones" were nearly as ubiquitous as the modern cell

phone—available at gas stations, shopping malls, restaurants, and so forth—but they required remuneration in the form of nickels, dimes, and/or quarters. It's hard to believe, I'm sure.

Back in my day, we didn't surf the Internet or catch webinars or podcasts. We didn't send or receive emails, instant messages or faxes. We didn't Google, Yahoo, or Bing anything, nor did we have YouTube, Instagram, or any online cat videos whatsoever.

We *did* have "voice messages," of a sort, but they were collected on a physical device called an answering machine, and—as incredible as it sounds—you typically didn't check your messages until you got home.

And back in my day, we knew absolutely nothing about text messaging. A freeworld friend of mine said he recently tried to call his young-adult daughter on her cell, but she wouldn't pick up. He called again and again, with no answer. Worried, he sent her a text—to which she finally responded.

He said: "Why didn't you answer your phone?"

She said: "Why didn't you text?"

I am annoyed that the world out there has changed so much, but I am also worried that I won't catch up. When I get out of prison, I'll not only have new-fangled ways to listen to the Rolling Stones, I'll have to figure out how to pay my utility bills without writing checks and dropping them in a mailbox. I'll be forced to learn cashless payment methods so I can buy gasoline, order a pizza, or make a charitable donation. I'll be required to operate a phone that doesn't have a dial tone, and I'll have to ascertain how one buys groceries without a live cashier at the checkout.

And let's not forget social media, which is apparently not just for teens to bully other teens or for public figures to post racist rants. To socially interact with the community, find old

schoolmates, conduct business, and even get a job, I'll have to figure out which online platforms are relevant to me, how to set up accounts, and how to properly present myself and communicate in the online environment.

Learning these things is of course not an insurmountable obstacle. I'm sure any 6-year-old could show me what to do. There will be, however, a learning curve. It will take time to settle into that brave new world, to really know it, and comfortably navigate within it. And that learning curve troubles me. I am apprehensive that my socio-technical ignorance will impede my successful transition back into society.

This is surely not a burden I bear alone. It may even be an issue for more youthful, less institutionalized prisoners, as well. Even those young enough to have lived or grown up in a connected culture of Facebook and World of Warcraft may need some schooling in technology. I know plenty of guys in prison who can use a contraband cellphone to find romance, listen to music, or send selfies to their baby mommas, yet they know very little about how to use Microsoft Word or safely conduct online banking. To become that proverbial productive citizen, we have to be able to look for a job, write effective and professional emails, and discern truthful information on the Internet.

It is perhaps notable that, despite my technological bewilderment, I have been—and continue to be—a thankful recipient of higher education in prison (HEP). I've learned about history, literature, biology, and philosophy. I can pen an academic essay with a hopefully concise thesis statement and source attribution in MLA, APA, or even Chicago Style. I've learned about world religions, economics, sociology, civics, business ethics, and plenty more. College education has opened my eyes to the world beyond the concertina wire; it's improved my ability to think critically; it's made me more employable, and it's done more than any prison program,

job, or class to prepare me for eventual release. But even a college degree can't make up for missing three decades of extraordinary technological change.

To better bridge the gap from incarceration to society, prisoners like myself should have at least minimal exposure to technology popular in the freeworld, and the most logical setting for this exposure is within prison classrooms. The biggest barrier to implementing this type of curricula, however, is not the attitudes of the colleges and sponsors of HEP, but those of prison administrators, who fear that offenders could use technology to listen to music, view adult content, or engage in some other nefarious activity. Somehow, those administrators must (1) recognize the importance and value of technology in the prison classroom and (2) realize that risk can be minimized or eliminated altogether.

Perhaps in some cases, prison officials should be educated themselves. Like many of us on the inside, many of them probably grew up in a less-connected world. Back in our day, we didn't have networked computers in school; we didn't access online resources or submit assignments electronically. But, lo and behold, things have changed. Keeping porn and video games out of the classroom is the kind of problem public-school administrators have been tackling for decades; thanks to them—and the youngsters who often thwarted them—software and hardware has been developed, improved and regularly updated to specifically address such issues. Prison officials must be shown that technology can indeed safeguard technology—allowing them to both monitor the online activity in classrooms as well as block unwanted content and websites—and incarcerated students can be safely afforded the benefits of a technological education.

All of us—prisoners, educators, HEP providers, correctional administrators—should embrace technology for the same reason the rest of academia has done so: it greatly enhances

education, in general. Platforms and applications make learning easier and contribute to knowledge retention. Online systems also assist teachers, who can spend less time grading assignments and more time teaching and creating content.

We should also embrace technology for what it can do for incarcerated students, specifically. Those of us behind bars and behind the times can benefit from exposure to the modern digital culture, and that exposure can benefit the communities that receive us. Like a college degree, a technological education may further contribute to our rehabilitation by easing our transition into freeworld normalcy.

Otherwise, institutionalized Luddites like me will continue to be released into a strange, unfamiliar world, struggling in our technological illiteracy to figure it all out.

And when we need to text our moms or listen to Nirvana, we'll hopefully be able to find a kindergartner to show us how.