

The Language of Public Goods*

by Henry Zhu

Is language itself a public good?¹ We can't easily exclude anyone from learning or communicating in one. Being able to speak a language doesn't limit anyone else's access to it; the whole purpose of it is to speak with others. Nor can we really stop the creation of new slang, dialects, or new languages. We might even say that this innate freedom to proclaim and enact new ways of life, starting with language, is what creates culture itself.

While language itself may not be controlled, we do find ways in which it is flattened. We dampen the complexity of thought through a desire for efficient speech; the uniformity of a lingua franca² whether for trade, administration, or religion, crowds out personal variants and local dialects. Schools may enforce a certain kind of proper speech or writing through standardized tests. Every medium of expression can be formalized into its own muzak: we learn to parrot a homogenized “news anchor voice”, or more recently, a YouTuber/TikTok one.

Language can become monotonous, even at the level of words. Tech monopolies with enough reach can replace previous verbs. After all, ‘to google’ now means to search.

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1 Typically defined in economic terms as non-excludable, non-rivalrous.

2 “Once you overcome the one-inch-tall barrier of subtitles, you will be introduced to so many more amazing films” - Bong Joon Ho

Some words such as progress, value, and even life³ have transcended all reasonable limits to become plastic words.⁴ Their malleable use by those in power expands their connotation (what it implies) so as to lose all denotation (what it refers to). Advertisers, corporations, and politicians justify and camouflage their actions with these linguistic ego⁵ blocks: Why not go ahead with my strategy? Don't prevent The Future! Why stop Progress? We are moving forward!

The prevalence of this kind of thought in the tech industry is worth a second look. The notion that software has eaten the world produces a fatalistic worldview— 'there is an app for that'—where the idea of *inevitability* becomes its own self-fulfilling tyranny. Big tech cannot wait to convert every externality into value. "All jobs will be automated", "code is the new literacy", "self-driving or meta-verse is happening", and "Bitcoin solves this" are attempts to fashion reality by proclamations.

Why try to bring about (or stop) what will happen anyway? Why think critically about what is happening? If neither helping nor hurting the cause can change progress, what is left for us to think, much less do? Yet, as Marshall McLuhan noted, "There is absolutely no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening." Why do we think we have the authority, that level of power and control over the future? When we believe that something is inevitable, we give up our agency to the prophets.

However, if we contemplate what is happening and, following Marshall McLuhan, consider media technologies

3 Illich gave a talk to a group of ministers where he boldly proclaimed: "to hell with life". (<https://www.davidcayley.com/podcasts/2015/4/19/life-as-idol>)

4 See *Plastic Words* by Uwe Poerksen (Penn State University, 1995). I know I used plenty of these in this essay. Also, the opposite approach of removing all ambiguity, like doubleplusgood in Newspeak, seems to end up with the same issue, a loss of meaning and voice.

5 This is an intentional typo!

as both an extension and amputation of ourselves that creates a whole new environment in which we are immersed, then we are called to understand the societal implications of these tools. When technology becomes a part of us, it becomes hard to understand. We take it for granted, as we do our own physical bodies. Whether it's language that gives voice to our inner thoughts or any other tool, seeing them as a form of technology may be a helpful lens to understand their impact on the world. We could then subject media and digital technologies to the same kinds of inquiries we've made of technologies throughout time.

When we uncritically accept technology, we tend to treat it as inanimate blocks, as standing reserves⁶ simply waiting to be used. In contrast, L.M. Sacasas reminds us of the ethical nature of our artifacts which allows us to pose a series of questions concerning technology.⁷ The things we create are not neutral. It seems difficult to ascribe the same degree of responsibility to a pencil pusher and a bomb thrower. But this also means thinking beyond whether something is simply good or bad, and understanding that how we live with technology is a mutually shaping relationship. As the saying goes, "we shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us." For example, we can ask: in what ways does Google Maps change our experience of time and place, our relationships to people, or even ourselves?⁸

In the 1970s, Ivan Illich was already pamphleteer-

6 Heidegger uses this term to speak of how tech creates an enframing of the world as subject to our whim (<https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/understanding-heidegger-on-technology>). And checkout Wilmot's Warehouse for an interesting video game about pattern matching warehouse objects.

7 <https://theconvivialsociety.substack.com/p/the-questions-concerning-technology>

8 Like how we relate to strangers; we used to ask for directions when lost (not that we need to go back).

ing the social effects of our tools.⁹ As a radical,¹⁰ he spent much of his life exposing what he called the “certainties” of our time, our unquestioned assumptions, our sense of reality. Who, if not what, defines this for us? Many technologies have opened paths for expression: the printing press for books, *Flash* for animations, *You tube* for videos, *Unity* for games. But who gets to decide what gets changed in a platform? Even setting aside trust, can any developer really balance their goals against their community’s input?¹¹ Platforms can’t help but act like controlling parents that smother us with love (this is for your own good), acting in some cases more like carpenters than gardeners.¹²

Illich recognized how computers were already doing this, beginning with becoming the root metaphor of contemporary existence (inputs and outputs, modular components, zeros and ones). Illich even foresaw a future in which we would change ourselves to match the inputs of our tools: “the new electronic devices do indeed have the power to force people to ‘communicate’ with them and with each other on the terms of the machine.”¹³ What are we giving up by living on the terms of the computer? Do we any longer understand

9 Paradoxically, Illich’s *Tools for Conviviality* was an inspiration for Lee Felsenstein, one of early developers of the personal computer.

10 Fitting for the role of a historian, one that goes to the *root* of things! from Latin *radic*-.

11 This tradeoff comes up in standards. My experience on Babel (<https://babel.dev>) gives me the sense that it exists to democratize language design (<https://podcast.babeljs.io/preset-env>) in JavaScript via TC39 (the standards body known as Technical Committee 39). It bridges the gap for users to try out experimental syntax, whereas projects (understandably) may not want to implement what will inevitably change or be discarded. Fears arise that making it too easy to create your own syntax may open up a Pandora’s box of bad ideas unto GitHub, so most of the design should be left up to the experts, which I’ve addressed in <https://increment.com/open-source/open-source-of-anxiety>.

12 <https://theconvivialsociety.substack.com/p/children-and-technology>

13 From *Silence is a Commons*. We increasingly “interface” with bureaucratic systems, automated callers, chatbots, AIs on their terms. Like how we learn to use keywords rather than use natural language to search, or tweak GPT-3.

the distinction Illich draws between communication and speech as in the following sentence? “You may not interact with me, nor do I wish to be downloaded by you. I should like very much to talk to you, to stare at the tip of your nose, to embrace you. But to communicate – for that I have no desire.”

ABC: Shaping the Mind

We use means to accomplish some end. But means may become an end in themselves. Illich’s term, radical monopoly, best describes what happens when tools attain power without limit. Radical monopoly does not mean the domination of any single brand (Tesla), but the domination over social need by the commodity itself (cars). Radical monopoly is visible when you drink Sprite to “obey your thirst.” That was his general critique of technology presented in his pamphlets on schools, medicine, and transportation.¹⁴

We might say Illich was a paradox: a teacher who disliked compulsory school, a rebel who remained a Catholic priest, a critic of cars who traveled widely. But he didn’t believe that any tool was inherently bad. Instead, he recognized that there was a threshold beyond which an institution becomes so large that it does the opposite of what it intends, that it frustrates its own purposes. In this way, the school turns into a substitute for learning, cars become a substitute for walking, the hospital a replacement for healing. Each of these technologies are perfectly valid, but they start to harm when they crowd out all other possibilities. These means become counterproductive when they foster the belief that there is only one way to accomplish things,

14 “After these years, plastic had replaced pottery, carbonated beverages replaced water, Valium replaced chamomile tea, and records replaced guitars.” – (*The Right to Useful Unemployment*). Illustrative of his critique is the hidden curriculum of all schools which is “...to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new.” (*Deschooling Society*).

namely their own way. Hence, he cared about balance, the recognition and acknowledgement of limits.

Think about the classic example of induced demand, when those that build the highways believe that traffic congestion can be solved with more lanes. Sacasas explains that this is due to an inability to imagine differently: “What can an institution possibly offer you except more of itself? For example, the one remedy for the problems it has unleashed that Facebook cannot contemplate is suspending operations.” Facebook cannot comprehend a metaverse where it isn’t the one making connections on your behalf; Google’s goal is to think for you by autocompleting your every email, conversation, purchase.

While they begin as augmentations of ourselves, Illich finds that “the institutions of industrial society do just the opposite. As the power of machines increases, the role of persons more and more decreases to that of mere consumers...the hypothesis was that machines can replace slaves. The evidence shows that, used for this purpose, machines enslave men.”¹⁵

Tools for Conviviality

Illich argued that the language of scarcity was one cause for this pathological monopoly. He tried to dispel the mirage that scarcity was solely the result of insufficient (not enough institutional commodities) rather than the excess of manufactured demand. But let’s be real. Who could really challenge the issue of unlimited wants with a sense of enoughness? The financialization of the world has long become one of the metaphors we live by, exemplified by phenomena such as the Gamestop short squeeze in January 2021.¹⁶ Even our al-

15 “There are two ranges in the growth of tools: the range within which machines are used to extend human capability and the range in which they are used to contract, eliminate, or replace human functions.” - *Tools for Conviviality*

16 A hyperreal moment where the price of a failing retail game company shot up over 30x and the fallout of the hype and downfall surrounding the events.

ternative financial systems may not be free of the same problems and in fact, could be leaning into them. Blockchain is usually promoted as a financial instrument enabling decentralized control. But as noted recently by *Positive Sum Worlds*, "...if blockchains serve a 'public' today, it is primarily one of decentralized finance. Fundamentally, these token holders share only one common object of concern: price."

Should any of us have to think about life in financial terms so much? We minmax our time and space like resources for a side hustle. Desires become animated by our investments rather than by our curiosities. There was a time where all my conversations started to end with the thought, "that would make a good podcast." The crypto ingroup are known as "token holders," while the outgroup is "nocoins." In the crypto world, we are what we hold. HR abbreviates humans as resources to be measured, managed, discarded. Even if not explicit, this reductionism becomes the water we swim in, our cultural liturgies.¹⁷ Can we escape this language of scarcity, of value?

Follow count, subscribers, page rank, h-index. This reduction is done everywhere: taxi drivers are measured solely by their number of miles driven, students become their grades or even their attendance record. Even in the spiritual realm, faith becomes solely a belief, ritual disappears, the transcendence of a sermon may become a TED talk, covenant community becomes more like a Costco membership.¹⁸ Programmers aren't immune to this characterization either; they become lines of code on GitHub. The abstraction of the "standardized repo" hides how each repo is maintained (it's governance, scope, purpose), not least because each one looks the

17 James K.A. Smith's work on cultural liturgies has had a great impact on me, how what we participate in changes us, even without us knowing. <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/articles/james-ka-smiths-cultural-liturgies>

18 A tithe becomes payment as dues, the consumer mindset of what can you do for me. Maybe you've heard of church hopping? (with the other extreme being a cult)

same. Maybe they are even “open source, not open contribution.”¹⁹ A repo can be seen as its own city, with its own rules, customs, and language. Traveling to a new physical country comes with an understanding of how different cultures may greet, eat, work, and play differently. This sort of quantification and objectification comes up as this universal concept of value or utility. For Illich, *value* has taken over the place of what was known as the *good*. Value is what can increase indefinitely, has no end. And as we know “stocks only go up.” Why not move fast? More is better.

Rather than being the opposite of evil, Illich relies on language of virtue to describe how what was good had a proper place, a golden mean.²⁰ Confidence is to tread the middle ground between self-deprecation (too little) and vanity (too much). He felt that we had lost the language of the good, and thus the language of limits. So how can our tools balance what we can do for ourselves with what a professional service can do for us? To reiterate, Illich’s suggestion wasn’t to stop using technology entirely, but to voluntarily impose boundaries on our tools.²¹ Namely, “tools to work with rather than tools that ‘work’ for them.” Such convivial tools nurture each person’s ability to help themselves and their neighbor. Industrial tools end up “deskilling”²² us, we externalize to them our “native capacity for healing, consoling, moving, learning, dwelling, and burying the dead.”²³ This is why he made the case for the

19 “SQLite is open-source, meaning that you can make as many copies of it as you want and do whatever you want with those copies, without limitation. But SQLite is not open-contribution.” (<https://www.sqlite.org/copyright.html>)

20 Virtue ethics is usually contrasted with consequentialism and deontology, it describes the thought of Aristotle, eudaimonia, see *After Virtue* by Alastair McIntyre, (Notre Dame University Press, 2007).

21 He preferred the term tool over technology. Tech has a magical quality to it (any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic).

22 Via <https://theconvivialsociety.substack.com/p/ill-with-want>

23 “.. Each of these capacities meets a need. The means for the satisfaction of these

disestablishment of compulsory school (akin to the separation of church and state) rather than its abolition, which is how his argument is commonly misunderstood.

With industrial tools, we can't make use of the *use value* of our own bodies, even to the point that our self-perception changes completely. People used to narrate their lives to doctors who listened to their stories. They understood themselves through their own words and lived experience. Now both the system itself and those in it (patients and doctors) have less need to know anything beyond what is precisely measured by instrument, whether in childcare or palliative care. Patients come to believe that the main way to understand oneself is by an abstracted notion of themselves, as represented on their medical charts, or by their risk cohort.

The unlimited space of the digital has happily incorporated the same kind of alienation while simultaneously being connected to everyone. It masks our sense of the physical; even the nebulous language of the "cloud" gives the illusion that this cyberspace is disembodied when its very foundation is miles of cables, data centers, and servers.²⁴ We become creators and yet, by our revealed preferences, we feel as if our Googled keywords can know us better than ourselves. We grant algorithms the ability to choose for us, and increasingly our ability to think. Our innate thirst for knowledge loses out to an app. We become like tamagotchis that desire to be managed. Even our very existence is digitally mediated: losing your phone, getting shadowbanned, or being ghosted is essentially death.

There is a clear pull to automate away all our decision making, whether to a corporation or even to the computer.

needs are abundant so long as they depend primarily on what people can do for themselves, with only marginal dependence on commodities." - *Tools for Conviviality*

24 Sacasas expands on this notion in *The Materiality of Digital Culture* (<https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/the-materiality-of-digital-culture>).

Maybe the myth of technological neutrality hasn't died.²⁵ This is pretty clear in some notions of "trustlessness" within crypto and the dreams of "code as law". We see ourselves as entirely subjective and thus as biased. We take every chance we have to remove ourselves, forgetting that it is precisely our personal commitments that motivate us to make art, create structures, practice science. We outsource ourselves to death.²⁶

T.S. Eliot said this:

They constantly try to escape
From the darkness outside and within
By dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need
to be good.
But the man that is will shadow
The man that pretends to be.

We could easily replace "no one will need to be good" with "...need to choose." But it doesn't have to be that way. Vitalik Buterin argues that "the goal of crypto was never to remove the need for *all* trust." He suggests that using multi-sigs or social recovery wallets (which involve people) doesn't betray the goal of crypto, but "give people access to...building blocks that give people more *choice* in whom to trust."²⁷ In a similar vein, Decentralized Autonomous Organizations (DAOs) in crypto should refer to the freedom of each party to make decisions rather than a desire to make organizations operated with-

25 See Drew Austin's *Worn Out*, for a piece on tech's supposedly neutral attitude applied to the realm of fashion. (<https://reallifemag.com/worn-out>)

26 "Man's final conquest has proved to be the abolition of Man." In *The Abolition of Man*, by C. S. Lewis

27 "...and furthermore, allow people to build more constrained forms of trust: giving someone the power to do some things on your behalf without giving them the power to do everything." (<https://vitalik.ca/general/2021/01/11/recovery.html>)

out human control. This may, at least, suggest a view of living with technology rather than being dominated by it.

Living with technology means setting limits on the power of our tools, reducing our dependence on industrial commodities. Illich suggests that we need to rediscover what was *vernacular*, as non-economic ways of thinking and being. Typically referring to local languages and architecture, Illich remixes the term to refer to a domain that is homemade, and thus within bounds. Like a book dedication, it occurs when we create for particular people whom we know by name rather than the abstraction of a user story, cohort, or the world.²⁸ Grandma's homemade cooking doesn't need to be incorporated into the economy as one step on the road to becoming a professional chef. Maybe she cooks for no ulterior purpose, no views, no revenue. Grandma's cooking shares its spirit with the earlier hacker ethos, a spirit of leisure and play, engaged in for no reason at all, for its own sake, and on its own terms.

It is against this backdrop of the vernacular, that Illich asks us to look towards the commons which lies beyond the modern dichotomy of private and public space (and public goods). As he noted, "A commons is not a public space. A commons is a space which is established by custom. It cannot be regulated by law. The law would never be able to give sufficient details to regulate a commons."²⁹ To break this mold, he tells the forgotten past of a commons in our own personal space, namely our body. He makes the (kinda gross) point that before things like pesticide, our skin was regularly inhabited with animals. Bed bugs, lice, fleas. He writes that even our "inhabited hair, belonging at the same time to inside and outside,

28 The Wordle craze started off as Josh Wardle's way of making something fun for his partner. It's wild how many threads there were, bewildered that he didn't monetize it through ads or making it a service, assuming the only reason one should make something is to make money (though he did later sell it to NYT)

29 Hair and the History of the City: <https://danielaterrile.wordpress.com/2011/11/17/hair-and-the-history-of-the-city/>

makes the division more fuzzy.” It was a “shared” space, and we didn’t think much of it (there was nothing that could be done). Now we can’t help but think of our skin as this dividing line between ourselves and the outside world, it becomes that much harder to understand a shared commons. The door that separates our private homes from the street represents our buffered self.³⁰ But reminiscent of Jane Jacobs’ sidewalk life, Illich reminds us that we aren’t necessarily separated by rigid lines of public and private spaces.

Let us hope to recoup such a notion of commons. Let us hope to not see ourselves as sovereign individuals or homogeneous components in a global program, but as interdependent members within a body of many parts.³¹ That hope seems necessary to share the proverbial table with those around us, in an intimate space where our neighbor’s aura instead of their vibes assure us that we are heard. Maybe it’s around the table that even our communication will find its limits, in words and their silences.³²

30 See Charles Taylor’s notion of porous (pre-modern, accepting of spirits/God, connecting the inner and outer) selves vs. buffered (modern, preventing anything from affecting the self, including transcendence/meaning) selves in *A Secular Age*.

31 “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.; “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.” - 1 Cor 12:12-31 (NIV).

32 An attention economy doesn’t want our silence, can’t contain it.