What's a Luddite? An expert on technology and society explains

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The term "Luddite" emerged in early 1800s England. At the time there was a thriving textile industry that depended on manual knitting frames and a skilled workforce to create cloth and garments out of cotton and

wool. But as [the Industrial Revolution](#) gathered momentum, steam-powered mills threatened the livelihood of thousands of artisanal textile workers.

Faced with an industrialized future that threatened their jobs and their professional identity, a growing number of textile workers turned to direct action. Galvanized by their leader, Ned Ludd, they began to smash the machines that they saw as robbing them of their source of income.

It's not clear whether [Ned Ludd was a real person](#), or simply a figment of folklore invented during a period of upheaval. But his name became synonymous with rejecting disruptive new technologies—an association that lasts to this day.

Questioning doesn't mean rejecting

Contrary to popular belief, the original Luddites were not anti-technology, nor were they [technologically incompetent](#). Rather, they were skilled adopters and users of the artisanal textile technologies of the time. Their argument was not with technology, per se, but with the ways that wealthy industrialists were robbing them of their way of life.

Today, this distinction is sometimes lost.

Being called a Luddite often indicates technological incompetence—as in, "I can't figure out how to send emojis; I'm such a Luddite." Or it describes an ignorant rejection of technology: "He's such a Luddite for refusing to use Venmo."

In December 2015, Stephen Hawking, Elon Musk and Bill Gates were jointly nominated for a "Luddite Award." Their sin? Raising concerns over the potential dangers of artificial intelligence.

The irony of three prominent scientists and entrepreneurs being labeled as Luddites underlines the disconnect between the term's original meaning and its more modern use as an epithet for anyone who doesn't wholeheartedly and unquestioningly embrace [technological progress](#).

Yet technologists like Musk and Gates aren't rejecting technology or innovation. Instead, they're rejecting a worldview that all technological advances are ultimately good for society. This worldview optimistically assumes that the faster humans innovate, the better the future will be.

This "[move fast and break things](#)" approach toward technological innovation has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years—especially with growing awareness that unfettered innovation can lead to deeply harmful consequences that a degree of responsibility and forethought could help avoid.

Why Luddism matters

In an age of [ChatGPT](#), gene editing and other transformative technologies, perhaps we all need to channel the spirit of Ned Ludd as we grapple with how to ensure that future technologies do more good than harm.

In fact, "[Neo-Luddites](#)" or "New Luddites" is a term that emerged at the end of the 20th century.

In 1990, the psychologist Chellis Glendinning published an essay titled "[Notes toward a Neo-Luddite Manifesto](#)."

In it, she recognized the nature of the early Luddite movement and related it to a growing disconnect between societal values and [technological innovation](#) in the late 20th century. As Glendinning writes, "Like the early Luddites, we too are a desperate people seeking to

protect the livelihoods, communities, and families we love, which lie on the verge of destruction."

On one hand, entrepreneurs and others who advocate for a more measured approach to technology innovation lest we stumble into avoidable—and potentially catastrophic risks—are frequently labeled "Neo-Luddites."

These individuals represent experts who believe in the power of technology to positively change the future, but are also aware of the societal, environmental and economic dangers of blinkered innovation.

Then there are the Neo-Luddites who actively reject modern technologies, fearing that they are damaging to society. New York City's [Luddite Club](#) falls into this camp. Formed by a group of tech-disillusioned Gen-Zers, the club advocates the use of flip phones, crafting, hanging out in parks and reading hardcover or paperback books. Screens are an anathema to the group, which sees them as a drain on mental health.

I'm not sure how many of today's Neo-Luddites—whether they're thoughtful technologists, technology-rejecting teens or simply people who are uneasy about technological disruption—have read Glendinning's manifesto. And to be sure, parts of it are rather contentious. Yet there is a common thread here: the idea that technology can lead to personal and societal harm if it is not developed responsibly.

And maybe that approach isn't such a bad thing.

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