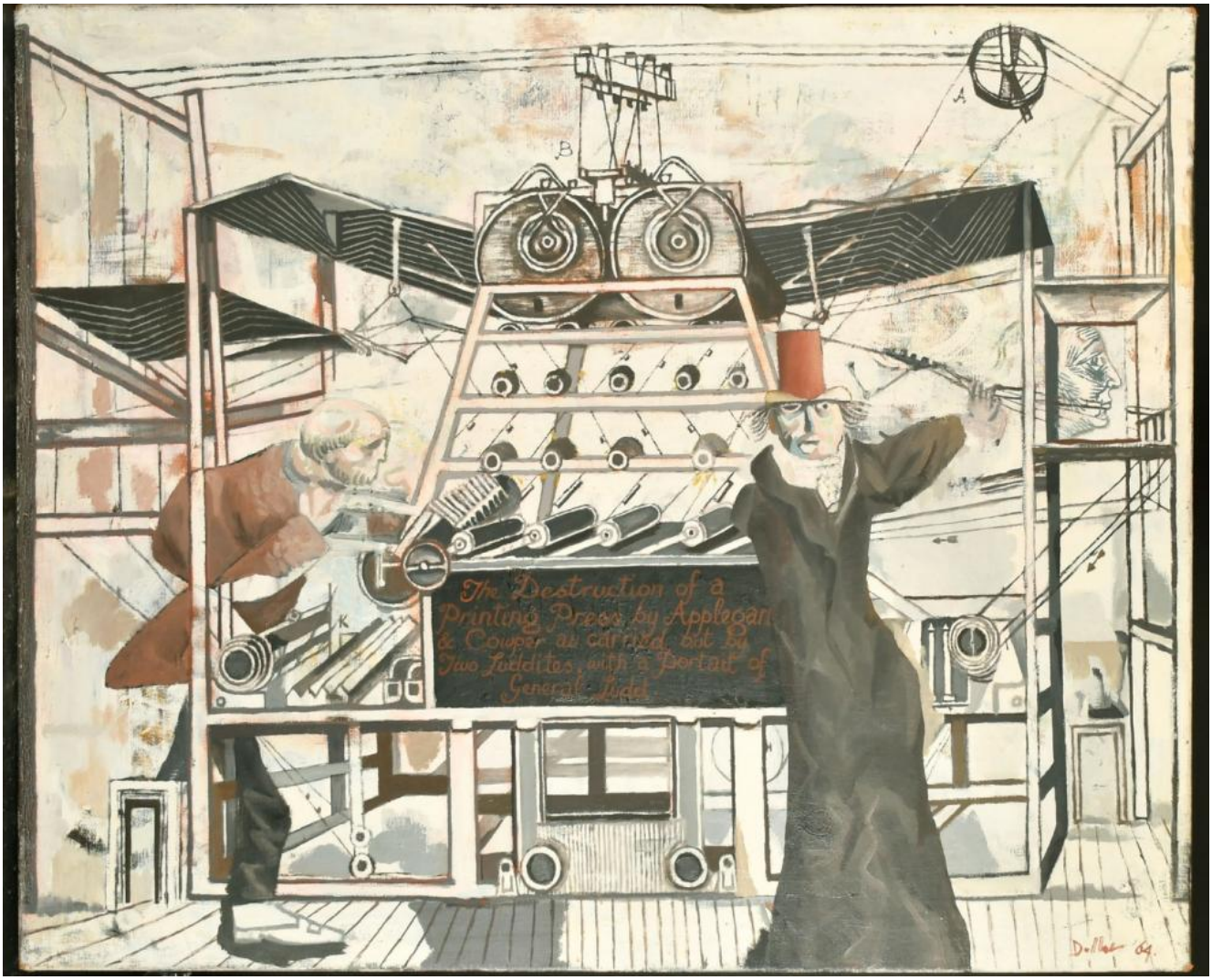
Luddite

by Paul Illidge (March 2023)



I was head of the English department at a large suburban high-school in 1992, the year leading up to computers being installed in schools throughout our school board. As head of a department, I was required to attend meetings of our school's Broad-Based Technology Committee, charged by the board of education with developing a plan for implementing computers in our high school program.

The committee met after school every two weeks for several months to discuss what exactly the term “broad-based technology” actually meant. No one seemed to know either what it was, or what it was supposed to do for students besides the cliché slogans the chairpersons spouted: *Expand horizons*. *Prepare for tomorrow when technology takes over*. *Help kids learn to surf the information superhighway coming in the new millennium.*

The principal had selected as committee chairpersons Art, the head of the school’s automotive program, and Lynn, the head of the family studies program, confusing appointments for our committee as neither subject leant itself to computer technology. In fact, Art and Lynn, good teachers in their respective subjects, seemed to know less about computers than the rest of the committee. They admitted they weren’t exactly sure what broad-based technology really was, was all about in terms of student programs, or even why the principal had appointed them to chair the committee.

As a result, Art and Lynn were extremely nervous and visibly uncomfortable leading our meetings, the information they provided scant and vague, both of them, in our third frustrating meeting, owning up to the fact they knew *zilch* about computers, a cue for many others on the committee to admit this as well, which left all of us even more bewildered as to what our precise purpose was. We asked the principal to attend one of our meetings and provide more details and direction. She declined, saying in her usual inscrutable way that it wasn’t an administrative matter, which is what her input would be restricted to, and therefore her presence would not be helpful to us.

Left at an impasse, an air of confused frustration always palpable in the room during meetings, our head of mathematics ventured a suggestion one day that we bring students into our committee meetings since more and more kids were talking about computers and data processing, about which they were

increasingly knowledgeable and extremely excited.

The principal responded in a letter that muddied the waters even more. Lynn read it to us: “Having students participate in the broad-based technology discussions would be inappropriate; the committee is a professional leadership group, and as such that is what the administration is relying on you to provide.”

The computers, when they arrived a few months later, were loaded into what had been the library but was now to be known as the Resource Centre (where the books had gone was never explained). The machines were *IKON*s, an ominous name that I proved to be prescient about: they were plagued with technical problems from the start. By today’s futuristic standards the machines looked prehistoric. If you could get them to work, it often wasn’t for long. They regularly experienced technical glitches, often broke down altogether and were sent out for repair. Some never came back. Rumours spread that there were new, more reliable machines coming from a different company—computers on which you could play games, a feature that renewed excitement among the students.

In the final meeting with the principal and vice-principals in which we were to explain the anticipated effectiveness of our committee’s *implementation framework*, I was attacked out of the blue by the disgruntled head of our business department, a man named Ian, for being a Luddite, and therefore responsible for the lack of success the committee was having in developing a satisfactory technology implementation process. As many heads of department were new to the term Luddite, the principal asked Ian to explain.

“The Luddites were skilled British textile workers in the early 1800s opposed to the use of new mechanized looms developed during the Industrial Revolution that would put them out of work. They were named after a textile worker named Ludd who, after losing his job, organized protests against the new technology which involved textile workers destroying the new

mechanical looms. A Luddite was therefore someone who opposed progress, in this case when it came to computer technology."

According to Ian, who said he spoke for some other members of the committee,

I had apparently acted the part of a Luddite at *all* the committee's meetings with my questions, doubts and objections about bringing computer technology into the classroom, thereby, according to Ian, sabotaging the committee's implementation strategies *at every turn*.

The pile on began. The co-chairs Art and Lynn, backed up by the geography, history and music heads of departments, concurred. They felt my continual negative questioning was unconstructive and had brought antagonisms and confusion to the group that prevented it from arriving at consensus on every aspect of an *implementation plan*.

According to Miriam, head of the French department, you could only blame so much on the malfunctioning *Ikon* computers—the negative attitudes I had continually brought to the committee's discussions had raised too many questions and doubts, and too much confusion in people's minds for there to be understanding on constructive *implementation strategies*.

The attack was not unexpected. I didn't attempt to refute any of the charges levelled against me or clarify exaggerations. I understood why they had been made. In my defence I did summarize my major reservations and objections to having computers in schools.

I pointed out that computer technology was still in its infancy. Developments and modifications in the computer industry were happening at such an accelerated pace that machines were outmoded before they were even installed: this was the problem with our *Ikons*. Glitches and malfunctions were part of the development process which had yet to be completely worked out. Companies wanted to sell the latest versions of

their machines in order to raise capital for further development. Everything was a quickly evolving process to create improved products and performance.

“More important,” I continued, “computer technology is above all a commercial enterprise. The place of commercial products in schools has always been questioned and ultimately resisted as counter-educational. It took years before school boards allowed vending machines inside schools, and even then they’re prohibited in elementary schools and restricted in high schools to the cafeteria. Yet here we are proposing in a matter of months to fast-track a new, untried, little understood and in all respects experimental piece of technology into our education system. A piece of technology which at this point is no more than a typewriter, with keyboarding—teaching students to type—becoming an academic credit course. As an English teacher and writer, I use my typewriter all the time. You can teach kids to type, but you can’t teach them to write, or more important, to think—

Someone piped up: “But as I understand it, computers do the thinking *for* you.”

I said, “A healthy individual shouldn’t have someone or something doing the thinking for him or her.”

“Ever think you might have a problem with authority?” snapped the group’s most passive aggressive member: Harriet, the head of the special education department. She’d been waiting to get back at me out of spite for outing her at a recent committee meeting when at the last minute she had sabotaged a key vote preserving the library with at least some books in it so students would at least remember what one was. The education trustee had been in attendance. She supported me, allowed the “Keep the library” resolution to pass. Defeated, Harriet fumed and left the meeting.

Uncomfortable with the rancorous personal turn the discussion

had taken, the principal looked to her three equally disconcerted vice-principals, who glared at me as if an explanation was in order.

“Who here,” I asked the group, “has any background in or knowledge about computer technology?”

No one spoke.

Harriet threw me an accusing stare. “You’re the head of English. What do *you* know about computers?”

“More than you might think.”

“How is that?”

I explained. “My writing partner and I took a fictional screenplay called *AIRTIME* about mind-boggling future computer developments, to Hollywood ten years ago. We arranged meetings with agents, directors and producers who had expressed interest in seeing us and hearing our pitch.

“After several months’ research on telecommunication systems, satellites, cable capacity, broadband technology and fibre optics, we centered our story on an octogenarian billionaire and cyber genius named J. Arthur Teasdale, creator of the Teledox Internet system that allowed people to send and receive live computer broadcasts from anywhere and from anyone in the world via computers and cell-phones. Everyone could have his or her own channel. Millions could watch you and talk to you. You could watch millions and talk to them, anywhere and at any time through the marvels of the random access Teledox network J. Arthur Teasdale had devised.

“On the worldwide Teledox system there was every type of site and online show imaginable. As I say, you could host your own site, deliver your own programs live in real time to dedicated bands of followers via your channel, and be sponsored by advertisers to attract more viewers to your broadcasts, for

which you received payment each time one of your posts was viewed. The opportunities to become well-known if not famous allowed you to make money, in many cases lots of it. There was no censorship, and the police were unable to track you online since no one used his or her real identity. Freedom reigned.

“Always known for holding an open mind, the aging billionaire Teasdale became disillusioned with his invention, which had been perverted for all sorts of commercial, political, military and otherwise immoral purposes and uses so that he could no longer countenance its continued existence. The time had come to take away the gift he had given the world, now that people no longer knew how to use that gift for the good he had originally intended.

“He assigned Reggie, the young man who had helped him build the original network—an Einstein in the making when it came to technology—to take Teledox down.

“We watch what happens when the world suddenly goes down, when screens everywhere blink off and go black. *For good?* You’ll have to watch the sequel to find out,” I kidded. “As I said, this was in 1982, ten years ago.”

I find it almost impossible now to imagine that non-digital, non-binary world of forty years ago. I find it impossible to think of our world today *without* binary digital communication devices regulating so much of everything we do, and where and when, and how and why we do it, with most of us feeling that we simply can’t imagine a life without personal computer and digital devices.

AIRTIME never got made. The producers, directors and agents in Hollywood whom we met with were unanimous: they liked us, they liked our writing, however they felt the story was *just too crazy and off-the-wall* to sell to the public at that particular time.

People just weren’t ready for it.

My writing partner and I still laugh and take great consolation in the fact that, for better or for worse, virtually everything we predicted about computers in our *AIRTIME* screenplay of forty years ago has come true.

Except, that is, for a latter day J. Arthur Teasdale who grows so disenchanted with what Teledox—the Internet—has been transformed into that he decides he has no choice but to destroy his once beloved creation . . .

At the conclusion of the story, Harriet smirked, shrugging like she wasn't impressed one bit. A few people applauded, a few offered compliments, a few voiced agreement with Teasdale about the dangers and *toxic possibilities* of widespread computer use in the future.

The principal adjourned the meeting without comment. She and her vice-principals stood up and headed for the door.

Harriet threw me a snarky look.

"Luddite."

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