

## **THE NEW DIGITAL DIVIDE: Rebels against their future**

Almost 200 years ago a grassroots movement began in Nottinghamshire close to Sherwood Forest – the Luddite movement. The Luddites wrecked havoc for a short but intense period of time in a vain attempt to hold back the tides of technological change. I've been thinking a lot about their 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalents – the new Digital Luddites.

It's easy to assume that the older a person grows the more reactionary they become, however something interesting is taking place in the digital space which is discounting that theory.

It might be surprising to know that the biggest web-celeb from YouTube last year was not Paris Hilton or Posh Spice, but in fact an octogenarian widower from Leicester, Peter Oakley. By his own admission, Peter enjoys a good bitch and grumble, often about the way society has taken a turn for the worse. You could easily make the assumption that someone like Peter would be a classic Digital Luddite, but you'd be wrong.

Peter is actually a seminal figure in this newly converging world of digital media and mass entertainment, You might have heard of his online pseudonym: Geriatric1927. This time last year "Geriatric1927" recorded a short autobiographical video and uploaded it to YouTube. He was hoping that his views on modern life and his memories of England during the Second World War would strike a chord, "*hopefully some of you will respond,*" he says.

And respond we did.

Within a week Geriatric1927 had become the most subscribed user on YouTube. Buoyed by the grassroots support Peter continued filming and uploading a series of vlogs (video-blogs) Entitled *Telling It All*, this series has been watched by close to 3 million people. His story was picked up by media outfits all over the world. Everyone wanted an exclusive with Geriatric1927. But Peter decided to avoid the mainstream media, preferring to keep his conversations almost exclusively via video in the new social media world of Web 2.0.

In one webisode, Peter says, "*This You Tube experience has been one of the major changes and breaks throughs in my life and given me a whole new world to experience. So many of you asked me questions about my life, even if I am a grumpy old man, you are interested in my life and I just want to let you know how appreciative I am.*"

Wikipedia called him "the coolest old dude alive"

My parents in law do not consider themselves to be technophiles, however they were the first people I knew who downloaded Skype. Skype, a VOIP application allows you to use your computer like a telephone and "talk" through the microphone to any other computer, anywhere in the world for free. Then they added a web-cam as they wanted to be able to talk with their three young grandchildren in Paris.

After quizzing my friends about their experiences with their own parents, I realised that that digitally-savvy grandparents are increasingly becoming the norm whereas none of us urban young professionals are using anything like webcams.

But Skype was just the beginning for my in-laws. They decided that they needed better digital backup and storage for the photographs of their grandchildren, so they created an online Flickr account. Flickr allows them to upload and share their pictures more easily. What made me stop and think is that only 3 of my friends have Flickr accounts.

Something odd was definitely going on.

Earlier this year came a swish black 80GB iPod that they connected to their Flickr account. My heavy first generation iPod looked a little old and grubby in comparison. Not only could their shiny new iPod house pictures of their grandchildren, they could carry around all classical CDs that had ripped onto their computer and they could download video Podcasts for free. Now avid Podcasts subscribers, they watch everything from foreign language courses, to guided trips around art galleries to french political debates. Embarrassingly, despite working in the digital industry, I have only ever listened to one podcast, Ricky Gervais.

Finally they decided that it was time that their own mother, 78, joined the digital revolution. She is now the proud owner of a brand new Mac. She has recently become a dab hand at Instant Messaging with her great-grandchildren. She thinks it is the best present she has ever had. It was such a cool computer that we had to go and buy an identical one for ourselves.

Could it be that the Wired Retired are the new digital trail blazers?

Not only has this demographic group got the money to invest in new technology, they have also got the time to invest into understanding how to use it and perhaps most importantly of all, they have a compelling reason to use it – their grandchildren.

So who the modern day Luddites?

We can be proud that our youth are not Luddites. Those under the age of 24 constantly astound me with their level of technology knowledge even if they don't consider themselves to be "techie". Teens and tweens happily hack and modifying their mobile phones, "modding", getting them to do things that even the engineers did not envisage. They all seem know basic HTML web-coding, not because they are desperately interested in coding per se but because it allows them to pimp their MySpace page. They are downloading US movies and TV shows for free from sites like Bit Torrent and All U C months before they are released here and they consider it absolutely bizarre that anyone would choose to access a site like iTunes and actually pay for music.

So the real Digital Luddites lie, I believe, somewhere in between our web-saturated youth and the Wired Retired. The 30 and 40-somethings urban professionals, too frazzled from family, too washed out from work, are simply too tired and scared to engage and explore new digital technologies. They have enough technology to contend with during working hours to let it impact during leisure time.

Laughing with dinner party guests about their profound technical inability these people wear their Digital Luddite badge with faux-shame. It's a sorry state of affairs. But just as cracks started to appear in the original Luddite movement, I think that cracks are starting to show here too. The most seismic crack could well be Facebook.

When the Facebook craze hit I invited all my friends to join. Well maybe not quite all my friends. One good friend, actively vocal in her loathing of technology, fell off the list. I simply did not have the energy to sell her on Social Networks. Every time in the past we had talked about sites like this she made her feelings abundantly clear.

Last week I received an email from her. Apparently she had received close to 40 Facebook invitations.

Grudgingly she was giving in.

"You win," she simply wrote.

There is hope.

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