: Who are the Luddites?

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Over the years, the word luddite has been used as a derogatory term to poke fun at those who resist technology change. "Oh, he is just a luddite" is a disparaging phrase that implies that a person's views can be ignored or dismissed. As technologists, especially in computing and information technology, it is easy for us to develop the notion that technology is inherently good and that greater use of technology is both desirable and inevitable. Adoption of information technology has had many benefits, but there have also been negative consequences and unanticipated undesirable side effects. The Luddites were "victims" of technology change more than 200 years ago.c

At the start of the 19th century, the Luddites were a secret oath-based organization of English textile workers who destroyed textile machinery as a form of protest. No one knows for sure but some sources indicate the group took their name from Ned Ludd (perhaps a fictional character), a weaver from Anstey, near Leicester. The Luddites protested against manufacturers who used machines in what they called "a fraudulent and deceitful manner" to get around standard labor practices.

According to Andrews (2015), most Luddites "were trained artisans who had spent years learning their craft, and they feared that unskilled machine operators were robbing them of their livelihood." Many Luddites were owners of workshops that had closed because factories could sell the same products for less. But when workshop owners set out to find a job at a factory, it was very hard to find one because producing things in factories required fewer workers than producing those same things in a workshop. Luddites were fighting for fair treatment of workers more than they were waging a war against technology and progress, cf., Coren (2017).

At the end of the 20th century the term was used more generally to refer to anyone opposed to industrialization, automation, computerization, and other new technologies. Modern day Luddites may be concerned about Artificial Intelligence (AI) or Smart factories taking jobs. Some of the concerns about job obsolescence are real. If you are still using a flip phone or can't sort out streaming services, some may call you a Luddite. Being called a Luddite means you are a radical and a renegade in a technology dependent World.

The Luddite unrest ended with the shooting, hanging or transporting to Australia of protesters, cf., Andrews (2015). The movement was suppressed with the use of military force. Luddites are remembered by some of us. For example, Brain (n.d.) calls the Luddites "pioneers in this struggle against machinery replacing the work of men".

So as decision support researchers and practitioners we can admit to being technologists, but we should look carefully and rationally at the consequences of recommending and adopting new

technology. Society will benefit from more critical reflection and evaluation of the technological world we are building, cf., Frischmann (2018). So when someone promotes use of a new technology, ask who benefits and who may be harmed? Remember Ned Ludd!

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