

have to wait on anyone else.” “It’s exciting.” When we see the very latest devices, often our expressions are on the order of “Wow!” or “That’s great!” or “Look at that, would you?” So, at deeper levels, there seems to be a good deal of like-mindedness about what constitutes better in our culture.

Another approach is to consider what people think of as clear examples of progress. Television today is far different from what it was in the past. In the early 50s, one was lucky to own a television. Reception was poor, the picture rough and in black and white; the screen was small, the set large; the number of programs was very limited. In addition to other obvious improvements, now the sets come on instantly, are controlled from the couch, can be found in all sizes and nearly everywhere, and have access to a vast number and variety of programs, especially with video cassette recorders. Even if they are not willing to pay the price for all of them, most count these changes as improvements, and rarely do we find people watching a black and white set any longer. What are the standards which make these changes count as improvements?

Television as a clear example of technology will play a key role in our understanding of the nature of the fundamental choice we face, but Borgmann uses another paradigmatic example of technology, the central heating system, to disclose most of these standards of technology. We can easily trace the development of central heating systems back to the wood-burning stove or the hearth. The chief advantages of the heating system over these latter two are various. Central heating is *easier*. We do not have to gather, stack, chop, or carry the wood. An automatic thermostat means that we do not have to trouble ourselves in the morning or evening with setting a thermostat. Central heating is more *instantaneous*. We do not have to wait for the house to warm up. It’s *ubiquitous*. Warmth is provided to each corner of the room, to every room, and everywhere equally well. Finally, a central heating system is *safer* than a hearth. My grandmother was born in a newly built chicken coop because three weeks earlier her family’s house burnt down from a chimney fire. So the standards by which people judge

central heating to be better than a wood-burning stove are ease, instantaneity, ubiquity, and safety or some combination of these, for example, convenience. These four “technological standards” can be collected under the more general notion of technological availability. To be more *available* is to be an improvement, then, in terms of one or more of the four above standards.

Why does it seem to people that this availability is good? From one perspective, this availability relieves people of burdens: less effort, less time, and less learning skills are required. Available anytime and anyplace, they are disburdened of the constraints of time and place. They are disburdened of having to take risks. Historically, modern technology was envisioned as enabling people not just to subjugate nature, but to do so for the purpose of freeing humanity from misery and toil. To be relieved of these burdens then fulfills this vision of technology. *To the degree people personally share this vision*, they will also see its concrete manifestations, such as central heating, as unquestionably good. Compared to older versions, the latest portable computers exemplify this relief from burdens and are attractive to many for this reason.

By overcoming nature, technology would, as some in the seventeenth century foresaw, not only relieve humans of burdens, but it would make available to them—easier, safer, quicker, and more ubiquitous—all the goods of the Earth. So, technological availability negatively disburdens people of misery and toil, and positively enriches their lives, makes them happy, it seems. So seen, technology has an attractive glow about it.

Technology promises to bring the forces of nature and culture under control, to liberate us from misery and toil, and to enrich our lives ... [More accurately], implied in the technological mode of taking up with the world there is a promise that this approach to reality will, by way of the domination of nature, fuel liberation and enrichment.

Borgmann calls this “the promise of technology.”

Clearly those below the middle-class of advanced industrialized countries and those outside those countries do not derive the benefits of