

The conflict of technology and people in the novel Fahrenheit 451

Research Question:

How does Ray Bradbury display the relationship between people and technology in the book Fahrenheit 451 to describe a dystopian society?

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“We have too many cellphones, We’ve got too many internets. We have got to get rid of those machines. We have too many machines now.”¹ Ray Bradbury.

Introduction

This essay examines the relationship between technology and people and how this relation leads to describing a dystopian society. For this question, the chosen book is “Fahrenheit 451” by Ray Bradbury. The main reason for this book to be chosen is that it demonstrates conflicts between freedom of thought and censorship so that it explains how technology can be a potential threat. Hence, these negative aspects create a dystopic society. Also, in Ray Bradbury’s envisioned future, all the assumptions about books’ losing their importance because of technology become true. In a very stunning manner, it is depicted that technology has the potential to be used against freedom, independence, and human rights in many ways.

Technology is one of the most essential tools for human life. Especially, in recent decades technology is developing significantly thus its effects are increasing. Therefore, societies become more dependent on technology and its developments. Society can be considered as a composition of three generations which are young, middle, and old. Hence, technology has different impacts on each generation, depending on age, social environment, priorities. Especially for the young population, the connection and dependency on technological devices cannot be ignored. As a member of the young generation, I myself observe well, how I and my age group are affected significantly by technology

¹ Ray Bradbury, telling the Los Angeles Times, how he desired a small government and less technology. TIME, August 17, 2010.

and its services, possibilities in both positive and negative ways. Therefore, it is a very critical issue to what extent and how technology must be in our lives.

In the novel, “Fahrenheit 451” Ray Bradbury expresses the dangerous sides of technology and depicts how, when it is in the wrong hands it can have crucial negative impacts. Departing from this point of view, I examined a significant relationship between the novel and today’s world, from the aspects of technology and its impacts upon society.

Even though technology has generally positive effects on the world and society it has some negative ones as well. In the book, “Fahrenheit 451” by Ray Bradbury how technology negatively affects society is examined through the depiction of its causes on a society. Therefore, technology is a powerful tool, but it might be used against society to control and observe them if it is in the wrong hands. Especially in the book, it is stated how a totalitarian government can use this tool to its advantage and as a result, the consequences upon the society are exhibited.

My research question is: “How does Ray Bradbury display the conflict between people and technology in the book “Fahrenheit 451” to describe a dystopian society?” To answer this question, I extracted the key points and analyzed them separately; how technological developments are related to societies, and in the scope of the novel what the relationship between people and technology is, how Ray Bradbury constructs a dystopian society, whether these questions are guiding the discussion around technology and people or not.

The Relationship Between People and Technology

In the novel, technological developments represent society’s problems because the major problems that people encounter such as censorship and an excessive amount of using technological devices for entertainment purposes are provided by the technology. Ray Bradbury expresses the negative sides of technology, and how these create a dystopian society. Firstly, with the developments of technology the usage of televisions and earpieces increased. Televisions in the novel are the size of a wall hence, it increases the addiction and people become numb. Besides, screens become an

inevitable part of daily life. The contents in the television programs are featured as the entertainment. Also, one of the main characters such as Guy Montag's wife Mildred Montag watches these shows which are generally pointless and violent. Whenever Mildred is not watching television, she listens to music and advertisements from the earpieces. Since she is always plugged in Guy Montag observes her lack of empathy, emotion and he thinks that this depends on her addiction to these technological devices. Society is generally like Mildred they are addicted to these technological devices and the limitless entertainment throws dust in their eyes, and they cannot understand what is going on. Being almost hypnotized by continuous interaction with the screen, not only pacifiers' people but at the same time, take their thoughts under control. "Will you turn the parlor off?" he asked. "That's my family." (Bradbury, 46). As stated in this quote Mildred's addiction to the TV reached to a level that she almost thinks TV shows are her reality and the world itself seems unrealistic to her. The general impact of these TVs and earpieces is summarized with the character Mildred.

In the book, the critical view towards technology is demonstrated through various mediums and tools. As described above, the major one is television and screens, but other than that, technological devices are also critically mentioned by their negative effects. Other than the captivate effects of technology there are some fatal effects. As an example, automobiles can reach unnecessary speeds. "*The keys to the beetle are on the night table. I always like to drive fast when I feel that way. You get it up around ninety-five and you feel wonderful. Sometimes I drive all night and come back and you don't know it. It's fun out in the country. You hit rabbits, sometimes you hit dogs*". (Bradbury, 68). The quote explains these cars are the way to escape from the depressed state of mind. However, it is a temporary way to escape depression and it embroiders people thus they cannot see the big picture. Also, this causes people to be more reckless drivers. In order to emphasize this aspect, another important character of the novel, Clarisse dies because of a car accident. The other example of the fatal feature of the technology is the mechanical hound. This mechanical hound is a nightmare to the ones who broke the laws. This machine is equipped with biometrics of the person who is meant to be killed. Also, this shows that the government controls people with fatal technological tools and they do not show mercy to the ones who break the laws which they put into effect. Nevertheless, the most fatal technological development is the atomic bomb. Before the novel was written two nuclear wars were encountered. The book ends with another atomic bomb that falls to the city. Fahrenheit 451 was written between the 1940s and 1950s in the United States. During this period people encountered the

Manhattan project and its negative effects. Nevertheless, by the Manhattan Project, the atomic bomb was created. Shortly after the atomic bomb was made, they detonated these nuclear weapons over the cities of Japan which are Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The effects of these bombs were devastating and fatal. Over 150 thousand people have died, and the atomic bomb had its radioactive effects on those cities for a long time. Therefore, these historic facts about the negative usage of technology strengthen Ray Bradbury's argument.

Fahrenheit 451 provides a dystopic, ignorant, numb, and anesthetic society. Society is majorly affected by the government and the government's most powerful tool to create this type of society is technology. *"If you don't want a house built, hide the nails and wood. If you don't want a man unhappy politically, don't give him two sides to a question to worry him; give him one. Better yet, give him none."* (Bradbury, 58) To construct a house people, need nails and wood, but if people don't have the necessary tools, they cannot build, similarly, to come up with ideas we need to be able to think, to be able to think we need to know; but if we don't know, if we cannot think, we naturally cannot produce ideas, politically or in any area. Just like the happiness that comes from ignorance, it is emphasized that the more brains are busy with useless stuff, the more they will feel happy, and not be able to even question. Therefore, the government hides the nails and woods by banning the books to obstruct the people to think and they want them to be ignorant to control them effortlessly.

Secondly, the role of technology is to create a lifestyle that is based on entertainment because they do not want them to have time to think and question. Also, with the technology, the government punishes the people and they do not show any mercy because they want to eliminate a riot that may happen. Thus, fear is another emotion imposed on society by the government again by the use of technology. As long as society is scared, it is easier to keep people under control. In addition, ironically firemen are burning books rather than protecting and stopping a sudden fire. Therefore, a major conflict is formed which is created by the government and this shows that they could shape people. To conclude, the government shapes the society into a dystopic one with the negative usage of technology and this society does not have any awareness since they are so busy with entertainment tools.

Expression of Technology and Dystopia through the Characters

In novels, different characters serve to express the ideas from people's points of view, therefore, it is important to analyze the relation of technology and people, from the characters within the novel. The characters display different sides of society and looking at how they are affected by technology would provide a more solid statement. Four characters from the book will be examined because these characters represent significantly different parts of society. These four characters are Guy Montag, Mildred Montag, Professor Faber, Clarisse McClellan. The selected four characters, their actions, emotions and attitudes demonstrate how different personalities react towards technology, government, and the system in general, therefore it's worth following the analysis from these four characters.

Guy Montag is one of the most important figures in the book. He is a former fireman who burns books; however, later in the book, he starts to question whether he is doing a good job or not. This realization starts with his meeting with Clarisse; she amazes him with being unique and asking some interesting questions which help him to realize how the government controls them. He concludes they control them with technological tools and banning the books, then he starts to think about what is so important about these books that they need to ban and burn. Also, Guy Montag realizes how important books are when a woman tries to protect her books with her life. *"There must be something in books, things we can't imagine, to make a woman stay in a burning house; there must be something there. You don't stay for nothing"* (Bradbury, 48). After the thinking process, he concludes that he would not want to be like his wife, ignorant, anesthetized, and to be controlled by the government therefore he goes to the rebellions and becomes a part of the movement.

The figure Mildred Montag is significantly important in terms of analyzing the negative impacts of technology on people. *"Mildred watched the toast delivered to her plate. She had both ears plugged with electronic bees that were humming the hour away. She looked up suddenly, saw him and nodded. "You all right?" he asked. She was an expert at lip reading from ten years of apprenticeship at Seashell ear-thimbles. She nodded again"* (Bradbury, 18). The quote emphasizes the numb state of Mildred and how she lost her assumption of reality. This figure is controlled by the government effortlessly and the tool they use is entertainment. Mildred's feelings are also buried by

the technology since she is always plugged in. Her betrayal of Guy Montag explains how atheized she is and how far she can go. To conclude Bradbury depicts Mildred as a hollow person who does not show any intellectual or emotional substance and she symbolizes most of the society. She is the character that shows in a stunning way, how a person can be controlled just by the impacts of technological devices.

Professor Faber is a victim of the government. He does not obey the rules therefore he lives with fear. The government evokes fear by using technological tools such as mechanical hounds and devices which listen to the conversations. Hence, he represents what would happen when people do not obey the rules. *“I’m one of the innocents who could have spoken up and out when no one would listen to the ‘guilty,’ but I did not speak and thus became guilty myself. And when finally, they set the structure to burn the books, using the firemen, I grunted a few times and subsided, for there were no others grunting or yelling with me, by then. Now, it’s too late.”* (Bradbury, 78). Since Faber is afraid of the government he cannot express his thoughts therefore, his thoughts became meaningless.

Clarisse McClellan is a complex character who is significantly different from society. She has a curious mind and asks intellectual questions which help Guy Montag’s change and realization about his wife. Also, Clarisse’s questions are generally basic, however, because of the numb state which the people are in they do not think about these questions. Such as questioning happiness helped Guy Montag to awaken. Until then he assumed that he is happy but when he thought about his happiness, he realized how miserable his life is. Hence, Clarisse symbolizes the philosophical side of a person who is killed by the government.

To conclude, while Mildred is depicted as the victim; Clarisse, Faber, and Guy are the characters, which still carry some hope, highlighting that, not all society is under control; on the contrary, there is still hope and courage that people may be or become aware of the things going on around, and that not everybody is blinded. But of course, from a realistic point of view, this is not easy and it has some consequences; when people reject the rules or question or fight for their freedom, there are always some costs that they have to pay, sometimes even to the cost of their lives. History has always witnessed such personalities who have fought for their lives for the sake of their beliefs, freedom, or human rights.

The construction of a Dystopian Society

A dystopian² society is a hypothetical society that has a negative and dark atmosphere. In this very novel, the hypothetical society is expressed to the reader by the government's use of technology. Ray Bradbury's reason for creating this type of society is to illustrate what could happen with the wrong usage of technology. Hence, it provides people to empathize and understand what would happen in the future. Also after reading the book, the reader inevitably would question the dependency on technology, the awareness of how we are capable of being distracted and hypnotized by the everyday tools without even recognizing. Also, the choice of the characters expresses the individual damages of the technology.

Key Features of Creating a Dystopian Society by Use of Technology

In "Fahrenheit 451", a dystopian society is created by some key factors such as individualism, alienation, fear, lack of communication. These four factors are the major elements for creating a dystopic society in "Fahrenheit 451". Individualism is a very dominant state of being in the novel. This concept states and evokes the moral value of an individual although it may seem like a positive concept it is the reason for many problems and in the novel, it is a negative philosophy. The reason that this concept occurs in the novel is because of the technological tools and the government's regulations about communication. The government does not allow communication to control people. Also, communication provides knowledge to spread to the world therefore, they prevent it. When people communicate, they are open to new ideas, it becomes easier to question. They can discuss and have their own opinions. Whereas when they cannot communicate and become isolated, it is easier to control their thoughts. Another impact is power, people are more powerful when they are together

² *Dystopias* are worlds of depressive misery, the opposite of utopias, fictional utopias. Fahrenheit 451 establishes a dystopic society through inhumane treatments of the government, censorship, and at the same time reality being replaced by entertainment. Kerry Gray. 12.06.2021.

and similarly weaker when they are alone. Thus, the more people are individualized, the weaker they become, available to be controlled by the government or the rulers.

Clarisse is the only person who despite everything, still keeps her individuality; she *“liked to smell things and look at things and sometimes stay up all night walking and watching the sun rise”* (Bradbury, 5). Montag’s encountering with Clarisse also affect him, her unique personality, individual habits, despite the rest of the society, make Montag o realize how conformity took everyone under control.

Alienation is caused by fear and isolated entertainment. This concept also provides a dystopian society since in Ray Bradbury’s future people are ignorant and scared. The ignorance among the people provides people to be happy and numb because lack of knowledge means lack of awareness of problems. Hence, the government sustains this state by entertaining them and burning books because the most important part of creating a degenerated and dystopian society is to obstruct knowledge, thoughts, communication, and thus create ignorance. These key points are successfully provided with the negative usage of technology. The balance that is created by the government is protected by the help of the people like Captain Beatty as expressed in the quote *“We must all be alike. Not everyone born free and equal, as the constitution says, but everyone made equal... A Book is a loaded gun in the house next door. Burn it. Take the shot from the weapon. Breach man’s mind.”* (Bradbury, 58).

Therefore, the purpose of captain Beatty stating this is to highlight that everyone must be equal and whoever tries to destroy the balance which is provided by the government will be punished. To conclude, this quote states that people were brain-washed and convinced that books are weapons that are dangerous to the reader. Also, the numb and anesthetized society that is created can be expressed by this quote. *“People don’t talk about anything.” “Oh, they must!” “No, not anything. They name a lot of cars or clothes or swimming pools mostly and say how swell! But they all say the same things, and nobody says anything different from anyone else.”* (Bradbury, 60). This quote states that because of the ignorance, and numb state of people started to become hollow, and it shows that the government succeeded. Also, people are stuck in their reality, and they have almost no connection with the real world as it is stated in the following quote. *“Good God, who were those men? I never saw them before in my life!”* (Bradbury, 14)

When explaining an idea, there are two important stages. First, the idea and then the quality of the idea. The second one is how it is expressed to the reader. Hence, if the writer cannot establish the right connection with the reader the idea that is explored does not have any value. Ray Bradbury's usage of literary devices has significant importance in terms of describing a dystopian society. The novel *Fahrenheit 451* is written in the third person limited omniscient point of view. Hence, this point of view allows the reader to access the feelings and inner thoughts of the characters. Also, it enables the reader to empathize with the character and be more intertwined with the novel. The tone of the novel is intense and dark. The intense tone is shaped by the dark atmosphere and the limited freedom that society has. The totalitarian government is the main reason for the dark tone. They restrict society with technological tools and callous policies thus, it provides a dystopic society. In addition, in the novel mistakes of society are not tolerated by the government hence, this also creates a dark and desperate tone. The genre of the novel is science fiction because it describes a future in which technology has transformed society. The common feature of science fiction novels is that they all speculate about the future and technology's effects on the people. In the scope of *Fahrenheit, 451* the negative sides of technology are described. But at the same time, among all dark and dystopic approaches, there still exists hope through the characters such as Guy, who becomes aware and connects with the rebellions. So despite all the negative sides and consequences depicted there is always hope as long as people are aware of their environment and get together.

Conclusion

While analyzing in line with the question "*How does Ray Bradbury display the relationship between people and technology in the book "Fahrenheit 451" to describe a dystopian society*", The novel ends with a stunning action where Guy escapes the city, which shows that there is always a way out, even in such a trapped condition. So there is always room for questioning, even the very basic tools we have. Technology is perhaps the most important one. Even in today's world, we are always connected to the world, but it remains as a question of how objective we hear about the news? Sometimes there is a war and perhaps we are not well informed about the reasons, the outcomes; it is even today, quite possible that we are being misinformed in many ways, depending on the "powerful" people or states or governments.

Technological developments affect human life significantly. However, the effects are not always positive, and Ray Bradbury has mentioned a possible negative outcome of the technology. Since the novel was written in the 1950s Ray Bradbury had some concerns about these developments. In our world today, perhaps our societies are not far from that of 'Fahrenheit 451' in some ways. Especially, from point of view of our association with social media.

It turns out that his concerns were logical because today, just as he had predicted, technology is used for controlling and observing people and they do not even know that their every move is being tracked. Also, people became incredibly addicted to technological developments one of which is social media. Nevertheless, it does not stop there, all the currencies started to become digital, people are buying NFT (Non-fungible token) which does not exist, and they are buying these digital things with real money which they earned with hard work. (Schneider, 2). Hence, these developments are laying the groundwork for something unbelievable which is the Metaverse. This concept is the latest technological concept that will eventually allow people to live in an unreal world. Similarly in Fahrenheit 451 people are living basically inside the televisions. To conclude every development of technology has positive sides and negative ones. Since technology is getting significantly improved it started to become scary. Therefore, in Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451 these negative aspects construct a dystopian society which makes the reader understand the possible outcomes even better.

As a novel of social criticism, Fahrenheit 451 is still valid after more than 70 years since it has been written. Even today, the topic of control of the masses by media is a valid topic to be critically evaluated. The novel, once more makes us realize that we must be aware and critical all the time against all authority, never accept without questioning. As Juan Ramon Jimenez³ (1881-1958) claims: "*if they give you ruled paper, write the other way*".

³ Spanish poet who won the Nobel Prize in 1956.

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