THE BRIGHT AGES

When it comes to technology, modern society is both inspired and terrified. In 2007, Steve Jobs introduced the first iPhone, and, in his words, "reinvented the phone." This exhilarated Americans, as we looked forward to the fulfilled promises of the future and the innovation that would culminate in the massive global network that modern technology brought us.

However, hope has faded for some. Celebrity artists like Banksy speak out against commercialization and excessive materialism. Scholars and psychologists like Sherry Turkle have voiced concerns about the negative effects of technology. But the technology that has many up in arms may be surprising. These people are not talking about airplanes, batteries, or even weapons —they're talking about phones, tablets, and laptops. "Technology appeals to us most where we are most vulnerable," Turkle said in a Ted Talk.

"We're designing technologies that will give us the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship." Turkle's criticism is indeed valuable, but scrolling through one's Facebook feed can lead to many videos claiming technology has rendered us disconnected, apathetic, and utterly deaf and blind to the world and to each other. But the rising stereotype of the inattentive teenager absorbed in their smartphone is not entirely accurate. Communication has shifted, but it has not wholly dissipated nor has it necessarily decreased.

Charles Pence, LSU philosophy assistant professor who has conducted research in the history of science and the philosophy and ethics of technology, said the argument that communication is being altered for the worse can just as easily be changed into a more optimistic, but just as viable, argument.

For Pence, these arguments, such as the idea that texting and social media has caused people to speak poorer English, can easily be translated into a positive.

"We have a generation of people who spent their whole lives manipulating text, playing with words. You think those people are going to be bad at language?" Pence said. "No, they're going to be awesome at language because you're thinking about language in a way at six years old that some people never did in their whole lives in 1900."

The issue, he said, is both arguments are

WORDS:
JOHN HANLEY

DESIGN:
KRISTIN HUDSON
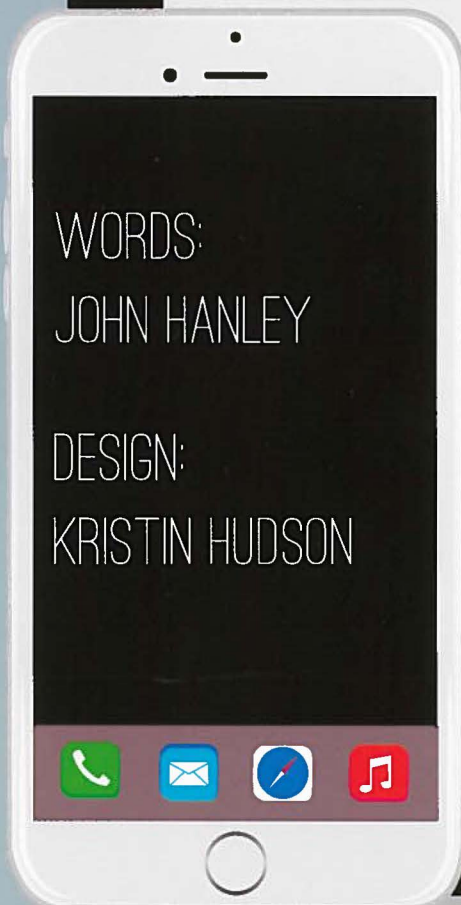
are equally reasonable. And America's cultural self image isn't broad or informed enough to know how social media and its relatives will truly affect people, for better or worse.

"When it comes to things as distant as cultural conventions like how to engage with your parents, those are going to change a lot, they have changed a lot, and they'll continue to change a lot," Pence said. "Yes, social media will change them, but you're going to need a better argument than I've ever read to tell me that those changes are obviously bad."

One of his biggest points is that human culture shifts to incorporate new technologies, and that social media is just another technology society is currently adapting to.

"You can find people making the same kinds of arguments that people make about social media, about every technological change that's ever happened in the history of human society," Pence said.

He then cited Socrates' argument that writing would ruin humanity's ability to cultivate memory and that monks initially argued against the printing press.

But ultimately, "We get over it," he said.

"We're going to go through the same equilibrating process that we've gone through when we integrated the printing press and the automobile and the landline telephone," Pence said. "We have, as a culture, been pretty good at working our way back to an equilibrium after changes like this."

In the same way society came to view 2 a.m. phone calls as a deviation from the norm, cultural norms will eventually emerge for social media and technology. Whether or not people follow those norms will ultimately be up to them, but Pence said he is skeptical that technology will take complete control because, in general, people don't actually think they should strive to refrain from communicating with each other.

However, he said he does agree that technology changes the way that people interact and has the capacity to change the world.

"Technologies do shape us in ways that we might not readily understand or that we might not be able to readily understand until well after the fact," Pence said.

But that doesn't mean they're doing anything bad, Pence said.

A computer science student at LSU, who wishes to remain anonymous due to his work in the field of cyber security, agreed society is inevitably going to incorporate social media into its culture.

"I think social media is something that people are going to have to learn the hard way how to police themselves," he said. "For example, people have already learned, for the most part, that you shouldn't post your address on the Internet."

People develop norms like these over time, Pence and this student agreed, and whether they do

do so consciously or unconsciously, people will find a way to incorporate technology into a changed but nonetheless functional society.

"I think it has more to do with the person than the technology," added the computer science student. "At some point, we have to be accountable for our interactions with other human beings."

This student said he has noticed that people are uncomfortable when he makes eye contact with them, and that, in a small, informal experiment of his own, he found people to be more receptive and more talkative if he looked at his phone rather than in the eyes. However, he said he found more professionally experienced people to be comfortable with eye contact and meeting face-to-face.

To an extent, Pence also agreed with this idea, and said technology and people work off of each other. On one end, technology affects the way people view the world and the way they interact in society. But on the other hand, people decide what technology to use and how to use it.

"It's not really possible to cleanly divide the people and the technology because the people and the technology constantly change one another," Pence said.
He said it's impossible to tell whether technology actually causes a shift in ideals and cultural norms, or if the advancement and emergence of technology is simply correlated with an already present shift.

"It's hard to say whether social media caused these shifts, or if a new generation of humans showed up with new ideals, and at the same time, they developed technologies to go along with those ideals to help enforce them and bring them into real life," Pence said. "I might be more inclined to say that there was a cultural shift, and that cultural shift and the technology mutually enabled and promoted one another in a symbiotic way."