

## Who Controls the Tech?

<https://mindmatters.ai/podcast/ep196>

Robert J. Marks:

Welcome to Mind Matters News. I'm your understanding host, Robert J. Marks.

Robert J. Marks:

We've been talking to Andrew McDiarmid. Andrew's a senior fellow and media specialist at the Discovery Institute. He is written for a bunch of great places like Daily Wire, New York Post, Houston Chronicle, American Spectator. He has also guest hosted here on Mind Matters News.

Robert J. Marks:

We're delighted to have him back. We're going to continue our discussion from last time. Welcome back again, Andrew.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Thank you very much, Bob.

Robert J. Marks:

We have been talking about Jacques Ellul's concept of technique. If you would, just summarize what technique is, in order to bring those listening up to date, and then talk about how the phenomena technique can help us understand our issues with technology today.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah, sure. Well, Jacques Ellul, as we said before, was a French sociologist, theologian, and philosopher of technology.

Robert J. Marks:

I want to get this in, because this is cool to me. I'm an engineer. Engineers have a big challenge with scientists, because it wasn't scientists that put a man on the moon. It was engineers. It wasn't scientists that gave you your cell phone. It was engineers.

Robert J. Marks:

There is an area called the philosophy of science, which deals with the philosophy of science. But here you're saying that this Jacques Ellul is a philosopher of technology, a philosopher, if you will, of engineering, which is a very, very different thing. It's nice to see that there is a philosopher of engineering.

Robert J. Marks:

I needed to stick that in there for a self-serving promotion for all of us engineers. Go ahead. I interrupted.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. That's a good point to be made and to be brought out here.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Well, Ellul's lifetime spanned almost the entire 20th century, 1911 to 1994. He wrote books and articles throughout his career on how he saw technology impacting the human adventure, as he calls it.

Andrew McDiarmid:

He comes up with this concept, written about in the 1954 book, *The Technological Society*, and he called it technique. At the heart of it, technique is just the practical methods we apply to do tasks. There's nothing controversial about it.

Andrew McDiarmid:

But prior to the Industrial Revolution, humans were shaping these techniques. The techniques were part of their work. It moved slowly, at the pace of humankind as they did their craftsmanship and their workmanship. It was localized. It was various. It developed slowly. It was to do with beauty as well as function, not so much with efficiency.

Andrew McDiarmid:

The Industrial Revolution changed that. As we started replacing human muscle and mind as a source of energy and information, became less to do with the pace of humanity, and how we wanted our tools to look and be, and more pursuing efficiency and the best way to do something. Then machines started coming into the picture.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Ellul opened my eyes to this concept of technique, which I think is a great way to look at the problems we're having with technology today, just some of the issues we're having, as well as how we can work on those problems.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Who controls technique in the modern age? Who controls these methods by which we access things and get things done in the modern age?

Andrew McDiarmid:

Well, the short answer is Big Tech with capital letters, the biggest technology companies, and even the medium ones joining in with them, that govern the way that we access information, connect with other people, entertain ourselves, get news and current events, and live much of our lives. Shopping, medical, fitness, mental health, recreation. There's so much involved with an online digital life now.

Andrew McDiarmid:

We have to realize that these big tech companies are governing the methods, the techniques by which we access all of that. That's big. That's the first thing we got to realize is just how much they're governing that. Then we can go from there to what to do about it.

Robert J. Marks:

I monitor a number of different sites, including some of them that you write for, the Daily Wire and Newsmax, et cetera. But I also got to make sure that I visit the other side of things, the more liberal side, so I also, every once in a while, poke around at The Daily Beast or the Huffington Post, and see how they're handling things.

Robert J. Marks:

The disparity is incredible. I really pity people that have all of their input from a single source controlling what they think and what they believe. It's really frustrating.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah.

Robert J. Marks:

Many times, we don't know what is true. That is enormously frustrating, not knowing what is new.

Robert J. Marks:

I'll give you an example. I did an article about McDonald's kiosks. There was a story that they were full of all sorts of bad things. A biologist went up and did some swabs of these kiosks, where you went up and you ordered your Big Mac and McNuggets. He did it in England. He discovered that there were all sorts of bad things on it, like E. coli, and traces of fecal matter, and other stuff. This was terrible. I wrote a column about it.

Robert J. Marks:

Then there was another column that came out and said that this guy that made this report was totally wrong. He didn't know what he was talking about. There was all sorts of bad practices in the way he gathered the data, et cetera, et cetera.

Robert J. Marks:

So I thought, "Well, maybe McDonald's kiosks aren't so bad after all." But then it occurred to me that this counter story could itself be fake. That these big companies that control the media, like you were mentioning, could come in and they could actually plant another story, which debunked a true story. You just don't know what to believe.

Robert J. Marks:

Today, I don't know the deal. I don't know the truth about McDonald's kiosks. But I can tell you I never use them. I go up and I order nose to nose, the way that God meant it to be.

Robert J. Marks:

It's frustrating when you can't filter out the truth, and you're being bombarded from all these sides by all of these different perspectives.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah, yeah. That's where you need to rely on the critical thinking skills you were supposed to be educated in in school. Folks our age would certainly have some of that. Today, I'm a little worried about the amount of critical thinking being taught in schools.

Andrew McDiarmid:

But the best way to get through fake news, and wondering what is true and what isn't, is evaluating, looking at multiple sources and seeing what comes out of that, just evaluating left, right, middle, and see who's corroborating what, and just really apply your own critical thinking to get to what you would consider is the truth.

Andrew McDiarmid:

But yeah, those kiosks, I've thought about them, but from a different perspective, the taking away of the human interaction. Of course, there's germs and there's all sorts of yuckies on the screen that multiple people would use. But to me, that's the secondary reason not to use it. The first reason is I'm not looking at a human. I'm not making a connection with another human being. That's where I'd go with those kiosks.

Robert J. Marks:

I have a cousin who's incredibly conservative. He just gets so upset at some of the things happening. He will talk for hours about why this is bad and why that's bad. I get to the point where I get tired of listening to it. I tell him, "Look. There's probably not a lot that you can do about this stuff you're complaining about. So maybe you shouldn't spend your time bathing in that information which gets you upset, if there's nothing you can do about it."

Robert J. Marks:

Now, there's always something you can do about something, right? But a lot of these things, like at the national level, in order to do something about it, you have to invest yourself totally into the process, in order to be effective at all.

Robert J. Marks:

Is there times when you should just stay away and fast from some of these different disturbing things?

Andrew McDiarmid:

Indeed. Really, the first person that you're trying to help is yourself.

Robert J. Marks:

Yes.

Andrew McDiarmid:

A lot of people forget that these days. They run out into the streets, and they join these parades, and they join these online social media driven mob processes, and forget that they're trying to help themselves, or they should. If we don't address the problems with ourself and get to a better place ourself, how are we going to help anybody?

Andrew McDiarmid:

So yeah. Turning it off, that power button really becomes our friend, Bob. The ability to just turn something off, and turn inside and say, "Okay. All right, Andrew. What are you thinking here? What are you doing? Are you spending your time well? Are you getting caught up in the minutia of daily life? What's the big picture here?" You got to give yourself time to look inside before you can help others.

Andrew McDiarmid:

It's like what they tell you, or they used to, I'm not sure they do it still, on airplanes. In case of an emergency, put your own mask on first, and then help your children. That's an analogy I like to use sometimes.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay. How does big tech influence us through the power of technique? We touched on it a little bit. It's just this dominance in the media, not only in the media of social media, not only the news, but in the entertainment that we get from Netflix and Hulu and all of these streaming services that have a certain agenda, and try to cram it down our throats with their entertainment.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah, yeah. I have a friend, Doug Smith. He's written a book called [Un]Intentional.

Robert J. Marks:

In fact, you did an interview with Doug Smith for Mind Matters News. We should reference that in the podcast links.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yes, yes. I was able to unpack a few things with him. His book's called [Un]Intentional: How Our Screens Shape Our Desires and What We Can Do To Break Free. He takes it all the way to why these people would do it. This is not just for a paycheck. It's not about money. It's about power, but it goes even beyond that to what influence us to do things to other people.

Andrew McDiarmid:

The people that have made these screens and these modern gadgets, they've studied human psychology. They've gotten tips from casinos. They know how humans tick. They know what causes people to come back for more on a regular basis. They know what hooks us. They have used these ideas to create this addictive, immersive technology.

Andrew McDiarmid:

What I'm encouraging people to do is, look, you got to become a tech boss here. You got to wake up, sleeper. You got to get back to what your vision is, what your purpose is, what you want to do with your life, and just really keep this stuff in check, or it is going to rule you. You're not going to know which way is up.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay. Suppose I want to do that, and I do want to reset my life. I want to quit worrying about things that there's nothing I can do about them. I want to quit worrying about things that are, in the long run, non-consequential. How do we go about resetting our relationship with technology? What are the techniques? What are the steps?

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah. Once we've renewed our understanding of technology, we understand that it's about us, it's about our art and skill, and it's what we can do to weave something useful, good and beautiful in the world ...

Once we get to that point, then we can ... It's time to reset. As I said, that Staples button, the easy button, you start hitting the button. Unfortunately, it doesn't take just a second. This is the lengthier part of the process.

Robert J. Marks:

That, by the way, is your second step. The first one is renew. Then there is reset. You have to hit that reset button, right?

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah, yeah. You do that by first addressing the big questions. Why am I here? Who or what is responsible for life in the universe? What do I want to do with my time on earth? What is my vision? What is my purpose in that vision?

Andrew McDiarmid:

You got to start there, because if you just start by saying, "Well, do I need this gadget or that one?" that's really not addressing the main thing here, which is, "What do I actually want to do?" not, "What am I caught up in doing because I'm not thinking and just acting reflexively?" No. It's, "What do I want to do with my life?"

Andrew McDiarmid:

Address the big questions first. Then you start to survey your gadgets and ask questions about them.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Here's an example. "Does this technology positively or negatively affect my," and then you can fill that in, my time, my energy, my relationships, my potential, my memory, my attitude, my outlook, my finances, my marriage, my kids. There's a lot you can unpack with that as you start to ask about each gadget.

Andrew McDiarmid:

I'm not just talking about gadgets. I'm talking about platforms, whole tech platforms. I'm talking about subscriptions. I'm talking about the tech companies themselves. It's all up for grabs as far as what we decide to get rid of and keep.

Robert J. Marks:

In terms of this resetting, both you and I are Christians. We're followers of Christ. One of the things that one needs to do is go to your fundamental ideology in order to choose these steps that you're talking about. What do you believe the Christian should do in such a case?

Andrew McDiarmid:

Well, thanks for asking about that, Bob. I was recently rereading Psalm 139 over the Mother's Day period this year. I got to verse 13 and 14. "You knitted me together in my mother's womb." I started unpacking that. I got to the Hebrew word [Hebrew 00:14:26], which means to hem in, but it also has this understanding of to weave. I thought, "Well, gosh."

Robert J. Marks:

There it is. Okay.

Andrew McDiarmid:

There it is. That is the same word as technology. So I think it's fair to say that when you're a believer, you are believing in a God of technology, a God that put you together with amazing technology and the ability to then go and create technology of your own.

Andrew McDiarmid:

If you start there, Bob, then you're thinking, "Well, okay. I can do technology because my maker produced me, created me, wove me together in my mother's womb. So what do I do with that?"

Andrew McDiarmid:

The Bible promises us that He knows the plans He has for us. Ephesians 2:10, He planned good works for us to do in advance. So then you're looking at what you can do, building a vision fueled by God that can inform your purpose. That's really where you start with the resetting step.

Robert J. Marks:

This is the third step, if you will, which is to, if you will, release our potential. Releasing our potential is the final step in your approach to technology. That's becoming who we are meant to be.

Robert J. Marks:

Could you unpack that a little bit and maybe elaborate on how we do it? In order to follow these steps, you're going to become a much more effective person. You're going to have more impact on the world by doing things that are impactful, that are meaningful, than you would if you don't follow them.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Absolutely. Yeah. This is not a process for getting rid of your gadgets necessarily. That's not really the focus. In the end, these tech tools that we have, they're just a means to an end. But if you don't know what the end is, then it doesn't really matter how you use technology.

Robert J. Marks:

But the end is going to be shaped by your ideology.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Correct.

Robert J. Marks:

That's where you're going to start.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yep. It's how you see the world. It's how you see your place in the world. It's what you want to do with the time you have.

Andrew McDiarmid:

After you've surveyed your gadgets and your platforms and all your tech, and then made the purge, which is getting rid of, severing ties with, selling anything that isn't going to be useful to you and help you serve your vision and your purpose, then we're into releasing our potential.

Andrew McDiarmid:

To me, it's the most exciting part of it. This is where we practice keeping our tech in check, as I like to say. This is where we apply what we've just applied to our current tech to any future tech.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Apple and all these other big tech companies, they're never satisfied. They don't close up shop, because there's always something to innovate. There's always a new version of whatever they have out. There's always the next new thing around the corner.

Andrew McDiarmid:

We have to decide how much of that next new we need. "How much is enough?" I've heard in a popular song recently. Lately, I've been asking, "Well, what is enough? Do I have a powerful enough computer? Is my phone got enough gigabytes of memory and storage? Or am I always going to have to look at the next thing?" That's part of practicing keeping your tech in check.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Then I think really just filling in your life with the human adventure, really addressing what it means to be human, because that, after all, is the natural antidote to dependence on machinery, dependence on technology, dependence on gadgets and subscriptions and big tech. It is living human.

Andrew McDiarmid:

The places that I would encourage you to think about that would be relationships, learning and discovery, producing more than you consume, raising healthy, happy families, being inspired and inspiring others. And then honoring the designer of the universe, if you see that there is one that is the designer. These are all parts of the human adventure.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Filling your time with those things is going to automatically give you less time to dwell on the tech gadgets that are taking up our time and attention.

Robert J. Marks:

I have a son that teaches high school from a low income demographic. A lot of these kids come in and they're spending all of their time on Twitter. They don't have relationships. They have very difficult parenthood. They're developing into social misfits. They're not sure how to relate to people.

Robert J. Marks:

As a result of this, things materially become very, very important to them, like what kind of tennis shoes they wear, if anybody is liking them on Facebook, and things of that sort.

Robert J. Marks:



It's very frustrating, because they're very empty. They're not the sort of people that ... Well ... They're not the sort of people that God intended them to be, because they're spending too much time being distracted by this other thing, not realizing that if they did spend this time, they would be fulfilled. They would be more happy, and they would lead a much better life.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah. This was a Ellul's fear as he was writing in the mid-20th century. He saw what was to come. He saw how these techniques would be shaped by technology companies and the state, and other factors. He just saw this coming. I enjoy so much reading his work, because I can relate it today in a way that he can't, but he saw it. He saw it coming.

Robert J. Marks:

Yeah. I think Marshall McLuhan did also with his idea that we're fish and we don't know the water. He made a famous statement. He says, "I don't know who discovered water, but I'm sure it wasn't a fish." You're swimming around in all of this stuff and all of this technology, and it isn't healthy, especially because you're being steered by these big tech hub companies. You're no longer in control yourself.

Robert J. Marks:

I think the point that you're making, Andrew, is that we need to get back in the driver's seat, and take control of our lives, and not hand them over to these big tech companies and to high technology.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Right. Yeah. I think we are now at the point where we can all realize that we can't trust companies with different values and different visions than us to dictate the best methods for us in life. I just think that's a foolish thing to do and to continue to allow yourself to do so.

Andrew McDiarmid:

That's where I'm coming from with this authentic technology approach. It's helping people to wake up to this, helping them to understand what technology really means and who it's really about, and then, like you said, having them take the steering wheel.

Robert J. Marks:

When's your book coming out?

Andrew McDiarmid:

Well, I wish I could tell you, Bob, but all these ideas are swirling. Everyone around me is writing books in Discovery Institute. I really want to put some of these ideas together and put it out as a book just to help people in that way. So I'm looking forward to it.

Robert J. Marks:

Well, I hope you do. We're going to put a link to your talk. You sent me a link to one of your talks that I listened to. It's about an hour long. I think it summarizes some of the points that you've made in here.

Robert J. Marks:

However, this interview in this podcast is much better than your talk.

Andrew McDiarmid:

There you go.

Robert J. Marks:

Sorry. I had to put a little plug in there.

Robert J. Marks:

This has been a blast. Our guest today has been Andrew McDiarmid. He is a senior fellow and media specialist at the Discovery Institute.

Robert J. Marks:

Until next time, be of good cheer.

Speaker 3:

This has been Mind Matters News, with your host, Robert J. Marks. Explore more at [mindmatters.ai](http://mindmatters.ai). That's [mindmatters.ai](http://mindmatters.ai).

Speaker 3:

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