

Wired magazine co-founder discusses "What Technology Wants"



Spencer Platt/Getty Images

A man displays his iPhone 4 in New York City.

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TEXT OF INTERVIEW

Kai Ryssdal: Technology is one of those words that can mean what you want it to mean. Context is everything. We treat it almost as if it's human, sometimes. Kevin Kelly is a longtime observer of technology, how humans interact with it, and vice versa, as well. His new book is called "What Technology Wants." Good to have you here.

Kevin Kelly: My pleasure.

Ryssdal: It's worth pointing out as we start this discussion that you yourself, the guy that helped start Wired magazine, who's been involved in technology for a long time, your relationship with technology is what you might fairly call conflicted.

Kelly: Yeah, we don't have television at our house, our kids grew up without it. I don't have a smart phone, I don't have a laptop, I ride my bike more than I drive. But then at the same time, you know -- Wired, Cool Tools -- all this kind of stuff. It all flows through.

Ryssdal: So you can't live with it, you can't live without it, right?

Kelly: That's exactly true. We are both the masters of technology and the slaves to it and the technium -- all this stuff -- it has its own agenda.

Ryssdal: Define that term for me: technium. You use it to sort of all-encompassing of the world of technology.

Kelly: Yeah, well let's take your little phone in your pocket. There are probably about a thousand different technologies that are required to make that. That whole thing, that whole interdependency is what I call the technium. It's kind of like a life -- like force.

Ryssdal: We tend to take technology to mean one very specific thing in this day and age. It's all about digital and the Internet and new gadgets, but you start us on this voyage in your book with stone tools and arrowheads, I mean technology has a spanning definition.

Kelly: We tend to think of technology as anything that was invented after we were born. I think the first technology was the invention of language, and of course once we invented language we began to transform us and change us. And we invented cooking and cooking changed our bodies, it changed our teeth and jaws. So we've been remaking ourselves with our own inventions. So we, I think, are the first domesticated animal. Humans are the first domesticated animal.

Ryssdal: Do we have power, though, over technology?

Kelly: That is the question. Have we made something that we're no longer masters of? And I think to some extent yes. In the book, what technology wants to talk about how the Unabomber was right, and what he was right about was the fact that this "thing," this technium has its own agenda. What he was wrong about was the fact that you need to kill people about it. Or that it was taking away our freedoms, when in fact the technium is actually bringing us new choices and possibilities. We do have an obligation to increase the amount of technology in the world.

Ryssdal: Who's the obligation to? Our coming generations?

Kelly: Yes. Every new technology is a possibility that will allow somebody's gifts and abilities to prosper and be expressed. Imagine if Beethoven had been born before the technologies of the piano or symphony. What a loss that would've been.

Ryssdal: I love that. That's a great image of Beethoven without the technology of the piano, but at the same time I think to myself, "Yeah, but why does my 12-year-old need a cell phone that he can text with his friends," right?

Kelly: Yeah, but see to him this is not technology. This is just the environment, the background. And, there are negative things. There are problems. But the solution to any problem from technology is not less technology but more technology. Just as the solution to a bad idea is not to stop thinking, instead a better idea.

Ryssdal: Kevin Kelly helped start Wired magazine. He ran it for a number of years. He runs a great website called Cool Tools and he's got a new book out. It's called "What Technology Wants." Kevin, thanks a lot.

Kelly: It's been a pleasure. Thanks for having me.