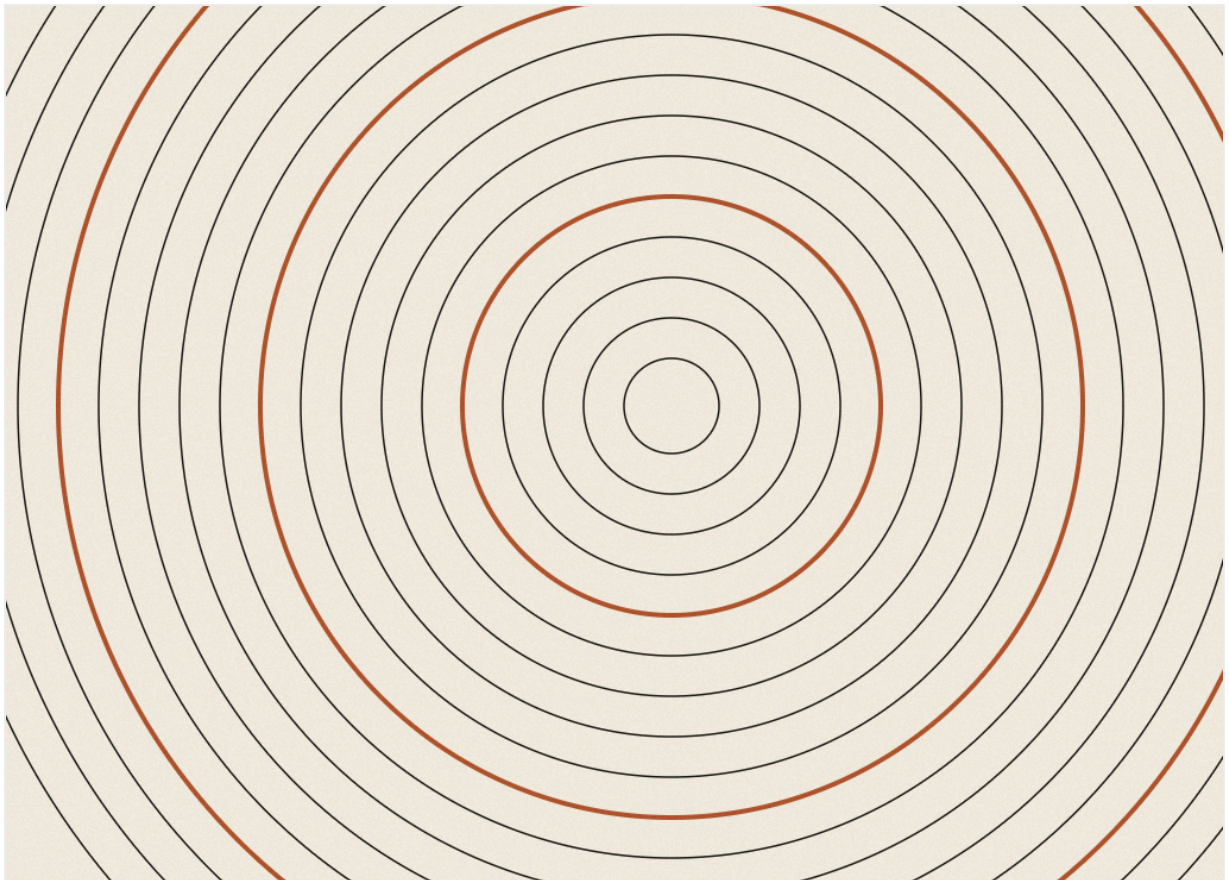

Philosophy

You Don't Get to Choose

You don't control what gets built, and it arrives whether you vote for it or not. A reading of Ellul for anyone who still thinks opting out is on the table.

By Emmanuel Awosika ■ January 2, 2026 ■



There is a comforting story we tell about technology, which is that it serves us. We are the customers. If a tool is bad for us we will decline to buy it, and the market will route around the harm. In this story

the individual holds the steering wheel, and every gadget is a choice freely made. It is a flattering account, and it is mostly wrong.

Jacques Ellul spent his career arguing that the story has the causation backward. In his account technique, by which he meant the whole apparatus of methods and machines organized around efficiency, is not a set of tools we pick up and put down. It is an environment that we live inside, and it develops according to its own logic. The decisive question about a new technology is rarely whether people want it. It is whether it works, whether it is more efficient than what came before. If it is, it gets adopted, and the society reorganizes around it, and the people living there adjust their expectations until the new arrangement feels like common sense.

Consider how little say any single person had over the private car, the smartphone, or the payment terminal that now assumes you are carrying one. Nobody was polled. The technologies arrived, the infrastructure bent to accommodate them, and within a decade the alternatives had quietly become impractical. You can decline a smartphone the way you can decline to have an address. It is permitted, and it makes ordinary life steadily harder, until the refusal costs more than most people are willing to pay.

This is why the language of consumer choice misleads. The consumer does not control the means of production, and does not get a vote on which technologies are developed, funded, and deployed. The choice on offer is always downstream: given that this thing now exists and everyone around you uses it, will you use it too. Framing that as freedom is like calling it a free choice whether to learn the local language after you have already been born into the country.

None of this is an argument for despair, and Ellul resisted being read as a prophet of doom. It is an argument against a specific illusion, the one that says personal opt-out is a meaningful response to a systemic force. If a technology is genuinely harmful, the level at which it can actually be refused is collective and political, not individual and consumer. Deciding not to buy the thing yourself is a moral gesture, and moral gestures have their place. But it leaves the machine running at full speed, and it mistakes a private exit for a public brake.