Five Steps to Recovery

Part Three: Technology is not the answer

Humanity and technology have been intertwined from the earliest times. Many will recall how this evolving relationship was brilliantly portrayed at the beginning of Kubrick's film, 2001, when an ape-like hominid threw a weaponised bone up into the air that dissolved into an elegantly turning space station. Popular histories often associate successive waves of new tech as evidence of 'progress' and 'growth.' Similarly, it's often said that technology is neither 'good' nor 'bad' but capable of being used either way. Such views, however, don't get us very far in part because they fail to engage with the default triumphalist myth of human development. Moreover, there's plenty of evidence to show that technologies exert shaping influences upon their inventors and users, often in unexpected and unusual ways. It may be more helpful to think of these processes as cultural journeys that evoke an unfolding series of questions. Tech in general changes things, creates new realities, re-casts the contexts in which it is used. The key idea, perhaps, is that technologies are dynamic but at the start of any new phase it's difficult to know where they will go or what costs they will eventually impose. It follows that great care should be taken long before they are set loose on an unprepared world. Caution and innovation need to go hand in hand.[1]

Societies need to be far more careful about what technologies are allowed into social and environmental spaces. With their eyes on immediate opportunities and rewards developers, innovators and investors are primarily concerned about whether something will work sufficiently well to return a profit. As a result, instead of exploring consequences and costs in depth, their primary fixation has been with promotion and saturation marketing. Which, as we now know, includes the promulgation of images and slogans that promote addictive behaviours and are designed to by-pass critical thinking entirely. Overall, the focus is on what tech can do, not what it means, not what costs are involved nor where it may be taking us as societies and cultures. The sheer embodied power of advanced tech pushes such questions aside and 'society' is left to adapt and grapple with the long-term costs. Devices that, in a saner and more prudent world, would never see the light of day, at least not in their early or most problematic manifestations, are adopted and used by millions.

So far, so theoretical, one might say. But if we step back briefly and recall the two topics covered in previous sections this all makes sense. *The great acceleration* has pushed humanity and its world smack into the middle of new dimensions of hazard and uncertainty. It has done so while remaining handicapped by human and cultural baggage, embedded assumptions, that we simply assume and blindly adhere to. Hence the *continued preference for the short term, 'here and now', 'mine and my own' thinking* that has become a default normal. This is not a recipe for progress but, rather, for 'overshoot and collapse' outcomes on a barely comprehensible scale.[2] But understand it we must because acknowledging the depths to which civilisation may fall highlights the false sense of security that self-deception and avoidance (two more characteristics of homo sapiens) bring with them. How, then, to think of 'technology' now we've reached the edge of a genuine global emergency? Here are some brief comments that contrast the received view of high-tech products of the Digital Revolution with some of their more obvious costs and penalties.

The Internet

The key innovations that made the internet possible emerged from US government research projects in an attempt to construct a robust communication system. Much was made of the early promise of the Internet. For example, it was seen as a levelling or democratising medium in which everyone's voice could count. It also opened up new possibilities of communication and research. Academics and economists earnestly looked forward to the new 'wealth' of

information and politicians welcomed what they referred to as the 'information superhighway.' It was seen as a new capability that could support a whole range of useful start-ups and innovations.

As it turned out, many of the latter occurred within social contexts permeated by questionable motives and dubious, self-serving values. While certain innovations did arguably contribute to human welfare, the notion of an 'open', 'facilitative' Internet that increased social and human well-being was steadily undermined. These new high-tech capabilities were employed to supercharge raw capitalist accumulation and gave rise to a rogue ideology known as 'surveillance capitalism.' Instead of creating new freedoms it undermined them through the routine and merciless evisceration of everyone's personal interior lives.[3] It also helped to create new dimensions of criminal activity such as scamming, spoofing, money laundering and, in its worst aspects, the daily moment-by-moment practice of cyber warfare by numerous 'bad actors.' Sadly, some nation states qualify for this dubious distinction. Overall, developments justified by the expectation that they would support and extend positive human capacities have facilitated a dangerous web of lies and deceit that serves to undermine civilised life everywhere. Nowhere more so than in America where many of the early developments occurred. Positive outcomes are still possible, and do occur, but the overall effect is to bind humanity to rogue applications and uses that have already proved costly beyond measure.[4] Here are two further brief examples.

Teaching and learning

Some 20 years ago prestigious girl's school in Melbourne published an in-house magazine with a striking cover image showing teenagers sitting around in arcadia happily using the latest laptops. The image was clearly posed yet it effectively conveyed a clear message the school was not only 'up-to-date' but also preparing these youngsters for 'living and working in the digital future.' Underlying this was the sense that 'tech is good for the school and good for young people.' Well, again, there's plenty of evidence that this can certainly be true in the right circumstances. Info tech can assist young people in all sorts of useful ways: literacy, research, communication, self-expression and so on. But the notion that such technology is neutral or mostly helpful perpetuates a core Silicon Valley myth in which advantages are repeatedly emphasised and possible drawbacks ignored. In fact, the possible uses of IT with children and young people cannot be evaluated without taking both sides of the ledger into account. It's best seen, perhaps, as both a blessing and a curse and it begins with the very young.

In educational settings the implications of IT for the young are profound. But the entire sector requires a far more measured and nuanced understanding of what it can do and how it can also be harmful or outright dangerous. A couple of examples will suffice. What many adults have thus-far failed to realise is that for IT to be used at all it needs to be carefully locked down and protected from on-line harms and misuse. Some may have seen the video of a girl in her bedroom being addressed by a remote stranger claiming to be her friend. Others may be aware of those cases when young children have been allowed to watch kids' cartoons on only to find that someone, somewhere, had manipulated the characters from sources such as *Frozen* or *Peppa Pig* to depict acts of violence and sexual deviance. But it's even less certain how many parents or, indeed, teachers fully appreciate how the internet oligarchs have quietly and insidiously infiltrated educational settings and inserted their products and programs as 'front runners' in pursuit of market share, profit and the wholesale extraction of private information. As Zuboff puts it: 'we thought we were searching Google, but all the time it was searching us.'

Some educators have braved the scorn (or indifference) of colleagues and bureaucracies and challenged the notion that, in spite of the vast expenditures expended, on-line learning adds little of value at all. Others have taken note of some of the regressive behaviours and results that have been experienced. These included: random pointless searches, multiple distractions along

with the risks of addiction, declining literacy, loss of control over personal information, and clear indications of a growing paucity of imagination. Such concerns took on renewed salience during the pandemic during which schools were required to translate classroom offerings into on-line materials for remote learning. Parents were not only stranded at home with their kids they also had to become substitute teachers. Predictably, many found this difficult and, in many cases, little was achieved other than enforced child-minding. Few hard-pressed parents would have known that hidden away in the materials they were required to use were the unmistakable fingerprints of Google, Microsoft, Apple and others. Those who sought answers from the schools were often dismissed with unhelpful platitudes. Teachers, schools and even Departments of Education, it seemed, were not in a position to question or critique the overt and covert influence that these well-heeled companies could and have been able to exert. They ironically failed to show evidence of the very same critical thinking and ability to question assumptions and practices that are routinely expected of students.[5]

Digital money

Much has been written about what money is because we all use it but the closer you look the less there is to see. The simplest definition of its main purpose is that it 'smooths out' the many ways that different human activities operate by providing a flexible medium of value and exchange. Nearly all societies have created their own money systems which have included nearly everything from shells to daffodils. Modern so-called 'fiat' money made up of promissory notes (bank notes) was a later development that has worked well in many places and at many times. But the digital revolution promises to change all that. Prior to Covid-19 certain financial institutions and internet oligarchs sought to promote a version of money that suited their interests rather well - invisible electronic money. At first sight the idea seemed to have a lot going for it. It meant, for example, that people no longer had to carry real vulnerable cash around with them. Now the flash of a card, fingerprint or a retina could begin to authorise transactions. In a surface view these can look like trouble-free options. Then when Covid-19 hit, 'contactless payments' had a new and obvious advantage: they impeded the spread of the pathogen. With weary predictability some of the dominant members of the global financial industry welcomed the sudden drop in the use of cash arguing that it was no longer required. The age of digital money had arrived. Or had it? Interestingly, some banks urged caution.

Retail banks apparently still tend to deal with real people from time to time and therefore know, first, that not everyone is on-line and able to make use of digital money and, second, that money has many under-acknowledged non-commercial functions. Valid tokens of value, such as bank notes, have a tangible presence and many varied uses in gift-giving, social and group solidarity, saving, informal contributing, holding a 'nest egg' and so on. All of which are overlooked as high-tech oriented corporations, driven by their own distinctive values, continue in their quest for ever greater control and levels of profit. Much more can be said along these lines. But a broad case against relying solely on digital money has another dimension entirely. It's already clear that in a digitally moderated world the locus of control steadily recedes from individual humans, human groups and many – if not most – organisations. 'Things happen' not because they are necessary or appropriate but because the switches, controls – and vulnerabilities – are elsewhere. As is clear from countless Dystopias, a world governed by 'algorithmic rationality' is a world that is, in its essence, hostile to human beings and sentient life in general. While currently AI tends to be actively moderated in specific locations the loosening of human oversight and control would be a serious mistake. Society could well end up being indistinguishable from a vast, anonymous, and poorly designed computer game. Then, as if this were not enough, there's one final issue to keep firmly in mind.

We already know the internet has been severely compromised – perhaps beyond repair. It has not only been colonised by every imaginable kind of criminal activity, but also constitutes a new and expanding medium of conflict, subversion, attack and, indeed, warfare.

Summary

Technology is more than a tool. It shapes creators, users and societies. Technological choices are therefore too vital to be left to large over-powerful organisations that have ignored costs and dangers in favour of income and market share. The current state of play suggests that there have been profound failures of governance, particularly in the US where 'rogue capitalism' established deep cultural and financial roots during the Neo-Liberal ascendency. There's a profound need to assert democratic control over private monopolies that seem to believe they are beyond regulation and civil law. They need to be proved wrong about this. Failure to do so puts us all on a slippery slope that lead directly to oppressive Dystopian techno-states such as is currently being constructed in China. If, as some suggest, 'the future is digital', then we require a far more profound understanding of what this means. The values, commitments and worldviews of the giant IT companies need to be subjected to interrogation and democratic oversight and replaced by civic organisations that operate in the public interest.[6]

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Part Four: Identity

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[1] This was something that was well understood during the late 20th and early 21st Centuries. It was among the many cogent reasons for several Institutions of Foresight (IOFs) that focused primarily on developments in technologies and explored some of their possible and likely implications. Most, however, were abolished as Neo-Liberal myths were taken up and applied in many countries around the world. Few have yet been restored...

[2] The best overall summary of this is still Higgs' (2014).

[3] No one has come close to describing in detail exactly how this crime against humanity was perpetuated better than Zuboff's magisterial work: *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*.

[4] The implications for our present and future, and possible ways forward, are explored in Slaughter (2021)

[5] See Anna Krien's perceptive article on the uncritical use of commercially produced material, *The Monthly,* Melbourne, 2020.

[6] See Diebert, R. (2020).