

## **Deleting Dystopia, Re-Asserting Human Priorities in the Age of Surveillance Capitalism**

Richard A Slaughter

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Reviewed by [Alireza Hejazi](#)

### **Core Message**

This book offers a critical examination of the information technology (IT) revolution in the early twenty-first century. It investigates approaches to comprehending the danger, envisioning remedies, and finding tactics that move away from digital authoritarian futures and toward those based on humanly feasible values and practices. It promotes a paradigm shift away from passively accepting the ideas of reality tenaciously propagated by Silicon Valley and its agents and toward a whole other reality. By ethical principles, the book aims to express its author's integral worldview, arguing that any attempt to design the future on structurally defective and empirical interpretations of reality is, at best, imprudent, and virtually likely a prescription for catastrophe. Scholars and students interested in the human and social ramifications of utilising technology, particularly IT, can benefit much from this book.

### **Content Analysis**

Prof. Richard A. Slaughter is a Futures Studies and Applied Foresight practitioner, writer, and inventor with a focus on Critical and Integral Futures. He is the author and editor of several publications on a wide range of futures themes, as well as the author or editor of several volumes, including *The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies* (2020). He has received three Association of Professional Futurists awards for 'Most Important Futures Works.' In 2020, he was invited to join the Professional Studies team at University of Southern Queensland on a part-time basis.

Slaughter (2021) reminds readers in his most recent book, *Deleting Dystopia: Re-Asserting Human Priorities in the Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, that the IT revolution has brought many shocks. Among these is the fact that powerful digital oligarchies have amassed vast amounts of personal data through extensive monitoring. Accounts of increasingly authoritarian applications of technology, and the resulting dumbing down of entire populations, in his opinion, cast shadows over our collective prospects that are beginning to appear increasingly dystopian. Slaughter believes that the existential threats caused by heedless innovation and poorly regulated enterprise endanger all human cultures and societies.

He cautions readers that the existential hazards presented by the abuse of modern digital technology are genuine, organising his views into the seven parts of this book. Instead of indifference and fatalism, Slaughter investigates methods of comprehending the threat, envisioning remedies, and creating tactics that move away from digital authoritarian futures toward those founded on humanly productive values and behaviors. Not only as an astute futurist, but also as a human being, his career is a never-ending quest for meaning. In other recent work he reminded professional futurists of their unavoidable obligation to safeguard and

nurture natural and cultural heritage, both of which are under-sustained and under-appreciated (Slaughter, 2020).

Based on his original work as reflected in one of his previous books, *Futures Beyond Dystopia: Creating Social Foresight* (2004) and inspired by Zuboff's (2020) concerns about the nature of commercialising human data through digital surveillance, Slaughter explores several core issues. In the first chapter of this new book, he picks up the tale in the early 2010s from the perspective of many competent observers. It is a good place to start since this is when genuine questions about 'where the IT revolution was headed' began to surface, along with a number of significant underlying concerns.

In the second chapter he examines three related themes that require serious critical attention: the Internet of Things, the potential of autonomous automobiles, and rising concerns about what was happening within the glossy but secluded world of Silicon Valley. Slaughter's summary of Zuboff's major concerns makes sense since she, more than any other, has brought new levels of clarity to reveal just what surveillance capitalism is and how it works. Her early critique of what she referred to as "the big other" predates her more in-depth work on the subject by several years. Even so, it helped to establish a new stream of informed understanding and greater clarity that later emerged in her masterwork. Since Slaughter regards language as one of the keys to in-depth knowledge and understanding, a glossary of some of her key concepts and phrases has been helpfully included in the appendices.

Slaughter's attention moves to many broadly defined categories in chapter three, which help to outline viable answers. Since the concept of compulsive innovation is central to this project, the first section examines some of its present and potential future manifestations. Next he examines rationales for viable solutions under a range of topics before concluding with a brief examination of values and moral growth. These issues, far from being arcane esoteric matters, illustrate another aspect of the book.

Science and technology, according to Slaughter, reflect the values, institutions, regulatory systems, and culture of the society in which they exist. He suggests that contemporary uses of digital technology are deceptive and diversionary. In this view, the term 'technology' cannot merely be restricted to a narrow collection of physical objects but should also include the networks and broader social and cultural environments from which they emerged. For these and other reasons, he believes that powerful new technologies cannot but have unanticipated and unintended consequences.

Toward the conclusion, the author draws on the preceding to suggest a framework for understanding our current position. His goal is to shed light on some of how the existing system wields power and influence over whole communities, to their immediate and long-term disadvantage. To do this, he introduces four witnesses to this "revolution". These are persons who have each had meaningful and direct experience of some of the key topics in one way or another. They collectively provide a varied, yet cohesive assessment of the present state of play. They tend to reinforce the view that, while conventional utopias may have passed us by, the contours of a technological dystopia are now taking shape around us.

Slaughter comes to a variety of conclusions in the final section. He notes the important work currently being done by others and proposes a two-pronged reaction to the current dominance of

‘Big Tech.’ This includes government efforts to impose different types of regulation, as well as growing funding for civil society, sharing cities, community start-ups, and the like. He argues that both multi-initiatives are necessary to wrest market share from the oligarchs by providing similar or superior services based on defensible, clearly stated human and community values rather than the traditional capitalist imperatives of profit and exploitation.

As Slaughter points out, this is important work in and of itself, but it is also essential in light of other grave dangers to humanity. Dystopian accounts of the occurrence of oligarchies’ dangers, unrestricted technological growth, and the dumbing down of humans by computers appear in both fictional and nonfictional works. Other evidence continues to emerge suggesting mankind is on a profoundly unsustainable path that also constitutes an existential threat. Given the likely consequences of IT-driven initiatives such as Facebook’s Metaverse at individual and social levels (Basu, 2021), Slaughter’s book should be seen as a timely warning.

## Conclusion

By authoring this book, Slaughter has clearly not contributed to, or supported, fatalistic “gloom and doom” narratives. Rather, he suggests that the dangers highlighted by dystopia are best viewed as warnings that help motivate us to take immediate and effective. His book is about overcoming the personal and social factors that together separate us from some of the deeper and more productive aspects of human existence. To achieve these ends, he proposes a practical shift away from what is already a “failed future.” This shift is divided into two sections. The first is to completely deny the internet oligarchs continuing social acceptance. The second path, which has its champions and start-ups in the works, is to transfer or duplicate the most socially useful parts of their operations from closed private infrastructures to a variety of civil equivalents, each equipped with appropriate codes of practice and operating solely in the public interest. Both routes create opportunities to reset and rethink the whole technical environment. Overall, *Deleting Dystopia* promotes the creation of an international IT system that is benign, effective, respectful, and safe for all valid needs or purposes.

## References

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