

▶ TECHNOLOGY – THE MORE THE MERRIER?

Among many other impacts, the global pandemic has certainly flipped the switch on digital transformation. Even back in April 2020, Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella already noted that they have seen [two years' worth of digital transformation in two months](#). By October, [McKinsey & Company](#) noticed that digital adoption has taken a quantum leap with executives reporting that they moved 20 – 25 times faster than they thought possible in adopting advanced technologies in operations. Zoom and MS Teams are regular household “items” like coffee and milk, and big companies like Shopify even ditch their physical presence and permanently move to work-from-home model. It appears that the world has finally gotten past the resistance and started to embrace the digital world.

So what is left to talk about now? The bigger risk now may be falling into the trap of “technological solutionism”, a term first used by Evgeny Morozov in his 2014 book “To Save Everything, Click Here”. Despite his incisive insights, we continue to be enamoured by the potential of future technologies and equate innovation and social progress with technological advances. Such optimism blinds us from seeing the whole picture.

Take the use of Artificial Intelligence in law enforcement as an example. Rather than making the police more effective, the lack of oversight in codes and poor data quality results in amplification of systemic racism.

Even when we are aware of [the issues with hard data](#), our preference of hard data over “soft, subjective” data persists and contributes to the booming of “data science”. Sadly, early COVID-19 disease modeling failed partly because the statistics do not account for the

complexity of the society. As Dr. Yaneer Bar-Yam explained in his [interview with Forbes](#),

“If there are dependencies in the systems, then statistics don't work. Standard calculus can't describe things properly when there are abrupt large-scale changes that involve changes in what many individuals are doing.”

There are many more examples of how we are surprised by the “unintended consequences” of a new technology, but we remain unfazed. When asked about possible ways to boost economic development, how often do we see policy makers immediately jump on to discuss technology needs?

The real danger of falling into the trap of “technological solutionism” is the inability to question the solution itself, as aptly described by a tweet from Simon Wardley, researcher at the Leading Edge Forum, inventor of the Wardley Map, and strategy advisor,

“When I looked into UK Gov(ernment) in 2009, what I found was we had outsourced the skills to engineer solutions to the point that we didn't even have the skills to effectively challenge the solution being proposed by the outsourcers”¹

We are not immune. Remember the Government of Canada is still working to solve the problems created by the development of the Phoenix pay system.

Don't get me wrong—I love science and technology. I like my smartphone and the ability to get any information instantly through “Dr. Google”. I can see the myriad of benefits that digitalization will bring. However, I worry that we all have made an unjustified mental

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leap—thinking that technology on its own can save the world because Alexa can now play our favorite tunes and keep the perfect temperature in the house.

Last December, I attended the “Resetting the Food System from Farm to Fork” virtual conference jointly organized by Food Tank and the Barilla Centre for Food Nutrition Foundation. One of the panelists at the Food and Technology session, Didier Toubia (Co-founder and CEO at AlephFarms, a start-up on cultivating cell-based meat) said,

“Technology won't save us, but it can help facilitate the cultural shift we need to build a resilient food system.”

This doesn't just apply to the food system. Many problems we face today are cultural in nature, and the key question is often “how can we shift the culture?” This takes a lot more work than making a new technological breakthrough.

This year, I decided to challenge myself to ask the following question every time I look at a policy question: “Is there a simpler solution that will involve less technology?” I invite you to do the same.

¹ Tweeted in January 2021



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