

BUSINESS COMMUNITY INSIGHTS

To Advance Humanity, We Must Retool Tech

By **Tony O'Driscoll** | May 30, 2019, 2:31 PM

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Nearly two decades ago, eight of the world's ten largest publicly-traded companies came from Big Oil. Exxon, Royal Dutch Shell, and BP created the fuel to power vehicles from General Motors, Ford, DaimlerChrysler, Mitsubishi, and Toyota, leaving room for only Walmart and General Electric to round out the top-ten.

But now, data has become the new oil. U.S. companies like Amazon, Microsoft, Alphabet, Apple and Facebook—along with China's Tencent and Alibaba—have rocketed up the global charts to land top-ten positions, leaving room for only Berkshire Hathaway, Johnson & Johnson, and JPMorgan Chase.

The digital upstarts are—on average—barely 30 years old. And they're sitting atop the business world for the same reason: They claim ownership to massive pools of data. Most of them are mining all that data with machine learning to monetize our every click.

Humanity finds itself experiencing a digital divide of a different kind: technology is proliferating, data is exploding, time is compressing, and change is evolving at such an unprecedented rate that we simply can't keep up. And so, through sheer exhaustion, we acquiesce to the digital abyss, checking our brain at the physical door, engaging in dopamine click-streams, mindlessly leaving behind digital exhaust for others to exploit.

The internet we once accessed to seek information and connection has evolved into a pervasive "immernet" that controls our every move. We're living in a digital ecosystem of our own making. Our online behavior is constantly being analyzed, tuned and optimized so others can command our attention and control our consumption.

As we use the technology, the technology uses us to learn how to turn our virtual behavior into real dollars. Left unchecked, this progression towards digital dementia could culminate in one of three unsavory scenarios for humankind:

1. In the "Extinguished" scenario, the immernet connects and amplifies the unanticipated consequences of our collective action far more quickly than we anticipate, leading to the eradication of life on earth much sooner than any of us could have imagined. Unchecked climate change or even nuclear armageddon could be the cause of our demise.
2. In the "Enslaved" scenario, technology continues to limit the fulfillment of human potential. It maintains control over our collective consumption. We reduce ourselves, and maybe our dreams, to fit the current form factor of technology, spending our time surfing in the shallows of the internet. It will erode contemplation, as we pursue the dopamine hits of digital consumption. In this scenario our immernet indwelling dumbs most of us down to a point where we become information technology laborers in indentured servitude to server farm owners, who mine our data for dollars.
3. In the "Enmeshed" scenario, technology redefines the notion of fulfilling human potential. Today, we're increasingly embedding technology into our bodies: technologies such as cochlear implants, knee replacements, and artificial hearts are improving, and extending, our life experience. In the near future we will be faced with the choice of whether to use Crispr technology to edit the genome of our unborn child to avoid a deadly disease, or even deciding whether we want to download our complete carbon-based life experience into a digital avatar that "lives" forever. In this scenario, the meshing of human and machine creates a new range of post-human fulfillment opportunities, but the price of entry could be to give up our uniquely human identity.

Technology isn't the villain in this story—people are. Technology has no conscience. It doesn't know right from wrong. It simply does what it's told. People who control the pools of data on the world stage today are training technology to do the wrong thing.

Avoiding these three scenarios requires a global paradigm shift in the role that technology must play in advancing humanity. This shift could surface a more palatable scenario, which I called "Empowered." In this scenario, technology amplifies the quest for human fulfillment. The immernet is no longer tuned to

maximize commercial profitability—but, instead to maximize human opportunity. Technology serves as a fulfillment service to help each of us achieve our biggest and boldest dreams. In this scenario, the shackles of digital control dissolve, and the abundance of cognitive surplus that exists within our global community is connected to create a more just world.

At this year’s Techonomy NYC Conference, the author Doug Rushkoff **made a compelling argument** for each of us to join “Team Human.” On “Team Human” – which, by the way, is the name of his latest book—we’d leverage technology to collaborate, not for profit or economic growth, but for humanity’s sake. Predictably, Rushkoff’s comments during the conference stirred **considerable debate**. But I hope everyone—especially the executives leading the digital upstarts—will join Team Human. The future of our species could well depend on it.

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