

Gesundheit, Gesellschaft und Kultur

Schwerpunkt / Thema:
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Gesundheit, Gesellschaft und Kultur

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Essay

In many ways, we are better off than ever before. We're healthier. We live longer. We have more technology, and we're more efficient. We have easier access to food and shelter, and we have knowledge at our fingertips. Yet we are also in the middle of a self-inflicted global crisis.

You'd have to be living under a rock to have missed the recent tsunami of technology and innovation. The rise of robots and the dawn of superintelligence. Quantum computing, automation, and the Internet of Things. Cryptocurrency. Brain-machine interfacing. Autonomous vehicles, and even autonomous weapons.

Each of these is poised to bring transformative change to our society, and not only that — just imagine the change possible when we combine these emerging technologies. The way we work, trade, and even wage war will be unrecognizable from the methods of past generations. The mere existence of five billion cell phones bringing telecommunication to far-flung regions is evidence enough. Our world has been forever changed by a maturing technical and social revolution.

It's interesting, though. Despite half a century spent figuring out how to integrate these great advances and advantages into society, we still experience a vast number of trivial issues.

When was the last time you attended a meeting that began without the presenter awkwardly struggling to get his or her presentation to show up on the screen? How many times has the video conferencing system failed on the first attempt? Have you struggled to find a friend's updated email address or phone number? Or dealt with the hassle of sharing photos with friends after a joint trip? And you may think these are small things. Why limit the vast possibilities that technology can bring us by nitpicking such negligible details?

But things don't look any better if we move back to view the big picture. We must ask ourselves what computer technology has really brought us so far.

There's been surprisingly little true progress. It's as though we have leapt forward before fully understanding the implications of our tools. We aren't using them with finesse or taking advantage of their true potential.

Imagine strapping a rocket to a bicycle to get to our destination faster. The result is an out-of-control, barely-contained disaster, not unlike our current times.

We're facing stark economic inequality fueled by the increasing power of large corporations, relentlessly harvesting our data. Politicians watch helplessly as tech companies break rules that the average citizen struggles to understand. Social platforms perpetuate the spread of fake news, undermining our trust in the free press. Our citizens are surveilled, our elections are skewed, and workers' rights are almost nonexistent in the sharing economy. Our identities are being stolen. Fully-automated drones drop bombs on civilians. We are harassed and maligned online. We're addicted to drugs, to speed, to change, to the idea of better/faster/more, and forgetting about the preservation of our humanity.

We've built this machine, yet the reality has turned out to be very different from what we expected.

This is not the new world that technologists promised. It's the same world with the same problems that have always existed.

The only difference is that those problems are now hidden away inside algorithms, data, and code. We get Facebook's view on the world, we get Google's view, we get Twitter's view. But we have no perspective, and no tools, to develop a view of our own.

We fetishize technology. We push each hype cycle to the absolute maximum, only to replace it with the next big thing when our current technology doesn't deliver on its promise. We don't adjust for system failures — we move on. And in moving on without assessing our shortcomings, we learn nothing.

We believe that newer technology is always the solution, that it can end our human social problems and leave a utopia powered by computers. We've somehow decided that computers are the pinnacle of technological achievement, the most important invention ever made, and perhaps the only thing we should consider when moving into the future.

Have we missed something? Is there too much technology and not enough humanity?

As Neil Postman puts it, a technology always has "a predisposition toward being used in certain ways and not others". We are wrong to believe that any technological innovation has a one-sided, positive effect. Every technology is both a burden and a blessing. It is never a matter of either/or. It will always be both.

Technology changes how we think. It shapes us, just as we shape it. And the real question, which we must ask with urgency, is whether we will manage the machine or it will manage us.

Technology doesn't solve the problems of humankind, and it's naive to think it will. We can enable, augment, and improve with technology, but, in the end, human beings must deal with human problems.

Daniel G. Siegel

Daniel G. Siegel is an independent digital strategy consultant, speaker, airplane pilot and 2nd Dan black belt in Taekwondo. He empowers expert firms to grow their business by giving them the strategy, technology, and skills to become a trusted brand.

He co-founded and served as CTO of Not Just A Label, the world's leading designer platform in contemporary fashion with over 35,000 designers from more than 150 countries. Later, he joined Accenture's emerging technology team, where he developed digital strategy for Fortune Global 500 companies.

His approach is that instead of using technology to replace people, we should use it to augment ourselves to do things that were previously impossible. He writes about all of that in his regular columns: <https://www.dgsiegel.net/articles>

