

IN CONSTANT CHANGE

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The Architecture of Innovation

Does technology influence society? We would answer yes. We can see how new technological products influence our way of living constantly. The invention of phones prevents the need for using humans as messengers to deliver letters. The airplane allows us to travel across continents within hours. This saves us time for travel, but increases the time we spend on our laptops for work. We barely need to walk even for food – we can get it delivered directly to our doorstep. This has led to increased consumption of processed foods, reduced exercising and hence obesity. Social media was originally built to bring people closer together and connect internationally with their loved ones. But it is now building pockets of echo chambers that are changing the very fabric of our society.

Now, the next question is, does society influence technology? For this question too, our answer would be yes. The fear of Earth being overtaken by horse dung led to the invention of the car. The world wars led to inventions like Radar, Computers and Microwaves. The need for humans to access information quickly led to the internet. There were too many people dying due to different diseases, which resulted in the invention of vaccines. Every innovation that has happened was due to a certain NEED in the society that was to solve.

This two-way interaction between technology and society demonstrates that we are existing in a loop. Thanks to modern medicine, the average person is living longer than ever before. But the quality of life for majority of our lives is spent on machines and medicines, implying that even though the life span might be up, the health span is down. People today are increasingly suffering from depression, anxiety and suicide. We don't deal with discomforts like having to find food, water and shelter like our ancestors. But we deal with the consequences of our comforts brought upon by technology – long term physical and mental health problems.



We need to find a way to improve the impact technology has on society, while reducing the negative effects of the exact same invention. Human-centric design, technology policy and the ethics of emerging technology remain topics of discussion that are the need of the hour to ensure a better future. Policy needs to pre-empt and predict the impact of technology to better ensure the privacy and side effects of technology on society remain under supervision and in control.

The Urgency of Now

With all the advances humans claim to have made in the field of medicine, the coronavirus pandemic is a demonstration of how powerless we are in the face of nature, forced to lock ourselves in our houses of glass against an enemy we cannot even see. The pandemic led to a collapse of global economy as the supply chains were disrupted, travel outside of homes was forbidden and businesses were shut down. Combatting the pandemic became the most "important" and "urgent" objective of all nations to resume normal life. Despite the economic tumult wrought by the coronavirus, startup investing in the U.S. reached a record high of \$130 billion in 2020. Industries like Fintech, artificial intelligence, digital health and medical devices saw large amounts of investment by private equity funds. These and more contributed to allowing smooth transitioning of workers from office life to work from home, permitting them to travel safely, and do booking without leaving their house.

But as we see the increased amount of funding poured by private players into these startups, we have also lost sight of our objectives in the long term. Poverty, access to education, gender equality all took a backseat. The number of COVID-19-induced new poor in 2020 rose to between 119 and 124 million. Education paused for a few months before transitioning to a digital medium. This leaves out the millions of students who did not have access to a digital device. Stay safe at home was the motto of the pandemic. But what about those for whom home is not a safe space? There was an increase in cases of domestic violence in the range of 30-50% across various countries (Spain, Brazil).



It is now going to take us years to reach back to the 2019 levels. This brings up the question – did we choose correctly by prioritizing lockdowns over school? Did we make a mistake prioritizing work from home over travel, which allowed the rich to sit comfortably at home while gig workers clamored for work? Who is the “we” that got to make decisions? Why did that “we” choose the decisions they did? Were the negative impacts on the weaker sections of society worth it? Somewhere, somehow, I believe the meaning of the words “urgent” and “important” were lost in translation.

