



## THE THING ABOUT TECHNOLOGY

Dave Pollard. [blog.salon.com](http://blog.salon.com).

*(This article is a heresy, especially coming from a self-proclaimed champion of innovation. It's not quite polished enough to be a Dangerous Little Meme yet. But there's definitely something here. I'm expecting a rough ride for it, but I'm ready.)*

The thing about technology is that, since the dawn of the human species, every technology we have introduced has ultimately, and inadvertently, made things worse. That statement sounds categorical, so let me explain.

The human species is not very well endowed with natural gifts for survival. Compared to most other creatures, we are slow, clumsy, earthbound, and lacking in both fur and claws. Prior to the ice ages, we managed to do quite well regardless, largely by sticking to our natural habitat (the tropics, mostly tropical rainforest), eating mostly vegetarian, and using our unusually large brains and unusual ferocity to compensate for our lack of physical gifts.

With the onset of the ice ages, however, life for us (and most other life) became quite quickly more difficult. Our solution was to invent (usually copying models from nature) technologies that extended our speed, agility, ability to fly, ability to stay warm, and ability to find and hunt prey. Each of these technologies improved our short-run ability to survive, but each unintentionally created huge, intractable long-term problems:

- The invention of the arrowhead and knife allowed us to kill and tear the flesh of, large mammals. This provided an abundant source of food. It also ultimately led to the extinction of these large mammals, and produced as a consequence the first true famines.
- The invention of agriculture allowed more people to live per square mile, but, as Jared Diamond has explained, it produced as a consequence the first instances of human slavery, massive malnutrition, desertification, soil exhaustion, factory farms, the End of Water, malnutrition (and a much shortened life expectancy), a huge number of new and debilitating human diseases (like previously-unknown tooth decay), and the need for political hierarchy and military force.
- The invention of transportation technologies allowed us to move ourselves and our food and other needs to places we would not naturally be able to live in. This produced as a consequence the ability to move slaves around the world, and to send prisoners of war to death camps. It has also produced the death of the oceans, thanks to transportation inventions like factory super-trawlers and the Exxon Valdez.

- The invention of human-controlled fire allowed us to keep warm in places we would naturally freeze. But as a consequence it has brought about massive and global deforestation (as much a contributor to global warming as manufacturing and transportation) and habitat destruction.
- The invention of the steam (and later electric) engine allowed great increases in production and productivity. It has also led to the commoditization and devaluation of human labor, a quantum increase in pollution (which in turn, along with mining processes, produced new, deadly chronic diseases), a fragile and severe dependence on oil (and because of that dependence, many of the major wars of the last century), and infrastructure and energy grids that are hugely vulnerable to attack, natural disasters and supply-outs.
- The invention of medicines and other health technologies has eradicated some terrible diseases and reduced human suffering. It has also produced staggering human overpopulation, gender selection of babies (that has skewed population in many countries heavily in favour of males), novel and effective new forms of torture, vulnerability to old and new (overcrowding-related) pandemic diseases, hugely increased risks of bioterror attacks, and murders of the poor and homeless for organ harvesting.
- The invention of communication technologies has enabled a breathtaking increase in our knowledge of the world. It has also enabled the rapid and effective spread of propaganda, which has sparked global wars, increased disinformation ("Saddam was behind 9/11") more quickly than information, and enabled genocides to be more effectively provoked and carried out.
- The invention of money has enabled effective trade in goods around the world that cannot be produced locally. It has also ushered in unprecedented disparity of wealth, currency and stock speculation and frauds that have ruined millions of lives and produced the Great Depression.
- The invention of nuclear power...(well, you get the idea).

We're in a constant race to keep up, and political, economic and media propagandists keep telling us we're winning, that 'good' technology has outpaced and will outpace 'bad' technology. But we cannot win this race. All technologies have unnatural consequences that are unpredictable and readily exploitable. It is not in our nature to understand and preempt the dangers that any new technology can introduce (just look at the untested ingredients in our unprocessed foods, the recalls of improperly tested drugs and foods deliberately poisoned for profit, the tens of thousands of chemicals introduced into our air, water, food and homes with no knowledge of their long-term effects). The Precautionary Principle (which says 'don't do anything unless there is compelling evidence it will cause no harm') is a brilliant idea, but one that is preposterously impossible to enforce -- it is contrary to everything we do, everything we believe in, and everything our modern systems are built on.

And we're just getting started with technology's 'promise'. In the next few years, new technologies like these will be introduced (because they can, and because there's a human market for them):

- Robots designed to wage war, with no moral scruples, and quite possibly with biological parts
- Freak animals grotesquely bred to 'grow' replacement, harvestable human organs
- Fully genetically selected (gender, hair color, eye color, other attributes) babies
- Experiments among the obscenely rich to achieve immortality, and to escape the Earth for another planet
- Security-compound communities for the affluent, completely closed off to non-members ("just leave it by the gate and go away")
- Mandatory sedative and other behavior-modification drugs administered by the state, initially to unruly children and prisoners, and then to the 'difficult' aged and anyone deemed by the psychological orthodoxy of the day to be 'mentally unfit'
- Mini-nukes and bio-weapons, developed by affluent states, with the same so-called 'deterrent' and 'preemptive' purpose that the bombs dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima were developed for

We will initially express revulsion at these technologies, because they don't seem to have any positive or popular function. But then we'll shrug and realize that they are just extensions of technologies developed for 'good', and that if there's a 'market' for them, or if the propagandists developing them can argue (as they will) that their end purpose (portrayed in glowing, or urgent, terms) justifies their unsavory means, we will simply insist that, like factory farms and foreign torture prisons, they be kept out of our sight and mind, so we don't get stressed about them.

A couple of years ago I gave up believing that top-down political or economic changes, or spontaneous social revolutions, will save us from ourselves. They never have. But I've always had a soft spot for innovative technology. In the short run, it can work wonders. It's like the addictive painkillers taken by the terminally ill -- for awhile, everything seems wonderful, but then the pain is back with a greater vengeance, and you need even more, of a different, stronger drug because you've built up a resistance to the old one. The one that worked for awhile is now worse than useless, because it no longer has any effect, yet you're still addicted to it. It's no longer enough.

It's never enough.