

THE TECHNOLOGICAL CHALLENGES TO LIBERALISM

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(note: what follows takes a largely pessimistic view of recent technology; for the latest in the myriad ways that technology is helping us, see <https://www.humanprogress.org/>)

By liberalism, I mean the political philosophy issuing from Hobbes and Locke which directly informed the founding of the American regime. The classic statement of American liberalism is the Declaration of Independence, which posits the following as axiomatic to its conception of legitimate government:

We hold these truths to be self-evidence, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed...

Today, American liberalism is being challenged by the very technological science it has fostered since the 18th century. I list the principal objects that the American regime seeks to protect and nurture and the ways in which technology has brought these objects into jeopardy.

LIFE—Although the right to life is a principal tenet of American liberalism, the USA has developed many of the technologies that have radically transformed the environment, thus pushing the planet toward ecological collapse. See:

Global Risks Report: <https://www.zurichna.com/en/knowledge/articles/2019/01/the-global-risks-report-2019>

<https://ca.news.yahoo.com/more-15-000-scientists-184-150000018.html>

In addition to nuclear and biological weapons, autonomous weapons systems will pose increasing risks in the near future. See especially Stuart Russell's talk on Lethal Autonomous Weapons:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JYQ7p3pWwr4>

And see the Slaughterbot video: <https://www.kurzweilai.net/disturbing-video-depicts-near-future-ubiquitous-lethal-autonomous-weapons>

Putin on AI arms race: <https://www.kurzweilai.net/leading-ai-country-will-be-ruler-of-the-world-says-putin>

See also: Sam Harris on the dangers of superintelligent AI:

<https://ideas.ted.com/how-the-gains-we-make-in-ai-could-ultimately-destroy-us/>

LIBERTY—Since the 1920's, Americans have been subjected to new modes of commercial and political manipulation, especially after the influence of Freud via Edward Bernays and the Bernaysian approach to so-called "Public Relations." Today, companies like Google, Amazon, and Facebook not only track your data, but they use increasingly sophisticated methods for manipulating you, each seeking to entice and hold your attention. Consider:

https://www.salon.com/2014/06/29/facebook_admits_it_manipulated_689003_users_emotions_in_psychology_experiment/

Phones designed to be addictive: <https://www.vox.com/2018/2/27/17053758/phone-addictive-design-google-apple>

See also: <https://www.1843magazine.com/features/the-scientists-who-make-apps-addictive>

And: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-6782767/Experts-warn-impossible-escape-persuasive-technology.html>

For more on Freud, Bernays and the PR revolution in advertising and politics, watch: Adam Curtis' Century of the Self: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJ3RzGoQC4s>

PRIVACY—The internet and smart phones have allowed companies to push data gathering to the point of criminal breach. Consider:

<https://www.cnet.com/news/zuckerberg-facebook-data-was-sold-to-cambridge-analytica-too/>

Alexa turned spy: <https://www.wired.com/story/amazon-echo-alexa-skill-spying/>

Facebook and the death of the private self:

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/jan/31/how-facebook-robbed-us-of-our-sense-of-self>

Short but useful video on how Silicon Valley has created the architecture for a surveillance state:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJwXL7vx5Q4>

FREE SPEECH AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE—In addition to being subjected to untold waves of consumer and political manipulation, the internet and social media have enabled new sources of disinformation and emotional provocation, all of which have taken a serious toll on public discourse. Never in American history has the regime paid such a high price for its speech protections, and technology is forcing a very difficult reckoning between the value of free speech and other goods such as security and political stability. Some tech companies have chosen their vision of moral progress in favor of free speech, which further foments political divisions between right and left. Consider:

Mueller report on Russian influence on 2016 election: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/04/18/what-the-mueller-report-tells-us-about-russian-influence-operations/>

Nicholas Carr on how social media is ruining politics:

<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/09/2016-election-social-media-ruining-politics-213104>

NPR: <https://www.npr.org/2016/11/08/500686320/did-social-media-ruin-election-2016>

Echo chamber effect and information silo-ing:

<https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/07/24/486941582/the-reason-your-feed-became-an-echo-chamber-and-what-to-do-about-it>

Youtube tilts viewers toward extremism: <http://www.fortune.com/2018/03/11/youtube-extreme-content/>

Fake news and fake video: <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/charliewarzel/the-terrifying-future-of-fake-news#.tfPWvYJEjG>

Former facebook exec says social media is ripping apart society:

<https://www.theverge.com/2017/12/11/16761016/former-facebook-exec-ripping-apart-society>

<https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/facebook-bans-white-nationalism-after-pressure-civil-rights-groups-n987991>

Watch interview with Joe Rogan and Twitter's Jack Dorsey and Vijaya Gadde on speech policies:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DZCBRHOG3PQ>

PROPERTY—Although the information economy has lifted millions out of abject poverty, many in the near future stand to lose their jobs to increasingly intelligent machines. For instance, autonomous vehicles might replace millions of truckers and other drivers, the effects of which could be massively destabilizing:

<https://www.axios.com/heres-where-jobs-will-be-lost-when-robots-drive-trucks-1513300554-58297c36-0cfb-4675-b3cd-9454d932ebbb.html>

Or: <https://www.axios.com/heres-where-jobs-will-be-lost-when-robots-drive-trucks-1513300554-58297c36-0cfb-4675-b3cd-9454d932ebbb.html>

Robots will take jobs from the young and minorities: <https://www.wired.com/story/robots-will-take-jobs-from-men-young-minorities/>

—And while many have benefited from the new wealth generated by the info tech revolution, there has never in human history been a wider wealth and power gap between the ultra-rich and poor, with half of the world's wealth belonging to 1% of the global population:

<https://www.newsweek.com/1-wealth-money-half-world-global-710714>

EQUALITY—Many tech companies like Apple present their products in a socially progressive narrative (<https://www.macworld.com/article/2026382/top-25-apple-commercials.html#slide2>); however, tech has not only enabled the massive wealth gap mentioned above, but has eaten away at blue collar jobs that used to be a sure path to social mobility for the poor and middle classes: <https://www.cheatsheet.com/money-career/middle-class-jobs-gone-soon.html/>

Moreover, there will soon be a confluence of infotech and biotech that will give the super-rich first access to medical technologies and enhancements that will, over time, transform them into a bio-elite, thus potentially hardening social inequality into biological stratification:

<https://www.newsweek.com/ai-transhumanism-super-intelligence-dystopian-nightmare-644128>

<https://www.yahoo.com/news/super-intelligence-eternal-life-transhumanism-041956373.html>

<https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/esmagazine/why-the-superrich-are-ploughing-billions-into-the-booming-immortality-industry-a3575416.html>

See very helpful documentary on Transhumanism: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmS_aL-cKxU

FAMILY—Although Americans routinely report that family is the prime source of meaning in their lives (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/11/20/americans-who-find-meaning-in-these-four-areas-have-higher-life-satisfaction/>), the influence of the internet and social media (especially porn and dating apps) has encouraged and worsened habits that can make forming and maintaining families much more difficult. The weakening of the family hurts the American regime because the family is the principal means of socializing future citizens.

Porn contributes to divorce: <http://time.com/4461451/people-more-likely-to-divorce-after-they-start-watching-porn-says-study/>

And: <https://verilymag.com/2017/07/causes-of-divorce-effects-of-watching-pornography>

Dating Apps and Hook up Culture: <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2015/08/tinder-hook-up-culture-end-of-dating>

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/science/science-news/11124140/Couples-who-met-online-three-times-more-likely-to-divorce.html>

Though for contrary view, see: <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/what-online-dating-could-do-to-divorce-rates-2017-10-16>

HAPPINESS—While many Americans believe that information tech and their smart phones are vital to their pursuit of happiness, several studies show that smart phones and especially social media have a serious downside, and may, in some cases, exacerbate pathologies like depression and narcissism:

Smartphone and social media linked to rise in teen depression and suicide:

<https://www.npr.org/2017/12/17/571443683/the-call-in-teens-and-depression>

<https://childmind.org/article/is-social-media-use-causing-depression/>

social media and rise in pathological narcissism:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/compassion-matters/201211/is-social-media-blame-the-rise-in-narcissism>

Tech-dependence anxiety: <https://online.csp.edu/blog/psychology/technology-dependency>

Tech addiction / compulsive use disorder: <https://www.addiction.com/addiction-a-to-z/technology-addiction/technology-addiction-101/>

Cognitive offloading and weakening memory via tech dependency:

<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2016/08/160816085029.htm>

Surfing the net has bad effect on attention span: <https://www.socialmediatoday.com/content/how-social-media-can-have-weird-effect-your-brain-infographic>

Habits of distraction inimical to deep work: <https://www.njlifehacks.com/deep-work-cal-newport-summary/>

Smartphone use associated with worse quality of sleep in adults:

<https://www.cnn.com/2016/11/09/health/smartphones-harm-sleep/index.html>

Smartphones erase the work-life boundary: <https://www.today.com/money/goodbye-8-hour-workday-smartphones-make-it-hard-escape-office-6C9676454>

Good overview of major problematic psychological effects of smartphones:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/>

See also: Facebook vs mental health: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/sex-murder-and-the-meaning-life/201404/7-ways-facebook-is-bad-your-mental-health?collection=162641>

Why won't the takeover of intelligent machines make us ultimately mentally regressive?

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-human-beast/201507/can-artificial-intelligence-make-us-stupid>

Important books that connect internet usage / smartphone usage / social media usage to mental and emotional problems:

Nick Carr, *The Shallows*

Jaron Lanier, *Ten Reasons to Delete Your Social Media Account Right Now*

Jaron Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget*

Cal Newport, *Deep Work*

Cal Newport, *Digital Minimalism*

Jean Twenge, *iGen*

Jean Twenge, *The Narcissism Epidemic*

Greg Lukianoff, J Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*

Helpful books on the risks of: autonomous weapons systems, superintelligent machines, cyberwarfare and surveillance:

Nick Bostrom, *Superintelligence*

David Hambling, *Swarmtroopers*

David Sanger, *The Perfect Weapon: War, Sabotage, and Fear in the Cyber Age*

P. W. Singer, *Like War: The Weaponization of Social Media*