

# Digital exuberance

BY WILLIAM DAVIES

*Discussion about our digital future always assumes we seek more convenience and fewer obligations. But technologies of connectivity can threaten stability and community. We may need a new ethics of inconvenience*

BRITAIN'S DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE is in rather good shape. Broadband internet rollout was all but completed in 2005. It also became possible last year to transact with government online in most relevant areas—from registering a vehicle to filling a tax return. The 2005 “e-readiness” survey produced by the Economist Intelligence Unit ranked Britain as the fifth best digitally equipped nation in the world, a table currently topped by Denmark, with Germany and France straggling in 13th and 18th places respectively. Britain's first wave of digital modernisation is thus almost complete, a period in which the internet evolved from a niche interest to an everyday tool for over half the population, and mobile phones became ubiquitous and classless.

The second wave of development looks set to merge these two trends, as the rapid spread of wireless internet access pushes us towards an “always on everywhere” society. Bandwidth levels, which determine how much information we can send and receive, are now reaching the point where television programmes can be transmitted online. And after much anticipation, mobile phones are beginning to act as web browsers and televisions, not to mention cameras and camcorders.

Most of the argument about our progress into the digital future assumes that it is both inevitable and desirable. Its shape has already been mapped out by a network of consultancies, academics and think tanks. The only question left unanswered is how quickly we will get there. But while the benefits of the digital

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revolution are evident enough, we should surely be wary of embracing a worldview that sees technological bottlenecks only as restraints on freedom. London Underground is looking at ways of enabling mobile phones to work on the tube, to eradicate one of the city's last blocks on digital connectivity. But what else will be lost in the process? Technological bottlenecks can also be necessary conditions of social interaction or valuable moments of isolation.

We learned this lesson following a previous wave of modernist excess, when urban planners set about carving up cities with multi-lane freeways. Until Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* was published in 1961, planners had not considered that slowing traffic down might be as valuable as speeding it up. Yet now it is inconceivable that planners could plough motorways through our cities in the name of progress.

Furthermore, the digital future is often talked about as a form of technological determinism: floating free of national institutions or collective democratic choices. But the Argentinian sociologist Hernan Galperin has shown how the transition from analogue to digital broadcasting occurred very differently in the US and Britain, thanks in part to the fact that the US has a far more decentralised broadcasting sector. In fact, a great deal of digital infrastructure is the direct result of industrial policy—consider the decades of public investment that underlies Silicon Valley's success or the British government's insistence that the BBC work towards switching off all analogue broadcasting by 2012. Government is an active player in the construction of the digital society.

The traditional justification for technological innovation is the increased productivity and economic growth that results from it. From this idea flow a whole range of policies and targets. At the Lisbon summit in 2000, the EU pledged itself to become the world's “most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy” by 2010. The EU's success in pursuing this target is gauged to a great extent in terms of the speed and availability of its digital infrastructure. E-government in Britain, which for some years was driven by little more than technological evangelism, is now explicitly motivated by the pursuit of savings.

And yet a conventional economic perspective does not fully capture either the rationale for digital modernisation or its transformative nature. Britain may have a more “e-ready” economy than France or Germany, but it is less productive in terms of output per hour. It is not clear whether e-government will offer any net efficiency savings over the next decade, given the quantities being spent on it. The paradox named after economist Robert Solow, that “you can see the computer age everywhere these days, except in the productivity statistics” is no longer as true as it was in the 1990s, but the economic case for IT investment is still harder to discern than might be expected.

Rather than measurable gains in productivity (or efficiency) for the producer, most of the benefits are those of convenience for the consumer. Digital technology is further tipping the balance of power away from the suppliers of services and towards the customer. If they wish to, customers can cut out inefficient intermediaries (such as the high street), and engage with more convenient intermediaries such as online portals. A website such as cheapflights.com offers a single place in which airfares of dozens of airlines and travel agents can be compared, enabling the shopper to make a vastly more informed choice. This unprecedented level of consumer information forces down prices while saving customers time. One of Britain's more successful "etailers," the online grocery Ocado, has gone to extraordinary lengths to convince customers of their right to dictate the terms of the relationship. Through blanket advertising on billboards and buses, the company has encouraged customers to identify with foot-stamping toddlers making unreasonable demands. The customer is no longer just king, but capricious dictator.

This does seem to be a feature of the technological change itself, not just the onward rush of consumerism. Digital technologies are generally personalised and ubiquitous, allowing us to opt in and out of social situations in a particularly egocentric fashion. Already, mobile phones offer us an almost permanent get-out clause from the here and now. As the ubiquity and bandwidth of the wireless internet grows, so the forms of technological connectivity that are constantly available to us will grow also.

IT IS no surprise that the private sector embraces this model wholeheartedly. As the US politician and writer Robert Reich argues in *The Future of Success*, the perennial threat faced by capitalism is its own productivity, which promises to satisfy our needs and thereby shrink the demand for goods. The future of economic success, Reich argues, lies in selling those goods that we can never have enough of, such as health, beauty and sexual gratification. Capitalism has to discover a less rational form of shopper,

or run the risk of a society that focuses less on production and more on leisure.

But it is not clear that the stripping away of individual constraints and inconveniences is synonymous with social progress. And as Gerry Stoker argued in last month's *Prospect*, the idea that it is only through individual choice that we can truly express ourselves has reinforced a dismissive attitude towards the unavoidably collective nature of politics. Moreover, New Labour's digital liberation creed can conflict with its advocacy of community and respect. Any centre-left vision must at some point assert the value of constraints upon an egoistic model of freedom.

In developing a critique of digital exuberance, I do not want to side with those who oppose modernity wholesale. But community depends on some sense of continuity and co-dependence, and a sense of the inescapability of social relations. When we talk about the architectural and planning disasters of the 1950s and 1960s, we do not mean that they failed in their ambitions to move vehicles swiftly in and out of cities—far from it. We mean that they destroyed the conditions in which urban communities might thrive by undermining social networks and the possibility of local culture.

The assumption underlying the digital model of progress is that we want fewer obligations, more immediate satisfaction, less contact with strangers in public spaces and more with those we already know. One study of mobile phone use told of a woman sending half a dozen text messages to her boyfriend in the course of one five-minute bus ride.

There are, of course, many contexts in which this technology can also strengthen social relations. The disabled and the elderly who risk social isolation benefit from innovations that give them greater opportunity for social contact. The internet has created many new "virtual" communities and helped people to stay in touch. In instances where individuals are in especially small or excluded minorities, this ability to locate and communicate with kindred spirits can provide vital psychological support. Or as Microsoft's in-house sociologist, Marc Smith, puts it, "if you're

one in a million, then there are 900 of you on the internet and you can find each other.” There are also many people who have benefited from the ability to work at home and remain with their young children. The removal of friction is not intrinsically bad, but nor is it intrinsically good. The question is how malleable we want the world to be, and “as malleable as possible” is surely not always the right answer.

**W**HERE MIGHT the beneficial checks on individualistic autonomy develop from, and how might policymakers be able to support them? One place to look is within the logic of market regulation itself. The German economist Wolfgang Streeck developed a compelling theory in the early 1990s of what he called the “beneficial limits on rational voluntarism.” Streeck defended the inflexible German model of industrial relations and employee protection on economic grounds, showing how the inability of German employers to hire and fire at will had forced them to invest in skills as the only sensible means of mitigating economic risk. This was self-interested behaviour that inadvertently strengthened social commitment.

Since Streeck developed the argument, the German model of capitalism has lost its sheen. Yet the logic of the argument survives. For instance, broadband connections are currently sold in France at a standard speed of 20 megabits per second, against 1 or

2 megabits per second in Britain. The reason for this is the widespread planning regulation in France that prevents residents from placing satellite dishes on their houses, and which forced the market to develop alternative ways of transmitting satellite television. This is not to say that the French broadband market is “better” than Britain’s, but simply to point out that controls do not necessarily impede innovation.

Elsewhere, the market itself may adjust to recognise the value of social obligation. William Mitchell, a professor of architecture and media arts and sciences at MIT, has argued that the digitisation of social relations introduces an “economy of presence.” He means that as we gain more and more ways of contacting one another, we will come to value most the ones which are rarest. The most effortless forms of social contact today are those which transcend both time and space, for instance sending an email across the world to be read whenever the recipient likes. The sheer ubiquity of this type of communication renders it less and less valuable. Rarer and more precious is communication which transcends space but not time, namely a telephone call. But most important of all is to be in the same place at the same time as someone, having face-to-face interaction.

Telecommunications technologies have effectively flooded the market for social contact, rendering the market value of that contact worthless, just as would happen to gold should alchemy become possible. The response of the market is to value face-to-face contact above all other forms. Booking a management expert to speak at a company away day will cost a huge amount more than picking up his book in an airport. In less formal circumstances, etiquette develops to represent this same fact. People feel an obligation to conduct difficult conversations face to face, despite the appealing distance that email offers as an alternative. We express our respect for someone when turning our mobile phone off before a conversation.

It is quite likely that “economies of presence” will affect public services over time. During the early days of the internet, online services were considered the preserve of the privileged. When NHS Direct was launched in 1998 to enable people to receive NHS-endorsed information online and over the telephone, the web-based part was criticised by some for being of use only to a small elite. But as electronic services become more commonplace and more widely used, privilege will lie in access to rare face-to-face services. The government is acutely aware of the need to safeguard the human face of the state. Yet if it is determined in its community-building ambitions, it may need to think more seriously about the long-term value of institutions such as post offices. This value exists not only in spite of the inconvenience of queues and bureaucrats, but almost because of them.

Another source of beneficial constraint is collective choice or democracy. Ofcom was established in

2003 to defend the interests of the “citizen-consumer,” to ensure that regulation went beyond the principles of supply and demand. During the same period, New Labour policy thinkers unearthed the idea of “public value” that had been first mooted in an obscure 1995 publication by Harvard academic Mark Moore. The concept attempts to capture two different forms of human desire: the consumer’s desire for efficient satisfaction, and the citizen’s desire for a good society. The NHS, for example, may not deliver the same consumer satisfaction and convenience as the private sector, but it delivers “public value” in the form of inclusiveness and accountability.

The BBC picked up this concept in 2004, and put it at the centre of “Building Public Value”—its bid for a new charter. The document provides the digital era’s most effective rebuttal yet of the simplistic identification of social progress with technological progress. The rationale for the BBC had always rested partly on the technological bottleneck of spectrum scarcity. Only a limited number of channels were possible within the technological limits of the analogue world, and so it was clear that a publicly funded, publicly accountable broadcaster was necessary to ensure that broadcasting spectrum served the public in the most inclusive way. Digital technology eradicated this spectrum scarcity meaning a free market for broadcasting became technologically feasible. The end of the bottleneck potentially heralded the end of the BBC.

The argument the BBC has been forced to make is that people do not always want the maximum choice possible; they sometimes desire limits on their freedom. The drift towards a multichannel world (which will expand further as internet-based television develops) makes it more, not less, urgent that there are accountable and trustworthy broadcasters to help people navigate an otherwise giddy degree of choice, and provide them with shared experiences. When technological bottlenecks are removed, we may sometimes discover that they performed a valuable function; in these circumstances we have to consider how institutional bottlenecks can be retained.

Converting the critique of digital exuberance into a policy agenda is, however, far from straightforward. For every technologically enabled gain in convenience or efficiency, there is likely to be a cost to cohesion or stability. Democracy requires compromises between enthusiasm for the future and preservation of the past. And carving this path in the digital era will require developing a rival ethic to that of “user-centricity.” In a sense, what is needed is an ethics of *inconvenience*. Motorists now understand that cities cannot be designed around maximising flows of traffic; hospital patients understand that a privatised health service may be more efficient than the current model, but it would lack even more valuable aspects.

Technology can also help us live with necessary inconvenience. Consider how dot matrix announcer

boards reduce frustration on public transport; they don’t make the train or bus come any quicker, but they inform people of how long they will be waiting, and enable them to respond rationally rather than impatiently. E-government websites could be developed in a similar direction, to inform users of the politics and pressures that public services are subject to.

What might be the equivalent of speed humps for the digital age? What are the technologies that might temper all this connectivity? The entertainment industries have shown themselves adept at blocking illegal sharing of content; technology can be harnessed in a similar way, to safeguard silence and isolation in places where it is valued. This is also what privacy-enhancing or encryption technologies do: they moderate technological connectivity, to ensure that we are not forced to give away more information about ourselves than we want to. The government could put the protection of privacy at the heart of its digital vision, not out of any particular sympathy with the civil liberties lobby, but so as to develop a manageable, more conservative model of the information age than the one currently unfolding.

The critique of unfettered technological modernity has a rich history. But today, the privacy lobby is the only source of sustained questioning of our compulsion to digitise social relations. The challenge is to move beyond a focus on infrastructure, and toward a more rounded consideration of needs. ■



