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Baking in Philosophy?

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By Sue Hessey (BT) and Jeff Patmore (BT)

In the ongoing debate as to whether communication technology is changing how we operate as human beings there is one constant message: change is happening.

Recently, there has been a lot of disagreement over whether this change is positive or not, whether it is a change that we can ever return from, and whether the existing technology can help us make sense of the explosion of information and communications that we are now exposed to.

Technology changes all the time. Over decades, we have seen how technological inventions from the printing press through the telegraph to the telephone have been greeted with dismay and foreboding, and yet we have not suffered any long-term harm from their existence. Due to enhanced communications technologies we now have the potential to know far more about the people we share this small planet with and to quickly provide help where it is needed.

Is the way we live our lives different to how our parents lived theirs at our age? Of course it is. Is this a revolution? Not to those involved in it, but taking an example from Einstein and his theory of relativity, it depends on how one looks at it.

Imagine an alien visiting our planet 50 years ago and then again today. It might think that something revolutionary must have occurred while it was away. And it would be right to some extent because, as a species, we have made a number of quite outstanding 'discoveries' in the span of the last 50 years.

New skills

But if that same alien examined the people carefully it would find virtually no difference, other than some new skills and an occasional change to language to accommodate new devices and systems. It would find no 'evolution of the species' during this time, just behavioural adaptation to a new way of life and new opportunities.

Humankind's potential to adapt is vast. In fact our species is known to thrive in almost any land-based environment on Earth. Historically harnessing the power of agriculture meant less time had to be spent foraging for subsistence, leading to more permanent settlements and more available time for cerebral activities such as developing art, writing, philosophy, and other forms of culture.

Labour and time-saving technologies enable us to move away from the drudgery and engage in more intellectual pursuits, of course if we choose to.

Humans have always searched for ways that new technologies or ways of doing things can assist in their daily lives.

A fairly recent example of this is the microwave oven. Before a microwave existed we were all quite content with the conventional gas or electric oven. It took time to produce a meal but then we knew of no other option and lived with the delay involved and adapted to it. Today, taking time over preparing a meal 'in the old way' is seen as something we do to impress someone or to show that we care. This behaviour is in itself a part of social change that our society has been undergoing.

Time saving

Zapping a pre-prepared meal in the microwave requires no special skills and is fast and efficient, and is seen by many as a really positive change in that the time saved can be spent on other more enjoyable pursuits including perhaps some deep and philosophical thinking.

Being able to exploit new technologies for our own ends is nothing new.

Some commentators speculate that an excessive use of communications technologies can lead to distractions from the things we *should* be doing. For instance, Social Networking Sites like Facebook can either be a great way of connecting with people, or a great distractor from other tasks such as studying and working. In some contexts this is undoubtedly true, even if the distraction is secretly a welcome break from a boring task.

But the same commentators will say that this is also detrimentally affecting our ability to communicate with others and that information overload from all the different sources that are available to us these days (e.g. Twitter feeds, status updates, text messages etc.) will lead to a meltdown of our psychological resources—almost as if we have "too many windows open" and our "systems" are in danger of crashing.

Therefore, the real question we should be asking ourselves is how do we make much better use of the vast amount of information and media that is now available to us through these new technologies?

We are currently conducting research across the globe into this particular issue in order to illuminate our thoughts on this topic, to provide insight into how 'real' people feel about their use of informational and communications technologies, and to gain insights from the world's lead researchers in this area.


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