
Risks and Consequences of Digital Globalization

Annotated Bibliography of Sources

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I. Introduction & Roadmap

In the modern era of worldwide informatization, people in every walk of life are proselytizing the numerous benefits to be reaped from the increasing ubiquity of information technologies. Exemplifying this enthusiasm, Walter Wriston writes:

All of a sudden everyone has access to everything...The power of a telecom network can change economic destinies and may start a train of political events of immense consequence...by drawing nearly all the world into a single global conversation, one that now assesses, approves, and disapproves products and services, institutions and ideas, that once were evaluated primarily on local markets.¹

John Perry Barlow, a former lyricist for the grateful dead and the author of “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,” expresses similar optimism:

What the Net offers is the promise of a new social space, global and antisovereign, within which anybody, anywhere can express to the rest of humanity whatever he or she believes without fear. There is in these new media a foreshadowing of the intellectual and economic liberty that might undo all the authoritarian powers on earth.²

In this annotated bibliography I review some of the works that analyze the flip-side of digital globalization. Starting from the question, “What are the detrimental effects of spreading information technologies?” I have tried to find authors who attempt to deflate the immense optimism surrounding the information revolution. This bibliography is grossly incomplete, and only scratches the surface of most arguments; nonetheless, it serves as a broad survey of the *types* of arguments that are being made. My goal is to provide a representative sampling of the more compelling criticisms offered from a wide range of disciplines, from the formulaic analysis of the Bridges.org economic report to Husserl’s philosophical discourses.

To facilitate the comparison of arguments from often unrelated disciplines, I’ve conceptually (and somewhat artificially) grouped them into three sets:

¹ Wriston, W. The Twilight of Sovereignty... Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992 (New York): 41-45

² Barlow, J.P. “Thinking Globally, Acting Locally” Time Magazine, Jan. 15, 1996

The first set of books (i-v) deals primarily with the digital divide. Though Compaine writes to debunk the divide, the predominant belief is that there is a harmful technology gap that exacerbates existing economic divisions. The authors stress the potential of information technology, generally agreeing (Haywood being the notable exception) that technology is inherently good. For instance Norris and Holderness, in a manner similar to Gustavo Lins Ribeiro (not included), focus on the democratic potential of the Internet, optimistically describing a cyber-enabled direct democracy while simultaneously condemning “promises of technological quick fixes for civic engagement in democracy akin to one-week wonder diets or surgical tummy tucks to save us from slothful selves without the need for painful exercise.”(Norse) For these authors, their misgivings arise from the *lack* of technology in certain areas, and equivalently the *disparity* in access to technology.

The second set of authors (vi-viii) present arguments that more directly call into question the value of technology itself. As opposed to the first set, where technology is assumed to be beneficial despite ominous disparities, these works argue for a more tempered (Feenberg), or altogether different (Poster) understanding of technology itself. While not claiming technology to be good or bad, they seek to reevaluate our conception of technology and its consequences. For instance Husserl, an existentialist philosopher, highlights inconsistencies and shortcomings in the way we relate to systems assumed to accurately represent natural phenomena. The discussions in this set are necessarily more abstract than in the first set. They do not necessarily portray technology in a worse light than the first set (in many cases the digital divide arguments are the most critical); rather, they seek to shift the focus of our attention.

The third and final group (ix-xi) represents some of the more vehemently anti-technology points of view. As opposed to the preceding authors, who had a relatively neutral attitude toward technology, these authors depict technology itself as a harmful entity. Menzies sees technology as a “deskilling” force, Heidegger claims it is impeding our quest for truth, and Sale believes many advances to be unnecessary and dangerous. I have not included works from the many “cultural critics” who essentially worry that, as Mark Poster writes, “the Internet destabilizes the community and undermines the felicity of face-to-face relations,” or equivalently, in Margaret Morse’s words, that the Internet

“erodes the sociality of a well-functioning society.”³ Nor have I done much justice to the many authors who decry the “cultural imperialism” implicit in the fact that the ‘global technology’ is really ‘Western technology,’ and who point to statistics such as the fact that seventy-five percent of the Internet is in English, and that all the major software producers are in the U.S.A.⁴

The grouping of the authors is ad-hoc, as the literature does not represent a cohesive body of work. The hope is that the reader, given this representative sampling, can get a rough idea of the ways people are framing arguments against technology.

³ For a prime example of this type of criticism, see Morse, M. Virtualities: Television, Media Art, and Cyberculture. 1998; also Norberg-Hodge in Mander, J. and Goldsmith, E. (eds.) The case against the global economy, and for a turn toward the local. 1996: p.33

⁴ For these arguments, see Ritzer, G. The Mcdonaldization of Society or Golding, P. and Harris, P. (eds.) Beyond Cultural Imperialism. 1997. For more statistics refer to the briges.org report.

II. Sources

- (i) **bridges.org** *Spanning The Digital Divide: Understanding and Tackling the Issues*, 2002 available at <http://www.bridges.org/spanning/index.html>

Bridges.org, an international non-profit organization, compiled this report on the digital divide – the gap between those with technology and those without. Of the many sources of information on the digital divide, this is the most current and comprehensive. The report concisely characterizes the divide, using statistics and case studies, and gives detailed descriptions and analyses of the many policies and initiatives that aim to span the divide. Though the presentation is dry and formulaic, Bridges.org does an exceptional job of clarifying and untangling the various factors that have caused and may continue to cause the technology gap.

For the purposes of this bibliography, the bridges.org report does more than provide a firm grounding in the digital divide (the subject of the next four books); it calls attention to the immense amount of time and money that is being dedicated to the resolution of the digital divide. In the public eye the technology gap is an obvious, insidious problem that needs immediate attention. Though there is the occasional dissent from this point of view (see Compaine, below), the vast majority of the literature (and mass media) depicts ‘technological indigence’ in language and imagery similar to that used to describe poverty and famine. Disseminating technology is the job of humanitarians and governments; impeding the spread of technology is the work of terrorists and protesters.

- (ii) **Compaine, Benjamin** (ed.). Digital Divide: Facing a Crisis or Creating a Myth, MIT Press, 2001 (Cambridge, Massachusetts)

Compaine focuses on the U.S. digital divide, with the interesting twist that the editor is “skeptical of the entire digital divide concept.” The volume is a relatively formal overview of the US disparity between haves and have-nots, with good case studies and plenty of statistics. Compaine’s concludes that government policy should not be excessively regulatory, but rather should let the “divide” do its own thing.

Chapter 4 (*Information Gaps: Myth or Reality?*) and Chapter 20 (*Declare the War Won*), both written by the editor, try to debunk the widespread concern over the growing technology gap. In Chapter 4, Compaine’s strategy is to set the computer/Internet divide in a historical context,⁵ next to the electricity, the telephone, cars, radio, and other technologies now considered to be (relatively) ubiquitous and universal:

There are indeed all sorts of ‘gaps’ in and among societies. Many are related to the state of an economy...The issue is not one of information or knowledge gaps...if there is an issue, it is: What priorities should a society have in making decisions on what are necessities, what are frills, and what falls in a debatable middle ground?

In chapter 20, Compaine points to statistics (measuring e.g. cost of access, corporate adoption of tech, ease of use) which suggest that the divide is currently narrowing. He argues that technology should not be the concern of countries dealing with “more important issues” of famine, war, etc., echoing Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. “Perhaps,” Compaine concludes, “it is fair to propose that the digital divide is disappearing on its own. Public policy in a few years can the turn its attention to the much smaller skirmishes that may be needed to help out with the digital crevice left at the fringes.”

Compaine’s volume illustrates an important division amongst social scientists studying the divide. Given that they are often unable to agree on whether information disparities are increasing or decreasing, it is understandable that they reach different conclusions on the beneficial and detrimental effects of the digital divide.

⁵ See also The Victorian Internet, in which Tom Standage makes the case, through a historical analysis of the telegraph, that the global communication revolution being attributed to the Internet is really just an extension of previous telecommunication revolutions.

(iii) **Norris, Pippa.** *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide*, Cambridge University Press, 2001 (Cambridge)

Pippa Norris is concerned with the digital divide around the world. She distinguishes between three types of digital divides:

- **Global divide:** Will IT reinforce or erode the technology gap *between nations*?
- **Social divide:** Will it exacerbate or reduce social divisions *within countries*?
- **Democratic divide:** Will it strengthen *representative democracy* or reinforce existing power?

The first few chapters provide an excellent overview of some of the arguments criticizing the way in which technology is unevenly disseminated – i.e. Norris summarizes the problems of the digital divide. However, unlike most of the other works concerned with the digital divide, Norris also emphasizes many of the *potential* economic, political (i.e. democratic) and social benefits of technology. In discussing both the good and bad of IT, her analysis remains relatively impartial and has plenty of case studies involving (supposedly) 179 countries. Through this case-study analysis (not just waxing philosophic!), Norris concludes that the *global divide* is not narrowing, and that “the root cause of unequal global diffusion of digital technologies is lack of economic development.” Likewise, she argues that the *social divide* is the result of larger socioeconomic divisions, and that it “shows no signs of closure during the first decade.”

Beyond the eloquent arguments concerning the global and social divide, which have been extensively discussed in other literature, Norris’s book draws an unusual amount of attention to the effect the Internet is having on global democracy. Instead of simply discussing its potential to unite the world in a communitarian utopia, as was the case in Wriston’s article (“The Global Conversation”), Norris actually evaluates the extent to which it has facilitated democracy to date. Does the Internet effectively involve the masses in the political process, and thus realize “egalitarian forms of direct democracy and grassroots networking” or does it merely reinforce established interests? Norris finds a safe middle-ground, arguing that so far the Internet has done little to revolutionize politics, insofar as it hasn’t dramatically altered existing political

institutions, and that the disengaged are not being engaged in the political process. In spite of these failures, Norris highlights one major success of IT – the empowerment of marginalized politics: “minor parties, smaller groups, and fringe movement activists.”

All told, Pippa Norris’ book is unique in its emphasis on empirical studies of the effects and dispersion of information technologies. She is concerned with the effectiveness of technology as a tool for facilitating democratic participation. She defines the worth of technology in terms of democracy, and evaluates it on those terms. Technology itself is not detrimental to society, in Norris’ view, though it is not as effectively beneficial as it could be.

Loader, Brian D. (ed.) Cyberspace Divide: Equality, Agency and Policy in the Information Society. Routledge, 1998 (London)

(iv) **Holderness, Mike**: Chapter 3: *Who are the world's information-poor?*

Holderness provides a concise summary of the extreme disparity in IT access between nations, with statistics, figures and tables, i.e. he characterizes the international digital divide. He writes like a reporter, and the social commentary is mostly implied. Like Norris (though far less sophisticated in the analysis), Holderness is concerned with the relationship between IT and democracy, citing Rand's argument that, "with greater than 99.9 per cent certainty...one can reject the null hypothesis that there is no relationship between democracy and interconnectivity. Furthermore, the coefficient on interconnectivity is large. A single point increase on the interconnectivity scale corresponds to an increase of 5 points in democracy rating." Holderness writes, with an air of optimism, that "For nations to be economically competitive, they must allow individual citizens access to information networks and computer technology. In doing so, they cede significant control over economic, cultural, and eventually political events in their countries."

Dave Carter and others have written extensively on the relationship between technological gaps and economic ones.⁶ Like many of these writers, Holderness operates on the assumption that ubiquitous technology is good, and that the bad results from our inability to ubiquitously spread technology. Holderness sees technology as the key to a new form of democracy, is glad that all nations are being forced to embrace technology, and laments the fact that some nations are not equal participants.

⁶ Carter, D. "'Digital Democracy' or 'Information Aristocracy': Economic Regeneration in the Information Economy" in Loader, B. The Governance of Cyberspace. Routledge, 1997 (London):136

Loader, Brian D. (ed.) Cyberspace Divide: Equality, Agency and Policy in the Information Society. Routledge, 1998 (London)

(v) **Haywood, Trevor:** Chapter 2: *Global networks and the myth of equality: Trickle down or trickle away?*

Haywood's article is essentially an ideological harangue on technology, masked as a scholarly critique of the harms of the digital divide. He starts with a general critique of the myth of universal access, arguing that internetworking in fact exacerbates the disparity between IT haves and have-nots along existing economic lines. His claim is that though trickle-down of technology occurs, the recipients are "observers" and not true users. "The world has always been a place of haves and have-nots and I can see no way that internetworking is going to change this very much. Indeed it has the decidedly ominous potential to increase the sense of alienation that has always made it more difficult for the economically deprived to cross over into higher levels of economic activity."

After arguing that the divide is widening, Haywood moves on to criticize the Internet's destruction of local communities and the lack of electronic security and privacy. "That which can connect us with others in far-off places can also reduce and inhibit the richest and most satisfying human intercourse when we use it over short distance to replace meeting each other in real space." Haywood's overarching point is, "the potential disadvantages of networking technology are more likely to be messily associated with the much wider social, political and economic imperatives within which networking will reside, rather than as a direct result of networking *per se*." However, he doesn't point to statistics or specific examples to support his claims about parallels between economic and technological divisions. His critique that the lower rungs aren't getting lifted up in the same way as the higher rungs is abstractly compelling, but again is not well-supported by evidence of such trends.

Haywood does not conceal his distaste for the effects technology is having on society, and in fifteen pages runs the gamut in his criticism. Though I found his arguments to be

scattered and unsupported, he convincingly emphasizes the indeterminate consequences of technology:

It often requires considerable advances in science or scientific inquiry before a comprehensive assessment of the downside of most new technologies can be made...With the introduction of all new technologies we enter an initial period when the missionaries declare the new scriptures...We have only just moved out of the missionary phase as far as the Internet and global networking is concerned...The potential disadvantages of networking technology...are more likely to be messily associated with the much wider social, political and economic imperatives within which networking will reside...

In many ways Haywood's fragmented dissent from the cyber-optimists reflects my own hesitation and cyber-pessimism: broad but ill-defined and inarticulate.

(vi) **Feenberg, Andrew.** Questioning Technology. Routledge, 1999 (New York)

Feenberg argues against the 'dualistic essentialist' view of technology, which separates technology from technology's meaning on a human level (see Heidegger, below). Instead, he proposes a non-essentialist "terrain of struggle between different types of actors differently engaged with technology and meaning." He wants to unify the technical with the social, and tries to find a middle ground between technological determinism and social constructivism.⁷ "Thus," he argues, "technologies are not merely efficient devices or efficiency-oriented practices, but include their contexts as these are embodied in design and social insertion." Feenberg makes an unusual comparison of technological forces to market forces, essentially arguing that just as it has taken humans time to realize their own power over economic forces, soon we will see that we have similar forces over macro-movements in technology: "Liberation from technological fetishism will follow the course of liberation from economic fetishism."

Feenberg sees this point of view as an activist one. Just as Heidegger hopes we will overcome the dangers of technology by looking the essence technology straight in the eye, Feenberg goes on to claim:

"Every major technical change reverberates at many levels, economic, political, religious, cultural. Insofar as we continue to see the technical and the social as separate domains, important aspects of these dimensions of our existence will remain beyond our reach as a democratic society...Real change will come not when we turn away from technology toward meaning, but when we recognize the nature of our subordinate position in the technical systems that enroll us, and begin to intervene in the design process in the defense of the conditions of a meaningful life and a livable environment..."

Feenberg believes marginalized groups can improve their position by pushing the course of technological development. He asserts human efficacy over the uses of technology. "Technology is not a fate one must choose for or against," he concludes, "but a challenge to political and social creativity."

⁷ For a good outline of the difference between technological determinism and social constructivism, see Schroeder, R. in Loader, B. The Governance of Cyberspace. Routledge, 1997 (London):98

(vii) **Poster, Mark.** What's the Matter with the Internet? University of Minnesota Press, 2001 (Minneapolis)

Poster is concerned with formulating the “cultures of cyberspace.” Rather than attempting to understand the effects the Internet has on existing cultural groups (race, sex, class, etc), Poster aims to understand the way the Internet is forming new cultures. “The question for [the State, economy, and academy] is instrumental: How will the Net benefit or harm their existing goals?...As long as we remain within an instrumental framework we cannot question it, define its limit, or look to new media in relation to how it might generate new cultures.” Poster asks, “how may new cultural forms emerge that do not necessarily improve the position of existing groups as they are currently constituted buy change them in unforeseeable ways?” He includes a chapter on globalization (“Nations, Identities, and Global Technologies”) but it mostly reiterates existing discourses on global citizenship and national identity (e.g. Sassen, Ribeiro, Hirschkop), albeit with a technological/communications spin.

Poster argues that the effects of technology are not only indeterminate, but that they are hyper-indeterminate because the effects defy the boundaries one normally uses to define cultural groups. In other words, any effects of technology (which may be indeterminate in their own right) will not be felt by existing cultural groups; the effects will define the groups of the future. Technology is transforming society by transforming its subdivisions; though Poster is clearly mistrustful of technological progress, the transformations themselves are neutral:

One cannot say how Internet technocultures will become inscribed in history, what specific institutional matrixes will be invented to shroud them, and how existing institutions will appropriate them or transform themselves in the process of doing so. Yet one can expect, from the bowels of the new constellation of elements, the birth of a monster, of a human-machine assemblage whose contours may be feared as those of an alien but who surely will be yet another incarnation of ourselves.

(viii) **Husserl, Edmund.** The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness. (trans. James Churchill) Indiana University Press, 1964 (Bloomington)

Also: Welton, Donn. The Essential Husserl. Indiana University Press, 1999 (Bloomington)

Husserl maintains that our understanding of time is constrained by our minds and our nature. Our consciousness of the passing of time is conceived through the temporal association of recalled perceptions. Husserl points out that association, recollection, and perception are all intentional, and are not equivalent to the fundamental and true representation of time. Human consciousness of time is a phenomenological experience that constrains the essence of time itself.

As opposed to the preceding works, which address the tangible consequences of technology (with particular emphasis on technology gaps), Husserl makes general arguments that apply to technology, as well as science and our broad system of representing nature. He does not deal with the phenomenon of technology in the same way as, for instance, Heidegger, but nonetheless raises issues stemming from our faith in technology.

Husserl calls attention to deficiencies in our system of representation and our conception of that system. We currently devote immense resources and energy toward insuring the universality of that system. Our blind faith in our grasp of the essence of time, technology, or whatever, could easily cause us to overlook the omissions and losses entailed in confidence in a given system. The cycle is self-reinforcing, potentially resulting in a loss of freedom and truth (as Heidegger has argued) or merely a benign ignorance; Husserl draws our attention to our oversight without alluding to tangible consequences.

(ix) **Heidegger, Martin.** The Question Concerning Technology (unknown translation), available at

<http://www.centenary.edu/~balexand/cyberculture/question1.html>

Heidegger discusses technology, questioning its phenomenological essence. Arguing that “technology is not equivalent to the essence of technology... the essence of technology is by no means anything technological,” he presents a detailed analysis of the semantics and language of technology. Technology, he claims, started out as a tool which humans controlled, and which was a “means of revealing,” i.e. it helped us to understand the essence of truth. Heidegger’s criticism of our current relation to technology is that we see ourselves as the master of technology, where in reality the end goal of revealing “does not happen...decisively through man.” This, to Heidegger, is dangerous because as a consequence of our misperceived control, we are limiting human freedom. In trying to make nature, via technology, a tool (“standing reserve”), we make ourselves a tool as well; man comes to “the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve.” Through technology, we obscure our understanding of ourselves and our essence as humans.

Though Heidegger specifically addresses machine and manufacturing technology, it seems reasonable to assume that the same arguments apply to information technology. If we constrain ourselves in utilizing and producing technology, then surely the globalization of such technology can only further harm humankind. In this sense Heidegger’s writing is similar to Husserl’s; however, the scope of Heidegger’s arguments is considerably narrower. He does so by roughly defining “harm” in terms of the discovery of truth, which is intimately tied to our understanding of our own essence. As technology conceals truth, it is a harmful endeavor.

McChesney, Robert et. al. Capitalism and the Information Age: The Political Economy of the Global Communication Revolution. Monthly Review Press, 1998 (New York)

(x) **Menzies, Heather.** Chapter 5: *Challenging Capitalism in Cyberspace: The Information Highway, the Postindustrial Economy, and People*

Menzies believes that the information revolution is reinforcing existing power structures. “Beneath the rhetoric of the ‘information society,’” she writes, “the ideology of monopoly capitalism is being consolidated (and hegemonized) in forms that are all the more total and totalizing for being invisible and ubiquitous.” She points to the fact that the big companies are best equipped to leverage new technology through expensive fiber-optic networking, third-world subcontracting, etc.⁸ She implies the government’s complicity in creating a new economy that “is beyond the reach of voters and of the policymaking constraints of all but the largest national governments,” and notes that “none of these institutions is accountable to people constituted as democratic communities.” Provides a strong counterargument to the democratic optimism of authors such as Wriston and (in a more tempered form) Ribeiro.

In the face of this predicament, Menzies places hope in the fact that consumers have economic leverage to make themselves heard. Though she believes people are being systematically stripped of their assets (“deskilled”), she is optimistic that individual people can triumph “by recovering the voice of experience, and making it the center of a new critical discourse on globalized capitalism where priorities of particular people, places and communities are paramount.” She emphasizes the importance of personal stories (more so in Whose Brave New World, 1996, than in this essay) in a manner similar to Noberg-Hodge, but only as a means to draw attention to the iniquity in current trends of power, and the role technology places in reinforcing those trends.

⁸ For another, more detailed, account of the way in which “the Internet comprises nothing less than the central production and control apparatus of an increasingly supranational market system,” see Schiller, Dan, Digital Capitalism: Networking the Global Market System. MIT Press, 1999

(xi) **Sale, Kirkpatrick.** Rebels Against the Future... Addison-Wesley, 1995 (Reading, Massachusetts); also **Sale, Kirkpatrick.** "Lessons from the Luddites" *The Nation*, June 5, 1995

A self-proclaimed "neo-Luddite," Kirkpatrick Sale gives an account of the struggles of the 19th century Luddites, a band of English handicraftsmen who violently protested the changes produced by the Industrial Revolution that they felt threatened their jobs. The book is filled with social commentary challenging the legitimacy of science and technology. He is concerned that the information revolution is running parallel to the industrial one in that machines are replacing workers, and that technology is transforming society for the worse:

For the fact of the matter is that, contrary to the technophilic propaganda, technology is not neutral, composed of tools that can be used for good or evil depending on the user... it comes with an inevitable logic, bearing the purposes and the values of the economic system that spawns it, and obeying an imperative that works that logic to its end, quite heedlessly... Tools come with a prior history built in, expressing the values of a particular culture. A conquering, violent culture... is bound to produce conquering, violent tools.

Sale strongly believes that technology can be malevolent, and urges resistance to the industrial system, which unflinchingly supports the development and spread of technology. "The principles and goals of industrialism," Sale write, "have pretty much gone unchallenged in the public arena." He advocates a stance, which many have disregarded, that it is possible to evaluate the benefits and impacts of technology on a case by case level:

It does not seem hard in a modern context to determine when machinery is hurtful or to define a commonality whose members might have something to say about a technology's introduction or use.

Sale represents a growing minority of writers who believe that the good in technology is generally outweighed by the bad.⁹ He believes that technological progress is not a worthy cause, and that only those technologies which are acutely needed should be developed and supported.

⁹ Similar works by other neo-Luddites include David Noble's Progress without People, Neil Postman's Technopoly, Theodore Roszak's The Cult of Information, and Jacques Ellul's The Technological Society

III. Conclusion

“What are the detrimental effects of spreading information technologies?” This bibliography presents a few possible answers. Yet clearly, there is no consensus among the authors cited in this bibliography. Heidegger worries about truth, Norris about democracy, and Sale about jobs, with plenty of other opinions to fill in the rest of the spectrum. The range of answers draws attention to the multi-dimensionality of the question, and though the authors don’t necessarily disagree with one another, they certainly are concerned with different aspects of the inquiry.

A major cause of these discrepancies lies in the fact that the authors don’t necessarily agree on what it means for something to be detrimental. An economist might look for the rise or fall of a given indicator, whereas the anthropologist might be more concerned with case histories. Technophiles, sociologists and philosophers have different ways of approaching the issues, and it is not surprising that conflicting methodologies lead to conflicting results. The variety in the scope of the arguments, from the philosophical to the instrumental, presents a broad dissention from the new religion of technology. It is, however, unreasonable to expect that any single work would give an exhaustive and cogent account of the dangers lurking in digital globalization. And by the same token, the general disillusionment is in itself perhaps the most compelling case against technology.