

ANDROIDS DREAM OF ELECTRIC SHEEP AND GEEKS DREAM OF THE WEB SUMMIT

The Web Summit (Europe's largest technology conference), is billed as 'Glastonbury for Geeks' and in that respect, it doesn't disappoint.

This year, a reported 70,000 people descended on the Lisbon based event to learn about the bleeding edge of technological innovation, seek funding for their start-ups or to tout for new business. But, the summit also acts as a forum to discuss the bigger issues (good and bad) around technology and its integration into our societies.

Now, whether or not you subscribe to a [Kurzweilian](#) view of our near future, there can be little doubt that our species is fast approaching a singularity at which point humanity's technological abilities will likely surpass our understanding of the possible implications of our actions. Never before have we been able to shape our environment as we can now.

For sure, science fiction has popularised a more dystopian perspective of this possible future - most notably through Hollywood blockbusters such as The Matrix, Terminator and of course 2001: A Space Odyssey – but the future is closer than we think. Whilst there's no immediate risk of mankind being wiped out by an 'Arnold Schwarzenegger from the future', there are some huge issues that we need to address sooner rather than later.



'2001: A Space Odyssey', Stanley Kubrick

Perhaps one of the biggest issues facing all of us is exponential growth in data and how we responsibly use it.

DATA AND OUR 5G FUTURE... YOU BETTER HOLD ON.

On the one hand, it's incredibly useful to share your personal preferences with a favourite online retailer so that you receive relevant offers, but this is just the tip of a very large iceberg. As [Guo Ping](#), President of Huawei, explained, Huawei and the other tech giants see a future powered by 5G networks that's more enabled by *our* data than ever before.



Ping explained that because of its speed and capacity, 5G networks when coupled with AI, and very soon AGI (Artificial General Intelligence – an AI that essentially learns like a human does – or Alexa on steroids, if you like) will be the tipping point at which a true internet of things (IoT) becomes a reality. This will revolutionise everything from transportation networks to healthcare – all in real-time, with vast amounts of data being generated, shared and stored.

[Ronan Dunne](#), Executive VP and Group CEO of Verizon, added that people need to understand 5G is 'not an evolution, it's a revolution'. It will see the start of the '4th industrial revolution', with connection speeds 10 times that of 4G whilst using only 10% of the energy – an important green credential when big tech is often viewed as not being all that environmentally friendly.

The everyday implications of this marriage of data, AI and 5G were best highlighted by [Manik Gupta](#), Uber's (now ex) Chief Product Officer, who provided an insight into Uber's view of the future in which they become the "operating system for your daily life" – a super app akin to WeChat++ or the fictional 'Circle'.



Uber's ambition to 'remove the points of friction' in its customer's daily lives will see them give away vast amounts of personal data in exchange for hyper-bespoke, hyper-local services and transportation options such as bikes, cars, scooters, boats (if you are in Lagos) and planes- as well as being able to access fast food and traditional groceries delivery services and most recently, banking.

(And yes, Gupta did promise flying cars are on the way next year... again! ;-))

Is this a fair and safe value exchange?

DATA AND ITS DARKER SIDE.

There are those who are less impressed with this big data future and urge caution. Perhaps one of the most vocal is American whistleblower, [Edward Snowden](#). Snowden believes that



our legislative structures are wholly inadequate for today's (and tomorrow's), data hungry tech societies.

Snowden stated, "Data is not an abstract, it's about people" and went on to say that, whilst data protection laws like GDPR are a step in the right direction, they are "a paper tiger" that do not address the real question: should we allow our person data to be collected (and stored), often without our knowledge or, importantly, full understand of the implications, in the first place?

"The problem is not data protection it's data collection – it's wrong to collect data all the time without our permission."

And let's be honest, how many of us *really* understand what personal data is being collected on us, who it's being shared with (without our knowledge and therefore express consent) and for what purposes.

One person who understands the 'dark-side of data' better than most is [Brittany Kaiser](#), ex Cambridge Analytica Director, unlikely star of the Netflix documentary "[The Great Hack](#)" and now self-styled data protection crusader.

Whilst at Cambridge Analytica, Kaiser worked on tens of projects that used social media advertising to manipulate (legally?!) the course of elections and public votes around the world including the now infamous Trinidad & Tobago election and, more recently supporting the Vote Leave campaign during the UK's BREXIT referendum.



Today, Kaiser believes the data is being "weaponised" for political gain and that there are serious ethical issues that need to be addressed by governments and the social media companies when it comes to allowing political advertising on their platforms. In Kaiser's own words when talking about the work that Cambridge Analytica did "... it really works... it's twisted!"

THE AGE OF ANXIETY

Kaiser's views were (perhaps oddly) echoed by [Brad Smith](#), President of Microsoft. Smith believes that technology has not yet delivered on 'the promise' and in fact, most people now actually live in "an age of anxiety", fuelled by social media, constant connectivity and data misuse concerns.

Big tech needs to step up, "The world wants tech to lead the way but respect timeless values.... We need to ask what computers should do. If we get it wrong the next generation pays the price."

And that price might be higher than we think.

"SUPER COMPUTERS ARE PLANES AND QUANTUM COMPUTERS ARE LIKE ROCKETS" – P. GERBERT.

In a packed session, [Philipp Gerbert](#), Senior Partner and Managing Director at The Boston Consulting Group, explained that in October this year, Google announced that its state-of-the-art quantum computer called 'Sycamore' had achieved "quantum supremacy" through using the entanglement process (what Einstein described as "spooky actions at a distance"). This makes it (for some applications) more powerful than the world's most powerful traditional super computer. Indeed, it took a mere 200 seconds to complete a task that would have taken its rival 10,000 years to complete.



Now whilst quantum computing is still in its infancy; China, the US and Australia especially, are investing heavily in this new and exciting technology because they believe the rewards will be huge.

They're likely right. Quantum computing promises a... 'quantum jump' (sorry) ... in our ability to combat some of the most complex and pressing issues facing our species today; such as

combatting climate change, discovering new drug compounds, revolutions in materials science, fast and effective data storage, communications and data encryption solutions.

But as the expression goes, 'with great power comes great responsibility'. Historically, whilst the motivations of tech pioneers have been focussed on improving the status-quo, it's often all too easy for other less scrupulous characters to adopt the technology for darker uses, which escape scrutiny until it's inadvertently highlighted by a whistleblower or the like.

AN AGE OF ACCESS?

There is no doubt that technology in all its many forms has changed our lives, but it would be naïve to assume that access to it is distributed evenly around the globe. As such, people's perceptions, usage and understanding of technology, differs greatly depending on their location and socio-economic background.

This represents a huge challenge for people like Ex-British Prime Minister and Executive Chairman of Tony Blair Institute For Global Change, [Tony Blair](#), stated that he believes a good deal of the political instability and backlash against technology and globalisation can be attributed to people feeling "left behind" by technology – a state Brad Smith of Microsoft describes as "the broadband divide."



Blair believes that "politics is playing catch-up to the technology revolution" and politicians have a role to play in providing greater access to technology for all. Interestingly, a focus for the UK's Labour Party Election Manifesto that promises free broadband for all if they are elected in December 2019. However, to do this they need to better understand it. "Politicians are simple people and what they don't understand, they don't like." Blair stated.

Support for Blair's views came from Congressman Ro Khanna, who represents Silicon Valley, California. Khanna explained that 'big tech' was realising that it needs to work more with governments to democratise access to technology and the opportunities that it can bring to everyone, not just the few – irrespective of their location or background. "We need people

with curiosity about tech in government... No child should be forced to leave their home town to get a good job.”

HANG-UP YOUR SHARPIES?

Of course, historically technology has often been considered to be instrumental in the loss of people’s livelihoods, with there being numerous examples from the dawn of the industrial age to the modern day.

However, the creative industry is a little different as it resides in a penumbra between technology and imagination.

The photographer Rankin, when asked if he felt that he’d been replaced by the iPhone explained, “We can’t let go of the craft of creativity” and that creativity is not always about the instant gratification that technology can provide. “If you’re creative, you have to be bored from time-to-time” and experience JoMo (the joy of missing out) by not having a smart phone with you every moment of every day.

For a re-styled (slightly Steve Job like) Sir Martin Sorrell, the creative revolution at S4C is purely digitally driven. Sorrell claims that, “In a 24/7 always on world, the traditional agency model cannot function”. His new mantra “faster, better, cheaper” is about embracing technology and using AI to deliver solutions quicker and cheaper for clients – maybe at the expense of traditional craft?



Sorrell's approach did find favour with Burger King CMO, Fernando Machado, who believes that today, speed (in housing) and innovation are essential to stay at the forefront of consumer's hearts and minds. Machado explained that in many cases he needs his agencies to counter activity from McDonald's in a matter of hours, but when time is less pressured smart thinking and smart technology can create memorable communications activity – such as [Traffic Jam Whopper](#).



For [Brian Collins](#), Chief Creative Officer and Founder of Collins, AI has a way to go before it can replace the spark of human creativity. Ultimately, he feels that “Creativity will go where it's loved” – maybe to become a more niche, high-end offering, with future ads carrying the line... *'This ad was proudly created by human's'* at the bottom?

INNOVATE, ADAPT AND MOVE-ON.

This all said, it's clear that the creative industry and especially the agency world, can learn a great deal from the tech world. Not least, its ability to rapidly innovate, launch, learn, innovate and re-launch products and solutions.

Of course, when it comes to innovation, the true masters in the digital eco-system are Amazon.

Amazon's Chief Technology Officer, [Werner Vogels](#), explained that a great deal of the company's success has been down to the fact that they've remained true to what the founders (who were mostly computer scientists) were trying to do – solve customers' problems.

This totally customer centric approach (often at a very granular level) to the application of technology and deep machine learning now enables Amazon to deliver billions of packages across 185 countries each year, as well as providing personalised, on demand music and video services to millions of customers.

START-UPS EVERYWHERE

However, for every tech giant like Amazon, there are millions of start-ups and lesser known inspirational businesses looking to be the next big thing. For example, New York based [CTRL-labs](#) is a neural interface platform that enable users to control computers with their minds. The application not only has benefits within the industrial world but also within the healthcare sector for patients with degenerative muscular disorders, for example.



CTRL-labs Co-Founder & CEO, Thomas Reardon, demonstrating the technology

Or maybe, [iSpace-inc](#), a Japanese based start-up that has raised over \$100m USD from private investors and corporations including Suzuki, Citizen and JAL, to create the world's first commercial lunar exploration program, named "HAKUTO-R" that will launch and land on the moon in 2023.

And finally, [TuSimple](#), a San Diego based autonomous trucking start-up that's now valued at \$1.1bn USD. TuSimple are the first company to run a fleet of 40 vehicles on a daily basis delivery goods between hubs.

CONCLUSION... FOR NOW...

It is impossible to reach a conclusion to any of this, because the story has just begun. However, look beyond the shiny tech, flashing lights and dancing robots and there are important issues being discussed at The Web Summit – issues that impact us all.

As mentioned, we can now shape our world in ways that just 20 years ago we could only dream of. Technology has been a great force for good in many cases, but technology in of itself does not solve a problem.

Solutions require application and herein often lies the 'pot-hole' in the road to advancement. Policy makers, legislators and societies are all too often mired by legacy thinking, resulting in them playing catch-up to technology and its application.

Whilst it's impossible (and probably undesirable) to 'uninvent' a piece of technology, perhaps greater scrutiny (but not over-regulation) of its application is required by businesses, policy makers et al? For example, do we want Facebook to be a political advertising / 'news' platform, or Google and Apple to know where we are and what we're doing (and likely to want to do next) all the time?

Furthermore, in a world where 1 billion people live without a digital identity (and if we believe that technology is generally a great enabler that'll power our 4th industrial revolution), shouldn't we be doing more to unleash everyone's potential and ensure people are not disenfranchised and left by the side of the digital superhighway?

For sure, technology and our use of it throws many big questions our way; questions that, as history often illustrates, shouldn't be ignored. Ultimately, since humankind invented simple tools, we've had to consider how best to use them and (in some cases too late) understand the wider implications of our actions.

So perhaps the big take out from exploring the future at The Web Summit is that to fully and productively embrace what's coming, we need to look back and understand the parallels of the past.

Paul Squirrell
Director
thenetworkone
Paul.squirrell@thenetworkone.com