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How Technology Affects YOU

When discussing innovation and technology, it's all too easy to forget what's most important: people. If we want to change this, thinking through the difference between artificial and ambient technology is a good place to start, says Jonathan Oliver, Global Head of Innovation, AOL.

Have you noticed that consumer trends and technology developments have become inextricably linked?

Indeed, we are moving into an age in which marketing, data, technology and culture are converging to create a new way of doing business, with innovation at the top of every marketer's agenda. It's no coincidence that six of the ten most valuable global brands today are technology companies (source: BrandZ).

That's exciting, but I am increasingly dismayed at the growing obsession with technology – particularly artificial intelligence – that seems to be dismissive of one of the most central issues of the day: the changing role, expectations and dreams of human beings in such a changing world.

After all, investing in technological advancements should benefit humans. Otherwise, why do it?

Technology that supports people
Technology helps us in two ways. First, it make us more productive in both our personal and professional lives. The more productive we are, the more we grow. Technology allows us to do things we've never been able to do before, and that's exactly how it should be.

Second, technology is helping us become even more human… more sensorial. There are some remarkable experiments underway that leverage technology to change people's umwelt (how we make sense of the world around us) by enhancing or augmenting the various senses. Researchers have created a protoype for deaf people that transmits language through vibrations onto the skin. As people get used to understanding what these vibrations are they connect these to certain words...expanding their umvelt by subjugating a less dominant sense.

All this techy goodness, however, should not be our sole focus. The most complex system in the world is YOU, and – while we are all born with vast similarities – each of us is unique. Technology needs to learn more about us than we need to learn about technology. For that, we need anthropologists to work right alongside innovators and developers to ensure that technology evolves in a way that is optimal for its creators.

Ambient intelligence
The distinction between ambient and artificial intelligence is vast.

The most talked about of the two – artificial intelligence – is centered on thinking and reasoning at a high-functioning level. And with media properties like Humans, Transcendance and even Spielberg's own AI itself, it's all too easy to become unglued at the notion of technology running amok: technology that begins working for itself, not for its original human creators (or worse).

What is more likely to open the mind to new ways of thinking about how technology can help man is, in fact, ambient intelligence: technology that exists to serve invisibly in the background.

We may not think about it, but we are now surrounded by the assistance provided by ambient intelligence. Once data is in the cloud, companies like Microsoft, Baidu, Amazon and Google generate algorithms to do things that we simply could not accomplish on our own. And as for marketing, these developments are essential if we are ever to truly achieve the holy grail of communicating with individual consumers at scale. We need machines and the algorithms that data science is creating.

The personal benefits will be significant, as well. For example, when my toaster is about to fail, it will not only know of its impending doom (because it'll be connected to the Web, which will serve up data indicating the weakness in its filament), but it will also be able to order its own replacement on Amazon, given its pre-existing understanding of my shopping habits and price sensitivity.

While I'm at work, I'll receive a surprise notification from the mailroom that a package has arrived. There'll be nothing better than an unexpected arrival, courtesy of the ambient economy, keeping me informed and protected without me having to discover such problems on my own. Or having to miss out on toast for even one day. That's the nub of ambient intelligence. It does all the low-level, task-oriented stuff that will allow each of us to focus on more of the things we want to do and think about, thereby making us more human.

Bridging the gap
There are a few companies seeking to bridge the gap between ambient and artificial intelligence. Unlike Google, whose goal was to index the web, Blippar wants to index the world around us. Blippar is an app that brings the static, physical world to life via augmented reality. Its mission is to consider how ambient and artificial intelligence can become a digital prosthetic, augmenting our human senses.

One of Blippar's most interesting features is its visual search product, which can recognize any object anywhere in the world, regardless of language. It processes data in the cloud and uses machine learning to return not just a bunch of search results, but a visual cornucopia tied to the user's actual interests and intentions.

Such a product will help overcome the cultural barriers that exist simply because the Web is based on language. Blippar gives us a look into a future where technology will feel more human: a world in which we will be able to simply point our fingers and discover everything there is to know about an object without having to type words into a browser.

This is intelligence that goes beyond being merely ambient while still allowing us to be – and feel – more human.

What if we thought of all technology like this? What if – rather than nightmarish fantasies of prison farms where we work for "the machines," or stories of an Internet that uploads us all to do its bidding, we were to truly join together to think of technology first in the context of what it could do for mankind? How it could help us do more… or do less of what we no longer wish to do?

I for one would love to attend and participate in panel discussions that do just that vs. the endless conversations we have today about cold metal.

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