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Radical Technologies: The Design Of Everyday Life

RADICAL
Techno-
logies

Adam
Green-
field

Synopsis

A field manual to the technologies that are transforming our livesEverywhere we turn, a startling new device promises to transfigure our lives. But at what cost? In this urgent and revelatory excavation of our Information Age, leading technology thinker Adam Greenfield forces us to reconsider our relationship with the networked objects, services and spaces that define us. It is time to re-evaluate the Silicon Valley consensus determining the future. We already depend on the smartphone to navigate every aspect of our existence. Weâ ™re told that innovationsâ "from augmented-reality interfaces and virtual assistants to autonomous delivery drones and self-driving carsâ "will make life easier, more convenient and more productive. 3D printing promises unprecedented control over the form and distribution of matter, while the blockchain stands to revolutionize everything from the recording and exchange of value to the way we organize the mundane realities of the day to day. And, all the while, fiendishly complex algorithms are operating quietly in the background, reshaping the economy, transforming the fundamental terms of our politics and even redefining what it means to be human. Having successfully colonized everyday life, these radical technologies are now conditioning the choices available to us in the years to come. How do they work? What challenges do they present to us, as individuals and societies? Who benefits from their adoption? In answering these questions, Greenfieldâ ™s timely guide clarifies the scale and nature of the crisis we now confront â "and offers ways to reclaim our stake in the future.

Book Information

File Size: 1093 KB

Print Length: 368 pages

Publisher: Verso (June 13, 2017)

Publication Date: June 13, 2017

Sold by:Â Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B01GYPMK5W

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #14,367 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store)   #1 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Arts & Photography > Architecture > Urban & Land Use Planning   #2 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Ideologies & Doctrines > Utopian #2 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Nonfiction > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Public Affairs & Policy > Urban Planning & Development

Customer Reviews

Radical Technologies is required reading for anyone who has ever considered the benefit-cost calculus of information technologies. Greenfield's cautionary tales -- those drawn from the real-life present and near-future scenarios alike -- are chilling and memorable, even to those already attuned to the vexing problem of digital security in everyday life [Exhibit A: the author, sitting in his study, viewing one of many available feeds of unsecured digital video camera networks]. His explanations of the impact of these technologies on humans, institutions, the economy and the environment range from microscopic examinations of smartphones and their component parts to one of the clearest high-level breakdowns of the Bitcoin, cryptocurrencies, and the blockchain that you will find anywhere. His call to action for users of these devices and the algorithms that power them is clear: know the risks, voice concerns to the companies and governments that make and use them, and above all, do what you can to prioritize the human and humane in every interaction with technology. Greenfield's take on our radical technological future is sobering, but ultimately, having thinkers like him pushing the rest of us to think more critically about our choices leaves room for hope and optimism.

Full of wonderful insights. As a designer and an educator, I found this useful on many levels. Greenfield takes on the issues of our age that deserve immediate, intense reflection and analysis.

Â¢Â ÂœThe virtually infinite multiplication of the object of desire is the essential character of the pathologies of our times. It is no longer the absence, or repression, or the prohibition of touching the object. The Other proliferates as an unreachable and unlimited object of consumption, as the virtual substitute of a no longer possible errotic alterity. The other becomes pornography, since it is always subtracted to enjoyment as it becomes the object of an infinite desire that exhausts the limited libidinal energy of real human beings.Â¢Â Â•--Franco Berardi, The Soul at Work, p. 172I open with this quote from Berardi, the Italian post-modern philosopher, because I was consistantly reminded

of his work while reading Adam Greenfield's Radical Technologies. Greenfield is not nearly so polemical or ideological. But both writers are honing in on the same topic: how technology is altering the human experience, all the way down to the level of perception, desire, and opinion. But where Berardi tends towards the esoteric philosophical notion, Greenfield roots us into the concrete infrastructure of our subject. He tells us about our smartphones, every little piece of them. It's almost annoying. But it isn't annoying, because Greenfield has done his research, and he can situate each component of our technology in a context of exploitation, surveillance, and political economy. He tells us about the conditions of the factory workers, about how the "cobalt in its lithium-ion batteries was mined by hand in the Congo, often by children" (19). In short, Greenfield's nerdy desire to deconstruct the particulars of our technological devices and networks is illuminating rather than overwhelming or obfuscating. Greenfield's descriptions of technology betray his fascination, dare I say admiration, for the stuff. He wants technology to be helpful, fun, benevolent, or so it seems. But the story just doesn't add up that way, and after years of research he is clearly skeptical of the liberatory function of any technology. As he writes in the introduction, "these allegedly disruptive technologies leave existing modes of domination mostly intact, asking if they can ever truly be turned to liberatory ends" (8). It's this constant skepticism that allows Greenfield to challenge some of the most prevalent and important assumptions about the utility of technology in our lives. There are many topics in the book that deserve discussion, but for this review I will just focus in on one that is of particular interest to me. In chapter 7, Greenfield takes on the idea of a 'post-work' economy. As someone who hates work, both personally and politically, I have always been drawn to the idea that we could eliminate the need to labor altogether, and spend our time making art, talking about our feelings, and going for long walks. There has been a good amount of scholarship on the topic, from technocrats, feminists, and many in-between. Of course, Greenfield rains on our parade. "What I wish to argue is that whether they are brought together consciously or otherwise, large-scale data analysis, algorithmic management, machine-learning techniques, auto-mation and robotics constitute a coherent set of techniques for the production of an experience I call the posthuman everyday. This is a milieu in which the rhythms we contend with, the ordi-nary spaces we occupy, and the material and energetic flows we support are all shaped not so much by our own needs but those of the systems that nominally serve us, and in which human perception, scale and desire are no longer the primary yardsticks of value" (185). In short: technology could eliminate work, but in whose favor, and at what cost? Greenfield cites the example of Japan's rapidly advancing economy, where

healthcare and farming, industries primarily worked by immigrant workers, are being automated. The choices made here (and Greenfield reminds us, "there are always choices") reflect the racism and xenophobia of the larger society. Would these workers benefit from a Universal Basic Income that was designed to exclude non-citizens or people of the non-dominant ethnicity?Greenfield problematizes the UBI. "Held up to sustained inspection, the UBI can often seem like little more than a neoliberal giveaway. Its proponents on the market right clearly anticipate it as a pretext to do away with existing benefits, siphoning whatever transfers are involved in it back into the economy as fees for a wide variety of educational, healthcare and family services that are now furnished via social provision" (204).In an era where Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg are seen as leaders in the movement for a socialistic, technology driven future of moralized capitalism (both being proponents of the Universal Basic Income), we need people like Greenfield.Greenfield's book is a warning, a reminder that "very often the claimed benefits never do come to pass" (303). But it also a call to action, a reminder that no technology is inevitable, no outcome is unavoidable. We are players in this game. We can dream alternatives and resist new technologies.I have recently read about a theory that is popular amongst the neoliberal technocracy. The idea is that since technology is exponentially growing, it will inevitably reach a point where we can simulate reality almost perfectly. Since this will inevitably happen, people will inevitably simulate many, many different realities. Thus, we are most likely in a simulated reality. You can read about it here.After reading Greenfield's book this theory appears to me not as a product of the imagination, but the failure of it.I will end this quote-heavy review with a final quote, another from Berardi:"Perhaps the answer is that it is necessary to slow down, finally giving up on economistic fanaticism and collectively rethink the true meaning of the word "wealth." Wealth does not mean a person who owns a lot, but refers to someone who has enough time to enjoy what nature and human collaboration place within everyone's reach. If the great majority of people could understand this basic notion, if they could be liberated from the competitive illusion that is impoverishing everyone's life, the very foundations of capitalism, would start to crumble." (The Soul at Work, p. 169)

Radical Technologies is published by a self-styled "radical" press, which made me a little leery about reading it. The introduction did not help, as it seemed a little odd and polemical. But I decided to look a bit further into the book, and I am glad I did. It's better than I expected. In fact, it's good.What makes me say that? I really liked Adam Greenfield's explanation of the technologies he looked at. In particular, he talks about machine learning, and he describes the technology in a

balanced way that ignores neither its strengths nor its weaknesses. So what he says makes a lot of sense.Like "Math Babe" Cathy O'Neil in her bookÂ Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy, who Adam Greenfield cites, he points out that machine learning hides what it is doing in a black box. No one knows why machine learning makes the choices that it does. Laws could be violated. Moral principles breached. Machines don't have a conscience or a sense of justice. They just act.Some high-profile people like Elon Musk and Stephen Hawking worry about artificial intelligence harming humans at some point in the future. Adam Greenfield points out that the time to worry is already here. , which hosts this review, has adopted machine learning whole hog, and Jeff Bezos sang its praises in a recent letter to shareholders. He said nothing about its dangers, but those worry me.Adam Greenfield covers a lot of ground in the book, and besides machine learning I thought his description of cryptocurrencies was quite good. There is a hint of a looming dystopian future brought on by these radical technologies, but mostly he raises warning flags rather than rail against them. Because of that, this is a helpful book rather than a partisan one.

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