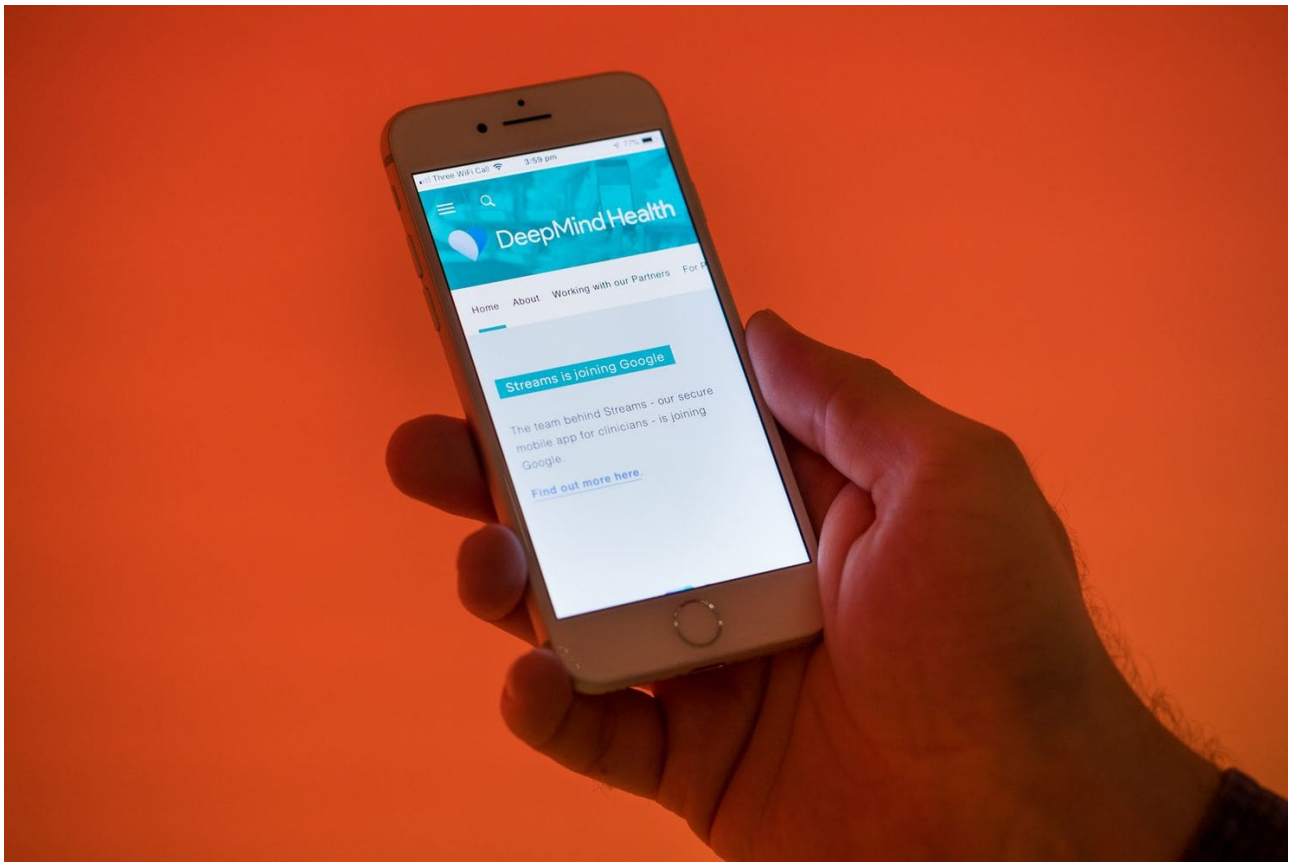
The Washington Post
Democracy Dies in Darkness



Why do we keep panicking over tech?

Jason Feifer November 30, 2018

https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/instead-of-bemoaning-new-technologies-find-a-way-to-embrace-them/2018/11/30/8287d080-f4cf-11e8-bc79-68604ed88993_story.html

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After the phonograph became widely available in the late 19th century, people marveled at the powers of the newfangled machine. For the first time in human history, music could be experienced without a live musician. But not everyone welcomed this radical change. Philadelphia banned phonographs from a city park, the New York Medical Journal reported in 1890, because they might "disseminate disease" in the form of injuries to the ear. The composer John Philip Sousa, writing in Appleton's Magazine in 1906 , asked: "When a mother can turn on the phonograph with the same ease that she applies to the electric light, will she croon her baby to slumber with sweet

lullabys, or will the infant be put to sleep by machinery ?" He thought the next generation would evolve into "human phonographs — without soul or expression."

Today, we know how laughably wrong that all was. Yet when we talk about new technologies, we often sound like eerie echoes of Sousa. Modern technology is so sophisticated, today's critics argue, that people are biologically unequipped to adapt to it.

Magazine covers stoke our anxiety, asking "Is Google Making Us Stoopid?" (the Atlantic) or exhorting "Put Down Your Phone" (New York). A staple of newspapers' Silicon Valley coverage is the story of terrified parents trying to protect their own children from the technology they create. Countless authors and academics and politicians warn about the deleterious effects of screens and social media.

Maybe these fears will turn out to be justified, but the track record for technological fear-mongering is not strong. My collaborator, Louis Anslow, and I have spent years studying bygone moments of technophobia for a history podcast called "Pessimists Archive," reading through reams of vintage doomsaying about dozens of innovations now taken for granted. The experience has left us with one conclusion: People have little idea how innovations will affect the world in the long term, and the impact is almost never as bad as predicted.

And the warnings themselves might be harmful. At various points during the 19th century, medical experts claimed that women could be damaged by reading fiction ("insane, incurably insane from reading novels," a doctor reported in 1852) and from riding bicycles ("retroversion of the uterus" was among the medical risks, a doctor wrote in the Medical Press and Circular in 1896). The goal, of course, was to ensure that women had less intellectual and physical access to the world.

Why do we keep doing this to ourselves? I see three primary reasons.

First, we expect innovation to replace anything it touches, destroying the cherished thing that came before. During a mid-19th-century boom in the popularity of chess, Scientific American was in mourning because the game "robs the mind of valuable time that might be devoted to nobler acquirements."

That ignores how technology actually settles into people's lives: It almost never replaces things wholesale. Instead, it integrates — improving the parts of our lives where it makes the most sense. We drive to houses of worship *and* to other places. We play games *and* pursue other interests.

Second, we tend to believe that if something looks different, it *is* different. Each generation grows up with particular habits. Then those habits change. A new generation might text instead of call, or gather in WhatsApp groups when there's no time to do it in person. The older generation views these changes with alarm. If someone isn't calling on the phone, they fear, *communication* is lost. If someone isn't gathering for pasta dinners, *community* is lost. But communication and community are core parts of humanity. They don't change. Their forms just become unrecognizable to the next generation. ("Addiction" is similarly immutable — it simply shifts from one new technology to the next, which is invariably blamed for creating the addiction.)

The third element of technophobia is a nefarious one: protectionism. Every time an innovation rises, an old guard feels threatened. When umbrellas began appearing in England in the mid-18th century, the drivers of horse-drawn cabs — whose business thrived in rainy weather — cast the invention as effeminate and not fit for proper society. The dairy industry villainized margarine soon after it was introduced in the United States in the 1870s, when butter was expensive and margarine (then made of beef tallow) was not.

In the modern age, print publishers howled about the ad-vacuuming Internet even as they have tried, with spotty success, to adapt.

But despite centuries of techno-pessimism, history also offers an optimistic lesson: Innovation is always opposed but rarely stopped. So as we bemoan, but also continue to use our iPhones, let's make the most of this moment. Instead of wasting time on meaningless resistance, we can focus on reasonable conversations about technology — about the right boundaries to set for children, or about ways to make new forms of connectivity and transportation safer. After all, even Sousa, who warned that phonographs would harm babies, eventually allowed his music to be recorded. We're all better for it.