



MILKEN INSTITUTE

# The Power of Ideas

2017

Insights for Building  
Meaningful Lives



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## Lessons for Technology from the Debate on Globalization

With heightened public focus and increased political discourse on issues surrounding inequalities in modern society, it is imperative that industry leaders and policymakers are mindful of the potential divisive effects of advances in technology. Feeling left behind economically has become all too common, and there is a risk that, if left unchecked, a similar sentiment could befall technological change.

Most of us now have first-hand experience confronting a disruptive technology, something transformative that moves from the esoteric to the everyday incredibly quickly. Early adopters embrace it, while those with slightly more sober views of technology keep an initial distance before eventually succumbing to its allure. But for many people, life goes on unchanged. Technology—whether it is disruptive, adaptive or additive—largely passes them by. This is fine for gadgetry, but gadgets are not where technology ends, nor are they technology's

most important societal contribution.

As a sweeping oversimplification, consider there to be two broad types of technologies as they relate to personal interaction—those that push us toward isolation, and those that bring us closer together. Experiences with isolating technologies might involve a visit to the automated teller machine, or, in the not-too-distant future, to a coffee shop with robot baristas. These were previously person-to-person exchanges.

At the opposite end of this spectrum are technologies that revolve entirely around shared experiences, such as most social media and applications that alert us to less congested driving routes based on readings of current traffic conditions faced by the collection of application users.

People can easily opt out of shared-experience technologies, and those with a greater degree of apprehension may also be put off by isolating

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technologies, hanging on to personal exchanges as long as possible. The upshot is a society with voluntarily calibrated tiers of technological integration.

One of the biggest risks of bespoke technology touchpoints is that part of an individual's relative incorporation—and ability to enjoy the ensuing benefits—is not, in fact, voluntary. People may feel that various technologies are either imposed upon them or inaccessible to them. Instructive parallels may be found in current global debates on the merits of international economic integration that are increasingly shaping policies on trade and migration. For those feeling left behind, less trade and less migration can seem appealing options if they are presented as ways of leveling the playing field.

Will technology suffer a similar fate? Will advances be resisted by groups aggrieved by inequities, perceived or real, such that rollbacks occur and the overall benefits to society are diminished?

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The most constructive way policymakers and industry leaders can contribute to the avoidance of potentially divisive and costly technological anxieties is to work toward an equitable technology distribution. Examples include ensuring high-speed broadband is available everywhere, not just in urban centers, and that modern technology-oriented innovations in the delivery of basic public services like health and—critically—education are equally widespread. The benefits of technology, and access to them, must be as inclusive and diffuse as possible.

By definition, disruptive technologies are game-changers that reorient a product, service, or industry quickly. They result in “winners” ushering in the new, and “losers” swept away with the old.

Realistically, it is impossible to fully compensate all of those displaced. A more achievable objective is to have in place an advanced technology infrastructure to mitigate the view that the costs of change outweigh the benefits. This would also help avoid new technologies such as cryptocurrencies, virtual experiences, or access to artificial intelligence being seen as the exclusive domain of insiders.

It is inevitable that technological change will accelerate in the years ahead, and likely in ways that are not easily envisaged. A future that benefits us most and allows technologies to reach their full potential will require careful consideration be given to their distributional impacts, and that policies are enacted and practices followed to minimize and address the needs of those left behind.