freedom lab

Corona and the end of the tech fix illusion

CORONA   **TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION**   **TECHNO-OPTIMISM**

In the West, the corona crisis is providing us with a rather unique experience. Rarely have we been confronted with a problem of this scale without having a technological solution at hand. In the coming months, if not years, our battle with this virus will continue, and our technology will only be of scant help. On the one hand, this will lead to declining trust in technological solutions in general. On the other hand, this crisis may also inspire us with regard to human solutions to problems, in the form of regulation and behavioral change.

Our observations

- MFrom the onset of the pandemic, hopeful messages emerged about possible treatments, based on existing medicine (e.g. malaria drug hydroxychloroquine). As yet, none of these treatments have had significant results. Even the only drug approved for use, Remdesivir, only leads to moderate improvement and its availability is limited.
- The whole world is eagerly awaiting a vaccine. The development of an effective vaccine appears to be going smoothly and we could see results within a year. This would be a true triumph for techno-science. At the same time, the distribution of the vaccine will be subject to an international political and economic joust and the technology, the vaccine, in itself will only be part of the solution.
- In a number of countries, various corona apps are already being employed to help trace possible contaminations. However, it's abundantly clear that an app alone can never be the solution. At the very least, it should be supported by policy to motivate or force people to quarantine themselves when the app says they may be infected.
- The ongoing debate about the use(lessness) of face masks is indicative of our longing for a ready-made solution to the crisis that doesn't require us to make any significant sacrifices. Critics continue to emphasize that a face mask can be part of a solution at best and that, even when they're used properly, they can lead to a dangerous sense of false security.
- The growing threat of viruses is linked to processes of deforestation and the loss of biodiversity. These processes are the result of our technological ability to intervene in nature on a large scale.
- Evgeny Morozov previously made the argument that Silicon Valley in particular is guilty of technological solutionism; diminishing and distorting real problems until it seems as though they can easily be fixed by technological means. They then often present false solutions that in reality might lead to new or even bigger problems. Uber's solution to the mobility problem, for instance, has many side effects (especially for drivers) while it doesn't necessarily contribute to a more efficient or cleaner mobility system.
- In the debate on climate change, eco-modernists argue that sustainable technology will enable us to reduce greenhouse gas emissions without having to change our lifestyles. Critics maintain that technology in itself will never provide a solution, as it can decrease emission percentages at best (i.e. making the economy less carbon-intensive but not carbon-neutral), inevitable rebound effects would partly offset these gains (e.g. a water-saving shower entices to take longer showers) and each technological solution in turn leads to new problems (e.g. environmental damage due to wind turbines).

Connecting the dots

The idea that technology will fix all our problems is deeply rooted in our thinking. It's often suggested that we cannot imagine mankind without technology and that we're therefore essentially technical beings. Technology has brought us much good and it's thanks to technology that our life expectancy has risen so rapidly in the past centuries and our quality of life has increased so significantly. Nevertheless, our use of technology and the industrial modernity that it has birthed, have also unequivocally led to severe societal and ecological problems.

Partly because of these problems, technology critics have fought the illusion of the so-called technological "fix" for years. However, the illusion of the techno-fix has proved ineradicable. It's based on a combination of trust in technology and limited trust in the ability, and the willingness, of humans to adapt their behavior. Moreover, it's the most comfortable and uncompromising solution; technology will fix our problem and we neither have to think about it nor make any kind of sacrifice. A "quick fix" for the corona crisis, in the form of a vaccine, would quickly silence the debate on the structural causes of the pandemic and allow us to revert to our pre-corona practices in a heartbeat. Comparable to the way medication often takes away the necessity of aspiring to a healthier lifestyle. Because of this apparent lack of any human sacrifice, the idea of the techno-fix is inextricably bound up with a feeling of guilt, as if, like in the myth of Prometheus, we really don't deserve to use technology.

In ordinary times, inasmuch as they've ever existed, there is more time to develop a technological solution to known problems. Until then, we'll accept the lack of a solution as an ill-fated fact (when we're sick) or simply put off dealing with the issue (as we do with the climate change problem). The corona crisis does not allow this type of acceptance or procrastination and immediately confronts us with our (technological) inability to procure a quick and "painless" fix. As such, the crisis is gnawing away at our illusion of the tech fix.

Technology was not able to prevent this crisis, by warning us ahead of time, for instance, or containing the virus in an early stage. Nor is there any ready-made medication or vaccine to vanquish the virus now. There may be many candidate medications and vaccines in development, but it will be at least several months before they're approved and possibly years before they're actually widely available. Our initial hopes of a corona app quickly enabling us to ease the lockdown and contain the virus, have also largely evaporated by now. Developing and validating a decent app will take time and it remains unclear whether, and if so, how, we would actually employ this kind of app and what sacrifices we'd be prepared to make for it.

As yet, the biggest victory over the virus has been achieved by human efforts and large-scale behavioral change. Though this is accompanied by severe economic and human suffering, it can also inspire us to put more faith in human solutions rather than technology hereafter. Most distinctly, this could translate to the climate change debate, which is marked by unilateral confidence in technological solutions. We trust that electric mobility will replace the combustion engine and that, with that, we'll eventually be able to realize a fully climate-neutral mobility system. The same goes for green electricity, which we've embraced as a problem-free substitute for power from gas- or coal-fired plants. Apart from the practical issues such as scalability and security of supply, green electricity poses more fundamental problems, such as the use of scarce resources and the impact it has on surroundings.

The essence of these (false) solutions is the illusion they create that we can "save" the climate without having to change our lifestyle. The underlying conviction is that we're not willing to make such a sacrifice as travelling less, for example, or reducing our total energy use. In fact, the prevailing notion seems to be that human beings are not or barely able to adjust their behavior at all without the clear prospect of a reward.

What's interesting about the corona crisis, is precisely that a large part of the population does seem to be prepared to change their behavior and even have valuable experiences in the process. Of course, the corona crisis cannot be compared to the climate problem as is, if only because the latter is a long-term problem, but the argument that people are unable to change their behavior and that we should put our faith in technology, has considerably lost credence.

Implications

- **In the short term, the economic damage caused by the corona crisis will be the main focal point, and yet, (European) governments appear to be willing to make demands on companies receiving government aid to force them to take more societal responsibility. This will partly translate to technological solutions (e.g. the use of cleaner airplanes), but there also seems to be room for reflection on the value and necessity of irresponsible activities (e.g. flying to sunny destinations).**
- **As we wrote before, our perspective on large digital corporations could further tilt as a result of this crisis and the more critical stance we'll adopt towards (digital) technology. From this critical stance, our tolerance for intervention with these parties will likely increase.**