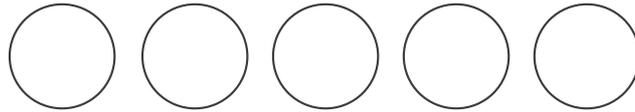


Juan Manuel De Borja May 8, 2018

## The disturbing connection between technology and bananas

When it comes to digital technology there's no doubt that we've gained much. But we've lost something too.



About 8,000 generations of people have lived without digital technology as a natural part of daily life. Over the next few decades the last of them—those born before the 1990s—will die out, taking the memory of what that was like with them.

So while I can remember: living was about being in the moment. What you could physically see, hear, smell. The people you were with. You weren't connected to what was going on beyond that, so you didn't really think about it. Questions—things you didn't know but wanted to—were serious things. If you wanted to find something out, the emphasis was on 'find', as you literally had to search for the answer: ask, imagine, try. And all that added up to a great thing about living like a caveman: randomness, spontaneity and the possibility for surprise.

Then somewhere around the turn of the century, digital started trickling in, then just took off. It was suddenly everywhere, and there was the sense that everything would change. More computing power than the Apollo mission in your pocket. The ability for a nobody to speak and have billions hear. Admission to the whole of human knowledge behind the press of a few buttons or swiping glass. John Lennon would have smiled at such power to the people.

But it's not all with the people, and a big chunk of the digital experience is mediated through a small group of gatekeepers, whether in hardware, software or the networks that connect them. In media, GroupM estimates that outside of China, 84% of ad revenues in 2017 went to just Facebook and Google.

### **This is not an argument against technology, but for more of it.**

It makes me think of bananas. They are my go-to snack, specifically a kind called Cavendish. It almost *has* to be a Cavendish because that strain makes up 95% of banana exports. And why not—it's filling, cheap, and reasonably tasty. It's also a sterile clone genetically engineered to be all that, and have other qualities great for banana tycoons, like long shelf life. So this fruit replicant is the same banana I had yesterday, down to the last molecule. The Cavendish is in its own way a marvel of technology, but its success also crowded out all the other bananas. (There are more than a thousand, including red, brown and purple ones; the few others I've tried are delicious.) And it seduces banana eaters like me into eating the same exact thing over and over.

When it comes to digital technology, there's no doubt that we've gained much, but we've lost something too. Everyone is connected, but those connections are funneled through a handful of platforms that dictate how those connections happen, what they can be, and what works best on them. The recent issues with Facebook over data privacy and voter manipulation show that this can be a problem. In advertising, when the world's finest creative minds are concentrating their talents on chasing the same algorithms or making the most of say a 1:1 aspect ratio with 37 character headline, you do get some wonderful stuff, but wonderful only within the possibilities offered by that square. I wonder at all the brilliant ideas for circles, blobs and stars that never saw light.

Concentrations in the digital space have contributed to the cloning of culture in other areas. Few brands promise originally local experience like Airbnb (so neatly captured by 'live there'). But even they have problems with monotony. Writing for *The Verge* in 2016, Kyle Chayka coined "Airspace" to describe the generic hipster aesthetic that's invaded cities around the world, creating experiences that are indistinguishable whether you're in Seoul or Paris because we've crowded onto the same platforms, "all acting and interacting more or less within the same space, learning to see and feel and want the same things".

This is not an argument against technology, but for more of it. More variety among platforms and, ultimately—what may be the big prize—more open, bottom-up systems that shift control and creativity into the hands of people.

3D printing is getting cheaper. Nintendo just released Labo—a DIY VR toy made of cardboard cutouts and electronics that can be combined and programmed in different ways to make everything from fishing rods to motorcycles, pianos, and with a little tinkering, whatever else you can imagine. Technology doesn't have to be the death of surprise. In fact, as it moves towards allowing us to create at more and more fundamental levels, it might set it loose.

In the meantime, we will of course continue to tell stories where people are, and do all the great things mainstream technologies let us. But there's also room to play around the edges of what's possible: to experiment, repurpose, and hack; to use the solid ground provided by data not for assurance, but to

make better leaps. Behind the dominant technologies are more ways than ever to stick our necks out, and what a terrific time to take a chance now that good work goes global. Because well, you know, we all want to change the world (I hope John Lennon references get a pass no matter where technology takes us).

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