

The Technology Trap

Mark Mancall

An Unashamed Editorial Opinion

It is possible that we are lost. From the outside looking in, an interested observer, lacking access to the privy conversation of the nation's leadership, could be excused for thinking that the drive to bring technology to Bhutan resembles nothing so much as wandering in a huge but trackless field without a map.

Let there be no misunderstanding! We need technological development. Opposition to the introduction of technology is a form of mindless conservative romanticism that places the preservation of an imagined traditional past ahead of the daily welfare of the nation's citizens. No, the problem we face is not one of opposition but, rather, and perhaps even more dangerous, enthusiasm. Let me explain.

The world is awash, or potentially awash, with technology. The trouble is that there is no such thing as "technology" per se, in the sense in which we use that word. When you come to think of it, perhaps one of the greatest technological innovations in the history of the human race was the invention of the wheel. That would hardly be classed as "technology" in the contemporary, 21st century, use of the word. What we call "technology" is an array of objects, systems, formulae and "algorithms", some of which have the power to change, and indeed already have changed, not only the world that we live in, but the way in which we live in it.

But this array, this mass of objects and ideas, requires very skillful use, including the ability to differentiate between what is really productive and what is frivolous, if we are to control the technology through which we want to create our future rather than find ourselves controlled by it, to our detriment.

Today, the history of the introduction and use of contemporary "technology" in Bhutan does not show great success. For example, the introduction of television led to an increase in entertainment, obviously, but it brought with it changes in family and social life, and certainly a culture of violence

through imitation, which was not expected and certainly not welcomed. For example, we were told that the introduction of the mobile telephone would allow farmers access to knowledge about the markets for their products and, therefore, improve their income by making the markets more accessible. That has certainly not happened, and it cannot be argued that the state of our agriculture has improved by virtue of the application of information technology via the iPhone to the rural countryside. For example, the promotion of computers in administrative offices does not appear to have increased productivity but, rather, to have led to a significant level of distraction.

Abroad, given our concern with the development of democracy, it is painfully obvious that the use of contemporary technology in political processes has endangered democracy itself. Even if we leave aside the furious debate that surrounds Facebook, in recent days the country in which Silicon Valley is located has proven that an application of the latest technology in and of itself can come close to destroying the possibility of carrying out free and democratic elections. The fiasco of the primary election in the American state of Iowa, caused by a faulty app and a lack of prior training and education for its use, serves as a very loud warning siren for those who believe that technology, at least in its present state of development, can enhance democracy.

But the problem is even greater, and it impinges potentially very profoundly on our own national condition. This has been demonstrably proven in the United States, Great Britain, and elsewhere, where the vastly increased amount of information made available through new technology does not lead to greater knowledge, better judgement, or more social cohesion. On the contrary, all the evidence suggests that it enables divisiveness and the fracturing of the body politic of the nation.

Great hope has been placed on the application of technology in education, but recent studies are showing that more use of technology in schools leads to a decline in non-technological knowledge and in academic performance in general. And, closer to home, there is no evidence that the increased use of technology leads automatically to an increase in the availability of jobs beyond a very brief period of time before the technology introduced is replaced by even newer technology requiring even less human labour.

None of this is to argue that we in Bhutan should not look to “technology” as a means to improve the condition of our society and a safeguard of our sovereign independence. It is to argue that the introduction of technology must be part of a long-term national development plan based on a vision of what we want to be in, say, 50 years, and that the introduction of technology must be conditioned by a profound understanding of our society and economy so that we can promote the positive — and try to prevent the negative — consequences of the introduction of new technology.

We are too small and vulnerable a society to allow the vagaries of the market, or individual initiative born more from greed than from national or social interest, to determine what forms of technology we need to achieve our objectives.

This means we need to specify our objectives more clearly than what is conveyed by the word “growth”. While it may be true that we define ourselves as being more interested in Gross National Happiness (GNH) than in GNP, that very assumption limits the ways in which we can choose to increase GNP in support of GNH. Some ways of increasing GNP, an enlarged commercial lumber industry, for instance, must be ruled out by the very idea of GNH and its environmental commitment, without which GNH would cease to be GNH.

In order to select intelligently those technologies that will promote our objectives, we need to develop specialists who can evaluate the uses and value of this as opposed to that particular technology. And, finally, we need people trained to evaluate and project the consequences of the adoption of any particular technology against the background of a thorough understanding of our national plan.

The introduction of technology for which we are not prepared, whose consequences we do not understand, and at a point in the trajectory of our development where we are not yet prepared for that particular technology, is just as likely — if not more likely — to lead to one or another form of collapse rather than to a stable society. A considerable amount of literature, both good and bad, is now available concerning the dystopian future that can easily result from a mismatch between the importation and use of a certain technology and the level of social, economic, and intellectual development of the society into which it is imported.

Our broad national aspirations may be summarised as economic, social, and political development that will enhance the well-being of society as a whole, and the potential for happiness of each individual in it. Moreover, and profoundly importantly, we want Bhutan to remain Bhutan. This means that we want to preserve our national and local languages, our traditions and arts, and to safeguard and even enhance our national independence in an admittedly increasingly interdependent world, with a spreading 21st century globalised culture that is based on wealth and power rather than growing out of tradition. That is, I believe, a fair summary of where we would like to find ourselves in, say, half a century from now. And, it is widely believed, technology will enable all of this.

However, while we have successive five-year plans which are aimed primarily at acquiring short-term inputs of capital for economic development and carrying out specific projects, we have yet to think our way through to a coherent vision of a future Bhutanese society against which the increases brought about through the five-year planning process can be evaluated and which can serve as a guide through the thicket of available technology. This failure to plan and “vision” ahead scars our landscape, where the urbanisation process has been allowed to grow some urban centres that are less than moderately satisfying.

Why is such a long-term vision important? Technology at any level and at any point of time brings with it social change. For example, it facilitates the creation of different classes or groups who are distinguished from each other by their ability to control the new technology. This is very apparent in the advanced industrial societies of the West today. And it has led, in many countries, to social disruption, political protest, and class antagonism. The introduction of technology into Bhutan must be carefully managed to account for these inevitable changes and to compensate for them before they become disruptive.

Technology brings with it cultural change. Improvement in communications, for example, has led to an increased use of English in Bhutan and has stunted, and perhaps even prevented, the reform and growth of the national language that is necessary if we are ever to have a vibrant Dzongkha-language intellectual life.

Technology brings with it political change, both because it facilitates the rapid circulation of new ideas and the introduction of new political processes such as, for example, elections. But technology itself, unaccompanied by the necessary preparatory educational and cultural development that democracy requires, results in a sterile political life of personal competition for fame, power, and income, devoid of any real policy oriented discourse and choice. We need to only look around our own neighbourhood to see how easily technology can contribute, not to democracy, but to the growth of autocracy and dictatorship and the diminution of those individual human rights to which we all supposedly aspire.

Technology brings with it economic change, as has already been suggested above. Contemporary experience shows how technology can lead to the concentration of more and more capital in fewer and fewer hands, to a loss of jobs and a potential need for more and more government assistance to maintain a viable standard of living for large numbers of the population, but without a sufficient growth in taxes to support government aid, because the tax base does not necessarily grow from the introduction of new technology.

In short, the introduction of new technology without embedding it in broad policies that will account for the social, cultural, and political changes that will accompany the economic change brought about by the adoption of new technology is, as history and contemporary experience everywhere in the world show, a fateful and, if we are not careful, even a fatal decision.

The introduction and use of new technology in Bhutan is going to happen whether we want it or not. It is impossible in today's world for a country to seal itself off from the tidal waves of change rolling everywhere. But we have the ability and, indeed, the duty to define the purpose, control the conditions, and determine for ourselves what form of technology will best serve Bhutan. And that, in turn, will be determined by the vision toward which we will work. Now we face the real challenge. Finally, we can no longer wait to define the institutional, social, political and economic substance of GNH to turn it from an aspiration into a planned and achievable goal.

At the present time, it may be argued, we have only one "national policy" to guide us, namely growth, increase, as an end in itself. In fact, we lack long-term agricultural, commercial, industrial, urbanisation, etc., policies. That means that we have no real guides to determine what legislation is more

important than any other legislation, what development sector is more important than any other development sectors. Once we have prioritised sectors of development in terms of the social, political, and GNH values with which we want to define the future Bhutan, that prioritisation will determine what kind of capital we need for what purposes and — more to the point at this moment — what kind of technology we need as opposed to technology which will not necessarily serve the policy purposes we have determined for ourselves.

To cite only one example, in a world in which everybody is predicting growing food shortages in the coming decades, with a consequent rise in food prices and perhaps unavoidable clashes of one kind or another over the availability of food, would it not make sense for us to think about developing a strong agricultural policy and about the application of contemporary technology to agriculture, both to grow our wealth in that sector as well as to provide meaningful and attractive jobs for young people? This would also serve the interests of our national independence by a planned decrease in our dependency on imported food. This is not a proposal; it is an example of framing the issue of the adoption and use of new technology to serve defined national interests and objectives.

There are specific steps that we can take to set ourselves on a carefully planned path toward a reasoned and intelligent set of decisions concerning the reasoned and intelligent acquisition and application of technology to grow our country. First, we need to openly confront and deal with the description of those institutions and policy objectives that are emblematic of a GNH society. By “GNH society” we mean Bhutan, not an imitation striving to be a small Canada or the United States.

This goes far beyond environmental considerations and requires us to consider questions of economic and social inequality, the democratic use and distribution of political power, appropriate forms of economic and social organisation, and development of community and social solidarity. In order to enrich this kind of discussion, we need to begin actively to explore other societies in which interesting forms of social experimentation have taken place to determine what may be useful for us.

Second, a national discussion needs to begin on this subject, based on a document that will be the result of consultation among interested parties

and experts. The place for this discussion to begin is Parliament, perhaps particularly the National Council, intended to be the house for reflection and advice. The discussion that could begin in Parliament needs to be taken to the people through conversations between the Members of Parliament and their constituents.

Against this background, proposals can be developed for reorganisation and growth of one or another economic sector and for the acquisition and application of technology appropriate to that sector for its growth. And, finally, all this could be described in a simple but well-written document that could be presented, both in writing and orally, to the voters in the election of 2023, which would, as a dividend, give some real substance to our electoral process which it has lacked from the beginning.

At the same time and alongside these discussions, we must start training a small cadre of young people who can think creatively and interdisciplinarily about public policy and the social sciences. This means that the State needs to take a greater hand in guiding some students toward graduate studies abroad in specific topics and guaranteeing them planning jobs upon their return. At the present time, our lack of trained policy thinkers inhibits the kinds of reasoned choices we need to make. Finally, we need something like an “Institute for Development and Technology” that would be dedicated to inspiring and managing the processes that can only be hinted at here.

We are a small nation, a fact that is of great advantage to us. We are not in a position to take responsibility for the rest of the world but we are free to take responsibility for ourselves. We can design our own future within the realm of our own practicality and we can pursue that future by means we have to determine for ourselves, picking and choosing the policies and resources we need to create the society we want.

Either we will continue to hold conferences about GNH, and about this or that subject, or we will begin to plan and construct institutions and processes that grow out of reasoned policies. Either we will continue to leave the economy to the vagaries of the market and of corporate and individual investors or we will take command of the economy and fashion it for the benefit of our society as a whole. Either we will leave higher educational decisions to the whim of individual self-interest or we will facilitate higher educational decisions that will make it possible for us to realise the idea

of a GNH economy and society. Either we will surrender ourselves to economic, political, and social chance, or we will hold ourselves and our institutions accountable for their decisions and performance in pursuit of our national goal. Either we will surrender our future to “technology” or we will consciously determine what technology we need for what purposes, and actively pursue it.

The great American poet Robert Frost said in his poem, “The Road Not Taken”:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

The issue of technology and the need to formulate and realise the programme of GNH face us squarely with the necessity of selecting which road we will travel along, and that decision will make all the difference for our national future and for the lives of our people.