Putting Technology in Its Place
Contribution to GTI Forum Technology and the Future

Helena Norberg-Hodge

For more than forty years, I have been studying the impact of globalization on different cultures and societies around the world, and in 1992, I co-founded the International Forum on Globalization, a network of forty writers, journalists, academics, and social and environmental leaders from around the world. As we studied "free-trade" treaties, the principal drivers of globalization, a clear pattern emerged: as people are pushed into deepening dependence on large-scale technological systems, ecological and social crises escalate. In countries as disparate as Sweden and India, we saw how globalization intensifies competition for jobs and resources, leading to dramatic social breakdown—including not only ethnic and religious conflict, but also depression, alcoholism, and suicide.

The link between globalization and technological expansion began well before the computer era. Large-scale technological apparatuses can be understood as the arms and legs of centralized profit-making. And while 5G networks, satellites, mass data-harvesting, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality will allow the colonization of still more physical, economic, and mental space by multinational corporations, technologies like fossil fuels, global trading infrastructures, and television have already helped to impose a corporate-run consumer-based economy on almost every corner of the globe.

For reasons that are increasingly evident, an acceleration of this process is the last thing we need in a time of serious social and environmental crises. What's more, the technologies themselves—from the sensors to the satellites—all rely heavily on scarce resources, not least rare earth minerals, the extraction of which in turn rests on massive exploitation of labor and environmental plunder. Some of the world's richest corporations are now racing each other

to extract these minerals from the deepest seabed and from the surface of Mars. It has been estimated that the Internet alone—with its largely invisible data warehouses—will use up a fifth of global electricity consumption by 2025.

And for what? So that we can all spend more time immersed in and addicted to virtual worlds, already exacerbating alienation, loneliness, and depression? So that we can automate agriculture to enable corporations to tighten their grip on the food system, and drive more communities off the land into swelling urban slums? So that drones can deliver our online purchases without an iota of face-to-face contact, shoveling even more of the world's wealth into the gaping maw of Big Retail, worsening inequality in turn?

When thinking about technology from within an already high-tech, urban context, we can easily forget that nearly half the global population still lives in villages, still connected to the land. This is not to say that their way of life is not under threat—far from it. I had my eyes opened to this when I was exposed to the ancient culture of Ladakh, or Little Tibet, which was unconnected to the outside world by even a road until the 1960s. But today you can find smartphones, cars, mountains of plastic waste, traffic jams, and more in the capital, Leh. Most Ladakhi children have been pulled out of their villages into Western-style schools where they learn none of the place-based skills that supported Ladakh's culture for centuries and are instead trained into the technological-modernist paradigm. As such, the traditional way of life is in danger of extinction.

While that process began less than a generation ago in Ladakh, in the West it has been going on far longer, with deeper impacts. But even here, more and more people are becoming aware that the technologization of their personal lives has led to increasing stress, isolation, and mental health struggles. During the pandemic, people have been forced to do more online than ever before— from classes to conversations with friends and family—and most have discovered how limited and empty online life can be. There is a clear cultural turning, visible now even in the mainstream, that goes beyond a desire to spend less time on screens. People are also rejecting the posturing of consumer culture and its work-and-spend treadmill, and wanting instead to slow down, to cultivate deeper relationships and to engage in more community-oriented and nature-based activities.

Small but ever-increasing numbers of young people all over the world are choosing to leave their screen-based jobs to become farmers. (This return to the land is happening in Ladakh, as well.) Informal networks of mutual aid are arising. Friends are gardening, cooking, and baking bread together; families are choosing to live on the land and developing relationships with the animals and plants around them. We are seeing increasing respect for indigenous wisdom and for women and for the feminine, and a growing appreciation for wild nature and for all things vernacular, handmade, artisanal, and local. There is also an emergence of alternative, ecological practices in every discipline: from natural medicine to natural building, from eco-psychology to ecological agriculture. Although these disciplines have often been the target of corporate co-optation and greenwashing, they have invariably emerged from bottom-up efforts to restore a healthier relationship with the Earth.

All of these are positive, meaningful trends that have been largely ignored by the media, and given no support by policymakers. They are particularly inspiring when you realize that they are running uphill in a system that is favoring corporate-led technological development at every turn. They testify to enduring goodwill, to a deep human desire for connection.

When viewed from a big-picture perspective, the expansion of digital technologies—which are inherently centraliz*ed* and centraliz*ing*—runs contrary to the emergence of a more humane, sustainable, and genuinely *connected* future. Why should we accept an energy- and mineral-intensive technological infrastructure that is fundamentally about speeding life up, increasing our screen-time, automating our jobs, and tightening the grip of the 1%?

For a better future, we ultimately need to put technology back into its place, and favor democratically determined, diverse forms of development that are shaped by human and ecological priorities—not by the gimmicky fetishes of a handful of billionaires.

About the Author

Helena Norberg-Hodge is the founder and director of Local Futures and The International Alliance for Localisation, and a founding member of the International Commission on the Future of Food and Agriculture, the International Forum on Globalization, and the Global Ecovillage Network. She is a pioneer of the new economy movement and recipient of the Alternative Nobel prize, the Arthur Morgan Award, and the Goi Peace Prize for contributing to "the revitalization of cultural and biological diversity, and the strengthening of local communities and economies worldwide." She is author of *Ancient Futures* and *Local is Our Future*. She is co-author of *Bringing the Food Economy Home* and *From the Ground Up*, and producer of the award-winning documentary *The Economics of Happiness*.

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Published by the Great Transition Initiative.

About the Great Transition Initiative

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