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Media Contact at Elon University: Dan Anderson, andersd@elon.edu

Read the 194-page report online, [The New Normal in 2025: Far More Tech-Driven, With More Challenges](#)

Experts Predict the ‘New Normal’ By 2025, in the Wake of the COVID-19 Outbreak, Will Be Far More Tech-Driven, Presenting More Big Challenges

A plurality of experts predict that sweeping societal change will make life mostly worse for most people as greater inequality, rising authoritarianism and rampant misinformation take hold in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, according to a new report by [Elon University’s Imagining the Internet Center](#) and [Pew Research Center](#). Still, a portion believe life will be better in a ‘tele-everything’ world where workplaces, health care and social activity improve.

This report, coauthored by Professor Janna Anderson of Elon University, and Lee Rainie, Pew Research Internet & Technology director, is part of their long-running series about the [future of the internet](#). It is based on an opt-in canvassing of technology innovators, developers, business and policy leaders, researchers and activists who were asked to consider what life will be like in 2025 in the wake of the outbreak of the global pandemic and other crises in 2020. Some **47%** said life will be *mostly worse* for most people in 2025 than it was before the pandemic, while **39%** said life will be *mostly better* for most people in 2025 than it was pre-pandemic; **14%** said most people’s lives in 2025 will not be much different from the way things would have turned out if there had been no pandemic.

As these experts pondered what was happening in mid-2020 and the likely changes ahead, some used words like “inflection point,” “punctuated equilibrium,” “unthinkable scale,” “exponential process,” “massive disruption” and “unprecedented challenge.” Among the 86% who expect change, some predicted it could reconfigure fundamental realities such as people’s physical “presence” with others and people’s conceptions of trust and truth. The experts’ comments fell under a number of broad themes describing the ways in which individuals and groups are adjusting in the face of the global crisis and the likely opportunities and challenges emerging as humans accelerate their uses and applications of digital technologies in response to pandemic effects. The themes are outlined in the following tables.

Emerging change: As the global pandemic unfolds, experts predict people will develop greater reliance on swiftly-evolving digital tools for good and for ill by 2025

The pandemic proves that world-upending phenomena can emerge from anywhere. The turn to living and working more intensively within digital communications networks shows the value of these complex systems. The pandemic brings more focus on both the upsides and the downsides of digital life.

- **Tele-everything is embraced:** The broad adoption of “remote” processes – telework, telemedicine, virtual schooling, e-commerce and more – is growing. In 2025, there will be more people working from home, more virtual social and entertainment interactions and fewer forays in public than has been in the case in recent years.
- **Humans’ yearning for convenience and safety fuels reliance on digital tools:** The pandemic has rearranged incentives so that consumers will be more willing to seek out smart gadgets, apps and systems. This will speed up adoption of new education and learning platforms, rearrange work patterns and workplaces, change family life and upend living arrangements and community structures.
- **The best and worst of human nature are amplified:** The crisis is enhancing digital interconnectedness that engenders empathy, better awareness of the ills facing humanity and positive public action. On the flip side, some individuals, cities and nation-states will become more insular and competitive as survival mode kicks in. Xenophobia, bigotry and closed communities will also increase.

Source: Non-scientific canvassing of select experts conducted June 30-July 27, 2020.

“Experts Say the ‘New Normal’ in 2025 Will Be Far More Tech-Driven, Presenting More Big Challenges”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER and ELON UNIVERSITY’S IMAGINING THE INTERNET CENTER, 2021

Worries: As the global pandemic unfolds, experts fear growing social and racial inequality, worsening security and privacy and the further spread of misinformation

The advantaged enjoy more advantages; the disadvantaged fall further behind. Concerns particularly focus on the growing power of technology firms. Many suggested solutions have a double-edged quality because they threaten civil liberties. Automation could take many humans out of the work equation. And the spread of lies via social media and other digital platforms is likely to further damage all social, political and economic systems.

- **Inequality and injustice are magnified:** The pandemic and quick pivot to the use of digitally-driven systems will widen racial and other divides and expand the ranks of the unemployed, uninsured and disenfranchised. Power imbalances between the advantaged and disadvantaged are being magnified by digital systems overseen by behemoth firms as they exploit big data and algorithmic decision-making that are often biased. More people will be pushed into a precarious existence that lacks predictability, economic security and wellness.
- **As risk grows, security must also; privacy falls and authoritarianism rises:** The health crisis spawned by the pandemic and broader dependence people have on the internet heighten threats of criminal activity, hacks and other attacks. Optimized security solutions may further reduce individuals' privacy and civil liberties. They are likely to expand mass surveillance, as authoritarian states will use this as an opportunity to silence dissent and abuse citizens' civil rights.
- **Threats to work will intensify from automation, artificial intelligence, robotics and globalization:** In order to survive, businesses are reconfiguring systems and processes to automate as many aspects as possible. While artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics will enhance some lives, they will damage others, as more work is taken over by machines. Employers may outsource labor to the lowest bidder globally. Employees may be asked to work for far less; they may have to shift to be gig and contract workers, supplying their own equipment, and they may be surveilled at home by employers.
- **Misinformation will be rampant:** Digital propaganda is unstoppable, and the rapidly expanding weaponization of cloud-based technologies divides the public, deteriorates social cohesion and threatens rational deliberation and evidence-based policymaking.
- **People's mental health will be challenged:** Digital life was already high-stress for some people prior to the required social isolation brought on by the pandemic. The shift to tele-everything will be extensive and that will diminish in-person contact and constrict tech users' real-world support systems and their social connections.

Source: Non-scientific canvassing of select experts conducted June 30-July 27, 2020.

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Hopes: As the global pandemic unfolds, experts urge that calls for social justice be heeded and that technology design focus on human well-being

People have the chance now to reconfigure major systems such as the structure of capitalism, education, health care and workplaces. Advances in technologies such as artificial intelligence, smart cities, data analytics and virtual reality could make all systems safer, more humane and more helpfully productive. Better communication of more-accurate information can dramatically improve emergency responses in crises and alleviate suffering.

- **Social justice will get priority:** The reawakening of public movements for social justice and economic equality may create more-responsive government and socio-political systems that are more attuned to diversity, equity and inclusion. This includes a focus on closing digital divides.
- **People's well-being will prevail over profit:** Businesses may start to value serving the greater good above the typical goals of market capitalism. This could produce policies to fund broader safety nets such as universal health care, universal basic income and broadband as a basic utility. A reckoning for tech companies and their leaders might also occur.
- **The quality of life will improve:** The transition to home-based work will reduce urban air pollution, overcrowding and transportation gridlock. It will enhance the overall quality of life, create a better environment for family life, allow more accommodations for those with disabilities and inspire other enhancements.

- **AI, VR, AR, ML will yield good:** Artificial intelligence, virtual reality, augmented reality, deep learning, machine learning and natural language processing will make virtual spaces feel much more real, in-person, authentic, and effective.
- **Smarter systems will be created:** Municipal, rural, state and independent services, especially in the healthcare sector, will be modernized to better handle future crises, quickly identifying and responding to emerging threats and sharing information with all citizens in more timely and helpful ways.

Source: Non-scientific canvassing of select experts conducted June 30-July 27, 2020.
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The full report features comprehensive responses shared by 915 thought leaders, including **Amy Webb**, founder of the Future Today Institute; **Larry Irving**, Internet Hall of Fame member and former NTIA director; **David Brin**, physicist and author; **Jim Spohrer**, director of cognitive open technologies, IBM; **Susan Etlinger**, industry analyst, Altimeter Group; **Brad Templeton**, chair emeritus, Electronic Frontier Foundation; **danah boyd**, founder, Data & Society Research Institute; **Douglas Rushkoff**, media theorist; **Esther Dyson**, internet pioneer and entrepreneur; **Glenn Edens**, Arizona State University professor, previously a vice president at PARC; **Abigail De Kosnik**, director, Center for New Media, University of California-Berkeley; **Gary A. Bolles**, chair, future of work, Singularity University; **Jamais Cascio**, fellow, Institute for the Future; **Vint Cerf**, Internet Hall of Fame member and Google vice president; **Jonathan Grudin**, principal researcher, Microsoft and **Ethan Zuckerman**, director, MIT’s Center for Civic Media.

A brief selection of remarks from among thousands of quotable predictions the 915 experts shared:

danah boyd, founder and president of Data & Society, principal researcher at Microsoft

“Digital technologies always mirror and magnify the good, bad and ugly. People will continue to use technology to get support and help, but they will also struggle with how technology becomes a place of hostility and information confusion.”

“The tech sector has built the new Gilded Age. Inequality has been a problem in our society for a long time, but the relationship between the tech sector and late-stage capitalism is insidious and getting worse. It's also affecting other sectors.”

“This systems-level issue will have all sorts of ramifications. The costs will be significant. Our polis will be less informed and less financially stable. Technology will also continue to amplify neoliberal logics that put individuals in a very precarious place.”

Amy Webb, quantitative futurist and founder of the Future Today Institute

“Important areas of science – synthetic biology, computational virology – are accelerating. This will result in more-efficient drug testing, new approaches to targeted therapies and, someday, a future in which we engineer life itself.”

“The virus has highlighted a growing digital divide. We could categorize internet access the way we categorize food security and emerge from the pandemic with federal programs to provide internet and device assistance to families in need.”

Susan Etlinger, industry analyst for Altimeter

“My main concern is that the large tech companies have far too much power to frame what we know and how we live, and that, ultimately, we are all assets to be leveraged for shareholder value. Tech should be a tool – not a weapon, a religion or a government.”

“In a year in which we mourn the deaths of George Floyd, Tony McDade, Breonna Taylor and too many others and again confront our long history of systemic racism, can we finally acknowledge that technology has been deeply complicit?”

“Will we address the inevitable issues of discrimination and exclusion of vulnerable and marginalized populations? Do these technology solutions actually work, and are there other, less invasive ways to keep people safe? Did we leave anyone behind?”

Alan D. Mutter, consultant and former Silicon Valley CEO

“We are not going to code our way out of the moral and political mess we are in. Technology will help if the right people do the right things. It will do epic damage if they don't. The social media were hijacked by thugs and trolls. The failures of social media and AI are not tech problems. They are problems of human design and execution. Tech is only as good as the people who devise and control it. I am worried about whether new developments by 2025 will be wisely and safely deployed.”

Jon Lebkowsky, CEO, founder and digital strategist at Polycot Associates

“I am most worried about technology-mediated indoctrination through propaganda and ‘managed alternate truths,’ and about the potential for the increasing and evolving use of AI-driven surveillance technologies.”

“My hopes for 2025 include technical innovations to address and mitigate anthropogenic climate change; smarter, lighter transportation; improved space technology; innovations in disease management; small, safer nuclear sources for energy; new food sources.”

Douglas Rushkoff, well-known media theorist and author

“My worries? There are now trillions of dollars invested in companies that depend on addiction, isolation and fear to keep growing. These companies spend their war chests on deliberately causing panic, pain and fear.”

“By 2025 there will be fewer ridiculous, meaningless, valueless cubicle jobs, and more time spent actually creating value. Instead of developing careers in industries, people will learn how to do things –truly fulfilling and psychologically stabilizing.”

“By 2025 digital technologies are likely be more embedded into other stuff, and less fetishized on their own. The only tech-related change I'm really hoping for is less of it. It's really draining.”

Brad Templeton, chair emeritus, Electronic Frontier Foundation, director Foresight Institute

“We will come to understand viruses at a fundamental level. We'll get much better at diagnostics as well. These are tremendous goods. This could prevent the death of millions.”

“We will probably learn to use technologies to generate a very hard [future pandemic] lockdown for a short time, rather than a moderate lockdown for a very long time. Delivery robots will gain more appreciation.”

Paul Jones, professor emeritus at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill

“Every purchase is cashless and checkless. Goodbye money, coins, etc. Too late for Harriet Tubman to replace Andrew Jackson on the \$20 bill, except in the area – much needed – of symbolism in the U.S.”

“Officeless organizations will proliferate. Every day is Bring Your Pet to Work Day. Every day is - from the waist down anyway - Casual Friday. The toll paid to commute is fully recognized and rejected.”

“Distributed access to education has arrived. The reimagining of the classroom for digital life is still underway, but we can expect the practice and expectations of learning to be changed radically by tech. If tech and policy align, this will make our lives better.”

Esther Dyson, internet pioneer, entrepreneur, executive founder of Wellville

“With luck, by 2025 we will start to think long-term and realize how much better things could be for all (including rich employers who want educated, happy, productive employees) if we invest in our greatest asset – human beings.”

“We need to think long-term and invest in everyone's future versus grabbing what we can for our narrowly defined selves. We need to train a large new cadre of tele-careworkers to help deal with the residual effects of COVID-19.”

“I worry that poor and minority people still will have limited access to all the tech and tools. Disparities in access can aggravate other disparities. I also worry that people will turn to tech rather than to other people for human comfort.”

Jamais Cascio, research fellow at the Institute for the Future

“Three big arenas of technological uncertainty we’re likely to see by 2025: prevalence and availability of remote work and enabling tech; the manifestation of authority and policing; and the degree of trust and accountability of social media systems.”

“Facebook could remain the default if it manages to act as a bulwark against social manipulation and tighten up its privacy-related behavior, but we’ll probably see the emergence of something else that fills that role for younger adults.”

“We could see major improvements in our lives through the acceleration of the shift away from fossil fuels: more electric cars and the corresponding infrastructure, more power-self-sufficient homes and much longer-lived energy storage/batteries.”

Vint Cerf, Internet Hall of Fame member and vice president at Google

“In 2025 we will see an expansion of cloud computing and cloud commuting. We will see an Internet of Medical Things – sensors mostly – as remote doctor house calls escalate. I am optimistic about the use of tech to automate chores and facilitate cooperative work.”

Barry Chudakov, founder and principal of Sertain Research

“A broad swath of our population – not just a slim class of techno-overlords – must understand the potential and biases of algorithms, machine learning, quantum computing, artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things and qubits.”

“Our tools and technologies are now more sophisticated, and their influence in our lives is now too pervasive to adopt a use-it-and-ignore-it approach. Ignoring the effects of our tools on our minds and behaviors ensures we will become their slaves, not their masters.”

“The new normal will encompass refereeing a facts-scrum: truth, lies, distortions, assertions... This will foster a new media literacy with ‘truth valuation’ protocols, that will serve as a reality foundation and foster resiliency to organized disinformation.”

Sam S. Adams, senior research scientist, RTI International; 24-year veteran of IBM

“By 2025 living in the city to avoid nasty commutes will give way to moving to the country and buying land vs. a high-priced apartment. If commuting patterns change drastically, then lots of other dominoes fall, including pollution and its impacts.”

“The pandemic experience will accelerate telehealth, expand the physician assistant and nurse practitioner ranks, and allow doctors and specialists to telework as well, resulting more-optimal use of medical resources without reducing quality of care.”

“By 2025 the pandemic straw will break the judicial backlog’s back, and a number of new approaches will take root. It will inspire legal reforms in how trials are conducted, which may cause major changes in the legal profession.”

Glenn Edens, professor, Arizona State University, previously VP at PARC

“The economic fallout from the pandemic will likely take a decade to ‘fix’ – we should be prepared for five to seven years of lower growth prospects, higher taxes, continued failures of firms and an uneven recovery.”

“I expect a significant restructuring of commercial real estate by 2025. The displacement of brick-and-mortar retail by e-commerce, which has been steady and slow, has been kicked into high gear. Many brands and chains will not survive.”

“Many managers I’ve spoken to are intrigued with (giddy about?) the increased tools for monitoring employees, their work output, productivity, work styles and intricate details of their behavior – this will be exploited.”

Jillian York, director of global freedom of expression for the Electronic Frontier Foundation

“Our 2025 ‘new normal’ will be an even greater dependency on privately owned infrastructure and platforms, making us even more beholden to Silicon Valley. My biggest concern is the impact they have on our speech, our well-being, our dignity.”

“I worry about the unaccountability of Silicon Valley and the ways in which corporate policymakers practice ‘both-sidesism’ ... I worry about the continued capture of data for no purpose other than to sell us more stuff we don't need.”

Larry Irving, Internet Hall of Famer, former head of National Telecommunications & Information Administration

“The new normal in 2025 will include using technology more extensively for most facets of American life, particularly for education/remote learning; medical diagnostics; news, information, entertainment; and business and commercial activities.”

“You will see much more continuous monitoring of health metrics, particularly if vaccines for the virus will need to be updated on yearly or half yearly basis. The measured life becomes much more real if failure to measure could lead to death.”

“I worry deeply about: security, privacy, AI being used to make assumptions, the proliferation of wrong or misleading information, exploitation of the naivete of young audiences. These are serious problems that we haven't had the will to address.”

Susan Crawford, Harvard Law School professor, a special assistant in the Obama White House

“I am worried the caste system in America will be increasingly entrenched and amplified by tech asymmetries as access to health services, jobs and opportunities of all kinds is targeted to people who have the money to access platforms that provide them.”

“Like clean water, functioning public health infrastructure and stable electricity, world-class internet access – persistent, cheap, ubiquitous and symmetric – is clearly something everyone from every walk of life needs in order to thrive.”

“I'm hopeful that non-tech, 'we're all in this together' sympathies will expand, take hold and become part of the fabric of life in America in a way they have not been for decades. I recognize that this hope is unreasonable, but I still have it.”

Jim Spohrer, director of cognitive open technologies and the AI developer ecosystem at IBM

“By 2025, dealing with pandemics will be improved, vaccine speed of development will be improved, preparedness for next pandemic will be improved.”

“There will be more retail robots, tele-presence robots and robots at home – all with more investment, deployments and success stories.”

“There will be a resurgence in community approaches to local jobs in service of community culture and development.”

Lee McKnight, associate professor at the Syracuse University School of Information Studies

“By 2025, I expect a new wave of crisis-spawned innovations finding wide application and new uses. Wastewater in hotels, cruise ships, ports and airports, office buildings and schools will routinely be monitored for an 'early warning' indicator of a hazard.”

“Communities will take control with their own secure cloud architecture to guard against viruses of the computer type and malicious actors. These systems can build in governance of privacy, security and human and property rights.”

“To ensure those digital technologies are not misused as surveillance technologies, or are not routinely stealing user’s data, certified ethical AI will be required by any municipality before it agrees to deploy anything.”

Gregory Shannon, chief scientist, CERT engineering institute at Carnegie Mellon University

“Willingness to trust and flexibility in trust is a key element of the ‘new normal’ for 2025. Previous trust modes/models/habits/norms will evolve, and those most successful in the new normal will have adapted/optimized their approaches on trust.”

“Expect increased social isolation, especially for those older, less tech savvy or unable to connect virtually. Smart virtual avatars/agents will make and manage connections, even warning when people seem insincere, untrustworthy or even artificial.”

David Brin, physicist, futures thinker and author of “Earth” and “Existence”

“Full-scale diagnostic evaluations of diet, genes and microbiome will result in therapies and treatments. AI appraisals of other diagnostics will advance detection of problems and be distributed to handheld devices, cheaply available to all.”

“Counterpropaganda pushing older, more traditional approaches to authority and conformity are already emerging, and they have the advantage of resonating with ancient human fears. Much will depend upon this meme war.”

“It is an open question whether we citizens will have the gumption to apply ‘sousveillance’ upward at all elites. But Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. likewise were saved by crude technologies of light in their days.”

Marcel Fafchamps, professor of economics, fellow in law and democracy, Stanford University

“What worries me most about tech in individuals’ lives is that the deliberate depreciation of complexity invites the tyranny of simple-ism and reductionism papered over by happy talk, lies and distortions designed to distract us from real issues.”

“A second level of complexity - and more urgent - is our engagement with our devices. We use them; we typically are not present with them. We don’t notice how they bend our perceptions and behaviors. The human psyche is an emerging business model.”

“With concentration of corporate power, increase in inequality and weakening of civil liberties, it will be easy to recreate a post-democratic world that fulfills the Soviet promise without requiring public ownership in the means of production.”

Abigail De Kosnik, director, Center for New Media, University of California-Berkeley

“Climate change, invasive corporatized tech and increasing economic precarity will combine to give rise to a far more paranoid society in 2025. Huge problems in mental health will negatively impact at least a couple of generations of Americans.”

“Tech companies are having a hugely negative effect on the environment and on humans’ ways of thinking about and understanding the world, training hundreds of millions of people all over the world to think *less* critically about information.”

"I hope we see a wave of activism and the formation of alternate organizations that will yield new problem-solving tech, mobilizing collective intelligence to solve issues like the massive social inequity and lack of opportunity that we will face in 2025."

Adam Clayton Powell III, USC Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership and Policy

"2020 has been such a setback for the hundreds of millions of people, most in Asia and Africa, who have just emerged from poverty and whose progress has now been reversed that it is difficult to imagine these reversals can be entirely cured by 2025."

"There is no reason to believe we will return to 2019. For a start, why would I ever want to commute to an office again? People who are connected have the world's information, entertainment and experiential technologies at their fingertips."

Kenneth Cukier, senior editor at The Economist and coauthor of "Big Data"

"I see this for 2025: Economic crises, less global trade and constant international political conflict. Companies substituting technology (machines and algorithms) for human labor."

"A rise in populist or 'infotainment' governments = serious problems aren't addressed by the state and civil institutions can't have impact. Educated, wealthy, moderates (a.k.a. 'elites') retreat, believing the situation unfixable and to avoid being a target of attack."

"Tech will also be on the front lines of responding to climate change. But tech will continue to foment huge problems like misinformation and social platforms that drive people apart. It will create new problems."

Christina J. Colclough, consultant on the future of work and the politics of technology

"Unless governments step into another gear, we will become super-surveilled at the expense of human rights, work will become more precarious, mental health will suffer and innovation will decline as social capital declines due to all of this."

"Among my worries is that we lose the right to be human, in as such that who you are, what you want, your dreams, desires and aspirations become subordinate to algorithms and algorithmically defined on your behalf."

Chris Arkenberg, research manager at Deloitte's Center for Tech, Media and Telecom

"COVID-19 will accelerate the deconstructing of an aging capitalism that fails to allocate resources to teachers, workers, 'essential services' and other undervalued sectors, favoring rent-seekers and financial vaporware that adds no real value to society."

"With such strong economic challenges, it is unclear if nationalism will retain its influence or if there will be a mandate for a more technocratic and educated leadership."

"The reality is that global, national and state institutions are being re-conceived under the impact of globalization, the internet, global warming, and now, global pandemic. There will be a rocky transition to the next stable state."

Craig Silliman, executive vice president for a major global company

"When we lost our physical proximity, we created emotional bridges that connected us in new and profound

ways. It took forced distancing to bring out our most complete and authentic humanity. We will not forget what we learned while we were apart.”

“We will think about a spectrum of locations where work can be done, and a spectrum of technologies, asking what task we seek to accomplish and then using the appropriate location and tech to best accomplish that task, liberating workers.”

“Because this was a simultaneous discontinuity in work patterns globally, it will have caused us all to change our work habits, particularly involving the use of technology to be more efficient. We will be working in very (positively) different ways in 2025.”

Mirielle Hildebrandt, editor of *“Law, Human Agency and Autonomic Computing”*

“I worry over society’s baseless trust in crappy digital decision-systems, with few options to opt out and even fewer options to contest decisions outside of prefab boxes with pre-formatted complaints.”

Michael G. Dyer, professor emeritus of computer science at UCLA

“The acceleration of the already ongoing trends of robotics and virtual interactions will continue to make life worse for the poorly educated and better for the highly educated. Some form of universal basic income (UBI) will need to be implemented.”

“Over time, more and more people will be educated via online targeted courses with targeted certifications. Only the wealthiest will be able to afford a traditional education in which they physically gather on campuses.”

Jonathan Kolber, member of the TechCast Global panel of forecasters

“I am concerned that universal surveillance will become the norm, due to drastic reductions in the cost, size and mobility of sensors, and antennas, as well as the AIs that will monitor and sift through surveillance data. I expect an Orwellian model.”

“The combination of zero-latency VR with quantum computing and AI should enable the generation of evolutionary ‘virtual worlds’ that conform to the laws of physics. Within such worlds, people will be able to create new kinds of societies.”

Cliff Lynch, director at the Coalition for Networked Information

“Life in this continued nightmare is a constant tradeoff between near-total social isolation and threat of death or disability. Day-to-day life is duty and courage, fatalism and stoicism (and perhaps denial), and a steady drumbeat of human tragedy in the background.”

“We’ll see more robots and automation; they don’t get COVID-19, they don’t unionize, they don’t demand pay raises, among other desirable characteristics. Meat-packing companies are already investing more in these technologies – this will only grow.”

“Many people are exhausted and frustrated at the tech vendors’ heady pace of planned obsolescence, of gratuitous and unnecessary disruption and change for change’s sake. They are inflicting this on their consumers.”