Can Science Fiction Alter the Future?

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What are the ethical ramifications and uses of technology? How can we know the dangers of using certain technologies when they do not exist or at least not at the moment? Science fiction reveals the possibilities of what technology can offer: the good, the bad and the ugly. Through an examination of select works, this paper analyzes how science fiction comments on the well-intentioned uses for technological services, while showing the worst-case scenarios that may result because of their existence. This argument is supported by a working communication theory to explain current technology use and the problems that arise from it. With a combination of educating oneself about technology and keeping in mind science fiction works such as these, the prevention of bad results from future technology advancements and uses is possible.

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The arts have been known as an outlet to express our desires, worries, and dreams. From love stories to war epics, there has always been a ring of truth to the arts, no matter how small. Science fiction has been able to bring very real subjects into discussion in an unreal setting. Literature and media in science fiction shed light on major issues of the time. The Twilight Zone, a show that started in the 1960s, tackled issues from racism to nuclear war. The creator of Black Mirror comments that the biggest issue of today is arguably the growth of technology and current science fiction works reflect that (Brooker 2011). Focusing on these and other works of modern science fiction, this paper will investigate how these worlds, which take place in a not too distant future, portray the abuse of technology in society. Using several communication theories, this paper also discusses how science fiction can be an outlet for preventive measures against such technological abuses from happening.

Where We Are Now

Technology has evolved fast and is continuing to progress in features and capabilities. Take cell phones as an example: they started as just portable phones that led to texting, to getting the Internet, to having cameras. Users are trying to keep up with these changes in technologies, which are escalating. The danger is that, “we face an ever-widening responsibility gap, which, if not addressed properly, poses a threat to both the consistency of the moral framework of society and the foundation of the liability concept in law,” (Matthias, 2004). Learning how to use and be responsible with the growing advancements and needs of technology is paramount. The abuse of technology in the wrong hands can create chaos. From a standpoint of national security, personal information being accessed or shared without consent has been notably addressed in our news (Thomas T., 2015). Educating more people on the services and effects of technology can help prevent the wrongful use of it.

How can we be sure that education in technology can protect us from dangers such as theft, abuse, or invasive activity? Looking at science fiction works can help society keep in mind the insights from worst-case scenarios. “Science fiction offers us the possibility to speculate about the possible outcomes of current developments. Even if these speculations are highly fantastical at times, they can nevertheless highlight the moral questions inherent in these possible developments,” (Magerstädt, 2014). Many creators of science fiction work keep reality in mind, as Charlie Brooker explains on his critically acclaimed series, Black Mirror, “each episode has a different cast, a different setting, even a different reality. But they’re all about the way we live now – and the way we might be living in 10 minutes’ time if we’re clumsy. And if there's one thing we know about mankind, it’s this: we’re usually clumsy,” (Brooker, 2011). Most of the episodes revolve around characters abusing technology and having to deal with the consequences.

Abuse of Technology

When speaking of science fiction works, discussions center on ethical dilemmas, specifically the good and bad sides to new technology. In 1995, the film Strange Days, taking place days before the new millennium, introduces a new fictional technology called SQUID, where a person wears a helmet-like device that allows them to see, hear, and feel what another person is doing. The main character not only abuses SQUID, using it for his own selfish benefits to relive memories, but also illegally...
sells the technology to seedy customers. The technology becomes an addiction for many—a new drug. The film escalates with the appearance of another character that uses SQUID to make people see what it is like to rape and murder someone. Using the same technology that allows the person to experience killing someone also allows them to solve cases as to who committed the murders. Without SQUID, they wouldn’t have been able to figure out who were the rapists and murderers. At the same time, if SQUID was not invented, those acts wouldn’t have happened to those specific victims because of their connection to the technology. This film is a great example of both the beneficial and the negative outcomes that may result from using a new technology.

Security

As much as technology has simplify our lives, it has also put our personal lives in the public eye. For example, the GPS system offered on our cell phones allows us to find out what is near us. At the same time, we can be found easily by anyone and this opens up to dangerous repercussions. The 2013 novel The Circle, touches on security and safety issues. The setting is an eerily similar Silicon Valley like lifestyle where a young woman, Mae, starts to work for the biggest and most powerful technology company known as The Circle. There is a section where the characters discuss the uses of tracker chips implanted into children’s arms. In this fictional world, The Circle has implanted a GPS chip into a baby’s arms once they are born. When a group of children go missing, the authorities and parents look for them using this chip. However, they find out that the kidnapper or kidnappers had cut off the arms of the children and scattered them around so that the authorities would be wasting time chasing around severed arms. The conclusion by the technology company came to was to start a service that would implant the chip to the bone of the children. Mae tries to bring notice to an ethical dilemma of such a service that has proved the worst case scenario does not solve the problem of finding missing children but no one listens to her. The novel quickly moves on leaving the reader with an unsettling feeling that the companies still only think about the good uses of technology, not thinking much of the repercussions.

This fictional, near future GPS tracking system on children is not all too far-fetched. We already have trackers on our pets. Then there are our smartphones and geo-tagging, which allows geographical metadata to most of our applications, videos and photos. This feature has risked people’s lives, most notably in domestic violent situations that shelters make it protocol to take out batteries so that abusers cannot track their victims at the shelter. Potential stalkers and thieves track our whereabouts as they plan their attack by checking our social media posts and finding the geo-tag. There are steps to help prevent this from happening. Checking each app on our phone and turning off the location service is one step. Another idea is to post pictures from an event or vacation after so that people won’t know where you are at that moment (Siciliano, 2012).

Past, Present, & Future

In the past, science fiction has represented an outlet to speak about real world problems but in a fictional somewhat futuristic setting. The Twilight Zone, for example, spoke of real world issues such as space explorations and government exploitation or control.

1 The Circle is due to become a major motion picture, scheduled for release sometime in 2017. It is being produced by Tom Hanks who also stars in the film along with Emma Watson.
“(Rod) Serling, a brilliant writer, created The Twilight Zone because he was tired of having his provocative teleplays about contemporary issues routinely censored in order to appease corporate sponsors. If he wrote about racism in a southern town, he had to fight the network over every line. But if he wrote about a metaphorical, quasi fictional world – suddenly he could say everything he wanted,” (Brooker, 2011). While the world has changed a lot since the 1950s and 60s, Brooker thought that if The Twilight Zone started today, it would concentrate more on the relationship between people and technology and how this relationship would affect privacy, media, and entertainment (Brooker, 2011).

These works set in near future worlds where technology is used for continuous reasons is arguably predicting the future and the problem with that is we can’t predict the future. However, we can look at the past and see if there can be a possible correlation, “(science fiction) is about the shadow that the future casts upon the present. It shows us how profoundly we are haunted by the ghosts of what has not yet happened,” (Shaviro, 2003). It has been compared to philosophy, where there is no certain reasoning or conclusion but both can keep a person in tune with the possibilities that can result of certain actions.

**Black Mirror**

Black Mirror, which has drawn comparisons to Twilight Zone, brings a futuristic yet realistic world of what it means for the abuse of technology in several societal matters such as a new justice system or how to record and keep track of our memories, (Brooker, 2011). As Brooker explains about the third episode, “The Entire History of You,” “...what if you had a kind of Sky Plus system for your head, so you could rewind and replay memories at will? You’d never forget where you left your keys again, for one thing. And it would be great for winning arguments. But it might not be brilliant news for the health of your relationship. After all, how much do you actually want to know about each other?” (Brooker, 2011). Early on in this episode, there is a scene in an airport where security can view your chip to see exactly what you were doing. This could be argued as a positive to having such a technology, making it harder to hide your intentions of breaking the law or planning a terrorist attack. Later on, a character is introduced who was attacked so that they can remove her chip to steal her identity. This shows a dangerous and life threatening aspect of having this fictional technology.

Does it hurt us more to have every little thing about our lives recorded and stored? This brings about the main storyline of the episode where a husband becomes obsessed to find out if his wife is having an affair. He rewind memories of seeing her with the man he believes is her lover, he stalks the other man, eventually attacking him and forcefully deletes memories of his wife from this man’s chip. However, without this we still have our memories, that cannot be taken away from us so the attempts of the husband to erase all memory of his wife from this man’s memories remain futile.

**Multicommunicating**

Technological development and implementation has always been connected to both positive and negative outcomes. The works above show some dangers of using technologies everyday. To keep in mind of everyday real life technology use and its repercussions, we can take a look at a new communication theory called multicommunicating. This theory is defined as, "engaging in
two or more overlapping, synchronous conversations,” (“Multicommunicating,” 2016). A current study being conducted on multicommunicating looks into all the issues that have come up with how often people can be reached through the vast number of communication tools. CEOs to teenagers and everyone in between can be connected to their professional and personal obligations all day, every day. Several cases explain that while in a meeting, a person also is texting with their significant about dinner. However, there are questions and concerns that arise if multicommunicating make these conversations more successful because people can do them at the same time. While this theory is still being studied and yet not published, there are findings that show it does depend on if a person is communicating with three or more conversations being not as successful as having just two at the same time. One subject for an interview explains, “I work from home, married and have four kids. Multicommunicating and budgeting is an everyday, almost all day occurrence. But when it comes to three or more conversations and platforms, the harder it is to be able to communicate with each and every one,” (Jabbari, 2016).

Another problem that arises is the pressure to get back to people right away otherwise, the perceptions of the person they are trying to reach is altered into a negative connotation. “Sometimes when I receive a text and I am not ready to respond, I used to be able to take some time to get back with that person and wait until I was ready. Now, with the visibility of social media, it means I can’t update my Facebook page. Then the person is thinking, she has time to update her Facebook page but doesn’t have time to respond to my text? What is going on?” (Tuner, 2016). These examples show that while through technology and multicommunicating, we can get a lot more done and stay in touch with people faster, there are still a lot of drawbacks.

The accessibility and the various ways for people to communicate with each other and about themselves has also become a central argument that narcissism and the want for immediate acceptance has reprioritize our standards and needs. “With the television image - the television being the ultimate and perfect object for this new era - our own body and the whole surrounding universe become a control screen,” (Baudrillard, 1988). For the series, Black Mirror, the title came about because it is referring to, “the effect of a TV or a computer screen when switched off, giving a dark reflection of the onlooker,” (Black Mirror, 2011). For instance, in the “The Entire History of You,” episode, the characters use their chips to over analyze everything of another person’s mannerisms. However, a lot of things are going on in a person’s mind and life as one psychology paper points out, “each one of us is, essentially, a bundle of memories and related psychological states-beliefs, thoughts, emotions, hopes, fears,” (Rowlands, 2004). While the main character thinks that during a job interview, the employers are all judging him, they could be thinking of something else entirely. We cannot read each other’s minds. To try and analyze why someone does something at a certain time to the point of scrutiny will not bring many answers, only frustrations and second guessing everyone’s intentions. Experts recommend steps to give us space from the grasp of technology. Having a meal with no technology around, such as being at a party and putting our phones in a different room. These steps can help bring perspective on how technology is here to help us. It is not there to take over our lives and we have a say in what controls us, (Turkle, 2015).
Our Online Persona

Another example of how we portray ourselves or are portrayed by others online distorts the reality of human beings is the episode, “Be Right Back.” In this story, a widow, Martha uses her late partner Ash’s emails, social media profiles and other digital data to bring him back in the form of a clone. In the beginning, the clone looks, speaks, and acts like her partner pretty convincingly. However, she learns that Ash is not back and that she has to really deal with grief. It sounds like this is a mandatory part of life, grieving the loss of a loved one but the episode touches on how our imprints, especially digital imprints are not what makes up a person. One side argues that when we take our memories and put them into a clone or even online, the idea is that we still continue living (Rowlands, 2004). However, there is the fundamental issue that people continuously change, that we cannot be just one type; we are more complicated than a computer system. To have ourselves be cloned into a digital format does not allow us to live forever and certainly does not represent who we are 100%. In the episode, the clone acts contrary to things that the deceased confided to Martha before he died. A seemingly happy photograph really was a sad day for him or a song comes on that no one would have guessed Ash would like because it seems so unlike him, he never shared this guilty pleasure online. As one review article humorously explains, “Obviously bringing your dead boyfriend back to life with his past tweets is not the healthiest route to recovery, and Martha learns this the hard way,” (Maloney, 2015).

The common practice of sharing our thoughts and daily actions on social media or anywhere online has gone on overload, “...all the useless information that comes to you from the entire world, like a microscopic pornography of the universe, useless, excessive, just like the sexual close-up in a porno film,” (Baudrillard, 1988). So how much information is needed and how much is just noise? Do we need to know what peoples thoughts are on this week’s episode of any popular show? Do we need to follow a trip someone is taking from the time they leave until they come back from vacation? It can be all too much and mistaken that it is needed when it is not a necessity to know about another person’s thoughts and occurrences. In The Circle, the employees and willing participants start to wear a camera on themselves all day to share with the world their lives. It begins with having politicians doing this to show they are not hiding anything and that they are trying to get bills passed and policies changed. “The company demands transparency in all things; two of its many slogans are SECRETS ARE LIES and PRIVACY IS THEFT. Anonymity is banished; everyone’s past is revealed; every one’s present may be broadcast live in video and sound. Nothing recorded will ever be erased,” (Ullman, 2013). During the course of the novel, we follow the rise of Mae and the ethically questionable company. She feels the pressure and becomes obsessed with letting everyone online know what and how she is doing something and with whom. The repercussions for her and those around her move from annoyance to paranoia to lethal.

The Circle’s Symbolism

The novel uses particular names and references that speak to real life occurrences. We will look at how writer, David Eggers used these symbolic moments and names to foreshadow the danger of what can happen
when you let technology take over your life. The Circle is analyzed by Margaret Atwood who theorizes the meanings of the names of main characters and some of the technologies invented at the company. Everyone working for The Circle has a username for his or her work profile; Mae is given the username, “MaeDay,” jokingly compared to a war holiday. “There is no real war holiday called MaeDay, but “Mayday”—from the French m’aidez—is a venerable distress signal,” (Atwood, 2013). This distress signal was used in real life during times of war and was satirized in George Orwell’s *1984*. In this novel, it is used once again as a reference that danger is coming. Another character’s name is Tyler Alexander Gospodinov, an inventor for the company that starts a system called TruYou, which takes away the need for passwords and its attempts are to stop fake identities from being made. His goal is to bring about simplicity and more transparency online. As Atwood notices, his middle name is Alexander, possibly a connection to Alexander the Great who ended up ruling most of the world, more than anyone else had done.

Symbolism is huge in the novel, with the founders of the company referred to as “the Gang of Forty.” Atwood points out, the number forty is known in several scriptures and histories as a period of tests and trials. In the Old Testament, Noah’s flood lasts for forty days and nights, Moses spent forty years in the wilderness while in the New Testament, Jesus fasted for forty days, (Atwood, 2013). All of these were high stakes life and death situations. In the novel, the characters are continuously tested and not just their reputations are threatened but their lives are as well. The buildings of The Circle are made of glass, a node to the continued idea of transparency and the lack of secrecy and privacy. While the idea of using the symbol, a circle to be the company’s name and logo can be a nod to real life company Google, it is also theorized of its connection to the circles many historic symbolism. In Egyptian tradition, the circle is representing the sun, the divine encompassing endless light. In the novel, it says, “A circle is the strongest shape in the universe. Nothing can beat it, nothing can improve upon it, nothing can be more perfect. And that’s what we want to be: perfect,” (Atwood, 2013). All these symbols are planned to show how much danger the characters and the company are to one another through the overuse of technology.

**Being Invasive**

In the novel as well as in real life, arguably, the common practice of sharing has become obscene. “Obscenity begins precisely when there is no more spectacle, no more scene, when all becomes transparence and immediate visibility, when everything is exposed to the harsh and inexorable light of information and communication,” (Baudrillard, 1988). This discussion of invasiveness ties back to “Our Online Persona” section in this paper as well. What used to be considered obscene meant a sexual perversion or what is hidden and not talked about other than behind closed doors. With the use of technology and communication tools associated with it, “…it is the obscenity of the visible, of the all-too-visible, of the more-visible-than-the-visible. It is the obscenity of what no longer has any secret, of what dissolves completely in information and communication” (Baudrillard, 1988). How much of this continuous information is retained? How much is actually useful? Today, we can share our daily lives and feelings through numerous technology services, such as social media or emailing. In *The Circle*, they take it a step further to have politicians wear personal cameras to show their activities then soon made most of the
employees at The Circle do the same. Despite several people close to the main character, Mae continues to participate and actually care about how many people comment, watch and like her daily activities. This isn’t too far-fetched, many companies and individual people want their content to be found and engaged with. They experiment with how to get their gratification, for instance posting a video then a photo to see what gets more notice. The Circle is not too far off on the idea of how often and what we share online, “What happens to us if we must be “on” all the time? Then we’re in the twenty-four-hour glare of the supervised prison. To live entirely in public is a form of solitary confinement,” (Atwood, 2013). Mae looses her family, her friends in order to gain a higher status for The Circle and among the internet. This is all due to the fact that she took the company’s belief in transparency to it’s highest and most dangerous level.

Not Letting Technology Run Our Lives

Charlie Brooker asked simply, “If technology is a drug – and it does feel like a drug – then what, precisely, are the side-effects?” (Brooker, 2011). His series as well as Dave Eggers’ The Circle explain a worst-case scenario of side effects. In Black Mirror, technology companies and services take over people’s priorities such as logging all of your actions and memories or bringing back your dead loved ones in the form of clones. Brooker elaborates on how much we depend on technology, “It’s hard to think of a single human function that technology hasn’t somehow altered, apart perhaps from burping. That’s pretty much all we have left. Just yesterday I read a news story about a new video game installed above urinals to stop patrons getting bored: you control it by sloshing your urine stream left and right,” (Brooker, 2011). The absurdity of being entertained constantly, even when you need to take a couple of minutes to relieve yourself is showing how much technology has overtaken our daily lives.

While technology and tech companies continue to grow in demand and bring more and more services, that does not mean that we, the public just sit back helplessly and let them take over. “...It is ultimately up to the community as a whole, through public scrutiny and debate, to keep watch over science and technology, and to decide what direction they should take” (Magerstädt, 2014). The power of science fiction can bring about awareness for issues that might not plague us, yet. That is how Brooker and Eggers shared their worries and thoughts, they don’t think we are too off from living a life of being fully surveilled and forever digitized but that doesn’t mean it will happen. Their works have brought about important questions that require people to really look into their lives and their priorities. Technology has helped the world vastly, from allowing people to communicate from all over the world to medical technologies that have saved people’s lives. At the same time, it is believed that technology has taken too much from us, or rather, that we let it take away from us, (Thomas T., 2015).

Predicting the future is impossible but preventing misuse of technological services is not. What have Black Mirror and some recent communication theory studies found? While there are more examples and aspects to them, a few were discussed here. Sharing every action and thought can be seen as obscene and narcissistic. What we put online doesn’t truly represent who we are as individuals. Being able to communicate with people at any moment can be a hassle to be able to concentrate on just one thing.
and keeping everything that has happened to us is not a necessity in life. We need to step away from technology, reflect on what is and what is not a priority. A conscious effort to take a break from technology, even for just a short time a day helps. The growth of technology is only making things more possible. Science fiction has brought about questions and thoughts on how, if we are not careful, technology can take over and we will lose control of ourselves. There are preventative measures from abusing it and threaten our livelihoods. Educating ourselves on the uses of technology or banning cell phones during family meals are small steps to protect us. It is not too late to for people to use advancements in technology to continue the progressiveness of humanity, we just need to be careful.
References


