



Smart Cities Promote Social Isolation, Not Togetherness

Technocrats design cities according to their “science of social engineering”, where citizens are just animals in the maze to be controlled, directed, managed and surveilled. Smart cities will be the scourge of humanity, not its salvation. □ TN Editor

George Orwell’s novel *1984*, published in 1949, imagines a society organized by a totalitarian state where daily life is regimented and Big Brother programs every move. Not a totalitarian government, but corporate power, combining with new applications of information technologies, may be leading us to a similar society.

Undoubtedly digital technologies are transformative. The instant communications of the internet, the joy of FaceTime with friends and relatives, and Google’s vast trove of information have immeasurably enriched human life. Cellphones have made almost the whole world accessible.

What digital technologies have done in medicine, industries, transportation, commercial dealings are no less than a miracle. Yet it does not mean that they are without social costs and that every new use of these technologies will increase human welfare.

The digital technologies combined with sensors and satellites are now being applied to our daily activities, threatening the bases of social organization and human relations. We are increasingly being programmed to act, behave and relate with each other in predetermined ways.

Two trends are striking: reduction in human contacts and face-to face dealings and the loss of spontaneity and personal decision-making in daily life, increasing social isolation and regimentation.

Google's proposed Sidewalk Labs in Toronto envisions a technology-led urban neighbourhood. The public discussions of these plans focus on privacy, ownership of data and surveillance, the regimented social life coming with its algorithms-driven neighbourhood should be of equal concern. Let us look at some trends already underway.

The new shopping experience is meant to liberate us from waiting in line and dealing with a cashier by picking, selecting, scanning and paying for groceries and other goods by ourselves. Shopping online brings clothes, shoes, even cars. Skip the Dishes will deliver favourite food at your doorstep. One can work from home without the companionship of co-workers. Apps, programmes and algorithms are shredding human connections and casual encounters.

Driverless cars are on the horizon and smart cities are the new promise. Smart technologies will not only relieve us of decision-making but also guide us in our everyday life. Is this not the 1984 embraced voluntarily without a visible big brother?

The social fallout of these smart modes of living is social isolation, loneliness, loss of personal choices and freedom to make decisions. The penetration of digital technologies, in the name of economic efficiency, in our small, casual and everyday interactions erodes opportunities for human connections.

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