

The story of techlash, and how the future might be different

April 10 2018, by Dr Kate Raynes-Goldie

Are you over social media? Are you disillusioned with a seemingly relentless pace of change? Does the future really, really worry you? You're not alone.

We're living in interesting times.

For the past 20 years, we've seen one major cluster of transformative technologies: the internet, [social media](#) and smartphones.

But in the past, say, 2 years, we've seen a multitude of [transformative technologies](#) start to hit the mainstream. From artificial intelligence (AI) to virtual, mixed and augmented reality (VR/AR/MR) to [driverless cars](#) to [bitcoin](#) and blockchain.

For many of us, it may feel like a certain vision of the future is inevitable—a vision where the future is almost unrecognisable to humans of today.

In this future, electric [driverless cars](#) will be pervasive, helping the environment by [putting all truck and taxi drivers out of work](#). In fact, in this future vision, [automation will replace 40% of all jobs](#). And then, eventually, [work itself would become obsolete](#) thanks to AI. We'll all live somewhere [in between the virtual and the real](#), with our everyday lives continually mediated. With [social media, augmented reality](#) and the [internet of things](#) being all pervasive, privacy will be a thing of the past. Our daily activities always [tracked, predicted and manipulated, for better](#)

[or for worse.](#)

In some versions of this future, everything is fine. Initiatives like [basic income](#) would ensure that everyone would have the means to live in a workless future. For others, including Tesla and Space X founder Elon Musk, an AI future is [scary indeed](#).

But some unexpected things have been happening that may disrupt this future. Things that are increasing mainstream concern about the trajectory in which humanity is heading. Things that may actually signal a shift in what appears to be our current trajectory.

Techlash

This shift in thinking about technology is widely being described as [techlash](#). It describes the increasing unease about the impact that companies like Google, Facebook and Amazon are having on everyday life.

There's widespread concern about the role these companies are playing in [fake news](#), [social media depression](#) and addiction and the [polarisation of communities](#). People are worried that the democratic process is being undermined. They're worried about a future where no one [has a job thanks to automation and AI](#).

Even technologists are getting on board the techlash, as the mood at this year's SXSW in Austin Texas suggested. As one of the top global technology conferences, SXSW is usually very ra ra for new technologies. But this year, commentators noted that the mood [was decidedly sceptical about the current technology climate](#).

In fact, this techlash is so significant that it's worrying [Wall Street](#).

How did we get to this moment? And what does it mean for the future?

Let's have a look at some key moments that have contributed to our current state of affairs.

Diversity (or lack thereof)

In February 2017, [ex-Uber employee Susan Fowler penned a 3000-word blog post](#) about her year working for the company. During this year, she experienced ongoing sexual harassment that management were aware of but refused to do anything about. Fowler's post went viral and resulted in the [firing of 20 employees](#). It also saw a management shakeup that [saw the resignation of Uber founder Travis Kalanick](#).

In August 2017, Google employee James Damore penned an [anti-diversity manifesto](#). In it, he argued that the cause of gender inequality in the tech industry is due to biology. Women, he argued, are naturally passive and neurotic and are not interested in technical roles.

But what was perhaps most concerning was that the memo went viral within Google, with many Googlers seeming to agree with its contents. The memo inadvertently revealed a toxic anti-diversity culture within Google.

While Silicon Valley has had a [diversity problem for years now](#), it appears that we are no longer willing to accept it. The reaction to these incidents signals a key shift and created the foundation for the growing techlash.

Autonomous fatality

Building on this foundation was a cluster of incidents early this year.

On 18 March 2018, a tragic milestone was reached in the history of driverless vehicles. On that day, a pedestrian in Tempe, Arizona, was struck and killed by a driverless car owned by Uber. As it approached the pedestrian, the car showed no signs of slowing down. It's widely being called [the industry's first ever fatality](#).

The incident has had widespread repercussions for the autonomous car industry. It calls into question the widespread claim that [autonomous vehicles are safer than human drivers](#). Both [Uber and Toyota](#) have since halted all their driverless testing programmes.

With humans already [having little trust in driverless cars](#), the incident is yet another data point for those concerned about the future.

The end of Facebook?

But what perhaps tipped techlash into the mainstream was what happened the day before.

On 17 March 2018, the news broke that Cambridge Analytica had attempted to influence the political process in the [US](#) and the [UK](#) using data obtained from 50 million Facebook accounts. Despite the firm's claims to the contrary, Facebook had known about the risks posed to its users for [at least 2 years but failed to act](#).

Reaction to the revelation was widespread and negative. Facebook's shares tumbled, [losing \\$60 billion from its valuation](#). [Sonos and Mozilla](#) announced they'd be suspending advertising on the site for a week. [Space X and Tesla deleted their Facebook pages](#). #deletefacebook began [trending on Twitter](#).

The Cambridge Analytica/Facebook scandal comes on the heels of the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) announcing

its launch of a potentially precedent-setting investigation into the possible [misuse of user data by Facebook and Google](#).

And with that, techlash is now most definitely a thing.

So, what comes next? What could a new, post-techlash vision of the future look like?

Post-techlash

One possible future is one not unlike the [dreams](#) of the early internet pioneers. One where power becomes decentralised and shifts to increasingly self-sufficient individuals and communities. Where we focus on humans before technology. A future powered by movements like [intentional communities and co-living](#) and [enabled by technologies like blockchain](#). One such example can be seen in Western Australia's White Gum Valley, where [experimental housing](#) is being built that combines intentional communities, sustainability and blockchain-distributed solar power.

This decentralisation is already happening with social networks on a grander scale. Individuals (especially young people) are leaving Facebook for smaller, more intimate spaces and groups.

Techlash is making it possible to rethink our future, to open up new possibilities. If you don't like where the [future](#) is headed, now is the time to do something about it.

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