



Richard Maxwell, Ph.D. and Toby Miller, Ph.D.
Greening the Media

Ones vs Zeros— Inequality Reflected in 2015 Digital Design

Technology predictions privilege the haves; hand outs for have-nots

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A new status symbol has shot up over the skyline of New York City. Number 432 Park Avenue is the tallest building in Gotham (beyond even One World Trade Center, *sans* antenna). Its skinny, straight-edged profile, which resembles a giant number one, towers above the urban landscape. *Fortune* aptly called it a “monument to owning” and “the epic rise of the global super-wealthy” in a city of vast income inequality.¹

Meanwhile, on the other side of the country, people in San Francisco are stoning the buses that carry Google employees to work in Silicon Valley, blaming them for the rising rents and cost of living that accompany the boom of high-tech, high-paid jobs in the City. Out in the valley (Santa Clara county) where the poverty rate hovers around 19 percent, the mega wealthy have been joined by one of the largest camps of homeless in the US, just a short walk from the headquarters of some of the wealthiest companies in the world. This is the futurist’s view of the new normal of American inequality—barbell-like with unemployment and lots of poorly paid, low-skilled jobs on one end and highly paid high-tech, high-skilled jobs at the other. The middle has become a long stretch of social immobility.²

This wealth gap is routinely reflected in the hierarchy of high tech-products announced at the annual Consumer Electronics Show (CES). This year is no different. The big-ticket items are designed for affluent consumers (also known to marketers as early adopters). They promise technophiles a lifestyle that mixes wearable technology (the year of the smart watch, again) smart home and automobile devices (interoperability is the key advance for 2015 futurists), high-end entertainment screens (this year will be 4K Ultra HD TVs and virtual reality headsets), and, as usual, the robots of domestic and professional life—cars, vacuums, pets, personal drones, and so on. Maybe 2015 will realize the potential of the internet-of-things, a mainstay of tech predictions over several rounds of new-year futurism.³

For the remainder of the population, new technology offers the usual enticements—gaming equipment, peripherals, gadgets to bypass cable companies, and the like. The standout device for 2015 appears to be cheap laptops tethered to online storage, processing, and software server systems (the cloud). Those of us who remember the French Minitel system of the 1980s will recognize this model of terminals networked to centralized databases. The difference is that the Minitel terminal was free, whereas the new terminal/cloud system is completely privatized. Consumers bear the cost twice: first to buy the hardware, and after that, the network subscriptions that are required, followed by the endless online purchases that are expected by the tech business.

Predictions for green technology don’t veer far from this digital divide. You would think there would be a socialized set of technologies aimed at rendering the old unsustainable gadgetry into green tech for everyone, like “district heating” systems used in Scandinavia (ironically, this innovation was started in the US but abandoned for privatized systems).⁴

But here again, a wealth divide seems to have predestined that most green tech will go to private individuals who can afford it—smart homes (again), household alternative energy, and green leisure lifestyle branded goods, apps, and sundry. All of this is happening in the context of a rightward shift in policy-making that has inspired some prognosticators to see the demise of socially oriented green programs, including a weakened Environmental Protection Agency, unthinking destruction of habitat (in the name of profits and, propagandistically, jobs), and free-market energy policies that return fossil fuels to pride of place in the Right’s America.⁵

Finally, the hyper-promotion of leading-edge tech for the 1 percent saturates consumerist media with imagery of a digital lifestyle that everyone else is supposed to aspire to. The social tension between haves and have-nots hinges on a very serious problem: the infantile megalomania that is associated with a key characteristic of emerging high tech goods—being “on-demand.” To be able to conjure up anything anytime anywhere (3-D printers for everyone!) is an expression of informational power and perhaps *the* aspirational good in the digital world—if you can get it now, you’re on your way to having the towering profile of a 432 Park Avenue.⁶

1. <http://fortune.com/2014/11/24/432-park-avenue-inequality-wealth/>
2. <http://www.technologyreview.com/featuredstory/531726/technology-and-inequality/>
3. <http://www.theverge.com/2015/1/2/7472871/ces-2015-preview-consumer-electronics-show-predictions>
4. <http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/nov/18/district-heating-a-hot-idea-whose-time-has-come>
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6. <http://www.shellypalmer.com/spb/2015/1/1/2015-the-year-of-on-demand>

   

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