

THE CONVERSATION

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The internet of things will be an internet of obsolete junk

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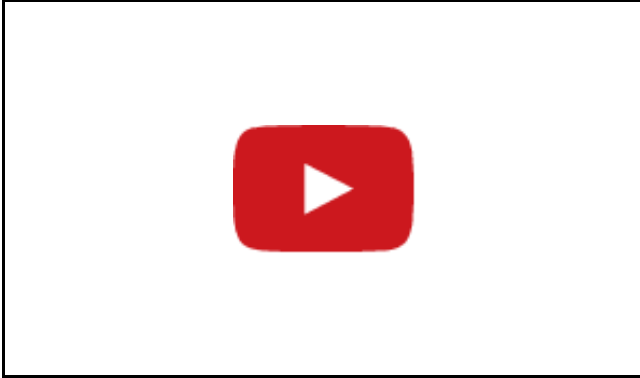
After a software upgrade your “smart mug” will be as pointless as these floppy disc drives. EPA

The US Federal Trade Commission issued a report on the “internet of things” this week. It announced:

Six years ago, for the first time, the number of “things” connected to the internet surpassed the number of people ... Experts estimate that, as of this year, there will be 25 billion connected devices, and by 2020, 50 billion.

Moments later, UK telecoms regulator Ofcom proclaimed a major initiative to ensure the nation “plays a leading role in developing the internet of things”.

So the internet is more than just a topic of work, fun, friends, and family that we routinely mention around the kitchen table; it actually happens there, thanks to such canny innovations as “smart chopsticks”. These new wonders can detect rancid food and hence protect animal-eating diners from fish-oil infections.



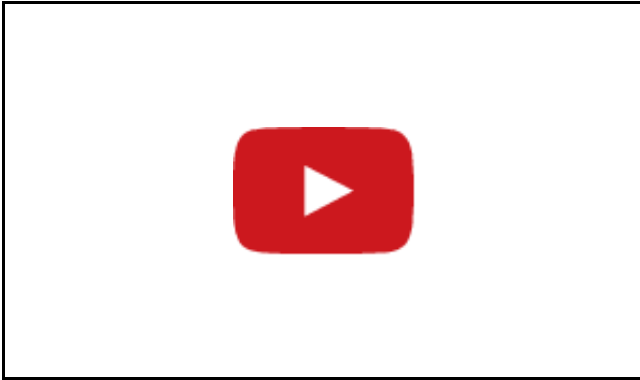
How did we ever manage without them?

The technocentric promise of this golden age is that electrical appliances will connect to the internet via subscriber identification modules (SIMs) and radio-frequency identification devices (RFIDs). Technology boosters promise a world where digital wallets will replace cheques and credit cards; personalised electronic adverts will compete with static hoardings; and transport, electricity, power and water systems will provide a continuous real time update of their performance and user status. Firms will offer us advice and services built on analysis of such data.

The internet of things is described as a marvel – the moment when wireless becomes limitless. Building sensors save energy; homes are automated beyond even the vision of post-war suburban idylls; transportation is effortlessly streamlined; smartphone applications direct daily life; manufacturing is tied to merchandising which is tied to consumption; and healthcare occurs at a distance from the bodies being cared for.

The very idea is proclaimed as an expansion of knowledge, convenience, and hence wellbeing. Cybertarians hail a new age of ethical consumption in which customers know the environmental and labour history and future of the devices and services they purchase and have greater control over their own lives than ever before.

We are at the peak of what the Gartner research firm calls a “hype cycle”, when expectations of new technologies rise giddily. This is followed by sober realism and everyday use.



The hype cycle, '95 edition.

The Design Museum has rapturously announced that we are entering “A New Industrial Revolution”. Given the costs as well as the benefits connected to the first one – illness, death, pollution, slavery, and war are all there on the downside – one might think the advent of this miraculous new age would provide opportunities to rethink the absurd lightness of being routinely attributed to the internet.

For the past two decades of cybertarianism have been an era of ignorance. We have neglected the dirty, material origins and processes that characterise communications technologies like tablets, phones, and laptops. We have forgotten the real story of Cold War militarism, undersea cables, conflict minerals, slave labour, toxic exposure, and illegal recycling. We got such things (the environment, workers, and legality) badly wrong the first time, and risk repeating the mistake due to the obfuscatory claims for a post-smokestack internet age.

Then there are the problems with architecture, security, robustness, interoperability, regulation, and privacy across the internet of things – and doubt even encircles the holy fetish of modernity: economic growth.

In 1987, the year he won the pseudo-Nobel prize for economics, Robert Solow identified what has become known as the “Solow Paradox”. He came to this insight while reviewing the tide of futurism that accompanied the Cold War and is now reborn via the internet.

Solow doubted the wonders of a service economy, which he thought might produce “a nation of hamburger stands and insurance companies”. The memorable phrase he used was: “You can see the computer age everywhere but in the productivity statistics.”

Last year, the National Bureau of Economic Research published findings that buttress Solow’s Paradox, a decade after it was supposedly dispatched to the dustbin of history courtesy of the internet. This research suggests that unemployment hastens productivity growth, not information technology. And of course, the internet of things will see labour displaced onto customers, who will become increasingly responsible for work previously undertaken by full-service utilities providers, for example, through properly-employed experts.

And what about the instant purchase and upgrade fetishes that will add massive over-consumption to mass capitalism’s inexorable crises of overproduction? The internet of things will create a mountain of junk. Its electronic detritus will be untold.

Suddenly your light switch, toothbrush, trousers, tights, kettle, bedroom toys – and chopsticks – will be rendered useless thanks to software upgrades, otherwise known as built-in obsolescence.

And that fish-oil prophylactic – do you need it? Why not cease industrial fishing?