

In praise of techno-austerity

The technology industry seems to be coming round to the idea that less is more.

AUSTERITY is a word much found on the lips of politicians and economists at the moment; but it is seldom heard from technologists. And although the idea that “less is more” has many adherents in architecture, design and fashion, the technology industry has historically espoused the opposite view.

Products should have as many features as possible; and next year’s version should have even more. As prices fall, what starts off as a fancy new feature quickly becomes commonplace—try buying a phone without a camera, or a car without electric windows—prompting companies to add new features in an effort to outdo their rivals. Never mind if nobody uses most of these new features (this article is being typed into word-processing software from 1997, for instance, but it seems to work perfectly well). In an arms race, more is always more.

But now there are signs that technologists are waking up to the benefits of minimalism, thanks to two things: feature fatigue among consumers who simply want things to work, and strong demand from less affluent consumers in the developing world.

It is telling that the market value of Apple, the company most closely associated with simple, elegant high-tech products, recently overtook that of Microsoft, the company with the most notorious case of new-featuritis. True, Apple’s products contain lots of features under the hood, but the company has a knack for concealing such complexity using elegant design.

Other companies have also prospered by providing easy-to-use products: think of the Nintendo Wii video-games console or the Flip video camera. Gadgets are no longer just for geeks, and if technology is to appeal to a broad audience, simplicity trumps fancy specifications.

Another strand of techno-austerity can be found in software that keeps things simple in order to reduce distractions and ensure that computer-users remain focused and productive. Many word processors now have special full-screen modes, so that all unnecessary and distracting menus, palettes and so on are disabled or hidden; rather than fiddling with font sizes or checking e-mail, you are encouraged to get on with your writing.

If the temptation to have a quick look at Facebook proves too much, there are programs that will disable access to particular websites at specified times of day; and if that is not draconian enough, there are even some programs that can block internet access altogether (see Technology Quarterly). A computer on which some features are not present, or have been deliberately disabled, may in fact be more useful if you are trying to get things done. There are no distracting hyperlinks on a typewriter.

Frugality is the mother of invention

And then there is the phenomenon of “frugal” innovation—the new ideas that emerge when trying to reduce the cost of something in order to make it affordable to consumers in places like China, India and Brazil.

The resulting products often turn out to have huge appeal in the rich world too, especially in an era of belt-tightening. The netbook, or low-cost laptop, was inspired by a scheme to produce cheap laptops for children in poor countries, but has since proved popular with consumers around the world.

Tata devised the Nano, the world's cheapest car, with India's emerging middle classes in mind; it is now planning to launch it in Europe, too, where there is growing demand for cheap, simple vehicles.

All this offers grounds for hope. If the feature-obsessed technology industry can change its tune, perhaps there is a chance that governments—which have also tended to be inveterate believers in the idea that more is more—might also come to appreciate the merits of minimalism.

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