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THE RULES OF PANIC

Why some technologies seem benign and others scare the bejesus out of us.



As anyone who reads the news knows, there's often a side effect to new technologies: moral panic. Facebook causes narcissism! Texting is making us illiterate! But the funny thing is, other technologies don't provoke such alarm. Take Square, a tool that lets everyday folks accept credit card payments. It's tipping into

mainstream usage, changing how small businesses operate and how friends split a bar bill, but it hasn't provoked any doomsaying.

What's the difference? Why do we freak out at some technologies and shrug at others?

Genevieve Bell believes she's cracked this puzzle. Bell, director of interaction and experience research at Intel, has long studied how everyday people incorporate new tech into their lives. In a 2011 interview with *The Wall Street Journal's* Tech Europe blog, she outlined an interesting argument: To provoke moral panic, a technology must satisfy three rules.

First, it has to change our relationship to time. Then it has to change our relationship to space. And, crucially, it has to change our relationship to one another. Individually, each of these transformations can be unsettling, but if you hit all three? Panic!

"How many times have we heard, 'It's the end of the American small town,' 'It's the end of the American family,' and 'Oh, the young people of today?'" Bell asks.

This cycle is very old. Indeed, it probably began almost 2,500 years

ago, when the written word was on its way to unmooring knowledge from space and time and letting new combinations of people "speak" to one another. This satisfied all three rules—and it panicked Socrates, who warned that writing would destroy human memory and destroy the art of argument.

Socrates hadn't seen anything yet, because the past 100 years or so have been a nearly nonstop spree of innovation and panic. Consider the telephone, which suddenly enabled us to talk across great spaces and at nearly any time to almost anyone. In a precursor to today's social-media scares, pundits predicted it would kill face-to-face socializing. Mark Twain mocked the presumed triviality and disjointedness of telephonic conversation between women. (Oh, and about women: As Bell notes, you can reliably spot a moral panic when critics start muttering about the impact on ladies and delicate youth.)

But technologies that didn't change all three things went mostly unprotested. The fax machine? It changed space and time, sure, but not social relations—so not many people lost their marbles over it, as Bell notes. I think the same explains the reaction to Square today.

Now, this is not to say the panics are always misguided. Centralized social networking really does create privacy problems; cyberpredation does occur, if rarely. But the bigger problem with panic-mongers is their insistence that each technological past was a golden age of civility and contemplation, when it was no such thing. And hilariously, many now rhapsodize nostalgically over tools that themselves were once demonized—as with modern complaints that the interwebs are killing that emotionally vibrant interaction, the telephone call.

Now, here's the useful part: We can use Bell's laws to deduce which new tools will provoke hand-wringing.

For example, 1 suspect geolocation, social book-reading, and the "Internet of things"—personal objects that talk to us and each other online—will all provoke widespread flip-outs. They all tinker with our sense of time, space, and one another. Indeed, they can even start to make *me* hyperventilate a little bit, as I ponder how governments and corporations will abuse them.

But I calm myself knowing that, like the Cassandras of the past, I'm wrong to panic. [Email: clive@clivethompson.net](mailto:clive@clivethompson.net).