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BOOK REVIEW

Radical Technologies by Adam Greenfield, Verso, London, 2017, 359 pp, ISBN-13: 9781-1-78478-043-2, price (hardback) £18.99.

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Two-thirds of the way through *Radical Technologies*, Adam Greenfield invokes the 'O' word – Orwellian – a cliché he had promised himself he would avoid. I, on the other hand, had barely finished the first chapter before the word managed to embed itself in my mind. With each passing chapter, I could not help but think that were George Orwell alive today, he might have written *1984* not so much with state totalitarianism in mind, but its corporate equivalent. Of course, as is made clear in this insightful book, the state is more than ready to make use of what tech corporations have to offer. Indeed, in the penultimate chapter, having explored the potential – good or otherwise – of the technologies, Greenfield himself offers a number of futuristic possibilities, some of which make life in Airstrip One seem almost utopian.

Greenfield is no stranger to the science of the technologies he explores. For two years he was Head of Design Direction for Service and User Interface Design with Nokia, and in 2010 founded Urbanscale, a company which, according to its website, brings 'a human-centred perspective to the design of products, services, and spatial interventions wherever networked technology intersects the urban condition' (http://urbanscale.org/about/). His previous works include *Everyware: The Dawning of Ubiquitous Computing* (2006) and *Against the Smart City* (2013).

Radical Technologies explores nine aspects of twenty-first century life: the smartphone; the internet of things; augmented reality; digital fabrication; cryptocurrency; blockchaining; automation; machine learning; and artificial intelligence. Greenfield avoids the assumption that his readers would necessarily be familiar with many of the concepts. Indeed, he pays considerable attention to explaining quite complex concepts in as simple language as possible – not always an easy task. The only chapter in which I found myself lost was about cryptocurrency; that may, however, have more to do with my own personal cerebral unease with anything related to mathematics.

There is not always a connection between each section, and in many ways they read as self-contained. There are exceptions – for example, the chapter on crytocurrency sets up 'Blockchain beyond Bitcoin', which I found fascinating, with Greenfield casting a critical eye over 'distributed autonomous organisation' (DAO), which he describes as a 'genuine rarity: a new thing upon the Earth' (p. 161). I do not

feel this detracts from the overall intention of the book, and there are overarching themes, most notably that often, certain technologies are developed with the best intentions, but unexpected negative – even sinister – factors come into play, calling into question just how much they are really 'advancing' humanity.

Greenfield is no Luddite, however, and does not take a particularly anti-technology position. Rather, the book reflects a certain pragmatism which does it no harm: the genie can't be stuffed back into the bottle, and is not necessarily always the diabolical menace some see it as. Nonetheless, serious political and social vigilance is the order of the day if we stand any chance of controlling the technologies (and the companies that develop them), instead of them controlling us. The more pessimistic people might argue that it is too late, but Greenfield does provide hope that all is not lost.

An attempt is made to offer a critique of how these technologies are radically altering humanity, but to my mind nowhere near comprehensively enough. Indeed, my major criticism of *Radical Technologies* from a psychological perspective is that it does not adequately address the issue of how they are changing the way humans meaningfully relate to each other. Instead, Greenfield uses broad brush-strokes to paint a picture of the possible social (or even political) ramifications, both light and dark. In the chapter on automation, for instance, he addresses the problem of workplace safety and the dislocation of human workers by machines, what he calls the 'posthuman everyday' experience (p. 185). But there is something almost mechanical itself in how Greenfield addresses these issues, and in the end his critique can often lack passion. It would have been helpful for him to be less machine-like and a little more human in style.

The target audience is those to the left of the political spectrum, whom, he warns, 'cannot allow their eyes to glaze over when the topic of conversation turns to technology' (p. 314). I believe such a clarion call is no less pertinent to psychotherapy, and a careful consideration of *Radical Technologies*, and the issues it raises, can help us reflect on how we rise to the challenge. Just how do we deal with these technologies that are so profoundly changing the way humans interact? As a starting point, Greenfield rightly suggests there is not really much point in arguing if the changes technology has wrought made life 'better' or 'worse' (p. 13). Such an argument can only really be subjective. What we as psychotherapists and psychologists really need to consider is how the changes impact on what is means to be human, how we communicate, and even how it directly impacts on our work and how clients present themselves in the therapeutic space.

Take the smartphone, for instance – the most ubiquitous of the technologies Greenfield considers. Increasingly, clients are bringing their phones into the therapeutic space. For me, at times, it feels like the presence of a third person in the room (or, when working with couples, a third and even fourth). Even when they are kept silent – which I ask all my clients to do – they are rarely far from their owner. Increasingly, clients refer to them to provide 'evidence' of something said or done by another, as if showing the therapist an email, text or WhatsApp exchange is somehow more reliable than their own word. It makes uncomfortable reading, but Greenfield reminds us also of the conditions under which most of these pocket-sized devices are made, in order that we in the developed world can obtain them cheaply.

Globalization's success relies on our ability to split ourselves from feelings and thoughts we prefer not to concern ourselves with, in this instance the fact that those assembling our phones endure horrendous working conditions so the companies can 'meet an acceptable price point' (p. 19). How often do we as therapists bear witness to clients splitting themselves off from uncomfortable truths?

I read this book from the perspective of someone who is mildly technophobe, but who by the final page had graduated to a slightly more paranoid one regarding the extent to how we are being 'tracked'. It made me curious as to how the surveillance abilities of the tech giants, and in turn their political and industrial clientele, might be experienced by a person with, for example, a diagnosis of paranoid personality disorder, someone who Bateman and Fonagy identify as being 'at best… suspicious of others' motives, and at worst… see people as having malign motives' (2016, p. 57).

In an age where our phones, computers and televisions are watching us as much as we are watching them, the possibility for paranoia to spread is high. Greenfield addresses surveillance mainly through the lens of technologies enabling highly personalized information gathering of the individual. Seemingly, what is acceptable behaviour for governments and corporations towards the general populace is also increasingly so for individuals to friends and family. I find disturbing the way in which some clients now use technology to follow another's movements, such as installing a tracking device in a car, without much thought to the consequences, and as if this is a perfectly acceptable and normal mode of behaviour.

I believe, too, that our profession itself is undergoing dramatic alteration, and that some of the concepts and technologies considered by Greenfield are playing a major role, particularly by state-based mental health providers, and even regulatory bodies such as the UKCP and the BACP. Montgomery (2016) refers to the 'McDonaldization' of psychotherapy, in which four core dimensions are prevalent: efficiency, predictability, calculability and control. It is not too much of a stretch to conceptualize how technology will increasingly allow these dimensions to be monitored with greater accuracy. The use of algorithms to build up an accurate and in-depth profile of an individual, which time and again Greenfield demonstrates is becoming easier, is likely to become more prevalent to not just monitor our clients, but us psychotherapists too.

This is a profoundly serious challenge we face, and has the potential to rob our profession of much of the humanity that is so essential to our work, particularly the I–Thou relationship between client and therapist. While we may not be the intended audience of *Radical Technologies*, the book is nonetheless an important and valuable resource in preparing to meet that challenge in an informed and courageous way.

References

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