Values in Innovation

WOMEN'S ENGAGEMENT IN RE-IMAGINING DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

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Rapidly shifting global realities have prompted a deeper appreciation of humanity's interconnectedness, and with it a greater reliance on digital technologies. For many women, including those who lack access or the ability to determine how such technologies will impact their communities, this has resulted in greater exclusion and marginalization. Yet even if questions related to access and similar issues were to be resolved, a deeper challenge remains. Many technologies, which should serve as tools to extend human capability and contribute to the construction of a prosperous and cohesive civilization reflective of humanity's highest values, instead reinforce distorted notions about human nature and identity, progress, and purpose. Often guided in their design by a privileged few, many technologies are underpinned by materialistic values and are widely transplanted without considering social, ethical, and spiritual implications. Though every individual is impacted when technology is shaped by harmful worldviews, for women and girls, who comprise a significant base of users

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and in many instances represent primary target consumers, this represents a profound challenge. As digital tools are increasingly employed across various areas of human endeavor, an honest examination of the values and intentions informing the process of innovation becomes essential. Central to such a pursuit must be the perspectives and contributions women can offer in ensuring that the tools of the modern world, informed by humanity's collective values, help multitudes reach their potential.

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Technology can be a potent instrument in amplifying human capacity and connecting communities. Yet, like any tool, technology, and the spaces it creates, can be deployed in countless ways, yielding benefits or reinforcing existing inequities. On a constructive level, online networks and movements have served as important means of raising awareness about numerous challenges faced by women and girls, while widening the circle of participation in ways previously unimaginable. But when driven by narrow worldviews or a myopic focus on profits, technologies have also been utilized to exclude, harass, exploit, or even repress.

Digital technologies are not value-neutral. Similar to the traditional development paradigm, technological innovation is deeply influenced by materialistic underpinnings. Basic notions about progress often equate the consumption of goods with greater levels of well-being. Various forms of social bias and inequity, as well as views about human nature and progress, driven by narrow profit considerations, are often embedded in the design or application of digital technologies and are thereby promoted to users, for instance, through algorithms designed to maximize screen usage despite scientifically proven addiction concerns. An honest examination of the presumptions and norms underlying the creation and use of such technologies is therefore critical. How can fuller conceptions of human nature, encompassing qualities and attitudes such as trustworthiness, commitment to truth, and a sense of responsibility as the building blocks of a stable world order, increasingly find expression in digital technologies? How can communities be involved in the process of collectively identifying their priorities and consulting on the impacts of technologies within their local context?

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Though every individual and community is uniquely impacted by problematic values underlying such tools, the wholesale integration of these values into technologies has had deleterious effects on many women and girls, particularly in the manner in which they are objectified, or enticed to consume an ever-increasing range of material goods in the name of supposed self-improvement. It is precisely because of these experiences, as well as the patriarchal orientation of the culture that exists in decision-making spaces surrounding innovation, that engaging women is critical in better understanding how such technologies can be appropriately and consciously conceived and employed.

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Extending women's participation will ultimately need to be based on recognition that a multiplicity of perspectives is a prerequisite for building a future responsive to the whole range of human experience. Given the obvious representation concerns within a traditionally male-dominated sector, increasing women's engagement in decisions related to the responsible design, use, and distribution of such technologies, as well as in the creation of digital content, must be prioritized. Yet fair representation, far from an end in itself, also serves as a condition that enables dominant patterns of competition and inequality to give way to collaboration, collective inquiry, and a concern for the common good. As in so many areas, the greatest degrees of change will be required from those who have largely benefitted from the prevalent culture.

Beyond shifting the culture in spaces and processes related to technological innovation, women's engagement—indeed widening the horizon of human perspective in processes of inquiry—can contribute to creating new paradigms for guiding the develop-

ment of technology. Though the capacity to explore ethical considerations associated with digital technologies can be exhibited by anyone, irrespective of sex, the experiences of many women, resulting from the imposition of patriarchal worldviews, position them well to offer specific insights into the development of more complete models, informed by qualities such as moderation, justice, diversity, and a concern for future generations. In doing so, women can help ensure that such qualities more consistently inform the development of technology.

As a wider range of qualities come to inform the culture of the technology sector, the potential of the field can be extended further. Far from a barrier stifling innovation and growth, more holistic forms of engagement and inquiry, characterized by a commitment to the principle of gender equality, could unlock forms of innovation more reflective of humanity's collective values.

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At the national level, policies will need to be set in place to ensure a multiplicity of perspectives are incorporated in spaces and processes related to technological innovation. Technology extends human reach; care must therefore be taken to ensure that

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it extends, not disrupts, the moral order in which human life flourishes. This will naturally involve mechanisms to support the full and meaningful engagement of women. Governments will also need to assume a more proactive role in responding to present threats, such as ensuring women, children, and vulnerable communities are safeguarded against online human rights violations.

Ensuring a diversity of perspectives at the international level will also be indispensable in informing the responsible creation, use, and distribution of technologies, given their inherently global scope and operation. Bringing together the United Nations, governments, the private sector, and civil society, including women actors, to openly analyze the impacts and values informing the development of digital technologies as well as to outline international policies—guided by principles of equality, justice, universality, dignity, trustworthiness and the search for truth - will be important in this regard. Movement toward the Global Digital Compact suggested by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, ensuring that technological innovation is aligned with shared global values, is one proposal worthy of further exploration. The development of measures of progress to complement gross domestic product in crafting more holistic conceptions of progress, will also assist in examining assumptions embedded in technology design. In this connection, the United Nations has a unique opportunity to es-

tablish processes fostering a more healthy model of humanity's technological innovation. Prioritizing and incorporating women's perspectives and promoting their participation to shape the direction of the development of technology will be critical to this end. Exploring mechanisms to enhance the education of women and children through the use of digital technologies, as well as to ensure their full engagement, representation, protection, and well-being online could be revisited periodically in spaces such as this Commission.

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This moment in history presents an opportunity to harmonize technological innovation with humanity's high-est wisdom. Traditional notions related to progress and human nature are incapable of responding to fuller conceptions of human well-being and creating a flourishing civilization, including informing and driving the development of digital technologies. Bringing in a wider range of perspectives to interrogate these underlying assumptions will be critical in charting a future that balances material well-being with ethical, social, and spiritual considerations. In this, the voices and perspectives of women, particularly those who have been marginalized by overly materialistic worldviews, will be indispensable, and their meaningful engagement a prerequisite for creating new patterns of culture

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and understanding around the development of technology. Constructing a more holistic model that speaks to higher conceptions of human nature and progress, and developing tools that can be utilized according to the needs and priorities of specific communities for the betterment of their societies is a vision for technological innovation that presents limitless possibilities.

Bahá'í
International
Community