

We'll Never Have a Tech Utopia

By Navneet Alang

Ever since Marty McFly took to a hovering skateboard in *Back to the Future II*, we've taken the hoverboard for a symbol of not only the future, but where technological progress should take us. Recently, Lexus [made waves](#) after the company unveiled its own hovering board. The device uses superconductor magnets cooled with liquid nitrogen to float above a specially designed surface for a short period of time. It's a hoverboard, sure, but it's not quite what McFly promised. Reality, unfortunately, is always a few steps behind science fiction.

In hoping for a thing that will likely never exist as we imagine it, we locate in the impossible our dreams for change, for utopia—for a world reimagined as the kind of place where a hoverboard might be real, where we might be McFlys. First step hoverboards; next, the cure for cancer.

That kind of optimism isn't naiveté, however. Some of the gadgets from *Back from the Future*—like slim TVs that go on walls, or portable tablet computers—seemed far-fetched in the '80s, but now, 30-odd years later, are commonplace. Such change is broad in scope, too: Fifteen or twenty years ago, instantaneous global communication was unimaginable for many; [recently](#), a billion people used Facebook in a single day.

In the face of such radical (and conspicuously visible) change, it is perhaps unsurprising that we look to technology for change. That approach, however, has turned into a novelty fetish: Because we've seen remarkable transformation, we crave new tech revolutions, waiting with bated breath for each Apple keynote, investing the yet-to-be invented thing with our hopes for a world remade.

Tech is the locus for our general utopian desires and our wishes for a better life. Think of Uber: Not just what it does, but the *feeling* of hailing a ride from your phone, tracking its arrival, rating your driver, sharing stories about exceptionally bad or good service with friends. Phones in hand, it feels like we are creating the future.

Though that kind of personally transformative technology feels good to use, it replicates and reinforces the very power structures we hope to change. Again, Uber is instructive. Though once-billed as a “ride-sharing” service that would democratize getting a lift, through the [rhetoric of its executives](#) and its [investments](#) in self-driving and mapping technology, [it is now clear](#) it at least hopes to become the next iteration of mass transit. It is a model of transit as an on-demand system, replete with surge pricing, precariously employed drivers, and routes based solely on ridership numbers. Public transit systems, on the other hand, currently have to fight to maintain their built-in inefficiencies in order to ensure service to impoverished, or isolated areas—something for which Uber's tech-enabled seamlessness would have no place. In a similar vein, AirBnB's promise of a better, more personalized system for accommodation certainly has made tourism more affordable. But in another of tech's unintended consequences, the service may well be [exacerbating the problems](#) with gentrification and housing costs in cities that are already increasingly unaffordable.

We thought technology was supposed to make the world a better place. The breathless hope of [One Laptop per Child](#), talk of [Twitter revolutions](#), and the [dreams](#) of Elon Musk speak to a

desire to solve immense problems. But as the sheen wore off, we saw it was no panacea: access to laptops alone doesn't measurably improve education, and Twitter's use in galvanizing protest [didn't extend](#) to the messy business of rebuilding countries.

Now, it's clear that tech is not a neutral force, and can make things worse. The inescapability and drudgery of work is made worse by the constant accessibility of email, Slack, and mobile devices. Public platforms enable [racist, sexist, and other abuse](#), giving hatred a platform and community. This is to say nothing of the poor working conditions where the gadgets are made, the [lack of diversity](#) in Silicon Valley and [its unexpected results](#), or the ways [tech is linked](#) to the erosion of labor's power.

Fifteen years ago, the dotcom bubble peaked; a year later, it burst and sent the economy into a spiral. We promised we'd be more careful the next time. Today, tech is once again ascendant, and the sensuous nature of the touch screen is obscuring what's reproduced. Again, we believe in the mystical, revolutionary power of the digital object. And again, it's a wish for the novel item to shove us into the future and explode the world we know.

I often think back to [this iPhone commercial](#) claiming the device is the most used camera in the world. Light piano music twinkles, both happy and melancholy, and images of people living their best lives flit past. It is utopic desire, crystallized: The ad says that the gadget *will* make us happy, and that, through its lens, we'll all evolve into a better version of ourselves. Like most advertising, it's an empty promise. We've seen hoverboards before.