

# THE DIGITAL PERSPECTIVE: WHAT'S THE POINT OF ALL THESE PEOPLE?

So it's that time again. To reflect and think about things. To not just react to the endless stream of stimuli but to actually reflect on what digital technology and media does to us, as human beings? What's it doing to our humanity?

## DAVID BYRNE AND HIS PERSPECTIVE

It's a real thought-provoking idea that [our friend and renowned artist David Byrne has offered](#). It's hardly a new one, but it's one that we would do well to be reminded of. Point of fact, it's an idea that we increasingly seldom let ourselves be reminded of.

Even if elements of his message may be dismissed as whole-hearted conspiracy theory, it's still an idea promoted by the MIT tech review in publication as well as resting on the credibility of the otherwise "safe" artist David Byrne, who's had his populism proven by Academy Awards, Grammys and Golden Globes alike. But above all, the exceedingly long disclaimer opening his article is telling in itself – that we should even "need" to drop to our knees, begging for forgiveness for making a case for pro-human over pro-tech, already suggests the perceived winner in this battle of man versus machine.

We all know the answer. Few of us can claim we're 100% in the driver's seat anymore. And even the few who think they can, myself possibly included, have to fight to know when we're really being proactive setting the trends rather than just subliminally following established patterns. We're all social creatures, after all.

## THE MALE ENGINEER AND HIS PERSPECTIVE

It's true nonetheless. The biggest point can not easily be disregarded, that digital discussions about making anything "frictionless" usually involves removing the human component from the equation. That perspective doesn't necessarily entail being a morally objectionable one either, and one often called the engineer's perspective. A perspective that can from statistics be deduced to be a predominantly male one, as over 83% of all computer science graduates in the US are men, with similar corresponding numbers all over the world. And, with the increasing dominion digital technologies have on the world today, that perspective is similarly becoming the dominant one.

It may be high time to ask ourselves if and when it's good for us as a society, as people, as a species, to have only ONE perspective be so utterly dominant of such a large part of our lives.

Byrne's point is that the human interaction from the engineer's (male) perspective is perceived as "complicated, inefficient, loud and slow". And boy, do I recognize myself in that, engineer or not, with all these meetings being so "HORRIBLY inefficient, far beyond irritating and not to mention slow – if we could only make it more efficient...".

And we CAN. And if we can, we SHOULD, right? Or?

## THE HUMANIST PERSPECTIVE

But if we give it but a second longer of thought, maybe we can find alternate perspectives. Other perspectives that are endangered, sometimes ridiculed or at best, degraded to being sidelined. It's from these places we hear those whispers of alternate viewpoints from humanists, the cultured, the familial "Mediterranean" creative, the madcap hyper-social artist, the loving parent, why not even the child?

It doesn't really matter which way we cut the cake, as long as we allow ourselves the opportunity to lift our gaze a few inches and we see a whole kaleidoscope of human perspectives that doesn't exactly coincide with the male-dominated engineering perspective that we've so gladly given over total control of our lives to.

## THE BROAD ATTACK ON ALL POCKETS OF HUMAN INTERACTION

But nevertheless, it's this male engineer's perspective that has in later decades become completely victorious. We don't have to talk to the cashiers, all of it's handled now as we buy things online for home delivery. We don't have to talk to the bus driver, the automatic card checks take care of that, we don't even have to hear his voice, the pre-recorded guiding voice takes care of that. And all of those pesky humans will be a thing of the past in traffic as well as we move steadily toward automated cars.

We don't have to ask a music snob in a record store when we pick out our tunes, we don't have to talk to friends and family about artist recommendation – algorithms take care of all that. And if we'd ever listen to, or god forbid, sing together with a mutually agreed upon compromise of music, that has now become a foreign thought, alien and unfamiliar. We each stick to our own preferences, bury ourselves in our own niches, with little regard for anyone else as we all plug our headphones in and go quietly about our way (except for those rebels that still run the show at concerts and festivals, of course).

And we don't have to ask people for directions, Google Maps and GPS take care of that. We don't even have to talk to each other at work, Alexa takes care of that (at least in my company, it does). In MedTech, we don't have to ask doctors for advice when there are bots. In EdTech we can take care of our own education. In FinTech we don't have to ask a financial advisor when we can ask a bot. Not to mention that we no longer have to take to bank employees as online banking has completely taken over.

And most of all, we no longer have just our headphones to drown out the sound of everyone's voices, we now FINALLY have the smartphone to visually do the same. Where we don't have to talk to people, don't have to listen to people, don't even have to look at people and instead stare down on a tiny screen and pretend to be busy with something of importance. Pretend to have friends. Pretend to ourselves be important (and you just wait until [AR-glasses take over](#), superseding all of visual reality, what a paradise!).a

And then we have social media. What Byrne argues isn't really social, but simulations of real interactions. Our remedy for not feeling the pain of

missing real interactions, but also a remedy – like most remedies – that doesn't go to the source of the problem but only treats the symptoms and even then, *not so efficiently as you'd think*.

The really messed up part is that the more we stop talking to other people, the more we start talking to machines. Machines are not just taking over our jobs and human relationships, they're taking over our very basic interactions, too.

### DO WE NOT WANT TO BE HUMAN ANYMORE?

We don't have to talk to each other at all, simply put. We don't have to socialize, we don't have to ask, we don't have to tell. We don't have to be human anymore. Because if there's anything that makes us human, that is being social. That's why we invented language itself, to talk to each other and communicate our hopes and dreams, our thoughts and desires. We have a brain that even allows us to create together, all for the benefit of showing someone else what we've done.

And we have a heart that makes us care about each other.

All of that we can now do without. Are you with me? Let us all be awesome robots that have all been programmed by this male engineer to be the perfect replaceable parts in the great big machine we all call home, as both consumers, citizens and employees. Or, as Byrne himself puts it:

"I'm not saying that many of these tools, apps, and other technologies are not hugely convenient, clever, and efficient. I use many of them myself. But in a sense, they run counter to who we are as human beings. We have evolved as social creatures, and our ability to cooperate is one of the big factors in our success. I would argue that social interaction and cooperation, the kind that makes us who we are, is something our tools can augment but not replace. When interaction becomes a strange and unfamiliar thing, then we will have changed who and what we are as a species."

### MAYBE WE JUST DON'T WANT TO BE HUMAN SOMETIMES?

First of all, I want to get rid of all of this conspiratorial BS, and the debate if this is all the "intended" consequences rather than "unintended". Even if I'm a

staunch believer in the latter, it doesn't really matter – the net result will always be the same. Unlike Byrne, I don't see an invisible hand guiding all, whether it be "intelligent design" or some "technological superiority" that is looking to kill us all. SkyNet is thus far firmly in the realm of science fiction.

And you have to remember, all of this is coming from someone who has for a long time [wanted to "be" a bot](#). And seriously speaking, there are few as dedicated to using the digital world to make our world a better place (and I'm not even talking about ["extreme direct interventions"](#)).

But that doesn't mean that you have to turn your gaze away from the unintended consequences to be considered rather than affirmed. My own perspective on this matter has for a long time been all about "contingencies" – that is, within certain areas (strategy, innovation, creation, love, teambuilding etc.), human interaction is a necessary prerequisite.

But what technology is doing is eliminating every other pocket of interaction where it's no longer "necessary", so that we (at least in theory) can dedicate more of our time to more necessary things or things we like doing more.

#### [MAYBE WE DON'T WANT TO BE HUMAN ANYMORE AT ALL?](#)

But the biggest question that it's due time to reflect on is if we, as an "unintended consequence", are throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Even if these little pockets of "unnecessary conversation" isn't necessarily what makes us human, maybe it makes us at least a bit *more* human?

That maybe in the meeting between two people, in the interaction between me and the bus driver, or the cashier, or the record store guy I find by chance greater meaning than I would've anticipated. Maybe I'll find the mother of my future children, or the new idea that will revolutionize the world, or at least revolutionize my day. Where I find the smile that will make me happy, discover the imperfections that will increase my tolerance and destroy my filtered echo-chamber. Where I find the provocations that make me alert, the stupidity that sharpens my argument, my own mistakes that will humble me, if only ever so slightly. Or where I find the sad gaze that nourishes my curiosity and empathy and makes me a better person as a result.

## TO CREATE AN AWESOME FUTURE TOGETHER

And all of this because I've been bedridden with nerve damage in my back after an overenthusiastic sparring session in the boxing ring at my local club. I've been walking around on crutches, drugged up on morphine and nerve medicine for epileptics and been dying to get out in the world and see other people again.

But as I'm sitting here with all of the above buzzing around in my head, I can't get away from the grand question. Maybe the point in all of this is that being "human" isn't something to be desired anymore? Maybe it's a obsolete feature, something that no longer makes me a more valuable member of society as a consumer, employee or citizen in the year 2018?

If that's the case, society sucks in 2018. And if that's the case, I look forward to creating something far more awesome in the future. Something combining the best of both worlds, both the digital and the human (Digiman? Huta!?).

So take care of yourselves and watch out, I'm taking on my crutches and seeking you all out with a great big hug in mind...

... WITH INTERACTION AS MY GOAL! A HUNDRED BILLION HUGS TO YOU ALL!