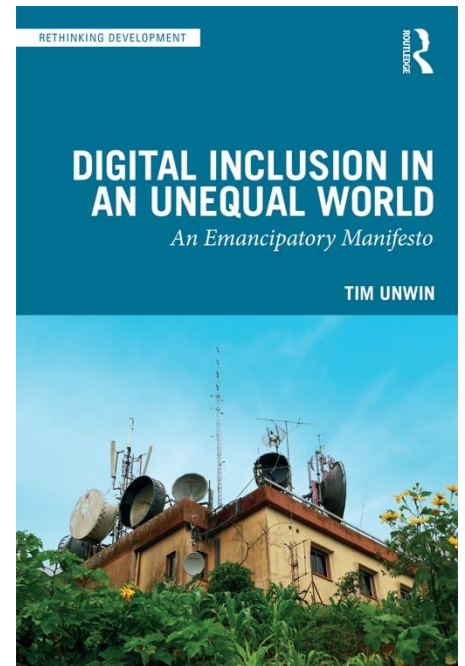


Towards emancipatory practice: why digital tech is not serving the poorest and most marginalised – and what we can do about it



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Pre-Launch of Book

At the ITCILO Innovation Lab

1 December 2025

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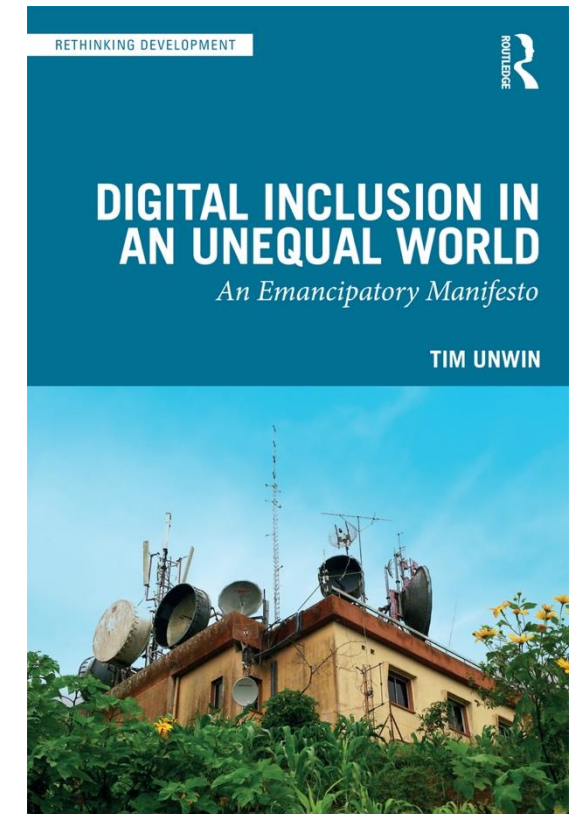
ITC
International Training Centre

**INNOVATION
LAB**

<https://ict4d.org.uk/diuw>

Outline

- Why, despite the global rhetoric otherwise, have the poorest and most marginalised not benefitted much from the use of digital tech?
 - It might seem very obvious, but there is a fundamental dissonance between rhetoric and reality
- An overview of the book's arguments
 - Focusing especially on The UN System and the Innovation Fetish
 - We are becoming ever more unfree through our use of digital tech
- What our responsibilities (rather than rights) are
 - Individually, and
 - Institutionally



The focus is on the most marginalised and not “the next billion”

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Take out your mobile phone (or tablet, or watch...) – and look hard at it

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Two fundamental questions...



Two fundamental questions...

When did you buy
it?

Less than 3.6 years
ago?

What are the environmental
implications?



More than 3.6 years
ago?

How can you keep it even
longer? The right to repair.

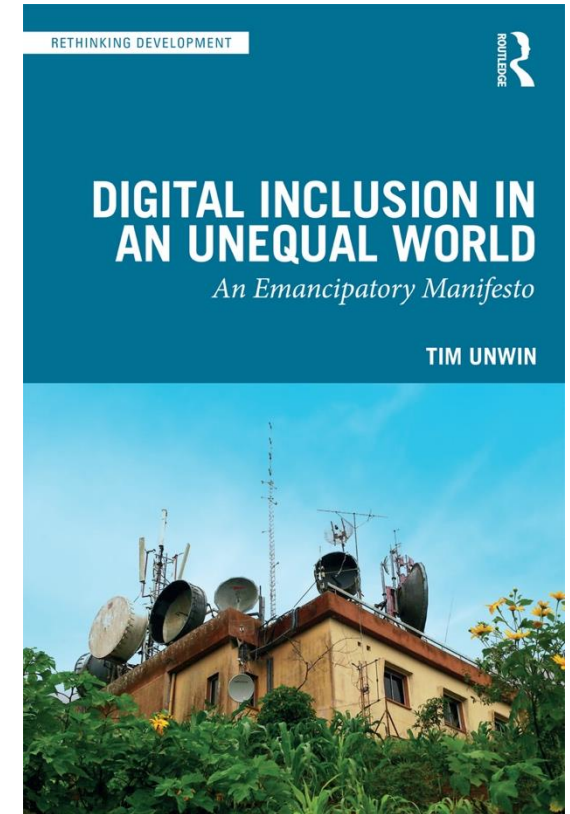
3.6 years was the global average in 2023

Seven Chapters: to begin to understand is a step on the path to emancipation

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1. Notes from the Underground
2. Shifting the balance from growth to equity
3. A UN system co-opted by global capital
4. The “Me” syndrome
5. The “Innovation fetish”
6. On freedom and digital enslavement
7. Towards emancipatory responsibilities and actions

With 31 vignettes from diverse contributors



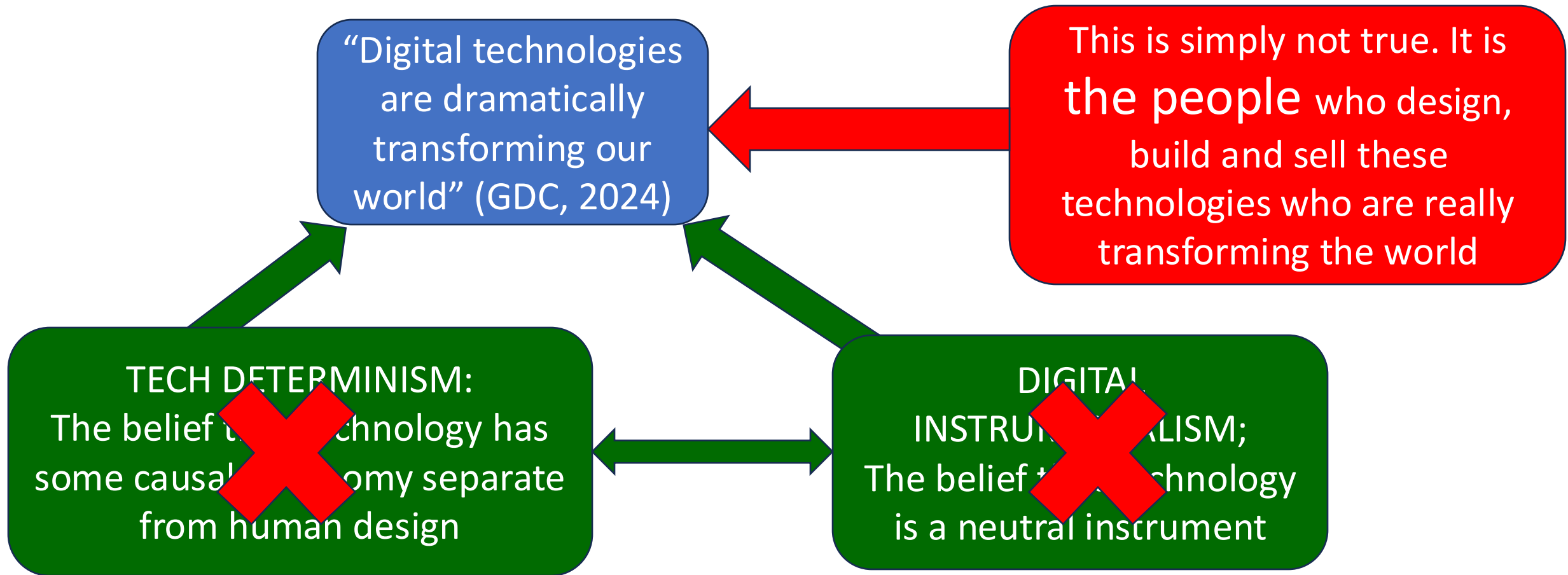
Nnenna Nwakanma: the biggest shock



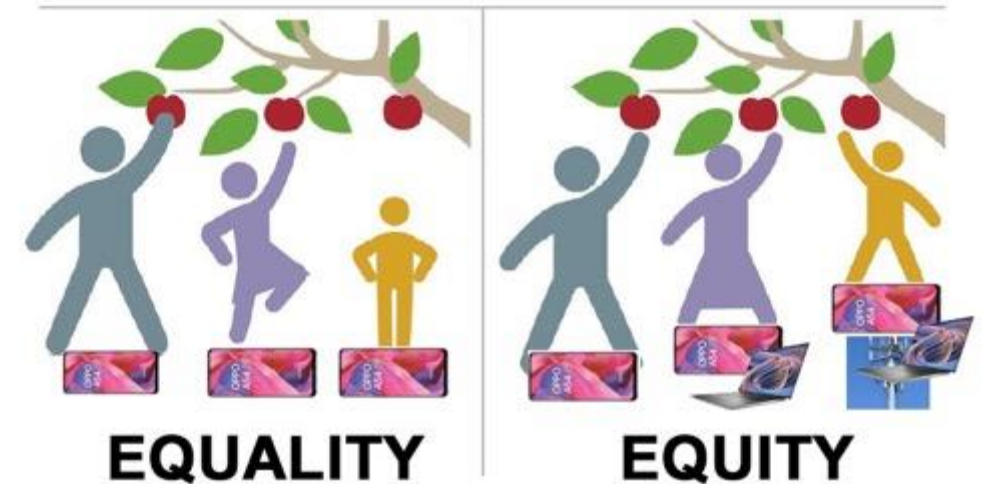
“It is 2025. I am in the capital city of one of West Africa’s ‘forward-looking’ countries ... I make a request to go down to the school that the media has touted as the ‘model’. I needed to see things for myself ... I also refused any ‘official’ or ‘media-related’ accompaniment ... Second shock: The digital hub was under lock and key. I had expected that on a good day, students would be there doing things under the guidance of a teacher. When the doors finally opened, I got the biggest shock: all the donated equipment was unopened and in the same cartons and packaging that they arrived in six months earlier”

Fundamentally against tech digital determinism and digital instrumentalism

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Shifting the balance from growth to equity



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From economic growth to equity

- The poorest and most marginalised will never benefit whilst economic growth dominates the global (UN) agenda
- Required shifts to balance between
 - Absolute and relative poverty
 - Inequalities and equity
 - Empowerment or emancipation?
- Digital tech is used to drive inequality
 - Must avoid terms such as “bridging the digital divide”
- Twin mantras of “economic growth” and “demographic growth” – feeding off each other
- Towards an equity agenda in which tighter regulation plays a key role



UN system co-opted by global capital



(Chapter 3)

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The global hegemonic rhetoric

“Digital technologies are dramatically transforming our world. They offer immense potential benefits for the well-being and advancement of people and societies and for our planet. They hold out the promise of accelerating the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals”
(UNOSET, 2024, p.1)



UN SG opens the Summit of the Future, 2024,
of which the Global Digital Compact formed a key component

Yet in 2024 (ITU figures)

- † 32% of the world's population were not using the Internet;
 - † **in Africa only 38% of the people were using the Internet**
- † Globally, 65% of women and 70% of men used the Internet;
 - † **in low-income countries, 21% of women and 32% of men used the Internet.**
- † Globally, 83% of urban people used the Internet;
 - † **only 48% of rural people did so.**
- † In high-income countries: 138 mobile 'phone subscriptions per 100 people;
 - † **in low-income countries there were only 71.**
- † Data-only mobile-broadband (2GB) basket prices cost 0.4% of GNP per capita in high income countries;
 - † **in low-income countries it cost 7.4%.**

Individuals using the Internet, 2024: growth is levelling off

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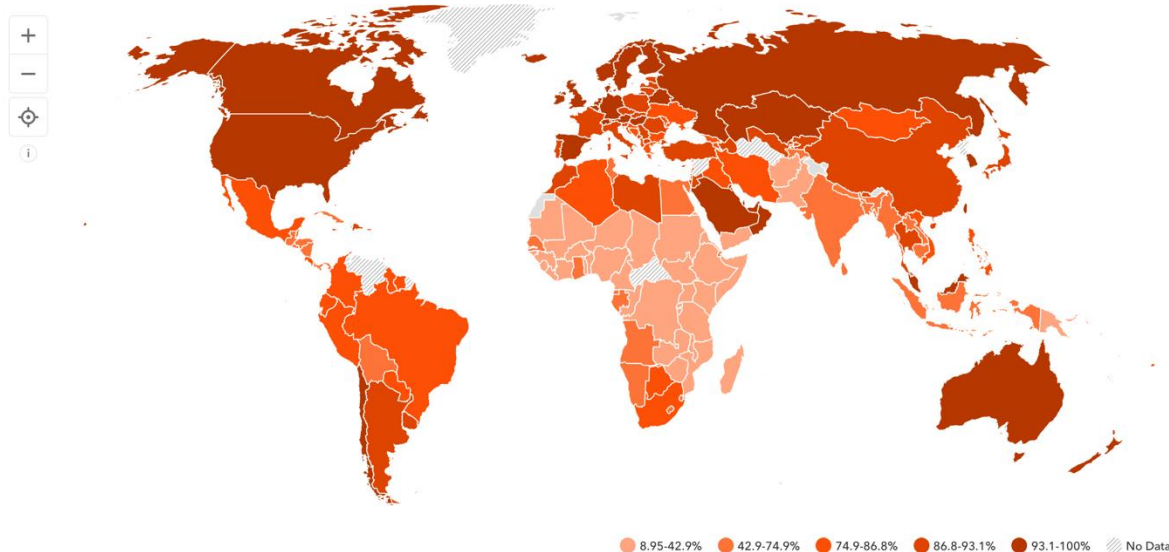
Individuals using the Internet

Connectivity, Use

Refers to the proportion of individuals who used the Internet from any location in the last three months. Access can be via a fixed or mobile network.

Overview Location Age Gender

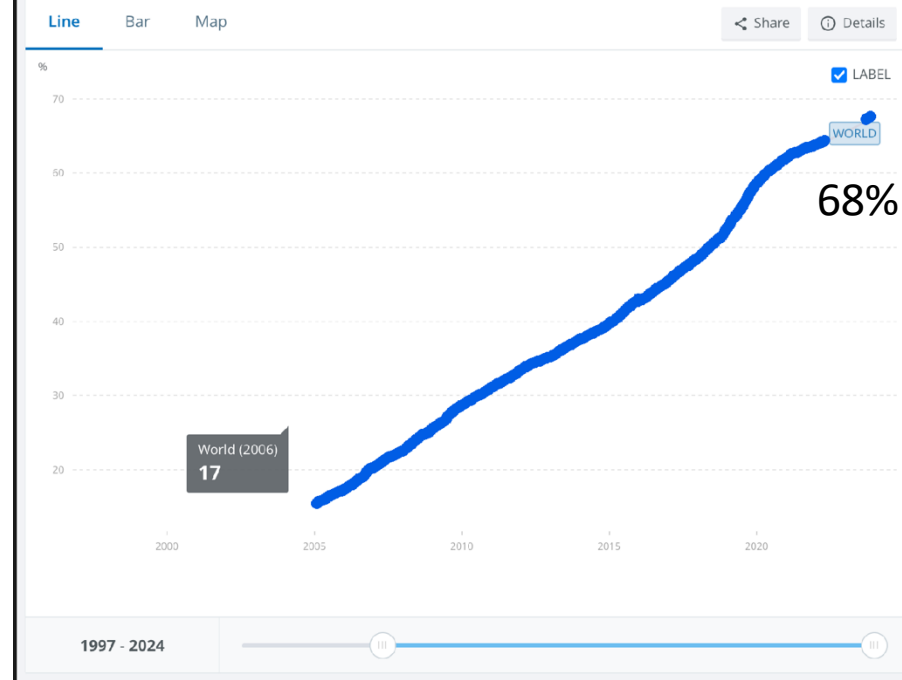
View: Unit: % Download



Individuals using the Internet (% of population)

World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Database, International Telecommunication Union (ITU), uri: datahub.itu.int

License: CC BY-4.0



ITU and World Bank data

UN digital agenda largely driven by the private sector

- No digital goals in original 2015 SDGs
 - Yet digital driven economic growth now seen as saviour of the SDGs
 - And new digital goals have been proposed by ITU and UNDP
- Lack of resourcing and expertise
 - UN agencies turned to support from private sector
- Complex politics (and personal careers)
 - ITU (and CTO likewise) created more than 100 years ago - close interlinkages between governments and private sector
 - UN SG Advisory Boards dominating by private sector members
 - UN SG's office centralizing power in ODET (2025)
- Multistakeholderism is mainly Public-Private
 - Civil Society does not yet have sufficient role
- Human Rights Agenda needs to be balanced by a Human Responsibilities Agenda



UN digital panel membership: dominated by private sector and “scientists”

	Private sector	Government (formerly private sector)	Government (formerly other)	Civil society (including law)	Academic (formerly private sector)	Academic (Science, economics)	Academic (social science, humanities)
High level panel on digital cooperation (2018)	9	2	5	2	1	3	
High-level advisory board on AI (2023)	11	2	5	5		13	5

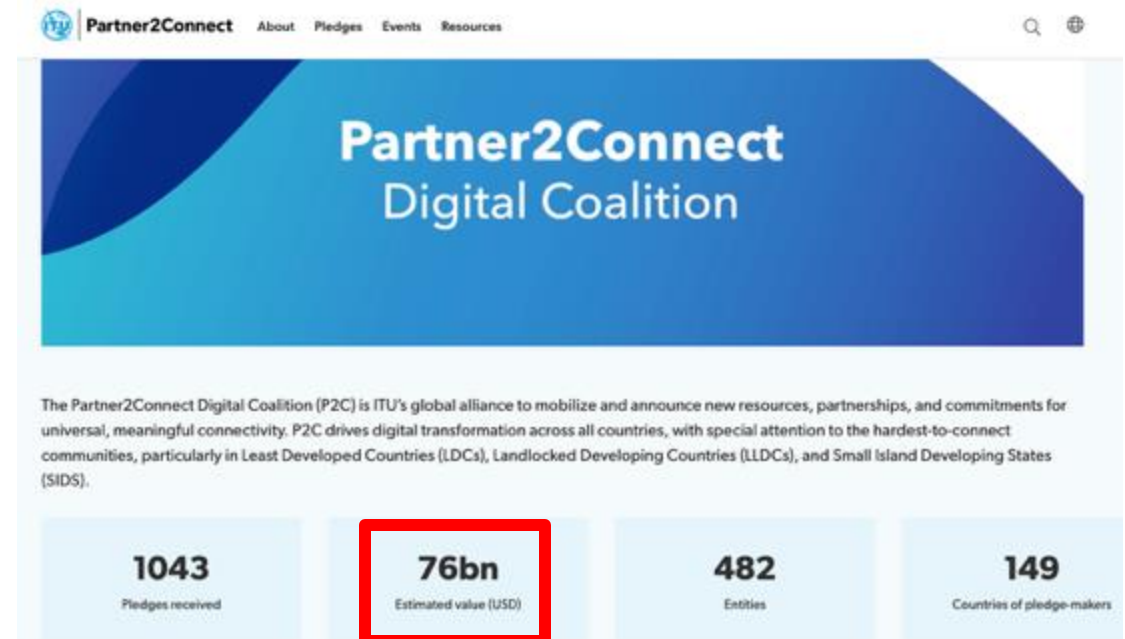
Note difficulties in allocating individuals to single categories

Funding for UN digital initiatives

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Source: <https://www.un.org/techenvoy/global-digital-compact/submissions> (5 December 2024).



<https://www.itu.int/partner2connect/>

<https://ict4d.org.uk/diuw>

<https://timunwin.blog>

The “Me” syndrome

Why do so many people developing digital interventions in Africa, Asia and South America think they know best how to do it, without knowing about what has gone before?

And the plethora of academic research that does likewise!

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Individual pursuit of wealth and success

- Those who have designed the digital tech we use have little interest in, knowledge of, or care about the most marginalized.
 - Other than as a source of potential profit
 - Why is this? How can we influence this? [MPIHD Adaptive Rationality]
- How compatible are making money and doing good?
 - The four richest people in the world in January 2025 were all based in the USA, were all men, were all white, and had all made their fortunes through digital tech (Musk US\$402 bn, Zuckerberg US\$248 bn, Bezos US\$247 bn, Ellison US\$248 bn; Bloomberg, 2025)
- Most leaders of the tech sector are characterised by
 - Wealth, power, and a fascination with tech
 - Why should the Digital Barons have gained such power?
- Digital tech leadership and neurodivergence
 - Gates, Zuckerberg, Musk, Bezos...
- Altruism only after wealth has been created
 - Effective altruism



Overconfidence and a lack of self-critique

- Symptomatic of Dunning-Kruger effect (1999)
 - “people who are unskilled in these domains suffer a dual burden: not only do these people reach erroneous conclusions and make unfortunate choices, but their incompetence robs them of the metacognitive ability to realize it”
- Impact on digital tech and development:
 - Unwilling to explore previous initiatives’ successes and failures
 - Persistence in failing, because they believe they are right
 - Wasteful repetition of failure
 - Paternalism and dependency
- Shaped by
 - Massive educational grade inflation
 - Private sector profit-driven motives in civil society initiatives
 - Workplace culture of praise
 - American exceptionalism (especially in immigrant and affiliated communities)
 - Scientific attitude that tech really is good (linked with innovation fetish)



(Plous, 1993; Moore and Heely, 2008)

The “innovation fetish”



<https://un-two-zero.network/innovation/>

(Chapter 5)

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The emergence of the “innovation fetish”

- Innovation has been around for a very long time, but took on a new level of emphasis in the mid-2010s
- World Bank had promoted innovation hubs from early-2000s
 - Strong US influence (and consultants such as McKinsey)
 - Very considerable failures with Smart Cities and Innovation Hubs
- Since mid-2010s
 - UN Innovation Network (UNIN from 2015)
 - Bilateral donors with innovation departments
- Innovation became central to competitive advantage in wealthier countries
- Innovation almost always as a driver for economic growth (and not equity)
 - But important to build on good examples of pro-poor innovation
- But most innovations fail
 - So, should donor governments invest in failure?
 - And the poorest can least afford failure

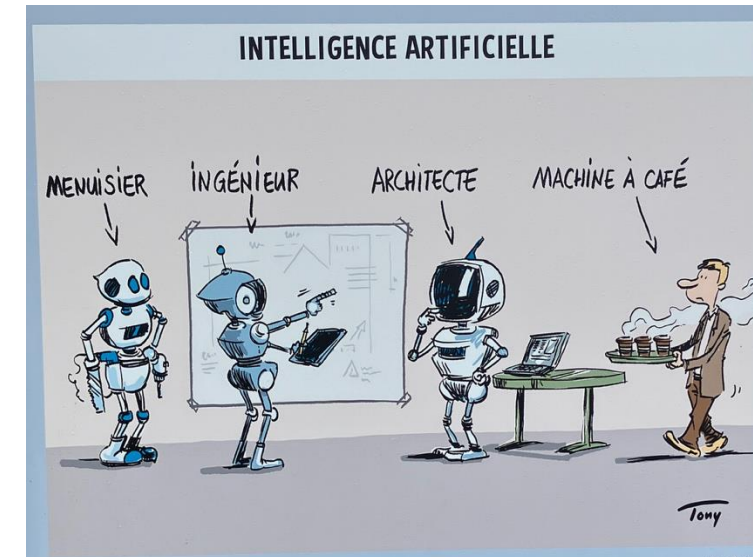


Konza (Kenya)

The next big thing: ICT4D, M4D, EdTech, Blockchain, AI, Biotech..

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- With each new innovation, the rhetoric is largely the same
 - Unwillingness to accept that anything useful could have come from the past
 - Making the same mistakes as predecessors did
- Note: most have been technology led
 - Often complete ignorance about the development context
 - Experimenting “on” the poorest and most marginalized
 - How will they benefit from failure?
- All seen as providing new economic potential
 - Especially reduction of labour
 - Potential rapidly to speed up circulation of capital
- Heroic visions: a Fourth Industrial Revolution, and Frontier Tech



The problem with “frontier tech”



John Gast, American Progress, 1872

- One person's frontier destroys another's present
 - Disruptive tech is not always good for all
- A world of heroes and villains
- Largely male
 - Although note the female representation of the USA and the telephone cable
- Environmentally destructive
- Again – our language matters

Neophilia

- Why are people generally so fascinated with the new?
- Why is our default position usually that something new is better?
- Personality inventories
 - Cloninger's (1994) Temperament and Character Inventory
- Neophilia as both a transient state and an abiding individual characteristic (Gallagher, 2011)
- Positive associations of novelty seeking
 - Excitability, impulsiveness, extravagance, disorderliness (Whitbourne, 2012)
- This emphasis on new technology reinforces digital determinism and instrumentalism
 - Ultimately they reinforce existing structures of marginalization



Pro-marginalised or hand-me-down innovation?

- Undoubtedly some innovation is seeking to increase equity
- But most is focused on driving economic growth
 - And the poor and marginalized are expected to benefit from it second-hand
 - Neither “trickle down” nor “bottom of the pyramid” work
- We need to develop an ethos of pro-marginalised innovation linked with “universal design”
 - Thus minimising “assistive” technologies
 - And learn from the innovations taking place in marginalized communities
- The poor and marginalized also need to be able to use innovation in their own interests



sora-s-innovation-in-ai-what-sets-it-apart

On freedom and digital enslavement



(Chapter 6)

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The Digital Barons and Digital Enslavement

- If you cannot function without your digital device for a week you are unfree
 - And slavery is defined as a loss of freedom (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2007)
 - Many of these issues also relevant to marginalised people in richer countries
 - Not least, we are all ageing
- Need to balance individual rights with communal responsibilities (only the rich can fully exploit the commons)
 - Free and Open Software movement – but proprietary remains dominant
 - Open Data - has positive potential, but is also exploited by private sector
- Digital separates us from the Nature that is so essential to our well-being
 - The “real” world is better than the “virtual” world
 - We need to reclaim our humanity before we are over-ruled by cyborgAIs
- If we do not act now, the future is very dystopic indeed

Towards an emancipatory manifesto...



Cape Coast Castle (2008) - a “Slave Castle”

Shifting from:

- **Me to we**
- **Growth to equity**
- **Rights to responsibilities**

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We could start by telling the truth as it is

- Get rid of the rhetoric
 - Stop claiming that we can achieve universal meaningful connectivity by 2030
 - Stop claiming that this is “good” and will eliminate poverty
- If we do this, what percentage of the world’s population are we willing to accept as not having the benefits of digital tech; or will escape the slavery of digital?
 - Most likely that at least 20% of the world will remain unconnected by 2030
- Verry difficult political decision for the UN/governments
- We **all** need emancipation
 - Freeing ourselves from the illusions and myths that enslave us
 - And the books suggests how we can begin to do this



Need for a collective focus on 'we' rather than 'me': our responsibilities

- Shifting balance from a Human Rights agenda to a Responsibilities agenda
- Individual Responsibilities (grounded in ethics)
 - To ourselves (personal and professional) and to others
 - Actions to reclaim our humanity from the Digital Barons
- Multi-sector Responsibilities (some examples)
 - Private sector
 - Low growth models, Responsible design, Investing where production is located
 - Governments
 - Public service provision, Increased regulation (European and Chinese models, rather than USAn), Strengthened international agreements (a new UN), Wealth redistribution
 - Civil Society
 - Holding governments to account, Championing diversity, Transparency agendas



Priorities for change

1. Becoming the servants of the poor and marginalized: working with not for
2. Technology design serves particular interests
 - Scientists are responsible for unintended consequences
3. Crafting rigorous understandings of the outcomes of digital interventions
 - Including the environmental impact
4. Reasserting the importance of Nature, and human involvement in it
5. Multi-sector not multistakeholderism
6. Forging freedom from enslavement by the Digital Barons



Reflections and questions



Above all, I hope the book will help us all look again at our preconceptions, and in so doing achieve enlightened emancipation so that we can all in turn help others to achieve likewise

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"Tim has articulated what many digital development advocates have long observed and privately lamented but seldom voiced publicly. In a world shaped by geopolitical tension, self-interest, and corporate exploitation, the gains of the technological revolution have reached only a privileged few. His book urges a return to compassion and reframes equity as an achievable goal. He critiques the corporate and political ecosystems, and makes an inspiring call for digital emancipation, laying out a clear roadmap for transformation, closing digital divides and unlocking opportunity for communities everywhere."

**Bernadette Lewis (Secretary General,
Commonwealth Telecommunications
Organisation)**



"Tim Unwin's new book digs into some of the deep psychological reasons why our digital interventions so often fail to live up to the promise of being 'for all'. He offers a sobering, even dystopian view of where things stand today — yet, at the same time, he inspires with his optimism that we still have the power to shape such technologies for real and lasting good."

Prof. Dr. Ralph Hertwig (Director of the Center for Adaptive Rationality at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin)

(Image © MPI für Bildungsforschung)

The future in the present – very grim!

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<https://ubn.news/ukraine-is-developing-attack-uavs-with-a-range-of-over-3000-kilometers/>



<https://cdnb.artstation.com/p/assets/images/images/056/645/301/large/alex-kondratenko-t-800-final.jpg?1669758005>

<https://ict4d.org.uk/diuw>

<https://timunwin.blog>

**Only when we ourselves
have become emancipated
in our understanding and
use of digital technologies
can we begin to help others
also to achieve such
emancipation**