Reimagining Digital Technology in a Corporate World

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Abstract

This paper examines the downside of digital technology as imagined in the short story "Behind our Irises" by Tloto Tsamaase (2020). It aims at identifying some unethical practices of the corporate world in their use of digital technologies and their impact on human lives. The study relies on the close reading methodology to extract primary data from the studied text. These data will be examined against the established ideas of critics to highlight unethical practices imaged in the studied text. Findings reveal that the fictitious corporate firm mind controls and siphons information from its staff through implanted nanobots. The study also reveals that the more vulnerable and greedy a person is, the easier it is for them to be preyed on in the corporate world. The study concludes that although digital technology is a life saver, it can also be a life taker. Also, that awareness and contentment are key factors in escaping the clutches of unscrupulous corporate enterprises.

Keywords: Digital Technology, Ethics, Nanorobots, Corporate World, Mind Control

Introduction

Digital technologies are digital tools, systems and resources used to generate, process and store data. Today, digital technology has proven to be an important catalyst in driving financial, political, cultural, and socioeconomic development in Africa. The emergence of the digital age offers countless opportunities to Africans, especially, with the fast and wide spread of the internet, artificial intelligence, sensors, automation/digitalization of machines etc. All these are driving the digital revolution in Africa and by extension, the world, towards an unknown destination. Millions of people are utilising different digital technologies for personal, business, health, educational, social, and security purposes. Some examples of digital technologies are online games, artificial intelligence bugs, nano cameras, mobile phones, computers, laptop. The benefits of digital technology cannot be overemphasized as Coates (1998) points out that "the biggest risk that we face is the failure to embrace the potential that new technologies offer for improving the condition of humankind and the state of nations (p. 33). However, there are some level of concerns regarding the path digital technology will open up to humankind, new tools, new products and new ways of organising everyday work and home life (Coates, 1998, p.7).

Miller et al. (1998) observes that:

> Still, with all this scientific promise, there are myriad risks that could be provoked or exacerbated by tomorrow's plausible technological innovations. As has been the case ever since technologies were employed not only for survival but also for conflict, these tools often have a double edge. Technological advances per se provide no foregone conclusions about how they will be used. Indeed, looked at purely from the perspective of technical feasibility – without taking into account the economic and social safeguards that are likely to be prerequisites for the rapid emergence of tomorrow's technological break-throughs – three broad dangers can be identified. (p. 14)

They further analyze the dangers of technological advancement into three broad categories:

> First, tomorrow's technologies contain destructive potential that will be both powerful and difficult to control. They could pose threats to the natural and human environment…Dependence on computers, networks and the software that runs them could leave critical parts of society's life-support systems, from nuclear power plants and medical systems to security and sewage treatment facilities, open to both

inadvertent yet catastrophic crashes and intentionally debilitating attacks. Less deadly but still pernicious risks might emerge as the spread of information tech criminal practices ranging from fraud and theft to illegal collusion. A second set of purely technological risks involves the possibility of greater vulnerability to system-wide breakdowns in, for example, the air-traffic control infrastructure… Lastly, the third danger relates to ethics, values and mindsets. Even the initial steps in the long-term development and diffusion of radically innovative technologies such as human cloning or computer-based intelligence (or even life-forms) could pose unusually strong challenges to existing ethical and cultural standards, and greater burdens on people's tolerance of the unknown and foreign. (pp. 14-15)

The first two categories of technological dangers result from the nature of these technologies, its powerful influence and "vulnerability". The third is the result of an intentional abuse of technology. Here technology is employed in unethical ways which reduce the value of human lives. This study is interested in the third danger of technology, its deployment for unethical practices in the corporate or business world. It is pertinent at this juncture to explore what ethics and business ethics entail. Generally, the word "ethics" is used to determine if a person's conduct is "right" or "wrong". Graham (2014) describes ethics as "a philosophy that examines the principles of what is right and wrong or good and bad" (p. 388). Business ethics is the application of ethics in a business environment. According to Okello (2021), "business ethics deals with what is 'good ' or 'bad 'guiding behaviour in business practices. It involves the frameworks, values, and principles for creating ethical awareness in the organization" (p. 1).

In spite of all efforts and policies by government, professionals and societies to promote ethical practices and mitigate unethical practices within the corporate world, these unethical practices have not ceased. The employee–employer relationship is dynamic as a lot of factors like: competitors, market trends, environmental conditions and most importantly emerging technologies, interplay with this relationship,. Berkley & Watson (2009) observes that "at the unfamiliar edge of these advances many corporate leaders make decisions that are ethically questionable" (p. 276). Graham (2014) confirms this when he writes that "in an attempt to reach their goals, keep up with their competitors or simply survive, companies face various moral issues and may be tempted to 'cut corners'" (p. 388). It is the hope of this study to contribute to existing literature on the need to sensitize innocent people against such unethical uses of technologies in the corporate world. In order to attempt a study of the adverse effect the abuse of digital technology can have on mankind in the corporate world, this study carries out a close reading of Tlotlo Tsamaase's short story "Behind the Irises". Literature has been acclaimed by scholars to be a useful tool in addressing societal menace. Shalini and Samundeswar's words best describe this function of literature:

> Literature indeed reflects the society, its good values and its ills. In its corrective function, literature mirrors the ills of the society with a view to making the society realize its mistakes and make amends. It also projects the virtues or good values in the society for people to emulate. Literature, as an imitation of human action, often presents a picture of what people think, say and do in the society. In literature, we find stories designed to portray human life and action through some characters who, by their words, action and reaction, convey certain messages for the purpose of education, information and entertainment…What writers of literature do is to transport the real-life events in their society into fiction and present it to the society as a mirror with which people can look at themselves and make amends where necessary. (p. 17)

Poverty as a pathway for abuse in Tsamaase's "Behind the Irises"

The short story, "Behind the Irises by Tlotlo Tsamaase, probes the secret unethical practices in a high tech market research firm. Tsamaase identifies poverty as a dangerous vulnerability because hunger for basic necessities can be exploited by individuals or the corporate world to manipulate and abuse one's fundamental rights. The story's protagonist, Joh, is a newly employed female worker who is eager to make it big in life. Her poor background and desire to live a luxurious life made her an easy target for the firm. Prior to her employment by the firm, Joh was barely surviving. "Before that I was unemployed for seven months living off my savings, so I hungrily signed the contract when they called me in after my interview" (p. 42) she laments. It is seen that her financial status left her no choice but to grab any offer given to her without proper scrutiny. The fictitious market research firm has a well thought out plan and that is to interview potential workers; select the most desperate ones. Those selected are placed on probation and allowed to see the luxurious lives of those who have already signed their contracts and have been upgraded with the most advanced technology, nanobots. At the point of signing the contract, all the victim can think about is the money, every other thing is a minor side effect:

> There was one clause. My contract included a stipulation that I would have to be installed with new, non-invasive pill-form technology WeUs— developed by the Nairobi Tech Hub of one of their prominent clients. If I agreed then I could keep my job…I just had to swallow a pill that would deposit nanobots behind my eyes and connect me to the firm's network, ferrying data to and fro. Of course, I'd be paid a minimum sum of 100,000 pula which felt like a shitload of money just to swallow a pill… I signed the contract and took the pill. (p. 47-48)

After her employment, the firm intentionally paid her a meagre salary in order to keep her starving and consequently made her hungrier and more vulnerable. Promotions, juicy salaries and even food are dangled in front of the staff to cloud their senses in exchange for installing high tech nanobots in them. Joh observed just a day after she blindly signed and accepted an upgrade, "It entered my mind like a butterfly. *They are using our temporary hunger to lull us into something"* (p. 45). Hunger had made her ignore the alarming behavior of a colleague, Keaboka, who tried drowning himself in a unisex bathroom; she also forgot his warning: "He grabbed my shoulders, … "Get out. Do not renew or upgrade your contract. Don't sign anything" (p. 46).

Mind control and information siphoning in Tsamaase's "Behind the irises"

To the ignorant eye, the firm employs advanced digital technology like spy bugs, nanobots, for genuine and legal purposes, "Every eye in our firm runs surveillance programs behind its pupil. Connected through the authenticated enterprise cloud network to the central servers of the Firm. Able to detect corporate theft, infraction, abuse of work assets and more" (p. 42). However, this also provides the gate to mind control their staff. To the outside world, the firm is simply a fast-rising market research firm where the workers "had the same smile, the same voice, the same excitement. They were so happy being at a miserable job" (p. 4). Keaboka, Joh's colleague, who had recently been upgraded by taking pills containing nanobots had a bathroom meltdown after discovering a way to temporarily deactivate the installed nanobots behind his irises. The bathroom scene became our introduction into what lies beneath the exterior of the firm from Keaboka's outburst:

> "It's the only way I can deactivate them. It only lasts three minutes. I don't know why. Listen to me." Keaboka grabbed my shoulders, his eyes wild and frantic. "You can't see it. The holes. They use the holes. They… They've been selling us to their clients." …"They use us. These bastards feel too safe and comfortable with this thing they installed in us." …"You're not listening to me." He grabbed my shoulders, … "Get out. Do not renew or upgrade your contract. Don't sign anything. They have a pipeline where they sell us—we are the products—it's those fucking updates — the holes—they plug—" (p. 46)

Signing the contract and getting upgraded meant that they, the workers, could live the luxurious lives they have dreamt of. However, what they do not know is that they were signing away their lives. They had no control over their bodies anymore:

> Then I started having strange tendencies toward staying late at work. Smiling at the manager who flirted with every woman in the office. Then there were the black outs. I'd be locking up after work, heading for a combi—then nothing but a complete deep abyss in my memory. My 6am alarm would blare, I'd wake up in bed feeling sore, like I'd spent the day before in an HIIT cardio workout, unable to recount where I was the night before or how I got home (p.48).

Not only were these workers' lives run by nanobots, they were further dehumanised and treated like mindless objects. They were manhandled and fixed liked gadgets:

> That afternoon, a man in blue coveralls that looked like a cross between a doctor and mechanic casually walked up to me in the kitchen, carrying a sharp tool. I tried desperately to move but some invisible force kept me rigid. He pierced the hole in my neck with it and fondled my veins. "Just doing some maintenance work on your ports," he said, whistling… I struggled and finally got an arm to move. "Stop resisting. Part of the contract you signed." The man hooked his steel-boot onto my shoulder as he twisted the sharp object into my neck. All I could do was remain still, as pain rattled in my body like branches in a wild windstorm. Inside the shackles of my skin, behind the bars of my bones I was screaming, "No!" "Somebody help me!" "Get the fuck off me!" "I'll fucking kill you!" "I'm going to burn this building down!" No sound escaped my lips. The man jumped off my shoulders when he was done. "Alright, you can get back to work. And then, against my own mind, I turned and went back to my desk (p. 49-50).

The above image can be likened to one's attempt at putting a cork back in a bottle. By now, one might be wondering why a person or group of people will treat human beings this way. In the case of the studied story, it is to sap information from their brains. Information that is used to add unique flavour, scent, colour etc to products:

> The company suckled our diversity from our DNA and nervous systems, spooled and aggregated it into its network to create 100% authentic indigenous products, used for concepts in fashion shows, architectural designs to win local tenders. They didn't need to get close to us to have us open our mouths, they were already inside our bodies listening to every thought pattern and whispers from even our grandparents in the genes of our bodies. The firm was touted for being revolutionary. They mined our stories to flavour just the right amount of diversity in their clients' products which accounted for their sky-high profits. They mined the minerals, diamonds and jewels of our very thoughts and histories and cultures that had been buried in our brains; the emblems, cultural motifs were woven with the dialect of our pain into their indigenous furniture designs, patterned textiles. It was all the market research they and their clients would ever need (p.50).

The scariest aspect of this mind control is that the victim is helpless and so struggles in vain. Even when others grow suspicious, they are mind controlled never to utter a word:

> The directors, the managers, the clients had nothing to fear. Their technology sat in us, maimed our voices before it could ever bite them; intercepted the tšatšarag neuromuscular signals shuttling from our brains to our vocal cords. It lynched those muscles in your throat just when you wanted to scream and cry and bleed truth.

Once in a while a concerned individual might notice their weird behaviours (p. 50) and make a report to the police. However, even as snoopy as reporters are and as observant as the police is, they uncover nothing incriminating:

> Then the reporters would come. Then the police would come. We'd smile mildly and reveal nothing wrong in this fine establishment. No matter how much they investigated every nook and cranny of buildings and emails, they couldn't find the secrets stacked in our bodies. What they found were good benefits, fully paid housing, medical aid, travel allowance, good hospitality, educational grooming, and very loyal unmarried employees who occasionally loved to sleep with their bosses and whose minds and histories were contained in a database monitored by the data analysts and employee management consultants of our established firm (p. 50).

Joh and Keaboka are among the few who were able to understand what was going on because their implants had technical faults and these created loopholes for them to recover their minds briefly. For Keaboka, he regained himself for three minutes during an upgrade and was able to figure out that staying under water deactivates the bugs. Joh's nanobot malfunctioned and she regained her mind but did not regain control of her body. All she could do is cry and regret:

> I had authorised this technology, agreed to the terms and conditions. Now I couldn't move, I couldn't breathe, except under the dominant hand of their technology. They were our voices and we were their voices. Their faces. Their ambassadors. We were locked behind our irises…and I find my skin feeling like artificial material. (pp.50-51)

Conclusion

It is in the nature of man to be creative, inventing things he needs to survive better and easier. However, everything on earth has an advantage and a disadvantage regardless of the initial intentions of its creator. Just like the case of the nanorobotics technology under study which is intended to help manage data is now being used to control and restrain the human mind, brain and body. A good majority of people are getting comfortable in accepting the ever-evolving array of technology just like Joh. This is both good and bad. Good in the sense that technology catapults growth in all aspects of human endeavours e.g financial, education, social etc. From our studied story, we can see some of the harms caused by technology used by a corporate company, specifically the nanobots which led to mind control, body control, invasion of privacy, information stealing, health complications etc. For this fictitious company their main goal is to maximise profit by creating unique products. Tsamaase's goal is to enlighten and prepare us towards a possible future that technology is ushering us into.

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