

When it comes to new technology, we're all Luddites at heart

Rory Sutherland



The latest electrical gadgets (image: Getty)

When I saw my first jogger in Wales in the early 1970s, I assumed he was running away from the police. Presumably joggers were familiar in California by then, but not elsewhere. I can't imagine any of the characters in *Goodfellas* going jogging, any more than I can imagine Rick in *Casablanca* going to a spinning class.

Nothing was stopping you from running around the streets back then. It was simply that there is always a high social cost to doing things most people don't do. Our brain's two most powerful default settings are social copying and acquired habit. Hence our preferences are not independent of our past behaviour, nor of that of others. We do not always choose our preferences: instead tastes, fashions and opinions ebb and flow through the population by a kind of contagion.

The same may be true of our adoption of new technology, and of new forms of consumption. If so, it would imply the limits to economic growth are as much imposed by consumers' psychological resistance to change as limits to investment or technological development. In Bill Gates's phrase: 'People don't know how to want the things we can offer them.'

This, certainly, is a theory advanced in Mario Fabbri's recent book *The Imaginary Economy*. In an echo of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, he suggests there is a natural pace and rhythm limiting the speed at which humans can adopt new ideas, technologies and patterns of consumption. This would suggest that the best thing you can have in an economy is not highly innovative producers so much as confident, adventurous consumers. The US, being rich and highly individualistic, tends to lead the world in new forms of consumption: interestingly its growth rate is very stable. By contrast, developing countries may grow faster for a time, but largely by copying patterns of consumption already established in the US.

Fabbri's theory is one I had entertained myself but, since I work in advertising, I had suspected it was rather a self-serving opinion to hold, and so possibly delusional. But Fabbri's is an interesting way of looking at the world, not least because, even if not wholly true, it is undoubtedly partly true. Moreover, as efficiency gains in production continue, it will become more true in the future.

It also chimes with patterns of technology adoption we see in the real world. Today, the idea of working as an 'electricity salesman' sounds absurd. But for several decades, in Britain and the US, electricity needed to be sold to a sceptical public — rather as electric cars need selling today.

Other things which seem obvious today once seemed like senseless luxuries. Early electric lights were switched on at the lamp fitting, like a gas light. This meant you had to walk into a dark room and risk colliding with furniture before fumbling for a switch above your head. Eventually some people realised you could put the switch just inside the door instead. For a time, many people saw this as a needless indulgence.

I notice this instinctive Luddism towards new forms of consumption calcifying in myself. A few years ago I was at an airport departure gate, where a mother had handed her toddler an expensive digital camera to keep her entertained. The child ran around photographing hundreds of patches of carpet. I knew perfectly well at a rational level that digital photos cost nothing and can be deleted. But something in me found it horrifying: I grew up in a world where a single photo cost about 50p to develop and print, and this seemed like a horrendous waste. In the end, it annoyed me so much, I had to walk away.

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