

THE PHILOSOPHY OF DISRUPTION

From Transition to Transformational Change

ALEXANDER MANU



The Philosophy of Disruption

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The Philosophy of Disruption: From Transition to Transformational Change

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Toronto, 2 January 2022

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Preface

As the true beginning of the mobile revolution, June 2007 marked the arrival of the iPhone. The iPhone changed everything: it put the Internet in everyone's pocket; it transformed photography from a hobby into an act of everyday life; it changed how software was created and distributed; it introduced developer-driven apps that changed everything from how people shop, how they travel to how they entertain or get the news; it transformed the advertising industry through mobile ads and made Apple the world's most valuable company.¹

Nevertheless, many analysts missed the significance of this transformation spectacularly. Under the headline 'Apple iPhone Debut to Flop, Product to Crash in Flames', one such pundit proclaimed in 2007 that: 'The iPhone is going to fail because its design is fundamentally flawed'.² He was not alone. Other headlines included definitive statements such as 'We predict the iPhone will bomb'.³ and 'Why the Apple phone will fail and fail badly'.⁴

How could such a radical disruption to the market dynamics be so critically misjudged? Most commentators discounted that Apple changed the rules of the phone game entirely and that Apple was building something fundamentally different. Very few did see that the disruptor was not technical but predominantly cultural. The iPhone disrupted the market by first *defining the category for itself* and then challenging the notion of what was valuable about a technology product.

The iPhone transformed expectations; it was the first generation of software and hardware that changed our lives. In doing so, Apple disrupted the perception of value, challenging individuals philosophically. Such challenge to the basis of one's knowledge can result in an intellectual tunnel, a place of comfort where bias anchors one into the status quo. It becomes easy to reject the vision of the iPhone, its boldness and its new way of engaging people with technology in everyday life. Such critics looked at the iPhone as an everyday product instead of understanding

¹Retrieved from <https://www.vox.com/2017/6/26/15821652/iphone-apple-10-year-anniversary-launch-mobile-stats-smart-phone-steve-jobs>

²Retrieved from <http://suckbusters2.blogspot.com/2007/06/apple-iphone-debut-to-flop-product-to.html>

³Retrieved from <https://techcrunch.com/2007/06/07/the-futurist-we-predict-the-iphone-will-bomb>

⁴Retrieved from https://theregister.com/2006/12/23/iphone_will_fail

it as a cultural signal. Apple's engineers and designers have created a philosophy, an artistic endeavour that has unapologetically transformed our lives.

New technology demands thinking differently. It challenges us philosophically, and when we are challenged, we question the way we think. New technology presents a path to testing our abilities to explore the limits of what is possible. New technologies have a unique way of disrupting social systems, changing the foundations of society and transforming values. Social change rarely occurs just by passing legislation. Social change requires a disruption of the prevailing social order, and disruption occurs only when the perception of the foundational value system of a society is changed to a new, more effective value system.

We have learned through lived experience that technology is inherently disruptive and that humans are also inherently disruptive. Disruptive technologies make possible a new form of human connection, and the proof is in the social media platforms that have disrupted the traditional distribution of power within societies on every continent of the world. The net result is an efficient and effective mechanism for social change.

Disruption and Philosophy

Disruption is a catalyst for transformative change and new knowledge and thought. As current knowledge systems have not necessarily been set up to reflect disruptions, this book is about the creation of knowledge as the starting point of a philosophical framework for human behaviour in times of transformation. Philosophy is the logical clarification of thought, and when applied to disruption, it interprets the possible impacts of a disruptor. The philosophy of disruption inhabits the transition space between the disruption of the existing order and its transformation, re-establishing the balance between what we know and what we need to know. Change is a sequence of a disruptor leading to a disruption, which leads to a transition, leading to transformation. We cannot ignore the role of philosophy and the humanities in this sequence. No discipline combines philosophy's critical thinking, analytical skills and cognitive skills with the broader humanities' people skills, symbolic reasoning and social justice perspectives. When disruptors change the context of entire industries, systems and markets, we need to activate our capacities to reason. The role of philosophy is to understand human behaviour in terms of reason, logic, rational thought and the exploration of human actions.

As a catalyst for a new form of knowledge, disruption opens spaces and possibilities that have not been explored. The philosophy of disruption is a platform to engage in re-imagining what will happen next. Philosophies are engines for re-inventing the world, building the world we do not yet know and working together to shape the world we do. The philosophy of disruption is one such philosophy, with implications for strategy, policymaking, education, and business practice and how we approach disruption in all its guises. This book is a primer on the philosophy of disruption to help businesses and leaders make better

decisions when a new paradigm, technological shift, product innovation or other disrupting element emerges.

To sustain social changes that support transformation, we must recognize that transformative outcomes will be unpredictable without foresight. Foresight anticipates the impacts of a disruptor. To transform people and their institutions into catalysts for change, one must foresee change. Foresight is not the simple identification of future scenarios but a sense of what needs to be done in the present, a combination of knowledge with wisdom to distinguish between what is possible and what is inevitable. A philosophy of disruption in combination with foresight will enable people to make an early decision on the possible outcomes of current events in an intentional way, in a process that generates a range of opportunities in a much broader context.

Disruption, Unlearning and the Self-Concept

Disruption does not mean knowledge is being taken away; it means that knowledge is being changed, and there is a tendency for the self-concept to shift out of agreement with technology disruptors. Self-concepts are the behaviours and attitudes that make one think and act in specific ways. They are the values that individuals adopt and are embedded in cultural codes. The self-concept includes beliefs and attitudes about others, the purpose of personal goals, how one needs to get to them and how one contributes to societal goals. Unlearning is the ability of the self to un-connect from the self-concept and give critical attention to areas in which self-concepts are unhelpful – unlearning means discarding things that were once a part of one's identity. Unlearning is a process that starts with a moment of introspection. To unlearn means that we choose to stop taking for granted our truths. To unlearn is to grow curious about our world, to ask questions. When we embrace unlearning, we accept the possibilities of a new world, a world that offers different challenges, challenges that are consonant with our values and traditions, and a world that could be much better.

Ultimately, disruption is a multidimensional phenomenon because its forces are moving at various speeds in multiple directions, making disruption not just a matter of one moment coming and one moment disappearing. Disruption creates a shock and causes us to respond to it by creating new behaviours and a new set of beliefs and ways of doing things. Disruption cycles ask us to think for ourselves. We are forced to change our behaviours. We are forced to change our minds. When we transform our beliefs and our behaviours, we transform our world. When we change the rules of our world, we are changing the rules of our future.

A continuous stream of change disrupts our world, from news to technology to information about everything. These are the transformational changes we are faced with today. The purpose of this book is to describe and explain how disruptions occur and take hold and help the reader recognize patterns of transformational moments and the mindset that can turn them into opportunities.

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Part I

Understanding Disruption

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Chapter 1.1

Understanding Disruption

Imagine a world without change. Specifically, imagine a world without the world-shaking impact of Moore's Law and the subsequent reorganization of the computer industry.¹ Imagine what the world would be like if computers continued to be manufactured in the same mould as they were in 1975. This world is the world of 1970s–1980s personal computers. The world of 1980s personal computers would have been an entirely different place. Sure, people might have played old MS-DOS games from time to time, but the PC would have been a decidedly underpowered machine. People's lives would have been like the stories they knew from their parents; commerce and entertainment would have been practically unchanged from how they were in the 1950s. The benefits of Moore's Law, the explosion of PC use that followed its adoption, are impossible to replicate in this world.

Compare this world to one where disruption had occurred. This is the world of today. The world of today is the world of smartphones.

The driving force behind the explosion of the smartphone world was not only Moore's Law, but instead, the way smartphones changed what the PC was and what the PC did. The smartphone empowered users to carry, connect to, and use as many computing devices as they wanted – something that PCs simply couldn't do. The fact that smartphones were so different from PCs created the market space that eventually led to the iPhone.

Let me start with a flexible definition of disruptors and disruption: a disruption occurs when human motivation embraces new technology and allows it to enhance and expand the experience of everyday life. In this definition, the disruptor is the technology, while disruption is the human being engaged in a new

¹Moore's law is based on empirical observations made by Gordon Moore. The doubling every year of the number of transistors on a microchip was extrapolated from observed data. Over time, the details of Moore's law were amended to better reflect the actual growth of transistor density. The doubling interval was first increased to two years and then decreased to about 18 months. The exponential nature of Moore's law continued, however, creating decades of significant opportunity for the semiconductor industry'. Retrieved from <https://www.synopsys.com/glossary/what-is-moores-law.html>.

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behaviour. People's acceptance and appropriation of new technologies create a business disruption, which changes, interrupts, and transforms our habitual way of doing things.²

I have termed the above as a 'flexible' definition because the idea that there is any comprehensive or final explanation of disruption needs to be abandoned because any thorough explanation of disruption assumes a somewhat firm idea of what disruption is, and some of the things that it consists of. In other words, it assumes a comprehensive, systematic analysis. Disruption is not like that, not any more than linear time, stasis, or inactivity. Disruption is not a simple, mechanical, or immutable matter, but it is a mixture of things and always an exchange of multiple energies that ends up with something new. A disruption has consequences, it involves physical and virtual actors, and it is not happening just to individuals but to the world in which they live as well. How, then, do we begin to understand the phenomenon?

The term 'disruption' as it is currently used has led to an assumption that this phenomenon occurs very rapidly. There is a tendency to think that disruption occurs in one moment and is rapidly over or is finished. In other words, there is a habit of thinking about the phenomenon as if it were a contraption whose workings are instantaneous.

At any moment in time, forces are moving towards or away from us. These forces are moving at various speeds and in multiple directions, making disruption a multidimensional phenomenon. It is not just a matter of one moment coming and one moment disappearing. It becomes clear very early in a disruption cycle that the phenomenon of disruption is asking us to think for ourselves, with no case precedent. In the absence of source literature, thinking involves many faculties not trained yet for their purpose, especially the faculty of knowledge. And this is where we find the connection with philosophy, whose ordinary definition is *to make sense of the world*.

Disruption itself is a flowing process. It is never as stable or purely neutral as the status quo, and if we think of it as reaching a finite state, we are in danger of ignoring the fact that disruption is also very dynamic. Some disruptions occur even when nothing is expected to change.³

The disruptive characteristics of current paradigms are not chaotic. They do not arise from chaos, but they arise in response to a controlled environment centred around the characteristics of the disruptor event or technology. It should

²Manu, A. (2021). *Dynamic Future-proofing. Integrating Disruption in Everyday Business*. Emerald Publishing Limited. p. xvii.

³The inception of Skype had a larger disruptive footprint than acknowledged today. Aside from the turbulence it caused in the telecom industry, it also illuminated a void found in communication technologies. Video conferencing created a need to accelerate communication beyond the mere exchange of words by introducing the concept of teleportation. Today, 19 years later, we treat people living across the world as if they were in our living rooms.

not be surprising, then, if disruption is an *organic*, rather than a purely accidental process.⁴ While an ‘organic’ process in this sense does not have the same type of chaotic breakdown associated with the destruction of matter, it can still have a negativity bias because it is often the case that the system at multiple levels is disturbed.⁵

It seems easiest to demonstrate this point by describing how individuals deal with disruption and understanding the differences between individuals and organizations. That is, between person-level tasks aimed at transformation and organizational-level tasks aimed at transformation. If disruption transforms the normal way of living, what is our normal way of living? We live, sleep, eat, fight, sing and do almost everything in our daily routine. Our routine always looks the same. We move in the same patterns, talk in the same fashion, feel in the same way. Our lives are well set, and we have learnt all the elements of our routine. People have been taught to behave the way they behave. Our habits and our techniques are predictable. Disruption brings about a change of that routine.

If we react to that change, we can do something completely different. We break the routine. This, of course, creates all kinds of confusion and changes in the way we operate. Now, as we change our routines, we need to keep in mind that our ability to perform new tasks depends on our ability to learn and adapt. Disruption not only brings about a change of routine, but it also changes our expectations. The moment we encounter disruption in our routine, we automatically begin thinking that everything must change. Some people take the challenge and learn quickly and perform well in a totally different setting. Others do not do so well, perform poorly, and stay confused.

On the other hand, organizations have a different routine, utterly dependent on the context. The context changes from day to day, and there are no explicit rules or specifications for how the change should be managed or implemented. In the business world, if one is not disrupting the business, then the business is already disrupted. If the most successful company you see does not disrupt your life, it is probably not making money. The core question asked from a business by a disruption of everyday life is this: ‘What does it mean to be a leader in a disrupted world? And are you ready to be that?’

The answer lies in our capacity to understand, adapt, and embrace the changes we will see in the future. The potential impact of change on business is enormous, both short-term and long-term. It is not an exaggeration to say that with the emergence of technologies such as AI, big data, cloud computing, the Internet of Things, and virtual reality, a new era in the evolution of humanity in the

⁴A paradigm shift was inevitable in a market dominated by retail mammoths, such as Amazon, eBay, and Walmart. It was only time before an eCommerce service for the proletariat emerged. Shopify CEO Tobias Lutke tweeted, *Amazon is trying to build an empire. Shopify is trying to arm the rebels*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2021/01/22/how-shopify-is-shifting-the-e-commerce-landscape/?sh=778743733ce9>.

⁵Think of the layers of disturbance provoked by the introduction of the ride-sharing service UBER. From the taxi industry to the city transportation sector, limousine services, car owners, passengers, parking lots, and more.

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industrialized world is upon us. These technologies can potentially change the world in ways we can hardly imagine today.

The changes will bring about incredible shifts in the way business is done. It will impact people and organizations. It will cause profound changes in how we live. These new tools, combined with the old human flaws such as ‘short-sightedness’, will generate disruption. The collective will be influenced by these disruptions at all levels of our lives. The impact of the change will not only be at the business level but will also extend to the personal, household, and societal levels.

We can all see what is happening at the personal and household level. Children are growing up with mobile devices. There is much talk about multitasking. Technology is transforming education and changing employment. Social media is transforming relationships. Even the most established companies are going through a transformation.

The Great Disruptor

When the *disruptor* is a technology – as opposed to a natural event – the *disruption* is not. The disruption is always manifesting at the behavioural level of everyday life, culture and society, transforming how people accomplish tasks and fundamentally challenging the very structures upon which economic activity is based. These include:

- Interactions of various non-economic cultural variables form every human culture.⁶
- The disruption in a relationship that occurs when one non-economic cultural variable is disrupted and replaced with another non-economic variable by technological means.⁷
- Or when the disruption is the basis of the change in behaviour.⁸

⁶TikTok is a video-streaming social network app that invites users to interact as content creators and consumers. In the format of 15–60 second videos, creators create in conjunction with the app’s licensed music while consumers browse the infinite feed of endorphin-inducing content. Since it arrived in 2016, TikTok’s audience, algorithm, and virality have infiltrated politics, the economy, the music industry, and far beyond. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michellegreenwald/2021/04/01/audience-algorithm-and-virality-why-tiktok-will-continue-to-shape-culture-in-2021/?sh=14dbe7f62af7>.

⁷One can compare home maintenance and cleanliness to a job because it contributes to self-fulfillment and identity. Time spent doing chores is time spent pursuing self-betterment, but what happens when the Roomba replaces this activity entirely? Do you lose the benefits this activity reaps, or do you pursue new self-fulfilling tasks in its place? As product manager Max Makeev states, “We aim to give back time to our customers.” Retrieved from <https://www.cnet.com/news/making-roomba-for-innovation-5-lessons-from-irobot/>.

⁸The Baby Boom characterizes the immediate years following World War II and the Great Depression. Years of family division and economic turmoil resulted in a generation-wide change in behaviour and values – that is, family and the American Dream. During the sprint from 1946–1964, baby boomer births reached nearly 72.5 million. They marked the largest generational cohort in the United States to date. Retrieved from <https://www.familysearch.org/en/blog/baby-boomer-generation-characteristics>.

Let us take technology seriously as a *disruptor*. We must also take it seriously as a *disruption* because of its power to alter how we relate to nature and ourselves. The great disruptor, which shifts the paradigm of human existence, is technology-aided or modified behaviour. Why does this matter?

Technology is the amorphous entity that is present everywhere around us. It is all around us informing and continuously transforming a new human condition, and now has an increasingly profound effect on our changing relationship to nature. Technology makes a deep-seated impact on how our perception of nature is transformed by the expanding technologies that interconnect humanity and nature, enabling us to achieve seemingly impossible feats.

Our perspective of nature has been changed, and we are only just starting to come to grips with the implications of this transformation. This shifts how we manage land, labour, and the services required to run the planet's machinery. Without technology, in a hierarchical, more highly defined sense, we would have been living a different life altogether than the one we have today. It would have been a life driven entirely by nature and not the quirks of human will. If we did not build the authority to do this – to modify nature as much as possible and conform it to our will - we would not exist.

In Ancient Greek mythology, Gaia was the woman in charge of the Earth. While today we understand Gaia to be the collective identities of all life on Earth, in a society steeped in traditional thought, Gaia was indeed the soul of the human world.⁹

Our entire idea of nature's omnipotence was seemingly based upon this relationship to nature. From the beginning of time, we knew that the elements of Earth – its soil, mountains, rivers, clouds, starry skies, and the weather – formed the basis of all that life on Earth contained. We also knew that this material world was interwoven with many invisible realms of nature beyond the grasp of human consciousness.

This knowledge is no longer doubted. Instead, it is used to support radically different ideas of nature; technology has changed our understanding of nature from an inanimate, inert being into a living, dynamic entity.

Our relationship to the environment has also changed because of this awareness of nature as living, integral and interconnected. Humans no longer see nature and ourselves as separate entities. The social domain of our lives is no longer based on a dichotomy between nature and humanity. Instead, it is shaped and influenced by a far more dynamic and alive relationship.¹⁰

Under this new paradigm of nature, the formal political and economic roles we have created for ourselves through human ingenuity and labour no longer serve us. We are now in the grip of a technology-generated oligarchy, in which it is us,

⁹Retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaia>.

¹⁰The GPS, ubiquitous through WAZE, Uber, or Fitbit, gifted humanity with a connection between our dynamic positioning and relativity to the world around us. Transformed from a static and irresponsive drawing, the map, the Global Positioning System, bridged the void between spatial awareness and spatial knowledge. Where we were once merely spectators, we are now co-creators. Now, WAZE is alive because we are alive.

and only us, who rule the planet, and we need to learn to see this new world of interdependence in the same way we see our great aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents.

The new knowledge that nature and all life are integral to each other, while at the same time, unique and non-distinct, is not something that can be assimilated and controlled with technology alone. We need understanding and a new or possibly renewed philosophy of life, one that integrates any upcoming disruptors with joy and competence by understanding the permanence of disruption as we understand water or the wind. This transformation requires humility, willingness to change, listening skills, empathy, creativity, open-mindedness and constant learning.

The Taxonomy of Disruption

From the perspective of economic performance, disruption is often understood as an adverse effect. Organizations that do not initiate disruption themselves find that it takes a while to transition to a new business model, a new practice, or new institutional processes so that profitability might be initially negatively affected.

In the modern context of automation, AI, robotics, and the explosion of digital communications, ‘the disruption effect’ has become more than a byword for technological progress and economic development. Over the past 25 years – since the wide adoption of the World Wide Web and the digital transformation that followed for all the organizations trying to remain relevant – I have spent some of the most critical years of my professional life learning the taxonomy and ontology of disruptions. Over this work, I have tried to map the concepts and ideas relating to disruption so, in this way, the work of an agent of innovation may be systematically mapped and explored as a system of values.

This work has several essential elements, which have an interdisciplinary character, and links at all levels across academia, business, government and civil society. The work does not seek to offer theoretical critiques of any economic activity, however innovative. The aim is to facilitate thinking in the ‘big picture’ about how people might think of the social, institutional and policy implications of the emergence of and the normalization of disruptive change. It is often a matter of learning about models and theoretical frameworks as they develop for the theorist. For the follower, it is an opportunity to move beyond the theoretical to produce concrete strategies and initiatives.

If the work succeeds, one should be able to situate the challenges of disruption in terms of new paradigms and new philosophical approaches or theories. My main interest is in the latter, and I am persuaded that the notion of a philosophy of disruption expands the prospect of understanding the fundamental nature of the phenomenon and is essential for understanding any new approach to sustainably organizing the economic activity that includes the disruptor. From this perspective, disruption is not just an inconvenience but an economic opportunity with vast potential if considered wisely.