

Innovation's Paradox

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Most people believe that technology is good for innovation. Technology removes technical barriers, improves productivity, and gives rise to new creative opportunities.

This is the story that often gets told. And it may be mostly true. But what often gets overlooked in the telling of this celebratory tale is the possibility that technology could also be bad for innovation in various ways.

Accumulating evidence, for example, is demonstrating how our interaction with technology is altering our brains in ways that are harmful for innovation. Technology use seems to be negatively impacting both our attention spans and our ability to filter out unwanted information. Because creativity—and even run-of-the mill productivity—depend on these skills, this is potentially bad news for innovation. Technology use is also hindering our ability to read emotional and social cues. Given that emotional intelligence is strongly linked with creative potential, this is also concerning from an innovation perspective.

The upshot is that in our rush to uncritically embrace new technologies in the name of innovation, we may be inadvertently undermining the very goals we are seeking to achieve. A more nuanced understanding of how technology both promotes and hinders innovation should help us craft a more nuanced—and successful—innovation policy.

How might we do this? For one thing, when we talk about technology and innovation, we might do well to remember that we are not simply static subjects imposing our collective will on the object of technology, using it to our advantage in the ways we see fit to promote innovation. Technology is also acting on us, and the results of that action might not always be beneficial from an innovation perspective. Given this, we should begin to be more selective about which technologies we promote for creation and widespread adoption. Various policy levers could help us with this task, including intellectual property law, funding regimes, and even social and behavioral interventions. The result should be a world in which technology, does, in fact, promote socially beneficial innovation.