

The Importance of the Humanities in the Fourth Industrial Revolution

By [Emanuel Pastreich](#)

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I was still trying to fit into the establishment discourse on technology back in 2018, still striving to get the word out in an acceptable format through an establishment newspaper like the Korea Times for a self-contented audience that was uninterested in revolutionary shifts in politics, let alone in consciousness, when I wrote this article on the humanities. Although the use of technology to dumb down and sedate the population was already visible then, it had not reached the extremes of the current moment.

Information warfare was not in full bloom yet.

Nevertheless, I believe that the essential arguments about the importance of the humanities, or perhaps better put, the human, put forth in this article remains critical for us today as well as we struggle to find some sort of light at the end of the tunnel that will keep us marching forward in this race against time to keep the doors from shutting closed permanently, leaving us to fend off as isolated and discouraged individuals the drones and robots, hostile AI and malicious internet, that will be sent to destroy us utterly.

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[“New importance of humanities in fourth industrial revolution”](#)

By Emanuel Pastreich, Korea Times, June 30, 2018

There has been much talk about the importance of the humanities in this age of rapid technological transformation and we see funding for “digital humanities” programs that provide cutting-edge communications technology that is claimed will revolutionize teaching and will provide online videos that effectively present complex information for any number of viewers around the world.

We have scholars in history and in the social sciences who have obtained funding that allows them to bring to bear advanced supercomputing technology on historical or social

conundrums.

Massive amounts of textual and statistical information are analyzed by them using supercomputers, and their unexpected discoveries are presented to us via fascinating graphs and charts. Big data reveals to us new truths previously obscured — although we cannot help but wonder if the amount of time spent reading and pondering is being drastically reduced.

Although there is significant research going on that makes creative use of new technology, the sad truth is that for all the articles trumpeting a new revival of the humanities, everywhere around us the number of teachers for the humanities, and the number of students enrolled in humanities classes, are being drastically reduced.

It is not that students are not interested, but rather that the social and economic pressure are unambiguous that the students must give up the quest for truth and focus on conforming to narrow norms to get a job. As a result, fewer and fewer citizens read books at all, or are capable of complex analysis of just about anything.

It is, in a word, a profound crisis.

We most desperately need a true revival of the humanities today, but tragically the humanities are presented in the debate on technology as valuable content to be employed on the digital displays, or social networks, powered by the new generation of computer chips. The argument may be that the content is ultimately more important, but the reality is that the investment by our society is in the technology, and not in the investigation of human experience.

We will not find the humanities we desperately need in such projects. Rather, we need to disconnect from technology and to take time to assess the complex impact of technological change on our society as a whole, and its implications for how we experience the world.

The humanities have much to offer us in that respect, but the wise voices of the past hidden in those dusty books will only start to speak to us when we recognize one simple fact: the rapid transformation of human society by technology is so profoundly destabilizing and confusing for us that we risk catastrophe in the near future.

Only when we recognize that the deeper truths offered by philosophy, literature, history, and aesthetics are far more critical for our future than pushing the envelope for semiconductors or super computers, will we start to address the crisis. I have not seen much evidence for that shift, even though the dusk is deepening.

Just contrast the tiny funding available for the humanities (and the tinier funding available for the careful analysis of the impact of technology on society) with the extraordinary amount of funding available to develop technologies with commercial applications (regardless of whether or not those technologies have a positive impact on society). Serious consideration will lead us to the painful conclusion that we have not even started to take the humanities seriously or to recognize the level of the crisis.

Just look around and you will see how new technologies aimed at stimulating the base instincts of humans have encouraged addiction to images (including games and pornography) everywhere. We encourage citizens to satisfy their curiosity and their desires

without any intellectual challenge, or ethical imperative.

To watch people eat food, or engage in sexually suggestive acts, is considered the norm. We use technology to appeal to the lowest functions of the human brain and thereby encourage a thoughtless consumer culture. No one, literally, is thinking about what our country will look like in 100 years.

We must set aside space in our society, and make that space significant, wherein we unplug from technology and we use our eyes to read books, employ our hands to make works of art, or build furniture, and use our feet to wander the Earth and understand how we are connected to it.

In that process of action, and of awareness of our own bodies, we learn about causality, that we have a chance to step back and make analogies between the phenomenon that we observe and our society as a whole. That process of reading, writing, painting, and observing allows us to reconnect with who we are and to recognize what this Earth needs.

Without such a break we are easily caught up in the suicidal tendency to think that throwing away plastic every day has no impact on our environment, that employing electronics has no connection to the dirty air we breathe, to deceive ourselves into believing there is no link between allowing young children to spend their days playing silly video games and the limits to their ability to conceive of the world.

The fourth industrial revolution poses a tremendous challenge: the confusion of the real with the fictional. As the technologies of mechanical reproduction speed up, people see images on TV of green trees and think we have a healthy environment, or see dramas showing close friendships and a healthy community and think that we actually have such a society ourselves.

That virtual world is fictional, and our media is itself increasingly contaminated by such fictions. Newspapers have become a place to sell images of what the funders want people to believe is the truth, rather than to engage in a rigorous investigation of the reality of society.

This problem is most severe in the case of climate change, an existential crisis that is getting rapidly worse even as it is blocked out of our media and out of our education as a serious topic for discussion.

Technology cannot tell us anything about the impact of technology on society, or about how we should reduce our increasing dependence on technology (which demands energy and thereby damages our climate). Nor can technology help us to understand how our perceptions of ourselves and our world are distorted by technological change.

Only a careful consideration of the essential principles of ethical behavior (moral philosophy), of the nature of being (metaphysics) and of the nature of knowledge and understanding (epistemology) can help us.

Because philosophy has completely receded from our intellectual world at precisely the moment that rapid technological change is transforming how we perceive the world, we are especially vulnerable. We lack the concepts to describe the process by which our lives are reduced to empty rituals by the domination of computer codes in our society. We cannot conceive of how using search engines alters how we engage with the world around us, with

our friends and family.

The decline in the humanities as part of our experience of the world, combined with a growing anti-intellectual culture born of the passivity practiced by so many who see themselves as consumers, not active members of society, has encouraged another dangerous trend: the failure to distinguish clearly between science and technology.

We see this trend especially in advertising, which has displaced analysis as the primary content of our media ecosystem. Advertising stresses the magical qualities of new technologies that startle and delight. In most cases, technology is presented as a means for amusing oneself, or solving an inconvenience, but is in no way related to the quest for truth. Understanding is discouraged and amazement encouraged.

We certainly live in an age dominated by technology, and new technologies (or new combinations of old technologies) are increasing. But we do not live in an age of science. This distinction is blurred by the common practice of lumping together the two fields in the phrase “science and technology,” thereby encouraging sloppy thinking.

Science is the critical investigation of the world around us in accord with the scientific method. Although there are experts who practice science in our society, fewer and fewer people within institutions, let alone the population as a whole, have much of a concept of what exactly science means. The profound ignorance about the impact of disposable plastics on the environment is just one example of the diminishing role of scientific thinking in our society.

I am reminded of Paul Goodman’s famous line in his article [“Can Technology be Humane?”](#)

“Whether or not it draws on new scientific research, technology is a branch of moral philosophy, not of science.”

Technology is ultimately about how we create a better world and should be governed by the principles of moral philosophy, including the possible decision not to develop, or not to employ, technologies that are destructive. Technology should never be confused with the search for truth through a combination of speculation and of constant systematic verification.

Ultimately, the humanities are essential to that cornerstone of true scientific investigation, the scientific method. The scientific method demands above all else a powerful imagination capable of coming up with multiple explanations to explain the phenomenon that we perceive, which then can be subject to rigorous analysis.

The rigorous analysis is required to produce good science, but it is imagination, the ability to postulate varied explanations, some far-fetched, which is the essential part of the process.

Albert Einstein was able to make a breakthrough in the field of theoretical physics because he spent hours imagining how the universe might work, how things look to a photon, what wacky explanations can be used to describe ordinary phenomena. His work was akin to storytelling and novels, and it was such thinking that allowed him to see what was invisible to others caught up in accepted practice.

Our addiction to technology, and to a commercialized and consumption-focused culture, has grown so deep that it will be extremely difficult to break free of the process that has so

narrowed our horizons. But the increasing fragmentation of our society and the negative impact of technology on the environment will force us to do so.

We will not find solutions to this crisis in the familiar toolbox of semiconductors and smartphones. Rather we will again have to open up that dust-covered box labeled “The Humanities.”

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This article was originally published on [Fear No Evil](#).

Emanuel Pastreich served as the president of the Asia Institute, a think tank with offices in Washington DC, Seoul, Tokyo and Hanoi. Pastreich also serves as director general of the Institute for Future Urban Environments. Pastreich declared his candidacy for president of the United States as an independent in February, 2020.

He is a regular contributor to Global Research.

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