The pandemic has changed the way we perceive technology — and how we resist it

Albert Cahn, Evan Selinger

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As coronavirus-related restrictions ebb (at least for now) and we begin to flow back to "normal" life, it's important to understand how the past two years changed us.

Among the changes, our protracted pandemic has profoundly altered how we perceive technology. For some, increased isolation and reliance on digital services dampened our willingness to critically confront the systems that ensnare us. But for many more, that same climate of reliance has also made it easier — or at least more essential — to question the hold our devices and platforms have on us. In other cases, our frustrating encounters with pandemic technology may have called attention to broader social ills. Indeed, encountering dysfunctional and intrusive technology during a time of need may have breathed new life into calls more generally for resistance.

When the pandemic began and nobody knew how long it would last, many believed technology and the companies that make it would keep us safe. Like other major companies desperate to appear noble, Apple donated millions of masks to health-care providers when they were in short supply, and Facebook stepped up with $100 million in grants to assist small businesses. Meanwhile, Google made headlines for fighting covid-19 misinformation and lies about coronavirus vaccines.

Whatever the value of this work from individual companies, the historic truce between Apple and Google drew the most attention. The pair hoped a joint exposure notification platform, using our phones to track everyone we come close to, could help keep the pandemic under control. Despite criticism of the technology's limitations, potential bias and privacy impact, public opinion initially ran high. Indeed, the dominant narrative held that the techlash — pushback against tech companies, automation and digitalization — had "softened."

Although tech companies benefited from initial interest, this enthusiasm was short-lived. Many Americans found contact-tracing apps confusing, and it didn't take long for skepticism to become pervasive. To put it mildly, the Apple-Google partnership "had limited success." For all of Apple and Google's claims to be innovative, their leadership made a classic mistake: They ignored the political, sociological and psychological barriers that inhibit dramatic behavioral change.

Despite two technological giants falling short, many remained generally optimistic about the role that technology would play in their pandemic lives. Last year, Oxford's Carrisa Véliz observed: "People have had to use online tools to work, get an education, receive medical attention, and enjoy much-needed entertainment. Gratefulness for having technology that allows us to stay in contact during such circumstances has thus watered down the general techlash."

For one scholar at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute, this meant saying that "Covid-19 Should Make Us Grateful for Technology" including in medical advances, food production, remote work and social connection. When the New York Times' Shira Ovide reflected on a year of the pandemic, she tempered her criticism of big tech with gratitude "that technology helped many millions of us muddle through work, school and family life." Even some theologians offered up their gratitude for the help of "technological marvels" during those first holidays during the pandemic.

However, despite the gratitude, lots of tech criticism emerged, and it often channeled grievances about other pandemic problems. Talk of "Zoom fatigue" is partly a lament about technological constraints, like being unable to make eye contact. But it's also a powerful reminder that we're mourning the ease of being at in-person events without worrying about getting infected with a potentially fatal virus. To some extent, then, the growing aversion to being on Zoom conveys dissatisfaction with living so much of our lives online. It suggests that, contrary to Mark Zuckerberg's metaverse mania, many of us are not looking forward to spending myriad hours socializing in virtual reality or any other digital medium. The backlash against what is colloquially known as Zoom school was partly about intrusive technology, such as discriminatory AI proctoring systems. But the technology also became a tainted symbol for a cluster of closely related problems. While Zoom made necessary distance learning possible, it called attention to the finite support available to teachers, limited socialization for kids, and overburdened parents who need to provide far more technical and educational help than usual.

That's the thing about so much pandemic tech. It's fundamentally contradictory. Tools that some welcome as salvation, others denounce as miserable.

Amazon is perhaps the best example of the antinomy of pandemic technology. American consumers tend to trust Amazon. But when we look at Amazon from the perspective of concerned community members, far fewer of us want to buy what it sells: dehumanizing labor conditions, expanding corporate surveillance, monopolistic power and excessive wealth inequality. The same pandemic that led to record demand for Amazon fulfillment services drove protests of inhumane warehouse conditions and drives to unionize Amazon's sprawling

workforce, which is the second largest in the country. (Amazon founder Jeff Bezos owns The Washington Post.)

Almost all technologies that sparked a backlash over the past two years predate the pandemic. But when adopted at a mass scale, concerns once demeaned as "fringe" privacy and civil rights positions entered the mainstream. When New York Times columnist Farhad Manjoo recently wrote, "A bigger deal, I think, is that the pandemic illustrated how much room there still is in our lives for adding even more tech," he was channeling a common Silicon Valley refrain that tech will only become more central to how we interact with the world. But when you look at how the public has responded in recent months, the reality is just the reverse.

When schools and universities dramatically expanded the use of remote proctoring, they faced growing national opposition from students who detailed the technology's terrifying impact and from scholars concerned about growing surveillance power. Pre-pandemic, academic spyware slowly, steadily expanded for years. Now, however, some schools were forced to abandon it.

When the Internal Revenue Service initially responded to increasing fraud reports, the federal tax agency turned to a little-known software vendor called ID.me. While some (including us) had previously denounced using facial recognition as a login tool for government services, the practice largely escaped public notice. But by the time the IRS threatened to expand the technology to services accessed 60 million times a year, the outcry was so pervasive the organization relented.

And when the historic economic insecurity of the pandemic drove a tenfold increase in performers on the adult site OnlyFans, the site followed a predictable pattern. As the sex worker advocacy group Hacking/Hustling documents, digital platforms frequently have relied on sex workers, with little or no compensation, only to eventually de-platform these same users. First, the pandemic drove exponential growth in the platform. Then, anti-sex work activists pressured both OnlyFans and the financial institutions that serve them. If the story had stopped with OnlyFans' response, the decision to remove sex workers, it would have followed the pre-pandemic pattern. But, instead, the mass adoption of OnlyFans also led to mass opposition, and unlike many sites before, OnlyFans reversed course.

It's surreal that the pandemic has dragged on for two years. Nobody knows when it will end, much less which trends will persist or fade away. Perhaps pandemic-era dependence on tech has further normalized a pervasive sense of gratitude tinged with resignation. Or maybe, just maybe, our period of heightened vulnerability will inspire a lasting pushback against invasive technologies and the companies that tell us their exceptional ingenuity and magnanimous beneficence will save us.