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Technology Run Amok: Crisis Management in the Digital Age: Book Review

Danielle Mehlman-Brightwell

West Liberty University, West Liberty, West Virginia, USA
Correspondence: Danielle.Mehlman-Brightwell@westliberty.edu

Technology Run Amok: Crisis Management in the Digital Age by Ian I. Mitroff weaves a captivating, informative, and alarming explanation of how technology can cause far more damage than society could ever dream of, and if not prepared, technology will have detrimental effects on humanity. He finds society accountable by failing to manage technology, claiming that the “Technological Mindset” is responsible for society’s coordinated fixation on technology and will cause continuing crises if not confronted. The title fits the theme that technology is amok—violently raging, wild, and uncontrolled. Mitroff recommends a crisis management mindset, contrary to the technological mindset, in which a regulatory agency audits every new invention’s social consequence.

This book contributes impressively to our understanding of the social impact of technology. The author uses an ethical analysis drawing widely from such fields as argumentation, crisis management, nuclear strategy, psychoanalysis, philosophy, and System Thinking (p. ix). By evaluating problems related to the social impact of how technology is disrupting lives with its constant intrusion (i.e., “the messy system” where our lives and technology are tethered together “affecting us in every way possible”), Mitroff takes a realistic stance (p. viii). He skillfully warns of the severe implications of technology: since users are too immersed within the technology, they are blinded by the effects of technology and are unable to analyze this situation rationally. Mitroff proposes that society needs to have a better understanding of this complex, messy system.

The 14 chapters are divided logically starting with the triumph of technology and building to coping with technology. Topics such as technical revolution changing society, wicked messes, technological mindset, and crisis management mindset all provide context to his arguments. His approach appears to follow McLuhan in that it is more about questioning the positive and negative effects of the advancing technology in society than questioning the technology itself. For example, Mitroff begins with an account of Facebook's unauthorized release of private data of millions of users. He argues that this one example is a "highly disturbing pattern" of what happens when technology becomes a complex, messy system without regulation. Even CEO Mark Zuckerberg claims that the crisis occurred because of the company's failure to see the "big picture" (p. 1). The author argues that technology users also fail to see the large implications technology has on society.

This introduction transitions into how all technology, not just Facebook, will totter from one crisis to the next. One area of the book that could be improved upon is its narrow scope of examples; the examples of Facebook are prolonged. Mitroff's analysis provides a clear explanation of how the "Technological Mindset" facetiously disregards the possibility that technological advances can cause societal disruption and instead focuses on the belief that technology is the solution to all our problems and is the most essential factor for progress. He warns of the falsehood of the "Technological Mindset" and provides a clear argument that "before any technology is unleashed, a serious audit of its social impacts, both negative and positive, needs to be conducted by panels made up of technologists, parents, social scientists, teachers, children, etc." (p. 16). However, this reveals a second limitation of the book—the author is less clear about a plan for how regulation could be used to release or not release these new technologies.

Overall, this book could be used in an undergraduate or graduate crisis communication or educational technology course. Mitroff uses a transdisciplinary approach that should appeal to educators and practitioners alike. He provides strong arguments and numerous, insightful sources and is recommended for researchers, professors, practitioners, and students interested in technology's long-term effects on society. Mitroff offers a thoughtful, sophisticated, rich analysis of creative interdisciplinary methodology. His psychoanalytic insights make the reader think about the interdependencies between technology and society and the best ways to deal with the wickedly messy world which we have created.

Danielle Mehlman-Brightwell is an instructor in Media and Visual Arts at West Liberty University. She has a B.A. from Wheeling Jesuit University, an M.A.E. from Muskingum, and an M.A. from Bowling Green State. Currently, she is a Ph.D. candidate at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. She serves as assistant editor for the Journal of Communications Media Studies, co-executive producer for Newline 14 on Topper Station, and faculty advisor to The Trumpet. Her research interests span both mass communication and political communication. Her work focuses on understanding the effects of mass media on the communicative activity of citizens.

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