#### Terrestrial manufacturing causes existential overshoot---orbital solves

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THE BENEFITS OF SPACE RESOURCES MINING

The true motivation for space exploration is to take better care of our fragile planet. Archaeology shows how entire civilizations can collapse after failing to manage their limited resources and neglecting to repair the damage inflicted to the environment.

Look no further than Easter Island. In his book Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive, American historian Jared Mason Diamond describes “the most extreme example of forest destruction in the Pacific, and among the most extreme in the world: the whole forest gone, and all of its tree species extinct. Immediate consequences of the islanders were losses of raw materials, losses of wild-caught foods, and decreased crop yield.” For the islanders this was catastrophic. With their natural resources depleted they could no longer manufacture seagoing canoes with which to fish offshore; no longer protect themselves from the cold, windy winters by burning wood or building shelters; no longer continue to erect the statues that are characteristic of the island. Deforestation enabled the wind and rain to erode the soil and further deprive the islanders of local sources of food. This severely limited their farming. As Diamond continues, “They had the misfortune of living in one of the most fragile environments at the highest risk of deforestation of any Pacific people. … [The] formerly complex integrated society collapsed in an epidemic of civil war.” Fights over control of the remaining resources, primarily plants and wood, led to one of the most repugnant of human acts: cannibalism.

Easter Island might be far in space and time from our reality but it is a compelling analogue of our modern society. The islanders were isolated, separated from the rest of the world’s civilizations by the Pacific Ocean and hence unable to ask for help. In much the same way planet Earth exists in the infinite ocean of space, isolated from any other habitable world (if indeed one exists). They could not escape from their tiny territory, which they had made worthless. Similarly if cli- mate change, pollution, and plundering of resources go unchecked and pose a severe threat to our existence we will be trapped. In concluding his analysis of Easter Island’s demise, Diamond asks: “If mere thousands of Easter Islanders with just stone tools and their own muscle power sufficed to destroy their environment and thereby destroyed their society, how can billions of people with metal tools and machine power now fail to do worse?”

Another good example is the Chaco Anasazi, a society that dwelled in the Chaco Canyon of northwestern New Mexico for hundreds of years, beginning in 600 AD. As Diamond has written: “It was a complexly organized, geographically extensive, regionally integrated society that erected the largest buildings in pre- Columbian North America.” They managed to tame a fragile desert environment characterized by low and unpredictable rainfall, quickly exhausted soils, and very low rate of forest growth. Then they collapsed. “Over the course of six centuries the human population of Chaco Canyon grew, its demands on the environment grew, its environmental resources declined, and people came to be living increas- ingly close to the margin of what the environment could support.” In the wake of this collapse they were unable to rebuild their society in the way that the first farm- ers of that area had because “the initial conditions of abundant nearby trees, high groundwater levels, and a smooth floodplain without arroyos [rivers] had disap- peared”. If our modern industrialized globalized society were to collapse, would it rise again and regain its splendor?

Easter Island and the Chaco Anasazi were small civilizations, tiny compared to our interconnected world, and we might be tempted to sit on our laurels and persuade ourselves that our society is too large to fail. It might be so, but the fall of the Maya is a striking reminder that even well-developed, culturally advanced societies are not immune to collapse. Diamond identifies several reasons for their break down. For instance, “pollution outstripping available resources … too many farmers grew too many crops on too much of the landscape” causing pollution to outstrip any available resource until there was no land left unblemished. A second motive was “the effects of deforestation and hillside erosion, which caused a decrease in the amount of usable farmland at a time when more rather than less farmland was needed, and possibly exacerbated by an anthropogenic drought resulting from deforestation, by soil nutrient depletion and other soil problems.” As the local climate changed, people were forced to move into new areas until, finally, “there was no useful unoccupied land in the vicinity on which to begin anew, and the whole population could not be accommodated in the few areas that continued to have reliable water supplies.” I am sure that, by now, you will have recognized how alarmingly analogous the Maya are to our society!

Diamond’s analysis of how civilizations collapse cites environmental damage as the chief culprit, no matter how sophisticated such societies were. He has arranged environmental damage into twelve categories: deforestation and habitat destruction; soil problems (erosion, salinization, and the loss of soil fertility); water management problems; overhunting; overfishing; introducing new species to native ones; human population growth; increased per-capita impact of people; climate change caused by humans; accumulation of toxic chemicals in the environment; energy shortages; full human utilization of Earth’s photosynthetic capacity.

Some of these categories, particularly the accumulation of toxic chemicals in the environment and destruction of natural habitats, are heavily influenced by resource extraction and manufacturing industries. We saw in Chapter 1 how we are generally degrading the environment and overwhelming it with pollution. We are in danger of destroying the biosphere that is the life support system for our species.

We went to the Moon in response to a perceived political and ideological threat whose magnitude triggered a whole nation into Cold War battle mode and delivered an impossible dream: walking on the Moon. Now, the entire human species is under threat by a menace far worse than those ideological skirmishes. An appreciation of just how similar our modern society is to civilizations that collapsed catastrophically ought to make us regard space not only as a place of discovery but also as a valuable resource that can safeguard the long-term prospects of our species by turning it into a spacefaring civilization. This will, in return, relieve the stresses that we are placing on our planet.

Let us highlight again that a space-based manufacturing industry is not a panacea, a cure for all of humankind’s misconduct, but it does have the potential to be a part of the solution. Off-world mining will initially parallel its terrestrial coun- terpart, then become our main supplier of resources. Remember in the lifeless vacuum of space, resource mining is environmentally harmless.

By accessing the immense resources of the Solar System, extraterrestrial mining might also play a role in alleviating the political pressures that result from resource scarcity, an issue that it is receiving ever more consideration. In their book Scarcity: The True Cost of Not Having Enough, Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir explain how “scarcity captures the mind … it changes how we think. It imposes itself on our minds … having less is unpleasant … scarcity leads to dissatisfaction and struggle.” And “because we are preoccupied by scarcity, because our mind constantly returns to it, we have less mind to give to the rest of life … it makes us less insightful, less forward-thinking, less controlled … focus- ing on one thing means neglecting others.” In effect, scarcity causes us “to focus single-mindedly on managing the scarcity at hand.”

Indeed, we are resorting ever more often to this single-minded management by way of declarations of economic sanctions; trade wars; establishment of outposts in territories whose jurisdiction is widely contested because they can offer a strategic advantage in controlling key resource supplies or commercial routes; and agreements between governments and corporations for the exclusive exploitation of land and its resources, often disregarding the local population and the possibility of armed local conflicts. As it is often the case, such arrangements involve countries that are laden with corruption and have essentially no interest in the welfare of their citizens or the preservation of the environment. Eventually, as the effects of resource scarcity are felt by our society this could all too readily precipitate conflicts on a much grander scale as individual nations seek to protect their interests by assuring access to crucial resources regardless of the consequences. Remember the Maya? Another cause for their disintegration was, as Diamond says, the “increased fighting, as more and more people fought over fewer resources. Maya warfare, already endemic, peaked just before the collapse. … Warfare would have decreased further the amount of land available for agriculture, by creating no-man’s lands between principalities where it was now unsafe to farm.” We would do well to pay attention to how resource scarcity might one day steer us to the same fate.

We could intensify our efforts to exploit lower-grade ores, presuming that we are willing to accept a few nasty consequences. For instance, resource mining is mostly a matter of energy rather than quantity. This is why we first exploited the high-grade ores. Because they are easily accessible they are not particularly demanding in terms of the energy required to extract and process them. By con- trast, low-grade ores are being surveyed and exploited only now because they do necessitate more energy for their extraction. This requires increasingly sophisti- cated equipment to be transported and then assembled in punishing places – remember the Shell Prelude? It must be designed to work in a more hostile environment – remember the Berkut oil rig? In general, if an ore has a concentra- tion ten times lower than a richer one it will demand ten times more energy to extract the same quantity of resource. What about waste? The poorer the concen- tration of ore, the greater is the quantity of rock and soil to be displaced and pro- cessed, as well as the chemicals needed for beneficiation. Thus we escalate pollution and environmental degradation. Besides, as Ugo Bardi, a professor of Physical Chemistry at the University of Florence, Italy, reminds us in his book Extracted: How the Quest for Mineral Wealth is Plundering the Planet, “The total energy used by the mining and metal-producing industry might be close to 10 per cent of the total world energy production [and] this can only increase as we access lower-grade resources.” So we see that resource scarcity and energy production are interlinked. Indeed, as Bardi points out, “The problem of dwindling ore grades also occurs with the fossil fuels; energy is becoming more and more energy- expensive to produce.” This includes energy produced by solar, tidal, and wind resources. Unless we can generate more energy to account for the increased demand imposed by the exploitation of lower-grade ores, resource scarcity will continue to pose a threat to society. At the same time, boosting the demand for energy can only cause additional environmental damage, as the already dwindling resources required for the energy-producing apparatus, such as solar panels, wind- mills, batteries, and power lines, are being extracted from low-grade ores.

A circular economy that makes the most of available resources while minimizing waste has undoubted merits but it is not immune from shortcomings. Bardi reminds us, “In most places around the world there has never been an effort to manage waste in such a way to make it easy to recover useful materials from it … as a consequence many minerals that have entered the world’s economy during the past few centuries are today accumulated inside landfills or dispersed in the eco- system … Reclaiming the minerals from waste that we have recklessly dispersed around or even dumped into the ocean is a monumental task, and it is unlikely we could reasonably recover much of them … The average concentration of rare met- als in a landfill is low. An even more difficult problem is that metals are mixed together. So exploiting a landfill as if it were a mine would require sophisticated and expensive separation techniques and much energy, and would also create a lot of pollution.” Mining landfills is not without risks, as it brings its own drawbacks in terms of workers’ safety and enduring organic waste that produces foul odors and bacterial contaminations. Also, landfills contain all manner of sharp-edged objects, poisons, explosives, noxious gases, and many more potential hazards. Bardi also warns of “downcycling,” a term that “refers to the fact the recycled material is normally of lower quality than the same material manufactured from pristine mineral sources”. For example, consider the aluminum in cans for foods and beverages. Often it is alloyed with magnesium. Separating the metals for reuse involves a great effort. Another representative case is that of steel. As the application drives the formulation of each type of steel, it follows that melting together components made of different types of steel would result in steel of lower quality due to the presence of uncontrolled quantities of alloying elements, mak- ing the recycled steel an average of the input steels and thus not suitable for demanding structural applications. The bottom line, Bardi says, is that, “Most materials are not endlessly recyclable.” In addition, “Recycling processes also require energy, water, and often the input of additional resources. Recycling also creates burdens through collection, reclamation, and transportation.” Consequently, “Something that is truly unavoidable in our future is the disappearance of high- grade ore and the dispersal of the elements they contained all over the planet in forms that cannot be recovered.”

Substitution is another approach but it, too, has its limitations. For instance, some elements have properties so peculiar that identifying a substitute might be impossible for given applications unless we invent a new metallurgy or new mate- rials physics. Besides, the resources problem is one of confronting general scar- city not of merely coping with the exhaustion of one or two particular minerals. To illustrate, if we wish to replace copper with aluminum in electronic applications, the demand on resources would simply shift to aluminum, which will then be depleted even more rapidly than projected. And if a substitute is less efficient this will require a change in the design of a given application, possibly causing it to draw more energy to perform the same function. It is easy to appreciate how, for consumer applications, substitution might quickly accelerate resource depletion and provoke soaring energy requirements that have the opposite effect to that being sought.

The exploitation of low-grade ore, recycling, reuse, and substitution, are all valid policies for stalling resource scarcity and are worth exploring whenever fea- sible, but it must be kept in mind that they are not exempt from drawbacks or limi- tations due to physics and chemistry. Space resource mining could overcome these barriers, or at least assist in compensating for them, and thus enter into the mix of solutions that address our society’s future resource and energy needs whilst caring for the planet’s environment. Space mining will be conducted in an environment where energy from the Sun is abundant, continuous, and free. The exploitation of low-grade ores will be worthwhile on celestial bodies. Space mining will be able to supply the resources for which substitution and downcycling fall short.

THE BENEFITS OF MANUFACTURING IN SPACE

Because orbital factories will be in the vacuum of space they will supplement their terrestrial counterparts without endangering a life-filled environment. Their heat and waste cannot cause harm, because they will not interact with any biosphere.

Sunlight will be an inexhaustible source of energy to run power-hungry facilities. What goods will be produced? Ideally, anything! More practically, the first task of space-based manufacturing will be to demonstrate several high-tech appli- cations of the type discussed in the previous chapter. Then, it can concentrate on producing a limited number of goods for terrestrial consumption that are in demand at that time; e.g., batteries for electric vehicles, computers and electronic devices. As is often said, “The sky is the limit.” As the possibilities are endless, we should not limit ourselves in speculating what might or might not be manufactured.

In fact, factories in space offer the potential of constructing and assembling large infrastructures, such as satellite solar-power systems. This concept was pat- ented by Peter E. Glaser in December 1973. US patent #3,781,647 says, “The radiation energy derived from the Sun is converted to microwave energy in equipment maintained in outer space, then it is transmitted as microwave energy to suitable collectors on Earth. Hence, the problems of absorption of the solar radia- tion by the atmosphere and of sudden interruptions are eliminated because micro- waves can pass through the atmosphere with minimum absorption and scattering. By receiving the solar energy and converting it into the form of microwave energy, the microwave energy can be collected in widely dispersed locations on Earth without regard to availability of solar radiation. … Hence the major drawbacks associated with the direct terrestrial collection of solar energy are minimized.” Ever since it was proposed, the concept has been studied in detail both by NASA and industry. Configurations and variations on the theme abound in the specialized literature. But the sheer size of the orbiting solar collector (several square kilome- ters) has always obliged the concept to remain on paper. Simply put, assembling such a large-scale infrastructure with components made on Earth would require so much material and so many launches as to make it unrealistic. The drawbacks would greatly outweigh the advantages. Yet, the concept will become viable if extraterrestrial resources and space manufacturing are adopted. Estimates vary, but some number of satellite solar-power systems could comfortably provide the energy to power our society and help elevate developing countries to the level of prosperity enjoyed by their developed counterparts.

[FOOTNOTE 8.1 OMITTED]

Gerard K. O’Neill and many of his followers (including this author) look forward to colonies in space capable of housing millions of people. It will take some time to get there, but in the interim a practical application that is on a par with satellite solar-power systems is that of space farms.

As American journalist and educator Richard Heinberg wrote in his book Peak Everything: Waking Up to the Century of Decline, agriculture “is now the single greatest sources of human damage to the global environment. This damage is in the form of erosion and salinization of soil; deforestation (a strategy for bringing more land into cultivation); fertilizer runoff (which creates enormous ‘dead zones’ around the mouths of rivers); loss of biodiversity; fresh water scarcity; and agro-chemical pollution of water and soil.” This means that more food production to feed an ever-growing population is not a viable solution if we are to preserve the environment.

As Eric Zencey pointed out in his book The Other Road to Serfdom and the Path to Sustainable Democracy, a positive feedback exists in which “food scarcity leads to expanded agriculture, which diminishes natural ecosystems and their eco- system services, which eventually leads to agricultural losses, which leads to food scarcity. … We could try to bring even more land into cultivation – but only at the cost of increasing the rate at which we lose something else, [namely] the ecosys- tem services on which our civilization, including our capacity to feed ourselves, depends.”

Besides, the amount of food we can grow is limited by three factors: soil fertil- ity, water, and sunlight. As Zencey continues, “In our cheap-energy petroleum economy we’ve pushed against the limits set by the first two constraints, using the energy of oil to fix nitrogen into artificial fertilizers and to pump fresh water into dry lands that are, in nature’s design, inhospitable to farming. … When the oil runs out, so too will end its enormous subsidy to agriculture.”

As far as sunlight is concerned, the Sun will keep shining for billions of years to come, so we will not have to bother with absence of sunlight any time soon. Still, we do need to consider that sunlight is the driver of photosynthesis, which is a complex sequence of chemical reactions that enable plants to grow food. Considering that the Earth’s surface is finite and that only a limited portion of it is suitable as arable land there is a limited capacity of growing food, for humans and all other living species. In the same manner that resource scarcity and environ- mental concerns can drive the exploitation of extraterrestrial resources, farming in space will alleviate the pressure imposed on the environment by the need to feed an ever-growing population. Space farming would also be immune from the vagaries of natural phenomena, often driven by the climate change that we are our- selves causing, such as flooding and droughts. When large areas assigned to agriculture are hit by such events, the resulting loss in food production can have repercussions on the well-being of a whole nation, perhaps even wider, depending on the kind of crops that are lost. Often the recovery is slow, and can be further delayed if another natural disaster strikes in the meantime.

As of today, only a small number of puny investigations have been carried out in the field of space farming. The focus is on achieving a better understanding of plant behavior in zero-g, and giving a therapeutic past-time to astronauts on long- duration missions. Interest is growing, spurred by the ever-present willingness to establish a small scientific outpost on the Moon or on Mars. Clearly, space farm- ing will require serious attention, as well as the establishment of a development program not unlike that for orbital factories. A good starting point would be to research the best ways to grow food in space on an industrial scale, to assess whether it is feasible in zero-g or requires a level of artificial gravity. Terrestrial approaches such as hydroponics and vertical farming would surely be among the favorite candidates for trial in space. At first the greenhouse modules could be manufactured on Earth and launched to create a space farm of several modules. This would help to grasp the working principles of an infrastructure dedicated to growing food, instead of the manufacture of products. In time, as space-based manufacturing evolves, such modules could be fabricated in-situ, perhaps using minerals supplied by off-world mines. The first space farms could be designed to grow staple and non-perishable food. Eventually, they would house livestock. Once again, the sky is the limit. And considering that space farming will require us to artificially recreate and maintain a terrestrial habitat, such applications might help us to find better solutions for taking care of Earth’s natural environment.

#### Space manufacturing doesn’t work. It is a distraction from efforts to uproot destructive social relations.

Matthew Robert Johnson 20, Ph.D., University of Technology, Sydney, “Mining the High Frontier: Sovereignty, Property and Humankind’s Common Heritage in Outer Space,” 2020, opus.lib.uts.edu.au, <https://opus.lib.uts.edu.au/handle/10453/142380>

We have discussed how NewSpace projects its ideals of individual liberty and economic freedom onto the exotic temporal and spatial horizons of inter-planetary space. Yet the aporia at the heart of NewSpace cosmopolitics is consistent with the neoliberal political project. NewSpace’s reliance on the sovereign power of national government and the support of the taxpayer is disguised under pirate fantasies and the valorisation of the entrepreneur and the ‘free’ market. NewSpace actors have dismissed the claim that space colonisation is an “escape hatch for the rich” (Musk, in Allen & VandeHei 2018) or that the CSLCA represents “a [further] step towards American domination and hegemony in space” (Kfir 2016). Does a colonisation project founded on private property really aspire to support a ‘burgeoning’ species, or is it more likely a project in lining the pockets of a select few members? As Shammas and Holen note, NewSpace does not herald the off-worlding of Gattungswesen, or the ‘species-being’ of humanity, but rather a “specific set of entrepreneurs” venturing forth while “carrying a particular ideological payload” (2019, p.5). The cosmopolitan, salvationist rhetoric of NewSpace is discordant with their undermining of international laws of the space commons and their evident support from the neoliberal think-tanks of the Atlas Network.

In this chapter we will return to another paradox of NewSpace: its post-limits environmental imaginary, where the cosmic frontier offers deliverance from planetary ecological catastrophe. The NewSpace network has appealed to environmental conservation as a justification for off-world migration and industrialism, ever since Gerard O’Neill responded to the predictions of the first Limits to Growth report (O’Neill 1977; Meadows et al. 1972). In the words of the Space Frontier Foundation, the colonisation of the Solar System will “not only preserve the biosphere of earth by using the resources of space” but will present the opportunity to transport “life to worlds now dead” (SFF, in Tumlinson 2003, p.2). The National Space Society (a descendant of the L-5 Society) warns of numerous existential threats to human and non-human life on Earth:

“The human species is encountering increased natural, man-made, and extraterrestrial threats, including disease, resource depletion, pollution, urban violence, terrorism, nuclear war, asteroids, and comets…Many forms of animal and plant life on Earth are suffering increased loss of population and quality habitat because of the growing presence of humans on planet Earth, via expansion, pollution, deforestation, fishing, farming, mining, and promotion of certain species of animals and plants…Space industrialization and settlement provide safety valves to relieve the pressures that cause Earth-bound threats. They also provide escape routes in case of catastrophic man-made or extraterrestrial threats. Humanity has inherited the stewardship of the planet Earth. It will therefore need the vast resources of outer space to reverse the damage it has caused to the Earth’s biosphere, and ultimately enhance all life on Earth” (NSS 2019).

NewSpace’s anticipatory discourse is eschatological or millenarian in nature: it envisions apocalyptic and world-transformative future events while optimistically positing unrealised space technologies as the source of salvation. A ‘rapture of the nerds’, to borrow an expression from the more irreverent quarters of science fiction literature (e.g. Doctorow & Stross 2012).

How do we interpret NewSpace biopolitics? In the first half of this chapter, I will demonstrate that NewSpace environmentalism rests upon the ‘techno-fix’: a mode of problem-solving that defers action on immediate ecological crises through the assumption of future technological progress (Clark & York 2013). Like ‘clean coal’ or geoengineering, NewSpace represents a case study in neoliberal environmentalism, where the market is presumed to be superior to the state as an architect of solutions to environmental problems (Mirowski, Walker & Abboud 2013). I will argue that NewSpace biopolitics is actually ‘postbiological’. NewSpace techno-utopianism involves an assumption that the biophysical limits of Earth and the human body can be overcome through private sector innovation, such that there is no need for a global steady state economy and the attendant constraints of international law. In this sense, NewSpace eschatology resonates with mystic philosophies like Singularitarianism or noöspherism: hypothesised, future evolutionary stages of humankind in which we transcend our connection to the biosphere (Vernadsky 2012 [1938]; Teilhard de Chardin 1964).

NewSpace’s project of ‘ecological salvation by space colonisation’ is undermined by the inherent elitism of its eschatology and the way in which the CSLCA undermines international laws of the global commons. The irony in the NewSpace ‘rapture’ is that we can attribute many of the crises facing humanity to the very remedies they have proposed for the off-world: extractive industry and the unyielding, largely unfettered exercise of mineral sovereignty (Walker & Johnson 2018). In the second half of this chapter, I will offer some policy recommendations that represent more pragmatic and egalitarian alternatives to the NewSpace techno-fix – a pathway towards more inclusive and sustainable futures on Earth and the off-world frontier. For this, we will return to Karl Polanyi and his notion of the ‘double movement’ – the social and political institutions that can protect against the deleterious effects of neoliberalism (2001 [1944]). Following Nanda and Ris (1976) and Baslar (1998), I propose the public trust doctrine (Sax 1969) as a governance regime for the global commons of Earth and as an alternative to the unilateral private property regime of the CSLCA. I argue that if we establish global commons and mineral estates as public trusts, predicated on the protection of intergenerational rights and an ethics of stewardship, we might be able to defend humankind’s common heritage on Earth and in space against the tide of neoliberal constitutionalism.

6.1 NewSpace biopolitics: planetary crisis meets transcendence fantasy

NewSpace actors have argued that endogenous crises (such as ecological collapse produced by industrial pollution, population growth and resource depletion) and exogenous threats (such as meteor impacts) could be mitigated by opening the space frontier to commercial exploitation and human habitation (e.g. Space Renaissance USA 2020 [2011]). NewSpace engages with environmental problems through what have been called ‘techno-fixes’ and anticipates that the fundamental biophysical limits of both the planet and the human body can be transcended through technological innovation (Cooper 2007; Clark & York 2013; Walker & Granjou 2017). Reminiscent of Enlightenment progress ideology, there is a faith-like confidence that technology and the market will inevitably deliver us from evils of our own making – a teleological grand narrative promising a future of infinitude and abundance that Walker (2007) has similarly identified in neoliberal growth theory. Space colonisation is perceived to be humankind’s ultimate destiny, where techno-capital will transcend the bonds of Earth and the worthy entrepreneurial elect ascend to pioneer the infinite frontier. I will explore similarities between NewSpace and Singularitarianism, a techno-utopian movement resting on even more ‘post-biological’ foundations. These two movements have over-lapping social networks and share techno-mystic philosophical tenets. I demonstrate how they appear to draw on the ‘noösphere’ concept: a teleological account of societal evolution predicated on the triumph of reason (Vernadsky 2012) and the transcendence of mortal limits (Chardin 1964). Seen in this light, space mining and colonisation appear as means to escape Earth rather than to save it.

6.1.1 The biophysical limits of Earth and NewSpace ‘techno-fixes’

NewSpace techno-utopianism posits space colonisation as a means of mitigating the risks of planetary ecological collapse and ‘fixing’ anthropogenic environmental degradation. In spite of copious technological hurdles, NewSpace philosophy treats such a solution as preferable to regulatory mechanisms. As we explored earlier (section 1.2.1), Gerard O’Neill’s space utopianism was spurred by the first Limits to Growth report (Meadows et al. 1972). O’Neill thought space colonisation could “protect the biosphere from damage caused by transportation and industrial pollution” (1974, p.36), while also dismissing the regulatory and governmental mechanisms of the ‘steady state’ economy as a viable alternative (1977). In the NewSpace paradigm, to work within terrestrial biophysical limits means accepting limits imposed by regulation and any global governance, resource re-distribution or environmental management that it might entail. The Space Frontier Foundation (SFF), for instance, muse that:

“Five hundred years after the beginning of Age of Enlightenment, society has merely expanded the size of its mental prison, and all current thinking is trapped in the cage of earth and its biosphere. This is a cage in our minds. It is this idea lurking behind such phrases as ‘limits to growth’ or today’s vogue term in social planning circles: ‘sustainable growth’… Proponents of this view plan for all of the world’s people to live under a global set of rules designed to limit our inevitably increasing damage to the biosphere. They hope to ‘manage’ human society through treaties and agreements that percolate down to the level of local laws… We can sustain the growth of the human species and the other life of planet Earth only by bursting the bubble. We must open the space frontier” (Tumlinson & SFF 1995).

The SFF are correct in pointing to the fallibility of attempts to achieve ‘sustainable growth’ on a finite planet (Tumlinson & SFF 1995). There is here a failure to acknowledge that reducing Western patterns of energy and resource consumption are an alternative option to leaving Earth. Responsibility for the Anthropocene is unevenly distributed, and ‘we’ are not ‘inevitably’ damaging the biosphere (Walker & Johnson 2018, p.57). Furthermore, the SFF have previously collaborated with the Cato Institute (Hudgins 2002), who have actively campaigned against environmental law and pollution controls (a deliberate and more literal bursting of the life-supporting atmospheric ‘bubble’).

It is important to note here that, across NewSpace organisations and their investors, there are divergent views on the most pressing of environmental challenges: climate change. For example, the Space Development Foundation has followed in O’Neill’s footsteps by emphasising space-based solar power as a solution to climate change (SDF n.d.). The Lifeboat Foundation, meanwhile, appear to support solar power generation on Earth, rather than solely through O’Neill’s highly speculative framework (Lifeboat Foundation 2020a). Planetary Resources briefly pursued small-scale hybrid power generation through their Planetary Power start-up, which sought to improve access to power in remote communities (CrunchBase 2020). By purchasing and expanding SolarCity and Tesla Motors, SpaceX’s Elon Musk has fuelled the proliferation of commercial solar panels, storage batteries and electric cars. Alternatively, the political donations made by Jeff Bezos’ Amazon.com to climate denying legislators – and the carbon emissions of the company itself – have likely done more damage to the atmosphere than ‘going to space to save Earth’ will be able to repair (Mahadevan 2019; Chasan 2019; Bezos, in Blue Origin 2019). Moon Express and Planetary Resources backer Peter Thiel has recently provided $1.7 million in funding for the journal Inference, which has started publishing pseudoscientific denials of climate change amongst more credible research papers (Becker 2019). The Founding Declaration of the Mars Society (2020 [1998]) noted how comparatively planetology of Earth and Venus illuminates the threat of greenhouse gases. Yet the Society’s founder and current president, Dr Robert Zubrin, rejects the science of climate change, pillorying Oreskes and Conway’s (2010) Merchants of Doubt with his Merchants of Despair: Radical environmentalists, criminal pseudo-scientists, and the fatal cult of antihumanism (Zubrin 2013).

Despite the evident interest in deploying technological solutions for climate change on Earth in some organisations, NewSpace’s broader environmental imaginary ultimately rests upon a project far more elaborate: space colonisation and the ‘off-worlding’ of industry. Space industrialisation has featured in NewSpace discourse as a means of displacing carbonintensive industry on Earth. The science fiction luminary Isaac Asimov had espoused the potential for space industrialisation in reducing atmospheric pollution (1985). Writing in a paper for NASA’s Langley Research Center, at a time when the Reagan Administration would vehemently undermine anti-pollution laws, Asimov noted that “we are in danger of poisoning the entire atmosphere” (1985, p.88). He nonetheless emphasised techno-utopian solutions: “when we have a factory in space, any unavoidable pollution that it produces can be discharged into space” (ibid, p.88). For Asimov, it is only a question of ‘when’ technological change would render this feasible. Like Karl Polanyi, he deployed William Blake’s evocative description of the Victorian workhouses, but was less interested in the historical processes that blanketed London in the poisonous fog of waste output – he thought that by off-worlding polluting factories and mines, “perhaps Earth can get rid of its ‘dark satanic mills’…without abandoning industrialisation” altogether (ibid, p.88).

Asimov’s ‘space industrialisation’ fantasy bridges the science fiction inspirations behind NewSpace and the neoliberal commitment to endless economic growth. This environmentalism-through-space industrialisation is perpetuated across the NewSpace network. Harrison Schmitt, the Apollo 17 geologist-astronaut and former board member at the neoliberal Heartland Institute, has argued that the Moon’s helium-3 reserves offer an unlimited source of clean energy (2006). Planetary Resources’ promotional work frequently claims that space mining could (beneficially) expand extractive industry’s resource footprint beyond Earth orbit (Planetary Resources 2012; Orsulak 2018). One of the company’s executives has recently combined Asimov’s off-worlding of all industrial processes with the O’Neillian vision of orbital megastructures:

“We can move our industrial manufacturing into space. All of it. You see, manufacturing is resource consumption: we use the resources of Earth, we turn them into manufactured products…What if we gather and harvest all of our raw materials and resources from deep space, and import them to an orbit manufacturing ring around the planet, and then return only the finished product to the surface? …So if we do this – we reverse the human supply chain, we push all of our mining, our manufacturing, outside of the atmosphere – what have we done? We have now zoned the Earth for residential access only” (Orsulak 2018).

Yet space industrialisation is so far from being realised that it is not a viable solution for preserving Earth as a liveable planet, in light of the stark, short-term imperative of rapid and widespread decarbonisation. Given the expenses of the Apollo Program and the failure of commercial spaceflight to achieve more than the (comparatively unambitious) goal of temporarily re-locating a handful of people off-world at a time, the notion of transporting all polluting industry into outer space is nonsensical. Whilst Orsulak’s comments are clearly marketing hyperbole, they are nonetheless emblematic of NewSpace’s general disinterest in addressing the underlying causes of ecological degradation.

Indeed, the colonisation of space is a future-projected techno-fix that defers resolution to the underlying causes of environmental degradation by assuming exponential (and beneficial) technological change. In the words of political ecologists Clark and York, proponents of techno-fixes attest that “there is no need to radically transform the social order, as the market will ensure that a technological fix is created to address each environmental problem” – space mining is another “technological panacea [that] obscures the antiecological tendencies of the capitalist system” (2013, p.23). NewSpace techno-fixes involve both saving the Earth through the mass migration of people and polluting industry, and a ‘Plan B’ of quarantining of human and non-human life on other planets – a hedging strategy against planetary catastrophe. If we could transport biodiverse genetic material off-world and somehow propagate it outside the atmosphere – even going so far as to ‘terraform’ other celestial bodies of the Solar System – we’d be “backing up the biosphere” and avoiding an ecological equivalent to the Alexandria library fire (Diamandis, in Hoffman 2010). Terraforming projects are an extension of geoengineering, and propose manipulating the atmospheres and geochemistry of other celestial bodies (predominantly Mars) in order to recreate life-supporting planets elsewhere in the Solar System.101 As Cooper notes, “It is no coincidence that the dream of terraformation has arisen at a moment in history when capitalist modes of production are literally testing the limits of life on earth” (2008, p.39).

NewSpace can be read as a neoliberal environmentalist project: it offers market-based solutions to problems that have been created by capitalist markets (Mirowski 2009, p.439). Neoliberal environmentalist discourses hold that “entrepreneurs will innovate market solutions to address dire environmental problems” (Mirowski, Walker & Abboud 2013, p.85). NewSpace start-ups are an emblematic example of what Mirowski, Walker & Abboud have called the “whiz-bang futuristic science fiction side of neoliberalism, seed-financed by inspirational billionaire ‘thought leaders’” (ibid, p.85). Yet neoliberal environmentalism is, in practice, an oxymoron: innovations range from the ineffective carbon trading permit through to phantasmic ‘clean coal’. The techno-fix approach to environmentalism is evidently more suitable for accumulating capital than for alleviating anthropogenic pressures on a finite planet.

#### No environmental collapse or extinction

Peter Kareiva 18, Ph.D. in ecology and applied mathematics from Cornell University, director of the Institute of the Environment and Sustainability at UCLA, Pritzker Distinguished Professor in Environment & Sustainability at UCLA, et al., September 2018, “Existential risk due to ecosystem collapse: Nature strikes back,” Futures, Vol. 102, p. 39-50

The interesting question is whether any of the planetary thresholds other than CO2 could also portend existential risks. Here the answer is not clear. One boundary often mentioned as a concern for the fate of global civilization is biodiversity (Ehrlich & Ehrlich, 2012), with the proposed safety threshold being a loss of greater than 0.001% per year (Rockström et al., 2009). There is little evidence that this particular 0.001% annual loss is a threshold—and it is hard to imagine any data that would allow one to identify where the threshold was (Brook, Ellis, Perring, Mackay, & Blomqvist, 2013; Lenton & Williams, 2013). A better question is whether one can imagine any scenario by which the loss of too many species leads to the collapse of societies and environmental disasters, even though one cannot know the absolute number of extinctions that would be required to create this dystopia. While there are data that relate local reductions in species richness to altered ecosystem function, these results do not point to substantial existential risks. The data are small-scale experiments in which plant productivity, or nutrient retention is reduced as species numbers decline locally (Vellend, 2017), or are local observations of increased variability in fisheries yield when stock diversity is lost (Schindler et al., 2010). Those are not existential risks. To make the link even more tenuous, there is little evidence that biodiversity is even declining at local scales (Vellend et al., 2013, 2017). Total planetary biodiversity may be in decline, but local and regional biodiversity is often staying the same because species from elsewhere replace local losses, albeit homogenizing the world in the process. Although the majority of conservation scientists are likely to flinch at this conclusion, there is growing skepticism regarding the strength of evidence linking trends in biodiversity loss to an existential risk for humans (Maier, 2012; Vellend, 2014). Obviously if all biodiversity disappeared civilization would end—but no one is forecasting the loss of all species. It seems plausible that the loss of 90% of the world’s species could also be apocalyptic, but not one is predicting that degree of biodiversity loss either. Tragic, but plausible is the possibility of our planet suffering a loss of as many as half of its species. If global biodiversity were halved, but at the same time locally the number of species stayed relatively stable, what would be the mechanism for an end-of-civilization or even end of human prosperity scenario? Extinctions and biodiversity loss are ethical and spiritual losses, but perhaps not an existential risk.

#### Cloistered innovation models exacerbate existential risks from disruptive innovation---openness creates checks and balances that control it.

Chris William Callaghan 18, Professor of Management in the School of Business Sciences (SBS) of the University of the Witwatersrand, “Surviving a Technological Future: Technological Proliferation and Modes of Discovery,” Futures, vol. 104, 12/2018, pp. 100–116

“Almost all the problems we face nowadays are complex, interconnected, contradictory, located in an uncertain environment and embedded in landscapes that are rapidly changing” according to Sardar (2010:183). Over and above the use of nuclear or biological weapons, potential risks are associated with emergent technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), biotechnology, geoengineering, and nanotechnology (Baum, 2015). Unlike the threats of nuclear, biological or chemical weapons of mass destruction, however, novel technologies such as genetics, nanotechnology and robotics (GNR) do not require large-scale activities to pose threats to humankind, but only require knowledge, posing the threat of knowledge-enabled mass destruction, “amplified by the power of self-replication” (Joy, 2000:1).

How does one address such threats? To do so, a choice must be made in terms of what scientific methodology to use, and a definition is required, as to what it means to ‘address’ such threats. Given the almost unimaginable uncertainties associated with technological advancement and its consequences (Vinge, 1993; Szerszynski, Kearnes, Macnaghten, Owen, & Stilgoe, 2013; Bostrom, 2017; Tegmark, 2017), and therefore the need for responsible innovation (Grunwald, 2011; Stilgoe, Owen, & Macnaghten, 2013), this paper takes recourse to the approach of future studies to develop a theoretical framework relating to how to prepare for such scenarios. In doing so, this paper also seeks to advance the argument that only through improvements in the capacity of humans to manage technology, can human agency survive into a technological future. This argument therefore draws from Tegmark’s (2017) logic, that given uncertainty about technological outcomes, an important goal is to immediately undertake technology-safety research, and make this research mainstream. As an organising framework, literature is used to derive six primary technological threats. These threats are used to guide and anchor discussions and arguments throughout different sections of the paper.

This paper therefore seeks to make a contribution to the future studies literature, in the following ways. First, it seeks to relate the threat of technological development to Sardar’s (2010) four laws of future studies. Whereas most approaches to such problems suffer from the constraints associated with disciplinary lenses, this work seeks to understand these problems through a systematic approach that does not privilege any specific disciplinary approach over another. Future studies “is not just multi- and trans-disciplinary, it is unashamedly un-disciplinary: that is, it consciously rejects the status and state of a discipline while being a fully fledged systematic mode of critical enquiry” (Sardar, 2010:183). This is Sardar’s first law, and it is particularly important in light of certain of the arguments made here, which draw on Nielsen’s (2012) theory of networked science, and its predictions that human collaboration enabled by novel technologies can result in radical innovations in the scientific discovery process itself. Nielsen argues that it is changes in the scientific discovery process itself that account for the great scientific leaps, or scientific advances through history. It is argued here that Nielsen’s theory offers useful insights into how radical innovations in the research, or R&D process itself can improve the capacity of humans to manage technological advancement, or other ‘wicked problems’ associated with technological proliferation, considered here in terms of six primary technological threats facing humankind.

Second, although seemingly alarmist, the potential threats of technological proliferation require consideration for those seeking to develop useful future scenarios for how technology may impact society going forward. Technological advancement has seemingly considerable potential for technological development and proliferation to contribute to the betterment of society through elevating the health and wellbeing of populations (and through offering outright solutions to catastrophic problems). However, it also has the potential for catastrophic consequences of technological development itself and the proliferation of harmful outcomes. Effective theory needs to be developed that can help stakeholders capture benefits while mitigating risk. This paper therefore poses an important question, namely what are the key theoretical dimensions of this problem? This problem is defined as the need to manage the seemingly unlimited opportunities of technological change while at the same time also managing the proliferation of dangerous technological applications.

In light of this problem, and the lack of sufficient knowledge of how to address the tensions between potential benefits and risk (and the failure of humankind to solve many of its present contemporary problems), this paper seeks to present an argument that two aspects of technological change account for most of the variance associated with this problem. It is also argued that a focus on the management of these two aspects, or dimensions, can provide important guidelines for the development of a discovery system that is relatively more robust to threats posed by both innovation failure as well as from dangerous technology proliferation.

These two dimensions relate to the urgent need (i) to manage the openness of the discovery system itself, and (ii) to manage the power relationships associated with a rapidly developing system of technological innovation. Sardar’s (2010:183) second law states that future studies are characterized by Mutually Assured Diversity (MAD), whereby MAD “is the proposition that full preservation of our humanity requires that [human diversity] is assured, that it not only survives but thrives in any desired future, and that future generations mutually recognise and appreciate each others’ diversity.” It is argued here that key to the survival of humans in the face of technological proliferation, following Nielsen’s (2012) theory, is the need for openness in the discovery process itself, whereby openness is a necessary condition for the knowledge creation necessary for the co-evolution of our capabilities to manage the accelerating rate of emergent technologies. Indeed, according to Tegmark (2017:89), the challenges of technological advancement “transcend all traditional boundaries- both between specialties and between nations.”

Sardar’s (2010:183) third law relates to how futures studies are sceptical, and “the reality of things is inaccessible to the human mind and certitude is impossible to attain.” Given the uncertainties associated with technological proliferation, in developing theoretical insights it is necessary to take recourse to theory that predicts how diversity in human action has seemingly been checked by power throughout human history (see Foucault, 1982). Thus, to develop a theoretical frame that is sceptical of truth claims, the initial structure developed here focuses first on a key defining issue of the knowledge age, namely the radical changes in the discovery process on account of the democratisation of knowledge (Callaghan, 2016). These changes seem to be fundamentally enabled by the increasing openness of the knowledge creation process itself. Second, the analysis focuses on the way that power relationships have seemed to pose a fundamental threat to the diversity of views in human history (Foucault, 1982). In this way, analysis is related to primary technological threats.

Third, in light of Sardar’s (2010:184) fourth law, that future studies are futureless, and the influence of futures studies is on thought and scientific behaviour in the present, this paper seeks to “change peoples’ perceptions, make them aware of dangers and opportunities ahead” and to “galvanise them into collective social action” to provoke discussion and consideration of important and uncomfortable scenarios that will unfold on account of our actions in the present.

Having introduced the paper, and having provided a brief overview of its key arguments, literature is now reviewed, and certain key technology threats are identified. After this, interrelationships between these threats are discussed. A theoretical framework is then developed, and four modes of discovery are derived from the use of two propositions as heuristics. Certain issues drawn from the literature are then discussed in relation to each of these modes of discovery. The paper concludes with a discussion of these modes.

Go to:

2. Theory and technological threats

The industrial and digital (information) revolution has had far-reaching impacts on “practically all aspects of our society, life, firms and employment” (Makridakis, 2017:46). As stressed previously, these effects are expected to intensify over time. For Makridakis (2017:50), those predicting different influences of technology on society can be differentiated on the basis of their optimism or pessimism:

[O]ptimists predict a “science fiction,” utopian future with Genetics, Nanotechnology and Robotics (GNR) revolutionizing everything, allowing humans to harness the speed, memory capacities and knowledge sharing ability of computers and our brain being directly connected to the cloud. Genetics would enable changing our genes to avoid disease and slow down, or even reverse aging, thus extending our life span considerably and perhaps eventually achieving immortality. Nanotechnology, using 3D printers, would enable us to create virtually any physical product from information and inexpensive materials bringing an unlimited creation of wealth. Finally robots would be doing all the actual work, leaving humans with the choice of spending their time performing activities of their choice or working, when they want, at jobs that interest them.

Pessimists, however, offer a more dystopian view while others are more nuanced in the way they frame opportunities or threats associated with technological advancement. With regard to AI, Tegmark (2017) differentiates between different schools of thought on the basis of when they consider AI to ultimately be able to surpass human levels of intelligence, and whether they consider this ‘superhuman’ AI to be a threat or not. This event has been termed the ‘singularity.’

2.1. The control threat

According to Vinge (1993:1), if the technological singularity “can happen, it will,” and we should therefore primarily be concerned about issues of control. The challenge of losing control of technological advancement is termed the ‘control threat.’ Longstanding debates in the literature seem to suggest that this control threat warrants consideration as a primary technological threat. Vinge (1993:1) defines the singularity as the “imminent creation by technology of entities with greater than human intelligence”.

Bostrom (2017:300) refers to the singlularity as an “intelligence explosion,” whereby “we humans are like small children playing with a bomb;” such “is the mismatch between the power of our plaything and the immaturity of our conduct.” Here, issues of human agency are central to the dangers inherent in this loss of control. Loss of control of dangerous technologies, and the need for responsible innovation (Grunwald, 2011; Stilgoe et al., 2013) are therefore key to discussions of the control threat. For Bostrom (2017:300), in light of the threat of an intelligence explosion the “most appropriate attitude may be a bitter determination to be as competent as we can, much as if we were preparing for a difficult exam that will either realize our dreams or obliterate them.”

In light of increasing uncertainty related to technological advancement, it is necessary to consider all voices, however abhorrent, or diversity of opinion, in “all of its mindboggling forms” (Sardar, 2010:183). According to Kaczynski (1996:1), as “society and the problems that face it become more and more complex and machines become more and more intelligent, people will let machines make more of their decisions for them, simply because machine-made decisions will bring better results than man-made ones.” Kaczynski (1996) argues that the increasing complexity associated with decision making will then ultimately outstrip the capacity of humans to make them, and human control of decisions would be lost.

The control threat therefore relates to the problem that humankind will simply not be able to manage these changes, primarily due to increasing complexity. Tegmark (2017) argues that many in the scientific community subscribe to the beneficial AI movement, whereby survival of a technological future depends on threats being identified now, and safety research so as to ensure that technological development will be beneficial to humankind. Central to this argument is the notion that the competence of the management of technological advancement will determine how beneficial is this advancement. Accordingly, binary conceptions of technological advancement as either utopian or dystopian might yield unhelpful and erroneous heuristics.

Tegmark (2017) stresses that discussions of malevolent machines are a red herring, and that the control issue reduces to one of competence, whereby the true danger would exist if the goals of a competent AI, for example, diverged from ours. It is argued here that technological advances need to be harnessed to enable human collaborative problem solving, or the capabilities associated with human collective intelligence so as to address this control threat, and to ensure that human management of technology is not eclipsed by machine intelligence or outpaced simply by the increasing complexity of the management challenge itself.

2.2. The power inequality threat

There are also challenges that might arise due to this loss of control. Certain of these challenges relate to how power can influence technological change, and in turn societies, and particularly how elites might behave if their power is unchecked. The loss of control of dangerous technologies to powerful elites, be they business, political or otherwise, can also have important consequences, just as it would if control is lost to researchers, absent principles of responsible innovation. Having the management of dangerous complex technologies subject to market profitability logics can be problematic, as shown in research on nuclear technology (Osborne & Jackson, 1988). Losing control of dangerous technologies to market power, or exposing them to the vagaries of executive risk seeking are therefore yet other dimension of the control threat.

The question naturally arises as to who should then be in control of technological advancement? According to Olsen, Kruke, and Hovden, (2007:69), societal safety is “a sensitive political issue containing dilemmas and value choices that are hardly possible to perceive or solve as pure scientific problems.” Central to such a perspective is the role of power in how such issues come to be managed. Given multiple perspectives and stakeholder interests, the full reality of things as they relate to dangerous technologies may indeed be impossible to perceive accurately (Sardar, 2010:183). The dispersion of power, including that associated with knowledge, may ultimately be key to, at the very least, ensuring societal scrutiny of the issues associated with dangerous technologies.

Power is of central importance in understanding the consequences of human behaviour (Foucault, 1982). There are therefore also perhaps increased dangers posed by elites if human control is maintained, and if technological change increases this power. According to one dystopian perspective, human work may ultimately no longer necessary, and “the masses will be superfluous, a useless burden on the system” (Kaczynski, 1996:1). The following passage is from Kaczynski (1996:1):

If the elite is ruthless they may simply decide to exterminate the mass of humanity. If they are humane they may use propaganda or other psychological or biological techniques to reduce the birth rate until the mass of humanity becomes extinct, leaving the world to the elite. Or, if the elite consists of soft-hearted liberals, they may decide to play the role of good shepherds to the rest of the human race. They will see to it that everyone’s physical needs are satisfied…Of course, life will be so purposeless that people will have to be biologically or psychologically engineered either to remove their need for power processes or make them “sublimate” their drive for power into some harmless hobby. These engineered human beings may be happy in such a society, but they will most certainly not be free. The will have been reduced to the status of domestic animals.

The notion of the need to biologically or psychologically engineer away the need for power differs radically from Foucault’s (1982) approach. To consider future technological scenarios, however, one cannot shy away from unpleasant narratives, no matter how ‘wicked’ or seemingly impossible to solve (Sardar, 2010), and this is a case in point. Joy (2000) also cites this paragraph, acknowledging Kaczynski’s role as a contemporary Luddite, and stressing the need to confront the arguments made therein. The problem of power inequality that may result from technological change is termed here the power inequality threat. Technologies such as human reproductive cloning and inheritable genome modification (Bostrom, 2017; Isasi & Knoppers, 2015) also raise important issues about inequality that may result of genetic engineering, including concerns about eugenics (Gilding, 2002).

There is clearly a need to address these issues, but in a different way than Kaczynski, who as the Unabomber sought to physically attack (bomb) those involved in the advancement of technology, including those in universities (Joy, 2000). Indeed, the power inequality threat might not extend simply to elites, and the power to unleash destructive forces would perhaps give those (ironically, such as Kaczynski himself) who seek destruction (for any reason) the means to do so, and ultimately, perhaps, the ability to threaten humankind itself.

2.3. The destructive empowerment threat

Advances in technology can alter the balance of power between nations and between individuals and security institutions. Tegmark (2017:107) stresses that “those who stand to gain most from an arms race aren’t superpowers but small rogue states and non-state actors such as terrorists, who gain access to the black market once they’ve been developed.” Cyberwar, and its potential to disable of critical infrastructure, will become increasingly likely between belligerent states as technology advances. Joy (2000:1) stresses that genetic engineering “gives the power- whether militarily, accidentally, or in a deliberate terrorist act- to create a White Plague.” According to Joy (2000:1), nanotechnology has “clear military and terrorist uses, and you need not be suicidal to release a massively destructive nanotechnological device- such devices can be built to be selectively destructive, affecting, for example, only a certain geographical area or a group of people who are genetically distinct.” Further, replicating nanotechnology can be dangerous on its own, for example in the way they can crowd out other life, and this could result from a single laboratory accident (Joy, 2000).

Given a world population of billions of individuals, under the assumption that there are very few at the far end of a normal distribution of harmful intentions, there would perhaps always be some that would meet Joy’s definition of ‘extreme individuals.’ With the proliferation of increasingly dangerous technologies, and increasing access to them, these scenarios are perhaps increasingly likely. This threat is considered here the destructive empowerment threat. Another example offered by Kurzweil (1999) relates to the dangers of nanotechnology, which might be more dangerous than nuclear, as its consequences are not localised, but can spread. According to Kurzweil (1999:160), once “the basic technology is available, it would not be difficult to adapt it as an instrument of war or terrorism.”

2.4. Intrinsic challenge displacement threat

Issues related to the loss of purpose, such as those suggested by Kaczynski (1996), that might be experienced by those who’s need to work has been displaced by more effective and efficient technologies is considered the intrinsic challenge displacement threat. Indeed, the psychological impact of such radical technological change is uncertain, and consideration of this issue seems warranted. For example, Tegmark (2017:89) stresses the need to “grow our prosperity without leaving people lacking income or purpose.” This threat is also taken to relate to how technology might replace humans in the workplace, for example in ways that result in ‘technological unemployment amidst digital plenty.’ Brynjolfsson refers to this future scenario as a ‘digital Athens,’ whereby in the same way that Athenian citizens lived lives of leisure with labour performed by captives, a highly productive and automated economy might free up human labour without reducing living standards (in Regalado, 2012).

The reality, however, may be very different. Some have argued that we are entering an era of machine intelligence that ultimately heralds the end of human employability (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2011:9). Rifkin (2011) argues that the world is experiencing a third industrial revolution related to computer power (following the first, associated with steam power, and the second, related to the rise of oil and electricity as sources of power). According to Rifkin, machines are increasingly displacing human jobs and making blue collar work obsolete, giving rise to a ‘silicon-collar’ workforce, of machines that have replaced humans in the work place. An ‘end of work’ era of worker economic irrelevance, and extensive joblessness might give rise to problems like rising levels of crime and feelings of irrelevance and alienation (Rifkin, 1995). Closely related to this threat is that of resource competition, in the form of competition from machines for human jobs.

2.5. The resource competition threat

The resource competition threat can become an unintended societal consequence of technological advancement. Joy (2000) points to how the design and use of technology has resulted in unintended consequences, such as the overuse of antibiotics which has given rise to antibiotic resistance, and drug resistant genes in Malaria parasites. Drawing from Moravec’s (1999) work, he also points to an argument that biological species “almost never survive encounters with superior competitors,” suggesting further that in a “completely free marketplace, superior robots” would outcompete humans, as robotic industries “would compete vigorously among themselves for matter, energy, and space, incidentally driving their price beyond human reach,” whereby humans, unable to afford the necessities of life, could be “squeezed out of existence” (Joy, 2000:1). This type of problem relates to the problem of crowding out, primarily related to resources, or the resource competition threat.

Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2014) point to how technological change may ultimately displace jobs. Advances in technologies are creating an unprecedented reallocation of wealth and income. However, whereas wages have increased alongside productivity for the previous two centuries, median wages have recently stopped tracking productivity, with important societal implications. Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2014) stress that on account of these changes, technological change has altered certain structural economic relationships and that this is in turn driving rapidly-increasing inequality. A small elite are therefore benefitting from growth in GDP and productivity but the median income is diverging from the mean. The main driver of this increasing inequality is therefore exponential, digital and combinatory technological change driven by the new economics associated with near zero marginal cost (Rifkin, 2014) which is creating ‘winner takes all’ markets where leading providers (with a fraction of traditional employment costs) can capture most of a market through digitization.

Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2014) argue that it is no longer true that a rising tide of technical progress will ‘lift all boats’ because technology acts as a multiplier, in that while it produces more with limited inputs, it also substitutes for workers in lower-skilled work, increasing returns to high skilled work. This then results in skill-based technical change associated with increasing inequality.

Technology is also shifting the returns to physical capital versus labour. The corporate profit share of GDP has now surpassed that of the wage share, bolstered by winner-take-all markets enabled by the low marginal costs of digital goods and their low capacity constraints which allow substantial economies of scale (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014). Others however have argued that previous dystopian predictions of devastating technological unemployment have in every historical case failed to materialise. According to Tegmark (2017) it may be different this time, as those arguing this might not have considered what will occur when machine intelligence begins to perform the creative work at which humans currently outperform machines.

2.6. The reproduction threat

According to Joy (2000:1), robots, engineered organisms, and nanobots differ from all previous technologies, as they share the ability to self-replicate, and with this will necessarily come the risk of substantial damage to the physical world; with each of these technologies, a “sequence of small, individually sensible advances leads to an accumulation of great power and, concomitantly, great danger.” There is therefore an issue related to the power of humans versus machines, and the dimensions along which these differences in power can result in different scenarios for society. Although this also derives from the control threat, this threat is considered more specifically to relate to the reproduction of technology, and the potential for exponential increases in the harmful effects of technology. This threat is defined here as the reproduction threat. The unchecked reproduction of nanomachines is a particular concern, according to Kurzweil (1999:158), due to the fact that to “be effective, nanometer-sized machines need to come in the trillions” and the “only way to achieve this economically is through combinatory explosion: let the machines build themselves.” He points to the risk of an exponentially exploding nanomachine population, and the risk of even minor software problems that fail to halt self-replication. The same is true for other technologies such as biotechnology. According to Kurzweil (1999:176), we are “very close to the point where the knowledge and equipment in a typical graduate-school biotechnology program will be sufficient to create self-replicating pathogens.” A theoretical model that seeks to contribute useful insights regarding the management of these threats therefore also needs to take into account the amount of time available to do this.

2.7. Scenario timelines

How long do we have until we can no longer manage technological advancement and its proliferation? According to Tegmark (2017), two conferences of AI researchers have collectively estimated that human-level artificial general intelligence will be created by the year 2055 (the first conference) and 2047 (the second, two years later). With regard to when dangerous technologies may no longer be manageable, Joy’s perspectives are included here as being representative of many dystopian commentaries. Unlike the 20th century weapons of mass destruction, GNR technologies are being rapidly developed commercially by corporate enterprises, and their promises are being aggressively pursued; according to Joy (2000:1), this “is the first moment in the history of our planet when any species, by its own voluntary actions, has become a danger to itself- as well as to vast numbers of others.”

Although it is simply not known when the machine intelligence ‘explosion’ will occur, other dangerous technologies are currently also developing; therefore, in terms of timelines, technology safety research is an immediate imperative according to Bostrom (2017) and Tegmark (2017). This is also the argument of Vinge (1993:1), whereby if the technological singularity “can happen, it will;” we should therefore primarily be concerned about issues of researching how this can be prepared for. Our scientific research capacity is therefore key to our ability to undertake effective technology safety research, and to our ability to manage dangerous technologies so as to not lose control of them.

Recent literature suggests that timelines in scientific research production may be about to shorten. In terms of the research capacity needed to support technology safety research, there is another perspective that argues that the human capability to research, and therefore to manage, a threatening context is about to be radically enhanced. Whereas the literature to date seems to have given much attention to scenarios similar to Joy’s (2000) commentary, lacking in these debates seems to be the argument that science itself is on the cusp of a reorganization, which some have termed the ‘reinvention of discovery.’ According to Nielsen (2012:19) the “reinvention of discovery is one of the great changes of our time” whereby to “historians looking back a hundred years from now, there will be two eras of science: pre-networked science, and network science” as we are currently “experiencing a time of transition to the second era of science.” The theoretical model to be introduced in the following sections will draw on this body of literature [networked science] that suggests the emergence of a new dawn of knowledge creation, whereby novel technological developments make it possible to take advantage of hitherto unimagined economies of scale in both (big) data collection and, importantly, analysis.

If the threats posed by technology are real, and if relinquishing science (as advocated by Joy) will not solve the problem of technological proliferation, and only exacerbate the current inequalities in innovation outcomes, then there is perhaps only one other alternative, namely to enhance our ability to manage it. According to networked science theory, this might be possible. For the purposes of this work, the opposite of relinquishment is taken to be uptake of open modes of science, or open innovation. Other alternatives arguably fall into these two categories, or along a continuum between the two. At this nexus, interrelationships between the technological threats discussed above are discussed, and then ‘real life’ examples are considered that specifically relate to the complexities associated with the management of dangerous technologies.

Go to:

3. Interrelationships between the technological threats

To develop a theoretical model of technological threats and their potential impact on society it is first necessary to relate these threats and to derive underlying regularities between them as the basis for a problem solving response that can to some extent address aspects of them all. Before discussing this model it is then necessary to consider existing proposed solutions to the threats discussed above.

The only realistic alternative [to the dangers of technological advancement], according to Joy (2000:1) is “relinquishment: to limit the development of the technologies that are too dangerous, by limiting our pursuit of certain kinds of knowledge.” Tegmark (2017:169) acknowledges that although the term Luddite is typically used as a derogatory epithet for those who are perceived as technophobes “on the wrong side of history,” the notion of relinquishment has nonetheless found “new support” in the environmental and anti-globalisation movements. This is an important argument, because to revalue knowledge as either ‘bad’ or ‘good’ would seemingly have important implications for almost every aspect of human life. Whereas six broad threats were derived in the previous sections, the notion that knowledge can be harmful is an important proposition, and this idea (relinquishment) as a proposed solution requires interrogation according to Joy’s criteria of potential harm, using these same six categories of threat as heuristics to sharpen the discussion.

The nature of innovation itself, and how it works through different channels, is not independent of these issues, and its channel of open innovation presents exponential advantages for knowledge creation, whether from its ability to harness very large volumes of data, or to harness large scale data analysis, or problem solving opportunities (Callaghan, 2016). This potential has been described in terms of the contributions of collective intelligence (Bernstein, Klein, & Malone, 2012) and networked science (Nielsen, 2012), which share a focus on the opportunities offered by open science, and open systems of innovation.

In contrast, Joy (2000:1) argues further that “despite the strong historical precedents, if open access to and unlimited development of knowledge henceforth puts us all in danger of extinction, then common sense demands that we reexamine even these basic, long-held beliefs.” One therefore has to question how realistic Joy’s solution (relinquishment) really is, to what is clearly a wicked problem according to Sardar’s (2010) futures studies approach. There are arguably three potential problems with the relinquishment approach.

Firstly, if open access gives way to closed access, and some (not all) relinquish knowledge, but not others, then who would access to this knowledge be limited to? The power inequality threat is not addressed by shutting down open access. Control of technology might then shift to elites, and as we surely know by now, state powers to limit or suppress activity can be captured by powerful interests, essentially creating the conditions for a monopoly in knowledge. Thus, secondly, the control threat brings with it similar problems as those associated with losing control of technology to intelligent machines. Thirdly, there is the problem posed by slow response to threats under closed systems of innovation (discovery). Under closed systems, destructive empowerment threats would perhaps be more difficult to defend against, without the social and institutional infrastructure that open systems of innovation are rapidly developing. Open systems of knowledge creation have demonstrated their increasing effectiveness in enabling timely disaster response (Callaghan, 2016). To contextualise certain of these ideas prior to discussions of the theoretical model it is necessary to first identify certain real life examples of the tension between openness and closure in decisions about dangerous technologies.

3.1. Contextualising the reality of technological threats

Certain decision making issues related to dangerous technologies have already been considered in real world contexts. Dual-use research of concern (DURC) is perhaps a useful example of how issues related to the control, power inequality, and destructive empowerment threats have been considered to date. DURC research is “research that, based on current understanding, can be reasonably anticipated to provide knowledge, products, or technologies that could be directly misapplied by others to pose a threat to public health and safety, agricultural crops and other plants, animals, the environment, material, or national security” (NIH, 2017:1).

An example of DURC research can be found in the debates concerning the publication of two papers revealing how to genetically engineer strains of the H5N1 avian influenza virus (Resnik, 2013). Those arguing against publication have cited concerns, particularly since 2001, about the use of this knowledge by terrorists, or others with destructive motives (Resnik, 2013), to create a bioweapon and set loose a global pandemic (Cohen & Malakoff, 2012). According to Specter (2012:1), the decision to allow publication of this knowledge “fundamentally altered the scope of the biological sciences.” The U.S. National Institutes of Health in 2011 initially recommended redaction of these papers, but after careful consideration the National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity (NSABB) recommended (notwithstanding a lack of unanimity) they “should be made public, in full,” as the potential public health benefits were considered to outweigh the potential harm (Cohen and Malakoff, 2012:19). This decision (creating an important precedent) was therefore taken in support of openness rather than closure, notwithstanding the destructive empowerment threat.

Over and above the issue of freely available dangerous information, accidental release of pathogens is another threat that is known to occur, if not regularly, but then often enough to warrant consideration here. Evidence-based examples of fatalities exist in the form of research-related accidental release of smallpox, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), and Ebola pathogens (Specter, 2012:1). Prior to the NSABB decision, in 2002, someone had already “stitched together hundreds of DNA fragments, mostly acquired via the Internet, then used them to create a fully functional polio virus,” and in 2005 academic papers published the genomic sequence of the 1918 Spanish flu, but these have both (notwithstanding much initial condemnation) ultimately been considered valuable contributions to knowledge (Specter, 2012:1).

The threat of biological terror seems real, as even Al Qaeda have called for its supporters with degrees in microbiology or chemistry to develop a weapon of mass destruction (Specter, 2012). This threat is of great concern, given proof of concept of how relatively easy it has been to reconstitute an extinct poxvirus, costing approximately $100 000 using only mail-order DNA (see Kupferschmidt, 2017).

Some also argue that such knowledge can help those developing vaccines or drugs to know if these are effective. Additionally, the scientific method and “the entire edifice of institutional research depends on such openness; without it, progress would slow dramatically” (Specter, 2012:1).

However, unlike the all-or-nothing decisions to research or produce pandemic strains of pathogens, the threats of GNR technologies are unclear, even as they currently proliferate, mostly behind the closed doors of commercial enterprises. At the same time, the artificial intelligence (AI) revolution will bring extensive changes to all aspects of society and life, and additionally to firms and employment, “resulting in richly interconnected organizations with decision making based on the analysis and exploitation of “big” data and intensified, global competition among firms” (Makridakis, 2017:46). Previous research has sought to make sense of the complexity of human engagement with technology through the use of metaphors to describe technological futures. This literature is now also briefly considered here to contextualise discussions in the above sections.

3.2. Metaphors as a heuristic for understanding technological threats

The evolution of technology and its core threats can be taken to be reflected in the metaphors people use when considering technological futures. Metaphors used by stakeholders reflect the evolution of technologies, as for the past two centuries the ‘technology is good’ metaphor has persisted, related to improvements in productivity; this metaphor has also been associated with another, namely that ‘more is good’ (Carbonell, Sánchez-Esguevillas, & Carro, 2016). Joy’s (2000) perspective might be read as a metaphor, that ‘technology is dangerous,’ conflicting with the metaphor that ‘technology will solve our problems.’ Drawing directly from this is the binary conflict between the metaphors ‘technology should be relinquished,’ and therefore that ‘closed models of development are best’ versus ‘technology should be shared, and open models are best to keep us safe.’ However, the danger here is that subscribing to these metaphors simply puts us at risk of creating unhelpful binaries.

It goes without saying that there are always graduations between these extremes, and Carbonell et al.’s (2016) use of technology metaphors are useful in order to simplify explanations of conflicts between different perspectives. These metaphors are then useful as heuristics, in that they can be related to the six technology threats, encouraging dialectical tensions that give rise to a more considered discussion of scenarios. On the basis of these conceptions, the answering metaphor is perhaps that ‘technological dangers can be successfully managed,’ juxtaposed against its counterpoint ‘technological dangers cannot be successfully managed.’ The relinquishment argument of Joy (2000) might needlessly echo historical Luddite arguments if there are no other options with which to frame our response to technological dangers. We might have no other choice but to embrace open systems of discovery in order to improve our ability to manage technology, with the hope that improved systems of discovery will ultimately be key to the successful management of technological change itself.

Historical Luddite protests associated with the metaphor ‘the job is up’ rather than ‘technology is up’ offer an early example of debates about the trade-offs some argue are to be made when technology advances (Carbonell et al., 2016). This is perhaps an example of the resource competition problem and the threat posed by technology to resources in the form of jobs.

Other examples include those of religious groups that have also advanced metaphors conflicting with technology, as reflected in longstanding historical tensions between science and religion. Similarly, there are now tensions between societal values like equality, respect or privacy (reflected in concerns about the digital divide, harassment and other outcomes) and the capacities the Internet now offers (Carbonell et al., 2016). These tensions can perhaps be related to the control threat, as individuals face losing control over privacy, over the continuity of their lifestyles, or as societies lose control over widening inequality on account of the digital divide. The latter issue also relates to the power inequality threat. If the cat is out of the bag already (as the example of the publication of the H5N1 papers shows), and relinquishment may no longer be a useful strategy (as countries and individuals differ in their moral propensity to develop and use dangerous technologies (Bostrom, 2017)), the only way out may be to radically increase our ability, as humans, to collectively manage these threats.

As it stands, it is unlikely however that we have this capacity at present or will be able to develop it quickly. How then, could this capacity be developed? And what future scenarios would result from failure to successfully manage these challenges? Alternatively, what future scenarios would result if such successful management of technological proliferation were possible? Successful management is defined here as effective research and knowledge creation that enables the threats of technological development to be mitigated in a sustainable way (Bostrom, 2017; Tegmark, 2017), and which results in a relatively equitable distribution of the outcomes of discovery (Rifkin, 1995).

One would need to ask, however, what is the role of the state in such successful management? Other metaphors relevant to debates about the impact of technology on society are those related to the tensions between ‘big brother dystopia’ versus ‘state as protector,’ and ‘equality is up’ versus ‘market is up’ (Carbonell et al., 2016). The enhanced surveillance abilities of the state might also lend themselves to a change in power dynamics, and an increase in power inequality, as this power might be part of the trade-off for safety in an era in which public gatherings, for example, are increasingly vulnerable to attack. Indeed, the same technological advances can also enable destructive empowerment, as individuals can use technology to amplify the damage they can cause. The key then, might be to therefore consider such management according to the principles of openness, and the democratisation of science, and its attendant ethical framework. According to the principles of maximum transparency and accountability, power inequality is reduced, and power over knowledge is made to be more equitable. In this way, inequality in the outcomes of knowledge is also reduced, maximising benefits to all affected by science as well as the problems it is tasked to solve.

A key feature of the theoretical model proposed here to offer certain insights into the societal impact of technology is therefore open knowledge creation, and an ethical framework that is fundamentally suited to open systems of innovation and discovery. Given scarce resources (including time), however, it is unclear as to which of the six threats require more urgent attention than others. What then are the relationships between these threats?

3.3. Ordering relationships between threats

Fig. 1 shows a possible ordering of technological threats. As discussed above, these threats reflect primary technological concerns in the technology futures literature.

[FIGURE 1 OMITTED]

Criteria for inclusion was based on the perceived relative seriousness of a threat. Threats were not considered for discussion on their own if they fell within another of these categories, other than the control threat category. This iterative and inductive process of review resulted in the six categories included here. A brief sketch is now provided, of how these threats might relate to each other. Technological futures are by definition uncertain, and the relationships discussed here are necessarily speculative, but such a discussion is necessary in order to draw out an ordering of these threats and to better understand which are more urgent.

If the control threat is considered the ‘origin’ of the other threats considered here, then the management of this threat would require an immediate and proactive response. This threat is therefore ‘immediately urgent’ while those that derive from it are ‘urgent,’ in that the control threat would need to be considered together with the others.

Such an ordering might have important implications for which societal stakeholders should be more involved in managing these threats. If the control threat is considered the dominant threat, then this places technology safety researchers at the source of the problem of managing dangerous technologies. Indeed, if technological development to date has typically followed the trial-and-error model, then we will “inevitably reach the point where even a single accident could be devastating enough to outweigh all benefits” (Tegmark, 2017:90). Having private or corporate stakeholders drive the technological development process without the engagement of independent research stakeholder groups may no longer be safe in an era that transcends trial and error approaches to dangerous technologies.

According to the logics described in Fig. 1, the control threat, or losing control of the management of technology, can therefore lead to other threats. We are now perhaps in an era in which the consequences of practice-based trial and error make it necessary to elevate the status of technology safety researchers. This is an immediately urgent imperative.

Certain research findings seem to support the necessity of a change in societal stakeholder relationships (as they relate to dangerous technologies) to include technology safety researchers. Insights from the use of nuclear power suggest that certain risks can arise from organisational structures of large corporate organizations themselves. Fewer coordinative mechanisms between functional departments, more levels of administration, centralization and higher numbers of employees may constrain an organization’s ability to respond to safety issues (Osborne & Jackson, 1988). Risk preferences are also not constant over different types of decision making (Osborne & Jackson, 1988). Indeed, under conditions of growing losses, decisions are typically more risky than they are under conditions of gains (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Osborne and Jackson (1988:930) therefore suggest that the proportion of a utility’s investment in a dangerous technology like nuclear power “partially reflects the technological risk preferences of its senior executives.” Developing and empowering technology safety researchers as an important stakeholder group may therefore be an urgent need, so as to ensure that the post-trial-and-error paradigm is safely managed through more inclusive engagement going forward.

To manage the control threat it may be important to therefore shift the locus of power related to decision making about dangerous technologies from corporate or other interests to proactively include technology safety researchers. This dispersion of power might however be at odds with historical practice and the autarky of corporate R&D. The management of, and decisions about, dangerous technologies require openness and societal inclusion, according to the principles of responsible innovation (Grunwald, 2011; Stilgoe et al., 2013). According to Douglas (2000:559), “value-free science is inadequate science; the reasoning is flawed and incomplete.” The task of managing the control problem cannot therefore simply be left to corporate market incentives, or even to science on its own.

Thus, the threat of losing control of technology, whether to human elites or to machine intelligence, is perhaps the most important of the threats, and is considered immediately urgent, requiring inclusive engagement across society. This implies openness and power dispersion to mitigate against loss of control of dangerous technology to any set of particular interest groups. Given the centrality of the control threat, what then of the relationships between the others described in Fig. 1?

The control threat, if unsuccessfully managed, may contribute to the power inequality, resource competition and destructive empowerment threats. The resource competition threat may in turn contribute to increased power inequality through two channels. The first is arguably the way digitisation is creating a winner-takes-all economy (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014) as the new economics of near zero marginal costs (Rifkin, 2014) allow a few producers to capture substantial market shares with very few human workers. Another channel might be through the erosion of jobs that fall below the ‘waterline’ of advancing machine intelligence, empowering a class of workers in areas that machines have not yet mastered (Tegmark, 2017). If technology creates or exacerbates such class differentials, and if these classes are able to prioritize their own interests at the expense of others, they might seek solutions associated with power inequality.

Intrinsic displacement might be considered a derivate threat, arising from a lack of purpose in a world in which machines do most forms of work, or (alternatively) a state of powerlessness as people are excluded from meaningful opportunities by a technologically-enabled human elite. Thus, the four threats of control, resource competition, power inequality and intrinsic displacement might benefit from further research that considers their potential interdependencies.

The destructive empowerment threat is an ever-present one, as advancing technology necessarily provides more options for both individuals and states to pursue destructive goals. Although the link is not shown in Fig. 1, power inequality can result in destructive empowerment if elites or elite countries use these technologies in war. A global power hierarchy held in place by technology might be such an outcome. Key to managing the relationships between these threats, however, seems to be the need for proactive engagement with technology safety researchers, and the use of technology to improve our research capabilities and, thereby, our ability to manage technological change.

Thus an order of importance seems to exist amongst these threats. A focus of resources and attention on the control threat without neglecting relationships between these threats is important. This approach seems to also find support in the literature. Bostrom (2017) and Tegmark (2017) stress the urgency of technological safely research, to be able to control the trajectory of technological change, and ensure its ‘beneficial’ use and contribution to human society. Their arguments capture the essence of what the management of the control problem entails.

If managing the control threat is key to the management of the others, what then are the principles most likely to empower this control, or management of technology? The theoretical model that follows draws from novel ideas and theory that suggest certain principles that might be useful in this task.

Go to:

4. Theoretical model

According to Tarko and Aligica (2011:987), Kahn’s conceptualisation of the ‘institutionalisation of interdisciplinarity’ is reflected in “a phenomenon that has as its core a process-based approach to knowledge and method aggregation” reflected in novel developments enabled by web-based techniques. According to Tarko and Aligica (2011)), terms associated with this phenomenon include Wikinomics (Tapscott & Williams, 2006), the wisdom of crowds (Surowiecki, 2004), the “army of Davids” (Reynolds, 2006), and “collective intelligence” (Malone, Laubacher, & Dellarocas, 2009). Malone et al. (2009:2) also acknowledge other additional descriptions of the phenomenon in the literature, such as radical decentralization, crowd-sourcing, and peer production, arguing that the term collective intelligence is the most useful, defined broadly as “groups of individuals doing things collectively that seem intelligent.” The phenomenon has also been defined as crowdsourced R&D, and considered in terms of its roots in the seminal knowledge aggregation problem with a view to formalising this both as a body of theory and as a new scientific methodology in its own right (Callaghan, 2016). Nielsen (2012) argues that dramatic breakthrough periods in science have typically followed changes, or improvements in the way discovery is conducted. For Nielsen (2012:19):

This change is important. Improving the way science is done means speeding up the rate of all scientific discovery. It means speeding up things such as curing cancer, solving the climate change problem, launching humanity permanently into space. It means fundamental insights into the human condition, into how the universe works and what it is made of. It means discoveries we’ve not dreamt of. Over the next few years we have an astonishing opportunity to change and improve the way science is done.

Rapid acceleration of the pace of scientific discovery, however, requires an ethical framework that is robust to the range of different issues that can be encountered. Over time there have been increasing calls for increased democratization of science, and for greater stakeholder involvement (Siune et al., 2009). Concerns about the role of science in society and its impacts have contributed to the rise of new research fields. These fields include risk studies, impact studies, technology assessment, [Science and Technology Studies (STS)], and applied ethics, which are increasingly integrated into research programmes (Siune et al., 2009). Governance of science and R&D processes is changing, opening up “new possibilities and opportunities for involving new actors and new types of reflection” (Grunwald, 2011:9).

This literature highlights a growing movement advocating the democratization of science premised on open models of knowledge creation. The democratization of science movement stresses the increasing importance of disclosure and transparency issues not only in the contemporary bioethics field, but in broader areas of technology governance. The concept of ethical practice in this literature highlights the importance of increased transparency together with increased accountability to stakeholders. This perspective echoes the emergence of new movements, such as those associated with citizen science (CS) (Bonney et al., 2009), public participation in scientific research (PPSR) (Shirk et al., 2012), and participant-led biomedical research (PLR) (Vayena & Tasioulas, 2013), which all relate to increasing access of citizens, or populations to the research process itself. These movements are in turn related to post-normal science (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1994), and its ethical framework premised on the need for maximized transparency and accountability. The need for the post-normal science ethical approach arose from the tensions between different perspectives of climate science, whereby only through maximized transparency could the necessary scrutiny of research findings result (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1994). These bodies of theory extend stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) and may form the basis for a complementary model of ethics in science that is robust to technological change.

Synthesis and integration of this literature suggests certain core ideas. The first is that the growing literature on technology governance seems to be able to provide ethical frameworks that might be sufficiently robust to support a rapid acceleration of the pace of scientific discovery. However, key to this is the need for maximised transparency and accountability, and for the full inclusion of societal stakeholders in technology governance.

The second is that, as suggested by Nielsen (2012) and documented in his work on networked science, there seems to be a coming ‘revolution’ in science itself, whereby we are on the cusp of a ‘second era’ of science, in that the nature of the research process itself is changing. In fact, Nielsen’s (2012) theory is perhaps foreshadowed by prior examples of the same phenomenon in the futures literature (see Tarko & Aligica, 2011). These changes also seem to echo Sardar’s (2010) principles, in that networked science transcends disciplines (first law), incorporates maximised diversity and inclusivity (openness) across society (second law), thereby mitigating the uncertainties (third law) inherent in the interactions of human agency with technological change though the dispersion of power and the empowerment of the scientific citizen. Such changes in the processes of science, or scientific research itself may make it possible to develop the management capabilities to address the control threat. A synthesis of this literature suggests, however, that there are two necessary (but not sufficient) conditions to the successful management of the control threat, namely the need for openness as a primary mode of discovery, and the need for dispersion in the power relationships around the management of dangerous technologies. From this body of theory, the following proposition is derived.

Proposition 1

The successful management of technology is fundamentally related to openness as the primary mode of discovery

The need for maximized transparency and accountability is therefore taken to necessarily be related to openness, or open access to knowledge and information as a necessary condition. There is a need however to articulate the tensions between the six problems, or potential technological consequences, as knowledge of the complex interrelationships between these threats is important, given that solving one problem might exacerbate another. It is therefore necessary to construct solutions that address a substantial aspect of these problems at the same time.

Given a framework that maximises accountability and transparency, ethical management of technological change may be possible. Under closed modes of discovery, relinquishment of technology might not occur, as those with more power would not have to disclose what they have not relinquished. The relinquishment option may therefore not be as effective as an open mode of discovery in addressing technological threats, as long as transparency and accountability is ensured in an open environment. However, because transparency and accountability, as well as the ethical framework related to this, is but a necessary condition, and not a sufficient condition for the effective management of technological change, it is argued that a further condition is necessary, namely the need for dispersed power relationships, whereby dominant elites do not gain control of the discovery process, resulting in inequitable access to it, and unequal access to its outcomes.

It is with regard to the need for openness and for dispersed power relationships in discovery that we then need to weigh up Joy’s (2000) other alternative, namely to give up the goals of perpetual economic growth as they may be inseparable from the dangers of technological growth. Joy (2000:1) suggests that material progress and the pursuit of the power of knowledge are problematic goals, arguing that “we must find alternative outlets for our creative forces, beyond the culture of perpetual economic growth; this growth has largely been a blessing for several hundred years, and we must now choose between the pursuit of unrestricted and undirected growth through science and technology and the clear accompanying dangers.” Indeed, openness, even with its attendant ethical framework, might not on its own be enough to address this threat, but it is arguably only through control that human incentives for progress can be subdued. A better solution therefore might not be the curtailment of material progress but the mitigation of the power of knowledge associated unequal concentration. Whereby openness ensures access to information and knowledge for affected populations, what is additionally needed is a mechanism to ensure the dispersion of power, or a mechanism to address power inequality, and to address threats of control. In the seminal words of Foucault (1982:780):

I would like to suggest another way to go further toward a new economy of power relations, a way which is more empirical, more directly related to our present situation, and which implies more relations between theory and practice. It consists of taking the forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point. To use another metaphor, it consists of using this resistance as a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, and find out their point of application and the methods used.

In order to optimise the ability of collaborative human networks to manage rapidly developing technologies, dominance of the network by any set of stakeholders needs to be kept in check, lest openness gives rise to this dominance. Whereas closed modes of discovery may favour incumbents, openness may also give rise to new, or emergent configurations of power. In light of this, Proposition 2 is offered:

Proposition 2

The successful management of technology is fundamentally associated with the dispersion of power, whereby control over the research process itself (and its outcomes) is, and remains, accessible

At this current time, with R&D models, and particularly healthcare discovery models, at the mercy of the need for high levels investments under conditions of uncertainty about returns to these investments, the discovery process cannot be considered to be entirely accessible, and the outcomes of such a process are therefore also unequally distributed. Pharmaceutical investments, for example, will be skewed towards wealthy markets, and poorer populations will typically be disadvantaged if there is no mechanism through which firms can obtain returns on investment without targeting only markets wealthy enough to recoup investment costs. Private firms, however, can take advantage of openness to lower their costs of R&D, but may have few incentives to do so if market power is concentrated.

Arguably, at the extremes of low or high openness, and of low and high power relationships, the societal impacts of technology will be very different, and it might be in conditions of high openness and dispersed power relationships that collaborative networks of human stakeholders would have an improved ability to manage rapidly increasing technological change, and to more effectively mitigate its threats. To better ground the propositions derived here in relation to the scenarios they predict, and the scenarios associated with their opposite extremes, Fig. 2 relates the extremes associated with each proposition. The extreme states of Proposition 1, namely openness as a mode of discovery versus closed modes of discovery, are related to the extremes associated with Proposition 2, or the dispersion of power versus its opposite orientation, the intensification of power. Four modes of discovery are taken to result. These four modes are now discussed.

[FIGURE 2 OMITTED]

4.1. Innovation closure

Conditions associated with closed modes of discovery and relatively high power dispersion are taken to be associated with a state of innovation closure, or a failure to made dramatic breakthroughs in important socially important areas. This is the state predicted by probabilistic innovation theory, whereby innovation failure, or gridlock persists on account of a failure to taking advantage of the exponentially increasing economies of scale in data analysis that are currently offered by technologies that already exist (Callaghan, 2016). Some have argued that in pharmaceutical innovation, for example, returns on investment have been stagnant for decades now. Although power is concentrated in markets, and innovation outcomes are inequitably distributed, the monopoly structure does not explicitly shut out new entrants, and the discovery system is considered to be open to disruption. This is broadly considered to reflect the current state of affairs. Because there is no explicit closure of the discovery process, the outcomes of discovery might be considered to be probabilistically related to investments in the discovery process. In others words, there is investment risk associated with innovation investments, but this risk can largely be quantified. Investment in innovation is not fundamentally uncertain in its outcomes.

4.2. Dystopian control

Under conditions of power intensification, the resources that dictate relationships within modes of discovery, and the outcomes of the discovery process, are within the power of certain agents, typically industry incumbents, or elites, because closed modes of discovery are expected to allow for the control of knowledge, and also its outcomes. Dystopian control is taken to represent a mode of discovery associated with high power differentials and low levels of openness. Under these conditions, inequality in discovery outcomes and in access to the discovery process is maximized. The power of knowledge creation is in the hands of elites, and both human progress and the threat of technological advancement are held in check, but at great cost to disadvantaged populations who are denied the benefits of innovation. This is arguably a feasible outcome if Joy’s (2000) strategy of technological relinquishment, or abandonment were adopted, as those less committed to it would not relinquish, and in so doing might increase their power over others.

4.3. Captured future

Under conditions of openness with high power relationships, it is still possible that industry incumbents, or new emergent groups might take control of the discovery process, in that openness might not be a sufficient condition for optimum effectiveness in the management of discovery. Given the efficiencies of shared knowledge, the consequences of concentrations of power in a context of openness, which facilitates the disruption of business models, are uncertain. Under conditions of such uncertainty, it may simply be not possible to calculate risk. Under the uncertainty associated with this quadrant, there might therefore be a shift in this quadrant toward any of the other three quadrants.

Opportunities for Internet-based global trade in goods and services and the exploitation of “unlimited, additional benefits” may result from AI inventions, but these “vast opportunities” for trade and productivity improvements need to be considered in relation to “dangers and disadvantages in terms of increased employment and greater wealth inequalities” (Makridakis, 2017:46). These advances may conceivably result in what Kurzweil (1999) has termed singularity, where nonbiological intelligence matches that of humans, and distinctions between human, machine, real reality and virtual reality disappear. Given the high levels of uncertainty associated with this mode of discovery, these outcomes need to be carefully considered.

Indeed, there might come a time where computers will choose those who serve in public office, given the poor choices humans often make in this area (Makridakis, 2017). As with the heralded advent of driverless vehicles, under conditions of openness and high power knowledge advantages that can be seized by the most powerful, technological change will be expected to accelerate, and attempts to manage it may be thwarted by powerful elites, perhaps in the form of a commercial arms race as technological advances fuel the pursuit of profitability. It is this mode that perhaps best captures the spirit of Joy’s (2000) criticism of material progress as a cause of the problem of dangerous technological advancement itself. Joy’s solution of relinquishment, however, might simply result in a shift toward dystopian control, as it is unlikely that elites will relinquish power. Under conditions of high openness coupled with dispersed power relationships, on the other hand, the mode of discovery might be uniquely suited to more effective management of societal problems, including that of dangerous technological change.

4.4. Age of effectiveness

The mode of discovery associated with a high level of openness and a high level of power dispersion is termed the ‘age of effectiveness’ as it is taken to offer the conditions most likely to contribute to the effective management of technologies. Digital technologies have “rendered new opportunities for learning that transcend barriers of time and space,” and harnessing the potential for robots as social agents in synergistic human-robot learning exchanges is distinct from many descriptions of AI which relegate humans to a “secondary role in the learning community” (Bricout et al., 2017:92). What such conceptions suggest is that technological advances can be harnessed in support of human learning and human agency in a world of AI. Advances in AI learning capabilities themselves show a dramatic increase over time. Milestones in this process include the reading of handwriting digits by the neural net device (1990), vision-based navigation (1993), the development of speech (1998), and self-driving cars (2009) (Makridakis, 2017).

How then could human connectedness leverage human problem solving ability to the point at which it would be up to the challenge of effectively managing the complexities and dangers inherent in technological advancement and proliferation? Monat (2017) argues that the current level of human interconnectedness is growing, but in terms of ‘connections’ or ‘synapses’ is well short of the number of these connections in the human brain. He suggests that collective intelligence is emergent, in much the same way as the connections in an individual’s brain exhibit ‘emergent’ intelligence. He offers the notion that the brute number of connections in a human brain account for an individual’s intelligence, and that if the brute number of human connections in the world matched this number of brain connections then collective human behaviour would relatively be as intelligence as an average human. Although only a useful analogy, this notion suggests that collective intelligence might offer useful opportunities to leverage emergent human intelligence in the quest to manage problems like technological change.

If there are billions of people, however, why then has the world seemingly not developed more collective intelligence (currently about that of a chimpanzee, according to Monat, 2017)? He argues that this is because there are too few nodes (individuals that are connected), and there are too few connected to the Internet or news media globally, and because much information, if not biased or sensationalised, is filtered by the media. According to Monat (2017:27):

A fundamental difference between humans and other animals is that humans are highly self-aware while other complex animals are less so; and simple creatures like mosquitos are not self-aware at all. Some researchers believe that self-awareness is an emergent property of a complex neural network. If this is so, then high self-awareness should appear when a neural network approaches the complexity of the human brain (∼90 billion neurons and 1014 synapses). If one takes a much broader view and considers all of humanity as a neural network, then today there are ∼7 billion individual elements, of whom ∼3 billion are interconnected via computers, smart phones, tables, and the Internet. By morphological analogy, as human interconnectivity continues to grow and strengthen, eventually humanity will approach ∼70 billion interconnected humans, at which point we will become highly self-aware as a single human super-organism. This organismal self-awareness may manifest as the elimination of wars, hunger, and strife, and as the collaboration of all individual elements working together for the greater good of humanity.

The lesson that emerges from this concept is that it is human collaborations and working together that might be key to leveraging human problem solving abilities, in the form of collective intelligence. According to Nielsen (2012), innovations in the discovery process can amplify human collective intelligence. The notion that humans can only stay ahead of the threats of technology by improving their ability to learn and manage technological change is associated not with technology pessimists, but with technology pragmatists.

The key argument of pragmatists is that by focusing on intelligence augmentation the dangers of AI can be managed, while “providing the means to stay ahead in the race against thinking machines and smart robots” (Makridakis, 2017:52). Some pragmatists have argued that AI technologies can be controlled using OpenAI together with regulation, as open systems that are not hidden behind proprietary doors will inherently offset risks (Peckham, 2016). High openness and high power dispersion might create the best conditions for humans to be able to manage technology, but this will necessitate taking advantage of technology itself to do this.

Humans may indeed have creativity advantages over intelligent machines. According to Jankel (2015:1), artificial intelligence has “raced forward in the last few years, championed by a libertarian, tech-loving and science-driven elite,” or “transhumanists who pronounce the eventual victory of the machine over nature.” He argues, however, that the belief that human brains are computers is “rooted more in metaphor than reality,” because algorithms act according to rules, and creative human disruptive innovators typically break rules, as breakthroughs are, by their nature, unpredictable; breakthrough “creativity is fundamentally organic, not algorithmic” (Jankel 2015:1). Within the next twenty years, however, rapid developments in AI are expected to result in breakthroughs based on deep learning that reflects the way children learn. Creativity might therefore not ultimately be the exclusive domain of humankind.

There is no limit to deep learning, on account of three factors, namely (i) open source software makes progress available to all and encourages the development of more powerful algorithms and cumulative learning, (ii) deep learning algorithms will use memory to apply problem solving to new contexts, and (iii) intelligence programmes will themselves write new programmes (Makridakis, 2017). According to Bricout et al. (2017:91) assistive technologies in the form of socially assistive robotics (SAR) can augment learning and action, and human-robot learning communities can develop, the success of which is contingent upon “how human users engage the networking capacity” of those communities. Thus, in the future, this level of machine intelligence might be unavoidable, and the key to successfully negotiating such an environment might be the ability we have to utilize technology to leverage human management capabilities.

Some might find these ideas unpalatable, given that they draw from a literature that engages with problems that are not yet part of our everyday experience. However, the fact that certain problems are wicked (Sardar, 2010) makes it necessary to confront them, as a consideration of future scenarios can help better manage these issues in the present. The arguments considered here are considered far future arguments. Baum (2015) argues that the far future argument, that “people should confront catastrophic threats to humanity in order to improve the far future trajectory of human civilization,” is important, notwithstanding the lack of motivation many have to do so, given their overriding concern for the near future rather than the far future, and the fact that there is little likelihood that they will experience the far future.

Can a technological future be a meaningful place for human life? Bricout et al. (2017:102) invoke Amartya Sen’s notion of capabilities relating to freedom, choice, and ability to act, to highlight the potential impact of vertical integration of technologies, or of a nexus future with universal accessibility in which the flow of information is unchecked. This future would give rise to “major ethical concerns of users around confidentiality, privacy and autonomy,” and therefore human capabilities (p. 102). Again, these potentialities might be a function of the extent to which technological advances can be successfully managed. Many of the changes, however, may be difficult to negotiate. An example is the effect of AI and computerisation on the nature of human work, which also requires the effective management of technological change.

Using an analytic Markov chain model, Kim, Kim, and Lee (2017:6) analysed the effect of advances in big data, machine learning and robotics that have reduced human employment opportunities, concluding that “even if computerization proceeds at an uncontrollable pace and renders all previously non-susceptible jobs susceptible, a healthy portion of the future economy will consist of new jobs that permit a peaceful coexistence between humans and machines.” Kim et al. (2017) however caution that their results demonstrate that “legal and social limitations on computerization are key to ensuring an economically viable future for humanity.” Therefore controlling the crossover rate of occupations between susceptible and non-susceptible states “will help reduce the proportion of susceptible occupations in the economy (p.6).”

Kim et al. (2017:8) also suggest that with regard to employment loss due to technology, the “most viable solution for long-term success, however, may be a large-scale revision of the education system, in order to better equip future employees with the skills that will be necessary in a human-machine hybrid economy.” It is argued here that an age of effectiveness is perhaps possible, as long as openness is used to increase connectivity and collaboration between humans, which might allow collective intelligence to be used to leverage human management capabilities. It is also argued that human agency is also key to this challenge, and that there are ways to meet these challenges, but these might require action in the present. A careful consideration is necessary now, to understand how the education system, for example, and other human systems, can be reconfigured to meet these future challenges. Table 1 summarises concepts derived from the discussions above, and relates certain key challenges to each of the technological scenarios, or modes of discovery identified in Fig. 2. Further discussion of these relationships is offered in this table.

[TABLE OMITTED]

In summary, it is argued that at high levels of openness and high power dispersion, the low concentration of power over the discovery process is expected to enable effective management of discovery. This is considered a probabilistic era as outcomes can be calculated as risk. Dispersed power relationships mitigate the control and the power inequality threats. Destructive empowerment in the form of harmful activities are more effectively managed using the enhanced response capabilities associated with openness and distributed networks of collaborators. Accelerated problem solving may result under systems of collaborative problem solving, with lower power asymmetries providing the ability to harness the economies of scale of collective problem solving. Under conditions of technological change, which might be unforeseen, and therefore difficult to predict, it is arguably this quadrant which provides the most effective response to these potential dangers. Threats related to resource competition are also perhaps more effectively managed by the approach described by this quadrant. Arguably, the self-reproduction of artificial intelligence is a state that is subject to the extent to which technological change can be managed, and it is also this quadrant that provides the most useful approach to this. Similarly, the societal changes that influence human work are also, to some extent, a function of the effectiveness of the management of these changes.

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5. Limitations

Certain limitations of this work need to be acknowledged. This article sought primarily to provoke further engagement with certain issues surrounding the development of dangerous technologies and their ultimate societal impact. The analysis undertaken here is however based on a critical review of literature, and therefore premised on subjective judgements of what aspects to prioritise in discussions. What insights were gained by the choices made here were necessarily at the cost of that lost by not considering other aspects. For example, anchoring the work on discussions of transparency and accountability as aspects of openness was based on the growing literature on responsible innovation, which was given priority. The choice to prioritise these perspectives was taken due to their accordance with the primary arguments of technology futures experts such as Bostrom and Tegmark. Given the need to subjectively provide an ordering, according to importance, of ideas and theory in this area, the analysis sought to draw on only what was taken to be the most salient work. In so doing, the analysis also provides insights that are at a certain level of abstraction.

To cover the necessary conceptual ground it was necessary to sacrifice depth of discussion in certain areas. Future work might address these deficiencies. Consideration of the six primary technological threats also necessitated subjective decisions as to which threats to recognise as primary and which to relegate to within-threat discussions of others. Given the uncertainties associated with attempts to make sense of technological futures, further work is invited, to improve on the categorisations made here. Indeed, it is hoped that further conceptual and data-driven work will draw out more detailed causal relationships between these threats (and highlight others), and ultimately provide tests of the predictions of the theoretical framework.

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6. Conclusions

Given the substantial promise of technological advancement for the improvement of human lives, and given the threat of the proliferation of dangerous technologies, the objective of this paper was to offer certain insights for how these threats could be better managed. Certain key threats associated with the future proliferation of technology were identified. A theoretical model was developed, on the basis of theoretical propositions derived from the literature. Using these propositions as a heuristic frame, four future scenarios were identified, predicting different societal outcomes for different permutations of openness and the power of elites. Under conditions of high power and low openness, it was predicted that powerful elites might control innovation at the expense of relatively less powerful populations. The current global state of discovery was considered to be categorised by a mode of low power and low openness, associated with innovation gridlock, whereby few have access to the discovery process and slow innovation, particularly healthcare innovation, results in high inequality in outcomes, as only wealthier markets attract substantial R&D investments from firms. Under conditions of high power and high openness, however, the consequences of technological advancement and proliferation were taken to be uncertain, as the discovery process might be dominated by powerful elites who have the power to either curtail innovation or enable the proliferation of dangerous technologies. It was finally argued that conditions of high openness and high power dispersion might be optimal for the development of the management capabilities required to successfully manage technological change, and that technology itself may hold the key to developing these capabilities. According to this pragmatic perspective, an important avenue for future research is how collective intelligence might be leveraged using technology, as this might offer a useful approach to keeping pace with machine intelligence and other threats associated with a technological future. Ironically, it is typically only in the face of a common threat that humans become united, and seek radically improved collaborations. Uniting now, in the present, to develop radically enhanced collaborative capabilities might be our saving grace, and it is the responsibility of future studies to lead the way.

#### Innovation accelerates existential risk creation---each spikes the odds of mitigation failure

Marko Kovic 21, co-founder president of the nonprofit think tank ZIPAR (Zurich Institute of Public Affairs Research) and the co-founder and CEO of the consulting firm ars cognitionis, “Risks of Space Colonization,” Futures, vol. 126, 02/01/2021, p. 102638

3.4 Speeding up the rate of catastrophic risk creation

Similarly to the risk of speeding up the rate of existential risk creation described in subsection 3.2, an increased pace of technological development might result in an increased pace of catastrophic risk creation. This is unsurprising insofar as existential risks can correlate with existential ones. For example, the artificial intelligence family of technologies has created the existential risk of uncontrollable superintelligence, but it has also created catastrophic risks such as unprecedented cybersecurity risks [26] or the prospect of autonomous weapons systems [27]. An increased pace of catastrophic risk creation is a concern for the same reason as an increased pace in existential risk creation is: The more such risks exist, the more difficult it might be for humankind to adequately mitigate them in time.