When Our Technology Is Used Against Us
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Is the world better off with cell phones? What about the Internet? These might seem like obvious questions. Sure, the rise of cell phones can be annoying when other people's conversations disturb our peace and quiet, and the rise of the internet makes it harder for us to shelter our children (and ourselves) from nefarious ideas. But by and large, it's hard to imagine actually wanting to revert to the time before these and other generally wondrous new technologies existed.

But consider this. The 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, which killed 164 people, were made possible by the sophisticated use of information technology. Al Qaeda uses these technologies too. Indeed, how else could a geographically decentralized network of terrorists be so effective? Clearly, these technologies, as is the case with so many others, can be used for both help and harm. And so we might ask, are these technologies more helpful than harmful?

We can get some simple answers by comparing events like the Mumbai attacks to events like the 2010 Haiti earthquake. The earthquake was a natural disaster, and for the most part all of humanity was on the same side fighting to save as many Haitian lives as possible, stabilize conditions on the ground, and help rebuild. Here information technology saved many lives. Services like Ushahidi were used in conjunction with cell phones to help find and rescue people buried in rubble. Despite the occasional event like the Mumbai attack, overall it seems clear that right now we're getting much more help than harm from these technologies.

The situation could change, however, if terrorists and other misanthropes become more effective at inflicting harm. The Mumbai death toll was limited by the fact that the terrorists were using simple guns and bombs. What if they instead had chemical, nuclear, or biological weapons? Biological weapons are particularly concerning here because they are relatively easy to produce and can spread widely throughout a population. This is why the World Health Organization (among others) considered an embargo on new H5N1 flu research: the concern was that the research could be used to create biological weapons, though ultimately they decided it would be better to publish the research so that it could be used to help develop a vaccine in the event of an outbreak.

If these technologies would spell our destruction, perhaps we would rather live without them. The only alternative may be for these technologies to be used aggressively to make sure that none of us do anything terrible. This means a highly invasive surveillance regime. The only way to make sure that none of us are up to anything highly dangerous is to monitor all of us all the time. But this is hardly an attractive option, as it raises major privacy issues as well as the question of who monitors the monitors.

In the long run, we may just have to learn how to live with our new information technologies. As a practical matter, the world would be unwilling or at least very reluctant to give up these technologies. Instead, perhaps the best we can hope for is that we will find ways to resolve what differences we have between us, so that the desire to cause harm fades away. And here lies one of the best uses of our new information technologies: helping people from around the world talk to each other, so that we can break down barriers and learn how to live together.