

## Life

# The quiet catastrophe in your pocket

Three trivial, almost invisible inventions are dismantling our humanity, writes Pep Torres

**B**arcelona's Gothic Quarter has a specific acoustic quality. When I founded the Miba, or Museum of Ideas and Inventions, here in 2011 I used to tune into the rhythm of the streets outside. It was the sound of heels on uneven cobblestones, the clatter of plates, the erratic hum of human friction. It was the messy, unpolished sound of life.

Later, walking these same streets, I have noticed a shift in frequency. It isn't just the noise of overtourism; it is something more subtle. It is the sound of a species that is slowly insulating itself from reality.

I have spent my career working at the intersection of technology and human behaviour, including leading creative innovation at everis UK, now NTT Data, and developing inventions such as a calorie-burning vending machine aimed at combating childhood obesity and a magnetic kitchen cloth that became an unexpected commercial success. Because of this, people often ask me which technology will ultimately lead to our downfall. They expect me to say artificial general intelligence, autonomous weaponry or climate engineering gone wrong.

They are always disappointed when I tell them the apocalypse has already begun, and it has arrived in the form of three trivial, almost invisible inventions that are quietly dismantling our humanity.

The first is the mobile phone case.



Main image: tourists outside the Sagrada Família and (above) in Park Güell, both in Barcelona — Hanan Henna/NurPhoto

A few days ago, sitting in a bar whose name I will not mention because it is yet to be discovered by tourists, I watched a man drop his phone. It was a device worth over €1,000, containing his entire digital existence. He didn't flinch. He picked it up with the indifference of someone retrieving a dropped sock, confident in the protection offered by its military-grade polymer shell.

When consequences feel permanently absorbed, responsibility slowly atrophies. A seabot protects against rare catastrophe; a phone case cushions everyday carelessness. I stopped using one some months ago, as a small experiment in personal responsibility. It brought a discreet sense of confidence I hadn't expected.

The phone case is the physical manifestation of a society that has decided consequences are optional. We have been subtly and progressively infantilised and now outsource the care of our property and, by extension, our behaviour, to shock-absorbent plastics. We have forgotten that the fear of break-

ing things is precisely what makes us cherish them.

The second horseman of this soft apocalypse is the infinite scroll.

Aza Raskin, the interface engineer who invented this feature in 2006, has since publicly apologised for his creation. He designed a cup that never empties. In the early days of social media, there was a natural pause when you reached the bottom of the web page: a digital silence that forced a micro-decision: do I consume, or do I stop?

That moment of reflection has been stolen. By eliminating the "end", we eliminated our cue to stop. Here in Barcelona, I see couples dining together while absorbed in their phones, physically present but mentally tumbling down a bottomless rabbit hole. It is not merely a theft of attention; it is an erosion of will. As an inventor, I know that creativity requires boredom; it requires the pauses between inputs. The infinite scroll has colonised the empty spaces where ideas used to be born.

But the third invention is the one that terrifies me most, because it has killed something even more sacred: our intuition. It is the 5-star rating system.

Barcelona is a city built for getting lost. Or at least, it used to be. You would duck into a tapas because the smell of garlic and frying fish pulled you in, or because the light in the window looked forgiving. You took a risk. Sometimes the food was terrible; sometimes you discovered a meal that stayed with you for a lifetime. That risk gave life to its texture.

Today, outside the Sagrada Família, I see visitors with their backs to the architecture, staring at their screens to confirm if the cafe across the street has a 4.5 or a 4.8 on Google Maps. We have outsourced our judgment. We no longer trust our own senses to navigate the physical world. The fear of a "sub-optimal experience" has paralysed us to the point where we only walk paths already flattened by thousands of strangers.

The tragedy isn't having a bad lunch. The tragedy is the homogenisation of

human experience. As an inventor, I know that error is the only compass that truly works. Discovery lives in the deviation, not the average. If you eliminate the possibility of being wrong, you eliminate the possibility of discovering something truly new. We are optimising our lives into a series of guaranteed, and therefore completely irrelevant, successes.

It is the systematic loss of responsibility, reflection, and intuition.

These habits do not stop at the level of the individual. They scale. They become culture. And culture, eventually, becomes politics. I write this from Europe. My home. A continent I love. Yet it has become the ultimate anxious user. For too long, we treated American power as our protective case, mistook the infinite scroll of deliberation for progress, and refused to move without a 5-star guarantee. Europe has spent decades writing the terms and conditions for the future; the moment has come to put down the pen and start inventing the prototype.

My museum is closed now, but my inventor's mind is still restless. Innovation requires tolerance for error and a willingness to accept consequences. A society that considers every fall may be safer but it also becomes hesitant, reluctant to take risks, to decide, to invent. The question is not whether we should protect ourselves. It is whether we have mistaken protection for progress. Responsibility cannot be permanently outsourced, whether to algorithms, ratings or institutions. It must be practised. And like any capacity, it strengthens only when exercised.

Pep Torres is an inventor and was founder of the Museum of Ideas and Inventions of Barcelona

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## The rise and fall of the UN

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Egypt, but expected their kings to do what British ambassadors told them. In the cold war, the US behaved with the republics of Central and South America in much the same way. Both accepted the notion of independence of smaller powers in strategically important parts of the world so long as they could dominate them informally.

Where the Germans erred was in thinking that there was no real difference between this kind of domination and what they liked to see as the "brutal realism" of the Nazi version; there was in fact all the difference in the world. Form mattered. After 1940, the Nazis were surprised that conquered Europeans too felt pride in their countries and resisted being pushed around. It was as though for the Germans, no one else's political sentiments registered and in the end, this attitude contributed to their downfall. When the time came for them to appeal for help against the Red Army, the patience of Europe was exhausted. Few wished to come to the assistance of a regime so indifferent to the claims of others.

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The lessons the founders of the UN learned from fascism's rise and fall help us understand why the organisation they built has proved so durable. For when liberal internationalism got a second chance, thanks to the Nazi defeat, it was a creed that was cognisant as never before of the power imbalances in international life. Nothing had hamstrung the League so much as the failure of the US to ratify membership; nothing was more important than ensuring that all the major victorious powers upheld its successor.

The new UN organisation thus combined the League's promise of universality and sovereignty equality for all its members with a recognition that Great Powers mattered more than others. This is why the Big Four got their power permanently enshrined in the form of the Security Council veto. The decision to create a kind of directorate in the Security Council was basically a reversion to the Great Power politics of the 19th century but it was politically essential to the UN's establishment and survival.

Not surprisingly therefore, the new system turned out to be compatible with Great Power politics. Even before the UN convened for the first time, Churchill and Stalin had agreed to carve up eastern Europe into spheres of influence — so much for free elections across the

liberated continent. When the Iron Curtain descended, splitting the continent in two, the work of the UN was curtailed but not ceased.

In the 1950s, it found a glorious new mission in accelerating the historic dismantling of Europe's overseas empires: the UN General Assembly in particular offered a forum for opposition to colonial rule of a kind that had never existed. At the same time, there was a massive expansion of the global presence of the US, its establishment of an entirely new network of military bases worldwide, and a series of regional security alliances designed in Washington. Acting as global policeman in a war against communism became in large measure an opportunity for a vast intensification of American economic and financial power: the UN did nothing to impede this.

These two epochal shifts — the rise of

UN has long allowed some Great Powers to play by different rules. Nor is this the first time that the shapers of US foreign policy have expressed contempt or disdain for the UN — one need look only at some of the rhetoric that came out of the George W Bush administration before the invasion of Iraq. It is perhaps the first time that Washington has been in the hands of unabashed America Firsters and UN Secretary-General António Guterres's warnings about the parlous state of UN finances should be seen in this context.

Recently he emphasised that genuine multilateralism provides the only path to solve global problems, and criticised the idea that Great Power politics or spheres of influence could be an alternative. A year ago the US withdrew from Unesco; last month Trump signed an executive order to end US participation in over 50 other UN agencies. More such measures may follow.

Yet the ambivalence of Trump's recent comments is suggestive. The Board of Peace may endure beyond the two years of its UN mandate. But an organisation that demands fealty to the president of the US will probably struggle to gain widespread acceptance. At the same time, permanent membership of the UN Security Council continues to present advantages to Washington with few accompanying costs just as it always has: nothing has changed to alter that equation.

What has changed dramatically is the standing of the US itself. In the attack on Venezuela and in the threat to annex Greenland, no great cause is invoked, no civilisational ideal. There is no promise to bring democracy to Venezuela nor independence to Greenland; indeed, it is hard to find anything resembling even the traditional demand for a sphere of influence. To put it in Carl Schmitt's terms, there is no "ruling idea". The claim made by some in the administration that western civilisation in Europe is beleaguered and that Washington's mission is to help shore it up is based on a racist ideology with little purchase outside the far right; it has done nothing to halt the collapsing popularity of the US among its oldest allies and may be contributing to it.

The country that more than any other was responsible over the past century for the construction of a durable system of international organisation appears to have abandoned a fruitful and flexible hypocrisy for a delight in force and a desire for ownership at all costs. What it has lost is something rarer than strength — it is the mystique of influence.

Mark Mazower is a professor of history at Columbia University. He is the author of *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* and *Governing the World: The History of an Idea*

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