

*“And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?”*

From “The second coming,” by William Butler Yeats

THE CENTRE CANNOT HOLD WHEN MERE DISRUPTION IS LOOSED UPON THE WORLD

This, what you’re reading right here, is my sixteenth—make that seventeenth—attempt at this column. I’m having a circular argument with myself and like all circular arguments I keep ending up where I started: from disruptive technologies to the shrinking middle class—which takes me right back to disruptive technologies. Let’s see if we can work through this together.

It starts with my extreme discomfort with Uber, Lyft, Airbnb (and, to a lesser extent, self-checkouts, automated tellers and robot bartenders—well, maybe not the bartenders because, you know... bartenders).

You’re likely wondering: how can I not love the car sharing apps? The convenience of not having to actually know your location... The security of approving or rejecting a driver because of their name... The thrill of tracking, in real time, the location of your ride rather than wasting that time just thinking... And let’s not discount the social brag factor—if the Kardashians are doing it, you know you wanna jump on that fanwagon.

And then there’s Airbnb, the search engine that connects tourists with people willing to rent them space in their home (or even the entire property). The buzzword in travel lingo these days is “authenticity” and there’s nothing like midday vino tinto on your borrowed balcony to deliver that true faux-local experience. Why would you want to be pampered in a hotel room when you can buy your own groceries and sweep your own floors?

Driving a taxi used to be (and I’m deliberately using the past tense) a decent way to make a living. Those jobs are going, going, about to be totally gone. But what are they being replaced with? Purportedly, according to the driver recruitment verbiage on the ride-sharing websites, these are people who want a side hustle that earns them a few extra bucks from their underused vehicle. That’s full-time taxi jobs—maybe not the best-paying careers in the world but family-supporting jobs all the same—traded for part-time hobbyists who may or may not be reporting that income to Revenue Canada.

It’s the same with the hospitality industry. Hotels employ dozens, if not hundreds, of cleaners, maintenance workers, registration and wait staff—increasing numbers of whom are put out of work every time we opt for an Airbnb over a hotel. Granted, the hospitality sector has to shoulder some of the blame for not doing enough to cater to travelers who want more than a generic hotel room. But that’s not entirely true either. There are commercial long-stay properties across Canada (and elsewhere), yet I often see people, even business executives, on Facebook and Instagram boasting about their Airbnb bargains.

Think about that. Technology has trained all of us, including people of means, to expect travel and vacations at prices that are

only possible when we eliminate jobs or underpay employees.

Using my small, rural hometown as an example, I found 10 different Airbnb property listings—at least half of which weren’t registered with the town office as official business operations (yes, I checked). They don’t have employees. They aren’t paying business tax. They don’t have a social license to operate (i.e. the approval of their residential neighbours). And, because they fly under the official radar, the owners (at least two of whom don’t actually live in the town) don’t have to pay the fees that pay for the marketing campaigns that attract people to the area in the first place.

How can established, play-by-the-rules hospitality hosts compete? They can’t. And that’s what infuriates me.

I readily acknowledge that bargain shopping is a need, not a want, for most Canadians. Except for the very few who are very well off, most of us are getting poorer every year. The cost of living is increasing—wages are not. Angus Reid research shows that one in four Canadians are living in financial hardship; 40 per cent of us can’t afford dental care. A 2019 report from the Bank of Canada, *Drivers of Weak Wage Growth in Advanced Economies*, begins with the premise that “advanced-economy wage growth has been generally low”. They attribute much of that weakness to “the rise of involuntary part-time work” and “technological change,” among other reasons.

Our increasing affinity for job-slashing technologies has painful pay-later implications. The more this trend amplifies, the more incomes will decline. People will have less money to spend which means less income for business owners, which leads to more business closures and even fewer jobs. Low-wage workers will be hit first and hardest, followed rapidly by their (for now) middle class colleagues. It’s an ominously self-perpetuating cycle with dire social and financial implications.

I’m not saying we should abandon innovation. What I am suggesting is that we start designing and adopting purposeful change. Disruption without a goal is just anarchy.

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FEEDBACK

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