The Golden Age Is Behind Us: How the Status Quo Impacts the Evaluation of Technology

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Abstract

New technology invariably provokes concerns over potential societal impacts. Even as risks often fail to materialize, the fear continues. The current research explored the psychological underpinnings of this pattern. Across four studies (N = 2,454 adults recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk), we found evidence for the role of status quo thinking in evaluating technology. In Study 1, we experimentally manipulated the reported age of unfamiliar technology and found that people evaluate it more favorably when it is described as originating before (vs. after) their birth. In Studies 2 through 4, participants' age at the time of invention strongly predicts attitudes toward a wide range of real-world technologies. Finally, we found that individual differences in status-quo-based decision-making moderated evaluations of technology. These studies provide insight into how people respond to the rapidly changing technological landscape.

Statement of Relevance

New technologies often garner much excitement but also fierce backlash. Technological innovations repeatedly raise concerns over their potential risks to society. Historically, this pattern has occurred for the automobile, radio, television, the smartphone, and many other inventions. The current research explored the psychological factors that contribute to these dynamics. Our core proposal is that new technology's threat to the status quo leads to negative evaluations. In line with this account, our findings showed that independent of the actual risks posed by technology, people have more positive attitudes toward technologies invented before their earliest memories. However, if people remember a time before an invention existed, they perceive that technology's impact on society as significantly more negative. These results help shed light on why cycles of concern over technology continually repeat.