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# Dancing in a Hurricane

Thomas L. Friedman NOV. 19, 2016

BRITAIN'S vote to withdraw from the European Union followed by Donald Trump's election in America constitute a single giant political event — one that makes 2016 a vintage year in history that will long be studied. Big political events have big causes. For the last three years I've been working on a book about what's been happening beneath the surface — in the plumbing and wiring of the world — that's roiling politics in so many places. My answer begins with a question: What the hell happened in and around 2007?

2007? That's such an innocuous year. But look again.

Steve Jobs and Apple released the first iPhone in 2007, starting the smartphone revolution that is now putting an internet-connected computer in the palm of everyone on the planet. In late 2006, Facebook, which had been confined to universities and high schools, opened itself to anyone with an email address and exploded globally. Twitter was created in 2006, but took off in 2007. In 2007, Hadoop, the most important software you've never heard of, began expanding the ability of any company to store and analyze enormous amounts of unstructured data. This helped enable both Big Data and cloud computing. Indeed, "the cloud" really took off in 2007.

In 2007, the Kindle kicked off the e-book revolution and Google introduced Android. In 2007, IBM started Watson — the world’s first cognitive computer that today can understand virtually every paper ever written on cancer and suggest to doctors highly accurate diagnoses and treatment options. And have you ever looked at a graph of the cost of sequencing a human genome? It goes from \$100 million in the early 2000s and begins to fall dramatically starting around ... 2007.

The cost of making solar panels began to decline sharply in 2007. Airbnb was conceived in 2007 and change.org started in 2007. GitHub, now the world’s largest open-source software sharing library, was opened in 2007. And in 2007 Intel for the first time introduced non-Silicon materials into its microchip transistors, thus extending the duration of Moore’s Law — the expectation that the power of microchips would double roughly every two years. As a result, the exponential growth in computing power continues to this day. Finally, in 2006, the internet crossed well over a billion users worldwide.

In time, 2007 may be seen as one of the greatest technological inflection points in history. And we completely missed it.

Why? 2008.

Yes, right when our physical technologies leapt ahead, many of what the Oxford economist Eric Beinhocker calls our “social technologies” — all of the rules, regulations, institutions and social tools people needed to get the most out of this technological acceleration and cushion the worst — froze or lagged. In the best of times social technologies have a hard time keeping up with physical technologies, but with the Great Recession of 2008 and the political paralysis it engendered, this gap turned into a chasm. A lot of people got dislocated in the process.

How could they not? What happened around 2007 was that connectivity and computing got so fast, cheap, ubiquitous and leveraged that they changed three forms of power — in really differentiated ways — all at once: the power of one, the power of machines and the power of ideas.

What one individual or small group can now do — the power of one — to make or break things is phenomenal. When President-elect Trump wants to be heard he

now gets his message out directly from his New York penthouse through Twitter to 15 million-plus followers at any hour of the day he pleases. And the Islamic State does the same from a remote province in Syria. Machines can now not only beat humans at “Jeopardy!” or chess, they are starting to become truly creative, offering architectural and other designs and writing news stories, songs and poetry that are indistinguishable from the work of humans.

At the same time, ideas now flow digitally through social networks all over the world faster and farther than ever. As a result, new ideas (including fake news) can suddenly take root, and long-held ideas — think opposition to gay marriage or transgender rights — can suddenly melt away.

So if you look down from 30,000 feet you see that technology, globalization and, I would add, Mother Nature (in particular, climate change, biodiversity loss and the impact of population growth) are all accelerating at the same time, and feeding off one another: More Moore’s Law drives more globalization and more globalization drives more climate change. And together, climate change and digital connectivity drive more human migration.

I recently met with economic and climate refugees in West Africa who made it clear to me they didn’t want aid from a rock concert in Europe. They want to come to the Europe they see on their cellphones — and they are using WhatsApp to organize vast illicit migration networks to get there.

So no wonder many in the West feel unmoored. The two things that anchored them in the world — their community and their job — are feeling destabilized. They go to the grocery store and someone there speaks to them in a different language or is wearing a head covering. They go into the men’s room and there is someone next to them who looks to be of a different gender. They go to work and there’s now a robot sitting next to them who seems to be studying their job. I celebrate this diversity of people and ideas — but for many others they’ve come faster than they can adapt.

That’s why my favorite song these days is Brandi Carlile’s wonderful ballad called “The Eye,” the main verse of which is: “I wrapped your love around me like a

chain/ But I never was afraid that it would die/ You can dance in a hurricane/ But only if you're standing in the eye.”

These accelerations in technology, globalization and Mother Nature are like a hurricane in which we're all being asked to dance. Trump and the Brexiters sensed the anxiety of many and promised to build a wall against these howling winds of change. I disagree. I think the challenge is to find the eye.

For me, that translates into building healthy communities that are flexible enough to move with these accelerations, draw energy from them — but also provide a platform of dynamic stability for citizens within them. More on that another day.

*This article was adapted from “Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist’s Guide to Thriving in The Age of Accelerations,” being published on Tuesday.*

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