

March 23, 2013

Imprisoned by Innovation

By **EVGENY MOROZOV**

PRISONS — those bastions of routine and tradition — are finally ripe for disruption. Such is the rosy conclusion of “Beyond the Bars,” a provocative report from management consultants at Deloitte published earlier this month.

“Imagine a virtual incarceration system,” the report’s authors write, “that uses advanced risk modeling, geospatial analytics, smartphone technology and principles from the study of human behavior to achieve superior outcomes.”

Such gizmos are meant to reduce overcrowding and help manage the spiraling costs of incarceration by allowing offenders to serve their sentences at home. Thanks to the almighty smartphone, offenders can be under the constant gaze of case managers, who will monitor their activities in real time. Welcome to the Panopticon for couch potatoes.

Deloitte’s proposal also taps a favorite Silicon Valley trick — a tactic known as “gamification” — to award the participating offenders with points for not being late for their appointments or never leaving their assigned zone. “A sufficient number of points,” the authors say, “would earn the offender tangible benefits such as additional freedom or extended curfews.”

That smartphones allow us to imprison twice the number of people at half the cost is the kind of cutting-edge innovation that only management consultants and tech entrepreneurs would be excited about. Such breakthroughs would be worth celebrating if they didn’t distract us from the more radical (and simpler) solution to the problem of overcrowded prisons: incarcerating fewer people.

Smart technologies are not just disruptive; they can also preserve the status quo. Revolutionary in theory, they are often reactionary in practice.

Take the recent obsession with self-tracking. From what we eat to how much energy we consume: everything is trackable, not least because our gadgets come equipped with clever sensors. Right now, most of such self-tracking efforts come from the grass-roots enthusiasts. But it won’t take long for governments to start exploring self-tracking as a solution to problems that could, and probably should, be tackled differently.

Are you not eating enough vegetables? Well, your smartphone will tell you so that there are none for sale in your neighborhood, and you can’t afford to buy

By offloading the responsibility for problem solving from governments to citi



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tracking can get us to optimize our behavior within the constraints of an existing system. What we need is a chance to reform the system itself — perhaps by dismantling those constraints. Ambitious reforms like regulating the food industry and building the infrastructure needed to get good food to hungry people shouldn't lose their relevance in the era of universal self-tracking.

That we now have the means to make the most miserable experiences more tolerable should not be an excuse not to reduce the misery of those experiences.

Take Chromaroma, a game that uses London's smart public transportation card to make commutes more fun by awarding points for "checking in" at stations. According to *The Guardian*, the game is "the makeover London commuting has been waiting for." But is it, really? As the writer [Steven Poole](#) put it, "Actually, the makeover London commuting has been waiting for is a more reliable service, with Tube lines that don't close every weekend and trains that can hold more than 17 people."

Many trendy technologies can not only hinder needed reforms but actually also entrench social iniquities. Consider the current enthusiasm for Big Data, with its ability to yield powerful insights based on correlations alone. According to [one recent tome](#) on the subject, once we fully embrace Big Data, "society will need to shed some of its obsession for causality in exchange for simple correlations: not knowing why but only what."

But a problem tackled through correlations alone lends itself to a very different set of solutions than a problem mapped out in all its causal complexity.

It may help to know that most crimes in a given neighborhood are committed by people who share certain "likes" on Facebook. But to stop there and become suspicious of everyone else who shares the same "likes" would be irresponsible, especially when those "likes" are themselves just proxies for class, race or gender. If criminal behavior does stem from economic inequality or racial discrimination, we need to fix those root causes, not just prevent the damage likely to be caused by people who fit a profile.

Smart technology, thanks to its ubiquity and affordability, offers us the cheapest — and trendiest — fix. But the gleaming aura of disruption-talk that often accompanies such fixes masks their underlying conservatism. Technological innovation does not guarantee political innovation; at times, it might even impede it. The task ahead is to prevent our imagination from being incarcerated by smart technologies. Or should we settle for gamifying ourselves to death?

Evgeny Morozov, author of "To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism," is a guest columnist.

