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The Tyranny of Convenience



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By Tim Wu Feb. 16, 2018

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Convenience is the most underestimated and least understood force in the world today. As a driver of human decisions, it may not offer the illicit thrill of Freud's unconscious sexual desires or the mathematical elegance of the

economist's incentives. Convenience is boring. But boring is not the same thing as trivial.

In the developed nations of the 21st century, convenience — that is, more efficient and easier ways of doing personal tasks — has emerged as perhaps the most powerful force shaping our individual lives and our economies. This is particularly true in America, where, despite all the paeans to freedom and individuality, one sometimes wonders whether convenience is in fact the supreme value.

As Evan Williams, a co-founder of Twitter, recently put it, “Convenience decides everything.” Convenience seems to make our decisions for us, trumping what we like to imagine are our true preferences. (I prefer to brew my coffee, but Starbucks instant is so convenient I hardly ever do what I “prefer.”) Easy is better, easiest is best.

Convenience has the ability to make other options unthinkable. Once you have used a washing machine, laundering clothes by hand seems irrational, even if it might be cheaper. After you have experienced streaming television, waiting to see a show at a prescribed hour seems silly, even a little undignified. To resist convenience — not to own a cellphone, not to use Google — has come to require a special kind of dedication that is often taken for eccentricity, if not fanaticism.

For all its influence as a shaper of individual decisions, the greater power of convenience may arise from decisions made in aggregate, where it is doing so much to structure the modern economy. Particularly in tech-related industries, the battle for convenience is the battle for industry dominance.

Americans say they prize competition, a proliferation of choices, the little guy. Yet our taste for convenience begets more convenience, through a combination of the economics of scale and the power of habit. The easier it is to use Amazon, the more powerful Amazon becomes — and thus the easier it becomes to use Amazon. Convenience and monopoly seem to be natural bedfellows.

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Given the growth of convenience — as an ideal, as a value, as a way of life — it is worth asking what our fixation with it is doing to us and to our country. I don't want to suggest that convenience is a force for evil. Making things easier isn't wicked. On the contrary, it often opens up possibilities that once seemed too onerous to contemplate, and it typically makes life less arduous, especially for those most vulnerable to life's drudgeries.

But we err in presuming convenience is always good, for it has a complex relationship with other ideals that we hold dear. Though understood and promoted as an instrument of liberation, convenience has a dark side. With its promise of smooth, effortless efficiency, it threatens to erase the sort of struggles and challenges that help give meaning to life. Created to free us, it can become a constraint on what we are willing to do, and thus in a subtle way it can enslave us.

It would be perverse to embrace inconvenience as a general rule. But when we let convenience decide everything, we surrender too much.

Convenience as we now know it is a product of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when labor-saving devices for the home were invented and marketed. Milestones include the invention of the first “convenience foods,” such as canned pork and beans and Quaker Quick Oats; the first electric clothes-washing machines; cleaning products like Old Dutch scouring powder; and other marvels including the electric vacuum cleaner, instant cake mix and the microwave oven.

Convenience was the household version of another late-19th-century idea, industrial efficiency, and its accompanying “scientific management.” It represented the adaptation of the ethos of the factory to domestic life.

However mundane it seems now, convenience, the great liberator of humankind from labor, was a utopian ideal. By saving time and eliminating drudgery, it would create the possibility of leisure. And with leisure would come the possibility of devoting time to learning, hobbies or whatever else might really matter to us. Convenience would make available to the general population the kind of freedom for self-cultivation once available only to the aristocracy. In this way convenience would also be the great leveler.

This idea — convenience as liberation — could be intoxicating. Its headiest depictions are in the science fiction and futurist imaginings of the mid-20th century. From serious magazines like *Popular Mechanics* and from goofy entertainments like “The Jetsons” we learned that life in the future would be perfectly convenient. Food would be prepared with the push of a button.

Moving sidewalks would do away with the annoyance of walking. Clothes would clean themselves or perhaps self-destruct after a day's wearing. The end of the struggle for existence could at last be contemplated.

The dream of convenience is premised on the nightmare of physical work. But is physical work always a nightmare? Do we really want to be emancipated from all of it? Perhaps our humanity is sometimes expressed in inconvenient actions and time-consuming pursuits. Perhaps this is why, with every advance of convenience, there have always been those who resist it. They resist out of stubbornness, yes (and because they have the luxury to do so), but also because they see a threat to their sense of who they are, to their feeling of control over things that matter to them.

By the late 1960s, the first convenience revolution had begun to sputter. The prospect of total convenience no longer seemed like society's greatest aspiration. Convenience meant conformity. The counterculture was about people's need to express themselves, to fulfill their individual potential, to live in harmony with nature rather than constantly seeking to overcome its nuisances. Playing the guitar was not convenient. Neither was growing one's own vegetables or fixing one's own motorcycle. But such things were seen to have value nevertheless — or rather, as a result. People were looking for individuality again.

Perhaps it was inevitable, then, that the second wave of convenience technologies — the period we are living in — would co-opt this ideal. It would conveniencize individuality.

You might date the beginning of this period to the advent of the Sony Walkman in 1979. With the Walkman we can see a subtle but fundamental shift in the ideology of convenience. If the first convenience revolution promised to make life and work easier for you, the second promised to make it easier to *be you*. The new technologies were catalysts of selfhood. They conferred efficiency on self-expression.

Consider the man of the early 1980s, strolling down the street with his Walkman and earphones. He is enclosed in an acoustic environment of his choosing. He is enjoying, out in public, the kind of self-expression he once could experience only in his private den. A new technology is making it easier for him to show who he is, if only to himself. He struts around the world, the star of his own movie.

So alluring is this vision that it has come to dominate our existence. Most of the powerful and important technologies created over the past few decades deliver convenience in the service of personalization and individuality. Think of the VCR, the playlist, the Facebook page, the Instagram account. This kind of convenience is no longer about saving physical labor — many of us don't do much of that anyway. It is about minimizing the mental resources, the mental exertion, required to choose among the options that express ourselves. Convenience is one-click, one-stop shopping, the seamless experience of “plug and play.” The ideal is personal preference with no effort.

We are willing to pay a premium for convenience, of course — more than we often realize we are willing to pay. During the late 1990s, for example, technologies of music distribution like Napster made it possible to get music online at no cost, and lots of people availed themselves of the option. But though it remains easy to get music free, no one really does it anymore. Why? Because the introduction of the iTunes store in 2003 made buying music even more convenient than illegally downloading it. Convenient beat out free.

As task after task becomes easier, the growing expectation of convenience exerts a pressure on everything else to be easy or get left behind. We are spoiled by immediacy and become annoyed by tasks that remain at the old level of effort and time. When you can skip the line and buy concert tickets on your phone, waiting in line to vote in an election is irritating. This is especially true for those who have never had to wait in lines (which may help explain the low rate at which young people vote).

The paradoxical truth I'm driving at is that today's technologies of individualization are technologies of mass individualization. Customization can be surprisingly homogenizing. Everyone, or nearly everyone, is on Facebook: It is the most convenient way to keep track of your friends and family, who in theory should represent what is unique about you and your life. Yet Facebook seems to make us all the same. Its format and conventions strip us of all but the most superficial expressions of individuality, such as which particular photo of a beach or mountain range we select as our background image.

I do not want to deny that making things easier can serve us in important ways, giving us many choices (of restaurants, taxi services, open-source encyclopedias) where we used to have only a few or none. But being a person is only partly about having and exercising choices. It is also about how we face up to situations that are thrust upon us, about overcoming worthy challenges

and finishing difficult tasks — the struggles that help make us who we are. What happens to human experience when so many obstacles and impediments and requirements and preparations have been removed? Today's cult of convenience fails to acknowledge that difficulty is a constitutive feature of human experience. Convenience is all destination and no journey. But climbing a mountain is different from taking the tram to the top, even if you end up at the same place. We are becoming people who care mainly or only about outcomes. We are at risk of making most of our life experiences a series of trolley rides.

Convenience has to serve something greater than itself, lest it lead only to more convenience. In her 1963 classic, "The Feminine Mystique," Betty Friedan looked at what household technologies had done for women and concluded that they had just created *more* demands. "Even with all the new labor-saving appliances," she wrote, "the modern American housewife probably spends more time on housework than her grandmother." When things become easier, we can seek to fill our time with more "easy" tasks. At some point, life's defining struggle becomes the tyranny of tiny chores and petty decisions.

An unwelcome consequence of living in a world where everything is "easy" is that the only skill that matters is the ability to multitask. At the extreme, we don't actually do anything; we only arrange what will be done, which is a flimsy basis for a life.

We need to consciously embrace the inconvenient — not always, but more of the time. Nowadays individuality has come to reside in making at least some inconvenient choices. You need not churn your own butter or hunt your own meat, but if you want to be someone, you cannot allow convenience to be the value that transcends all others. Struggle is not always a problem. Sometimes struggle is a solution. It can be the solution to the question of who you are.

Embracing inconvenience may sound odd, but we already do it without thinking of it as such. As if to mask the issue, we give other names to our inconvenient choices: We call them hobbies, avocations, callings, passions. These are the noninstrumental activities that help to define us. They reward us with character because they involve an encounter with meaningful resistance — with nature's laws, with the limits of our own bodies — as in carving wood, melding raw ingredients, fixing a broken appliance, writing code, timing waves or facing the point when the runner's legs and lungs begin to rebel against him.

Such activities take time, but they also give us time back. They expose us to the risk of frustration and failure, but they also can teach us something about the world and our place in it.

So let's reflect on the tyranny of convenience, try more often to resist its stupefying power, and see what happens. We must never forget the joy of doing something slow and something difficult, the satisfaction of not doing what is easiest. The constellation of inconvenient choices may be all that stands between us and a life of total, efficient conformity.

Tim Wu is a law professor at Columbia, the author of "The Attention Merchants: The Epic Struggle to Get Inside Our Heads" and a contributing opinion writer.

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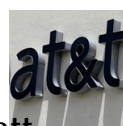
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