

## **WITH DIGITAL, IT'S ALWAYS "EVERYTHING'S DIFFERENT NOW"**

BY

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I've been thinking about the successive waves of "Now everything's different," that overtook the world since the first IBM PCs and Visicalc arrived in the 1980s. Consider only this subset: PC/microcomputers, spreadsheets, WYSIWYG, self-publishing, networking, Internet, Search, e-Whatever, Mobility, digital music/audio, GPS, ERP, social media, Big Data and analytics, Web1.0, Web2.0, Web3.0-to-infinity, and Cloud computing.

In retrospect, the stench of *eau de huckster* exceptionalist hyperbole should have been a tip off. As a student of history, I should have known better than to get swept up.

Every one of these is merely part of a singular, larger wave of "Now everything's different" (and yet not so much) flowing over the world. That all-encompassing change is *digitization*. Not the shape shifting "digital" that's again being touted as a new thing. *Digitization* that started with the dawn of the computing era, back when Turing broke the Enigma code.

Every one of the "Now it's different" developments was, it has to be granted, remarkably different. But, each was just the next high-water mark for the rising tide of migration to digital from everything analog. Reasons why this change is inevitable and

inexorable warrant exploration at some other time, in some other forum. For now, the important thing is that in every case, every different thing had an ever-shorter shelf life before the next thing came along to make everything different once again. Charts revealing the accelerating pace of diffusion from washing machines and fridges through to smart phones attest to this.

What remains but unspoken is that these waves build. They are not discrete. So, "Everything's different" *all the time*. What was once (in the first three quarters of the previous century, anyway) a luxuriant stability has become quite obvious, persistent instability. This is the digital effect... for now. (A time will come when the world again settles into a period of recovery, when change and innovation give way to reconsolidation of energy during a lengthy technological equilibrium. I, most certainly, will not see it.)

There is another realization: by virtue of digitization, ICT (Information Communication Technology) is not that place over there. Perhaps, during the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, it made some sense to hold ICT apart from manufacturing, weaponry, agriculture, transportation, health science, and other technologies. Every technology had its place. What has to be obvious now is that digital ICT is a foundational part of all other technological areas in all other industries and sectors. One need only look at the presence of the Internet and the plague of cybersecurity challenges affecting the critical (national infrastructures and financial flows) to the banal (piracy of personal information via children's toys).

As we near the close of the first fifth of this century, everyone and every organization ought to make three fundamental perceptual and approach recalibrations.

1. Yes, everything is different. Today it's *always* different. Forget your 20<sup>th</sup>-century expectation of stability. Expect instability; be cautious when things are unchanged too long.

2. Digital is not at the periphery of business or the edges of society. The digital wave has been swelling for 80-years and will continue for some time yet. If recent events reveal nothing else, it is how integral digital is to our quotidian lives. Embrace it: there is no going back.
3. Let's refresh our categories. There is no such thing as the "software industry," and ICT is not discrete. Practically everything of value is directly affected by software code; and ICT, thanks to the digital evolution, is fundamental to practically everything short of food. Case in point: the automotive industry is now a software business.

Digitization has been and will continue to make everything different. Its velocity may yet increase further. Get comfortable with it. But don't get fooled by anyone—including your favourite tech pundit—putting undue importance on any given change for this reason.

*Everything is different all the time.* Adapt. But remember that sooner than you think, that adaptation will be the old thing and you'll have to do it all again.

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