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# THE TECH REVOLUTION HAS REACHED WARP SPEED: WHAT LIES IN STORE FOR 2022

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Deepfakes, privacy-busting cameras, conspiracy theories galore—the pace of change is getting faster, and darker, than ever before.



BY NICK BILTON

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he best way to put the past year into context is to simply look at the numbers. For example, over the course of 2021, as of this writing, **Elon Musk**'s personal net worth grew by \$87 billion. That's more than the **market capitalization** of Ford. Musk wasn't alone—**Larry Page**'s and **Sergey Brin**'s net worths grew by \$46 billion and \$43 billion, respectively; **Mark Zuckerberg**'s by \$21 billion, and **Jeff Bezos**'s by \$4 billion. Over the same period, Apple's worth grew to almost \$3 trillion, up some \$700 billion from 12 months ago. (That means it grew by about the entire GDP of Saudi Arabia.) The market cap of **cryptocurrencies** grew from around \$770 billion to over \$2 trillion, and that's on a bad day (at its peak this year, in November, crypto was worth almost \$3 trillion). Even the internet itself **added 222 million** new users—nearly 90 million people more than the average number of births per year—bringing us 100 million shy of 5 billion users. All connected together like billions of little synapses in one giant, discombobulated, meme-making, fake-news-sharing, Netflix-and-chilling chatterbox of a network.

But these numbers tell us something else. While the global pandemic fucked up pretty much everything—creating mass unemployment, stretching inequality to its bleeding edges, and killing **more than 5.3 million** people—tech just seemed to keep growing. Sure, we were all stuck at home, downloading app after app, slicing away our time with dancing meme videos and endless opinions. And it wasn't just the old stuff, like Apple and Microsoft and Instagram, that grew. Over the past 12 months, we saw an explosion of new technologies, like NFTs, DAOs, and DeFi, plus a slew of other terms that just a year ago were not even in the public's consciousness. Now, of course, they are all anyone can talk about.

In March, **Beeple**, a digital artist few people had even heard of at the start of the year, sold a digital artwork for **\$69 million**—around the **same price** as Claude Monet's breathtaking *Le Bassin aux Nymphéas*. Then there's the collection of NFTs called the Bored Ape Yacht Club, whose 10,000 ape drawings were first "minted" around May and sold back then for 0.08 Ethereum, around \$200 each at the time. Now, the group of apes is **worth over a billion dollars**, with a **handful of these** JPEGs selling for over \$2 million each. (Even just reading this paragraph aloud a year ago would have made me sound like I'd been through one too many ayahuasca ceremonies.)

On the one hand, it might seem that the world has gone stark raving mad. But I think there's something else at play. And that's the speed of time.

About a decade ago, on a tour of the MIT Media Lab, a professor there told me that "the technological changes that would take place over the next century would be more rapid-fire than the technological changes that had taken place over the past 20,000 years." In other words, the speed with which

technology will start to change society will one day be unlike anything we've ever seen before in history. I think we're now starting to see this become a reality. The slow roll of watching the internet grow to nearly 5 billion people took almost 39 years. The speed with which information can ricochet around the planet between almost three quarters of the people on earth is now nothing short of astounding and terrifying. Everything in tech is happening faster and faster, and it's becoming apparent that, short of unplugging the whole thing (which is not a terrible idea), there is absolutely nothing we can do to slow it down. The speed with which everything grew this past year, and the direction in which the money flowed with torrential effect, are perfectly illustrative of that. And it's only going to get faster and faster as technology proliferates evermore through every aspect of our daily lives. One of the aspects of technological change is how it grows exponentially, so the speed of change actually grows faster with each new advancement in tech. Given that we're only 21 years into this century, and how much has changed in that period of time—the invention of everything from driverless cars to smartphones to social media—we're only a tiny smidgen of the way into the century of unimaginable change the MIT professor predicted.

**P**erhaps the one aspect of technology that is different today than it was a year ago is the general public's understanding of the positives and negatives of the services with which we now engage for hours a day. In early October, when a Facebook whistleblower, **Frances Haugen**, testified before Congress, people knew that what she said was true, because they had felt it themselves over the past year. "I'm here today because I believe Facebook's products harm children, stoke division, and weaken our democracy," Haugen said at the opening of her testimony.

Having been cooped up inside during the pandemic, with nothing but technology to connect us, we knew she was right. America is a mess, torn in two, and one of the main through lines that helped get us here is none other than social media, which has become the propaganda poster of our time. (Yes, traditional media, also driven by social media, hasn't helped much either.) The Facebooks and Twitters of the world didn't start out like this; instead, they began as web pages with just a little white box at the top to type in a few words. That's it. And yet, they have subsequently helped usher in an era where people don't believe in science and vaccines, where nothing is real and everything could be fake, where a lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes, to quote the wisdom often attributed to Mark Twain. And that's just with words.

There are aspects of technology that clearly have astoundingly positive impacts on the world. The mRNA advancements that gave us a vaccine in nine months led to, as one person I know who works in biotech put it, "one of the greatest scientific achievements in human history." Social media, for all its plentiful pitfalls, gave us massive positive global movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo. The cell phone has enabled us to be connected to people we love in unimaginable ways. And yes, there are plenty of positives from the past year—imagine if we'd been in quarantine without technology to help

us work and pass the time. But, more and more lately, the negatives are starting to outweigh the upsides of these advancements.

I've been writing about technology for almost two decades, and there are two things I've learned about tech that are absolute certainties. The first is that we can rarely ever predict how a technology will be used in unintended ways. Facebook was founded as a way for Mark Zuckerberg and his friends to get laid; now it's not only being used to spread incomprehensible amounts of misinformation, but it's helping contribute to the spread of the coronavirus, the rise of depression and suicide in teens, and even **international genocide**. **Donald Trump** has gleefully admitted that if it weren't for Twitter, he would **never have been president**. If he had never been president, January 6 would have been a day for celebration, no matter who won, not an assault on the Capitol. And the current wave of smash-and-grab robberies wouldn't even exist if it weren't for social media. Snapchat, which was originally designed to share suggestive disappearing pictures, is **now being used** to organize this new type of crime. Which brings us to the second certainty about technology: that the people who build these things rarely ever try to predict what could go wrong with them. When they do—which is rare—they make very little effort to build in tools that will help mitigate the disasters they are capable of auguring. That's why the world looks the way it does today—and why, by the end of next year, it will look even worse.

Over the next 365 days, people will start moving into the metaverse; cars will become more autonomous; cell phone cameras will get bigger and better; drones will start to deliver packages; deepfake technology will be as easy to download as Candy Crush; and Web3 scaffolding will be erected on top of the current internet. And yet, some of the downsides are as clear as day: In the metaverse, you might become even more dissociated from society, even more depressed, and even more deeply indoctrinated into a QAnon-type conspiracy theory that hasn't even been invented yet. ISIS, or some rogue state, might stop trying to recruit suicide bombers, and instead focus on hackers who can hack into a car's autonomous system and drive thousands of them into a thousand sidewalks. Cell phone cameras are about to get zoom lenses that will be able to record over your shoulder from a thousand feet away with extreme clarity, eroding our privacy even more. Consumer drones could cause airplane accidents, or be used in attempted assassinations (which already happened **once** in Venezuela), not just by the U.S. military overseas. Deepfakes will turn the midterms into a breeding ground for **fake videos** and photos of candidates, ones that will make fake news look about as treacherous as a **talking paper clip**. Web3 and crypto will surely have endless advantages for creative people and our lopsided economic system, but they will also be used in nefarious ways that we can't even see yet. And a year from now, when we look back at society in an even worse place than it is today, there will be one final certainty: that the people who build all of these things will be even richer than they are today.

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[Nick Bilton](#) is a special correspondent at *Vanity Fair*.

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