

Bronwyn Williams – Techno-optimism not acceleration: How to make friends with machines

 By [Danette Breitenbach](#)

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This exclusive #BizTrends2024 interview is with future thinker and Flux Trends partner, Bronwyn Williams.

Williams chats to Bizcommunity Marketing & Media editor, Danette Breitenbach on the concept of techno-optimism, which she describes as an optimistic view of the joint trajectory of humanity and technology.

While technology has historically been aligned with progress, optimism isn't the same as blind faith, she says. "It's about backing the world you want with the actions you need to take to get there."

Williams warns against techno-pessimism, which can hinder the exploration of new technologies. "Techno-optimism also varies globally," she says, "But whatever your view, the narratives we create about technology significantly influence our attitudes towards it."

She advocates for a balanced view, where technology complements rather than supersedes humanity, opting for cautious optimism and a balanced approach to embracing technology, allowing us to be optimistic about the trajectory of humanity

and technology together.

Bizcommunity · #BizTrends2024: Bronwyn Williams

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“An optimistic view of technology is that, historically for the greater part, - and of course, there are exceptions - it has aligned with progress. That’s the purpose of technology. If we can remember that, we can be optimistic about progress.”

The developing world vs the developed world

It is all about the stories that we're telling ourselves about technology.

Studies globally around techno-optimism, as opposed to techno-pessimism, show that techno-optimistic countries view technology as an opportunity. The people in these countries see technology as something that can help them progress, get out of poverty, and improve their lifespans and their quality of life.

These are mainly from the Eastern, and the so-called Global South communities, where economies are still developing.

"In the more developed, wealthier world, people tend to be more techno-pessimistic because they see technology as threatening the lives they already have, as opposed to people who have less and see technology as a way to have what they do not have yet or to get ahead in life," says Williams.

The extremist view: Techno-progressivism

"The accelerationist movement advocates rapid technological advancement, even at the expense of human experience. This is a subtle form of pessimism that disguises itself as hyper-optimism but is fundamentally anti-human, as it suggests that humanity is flawed and not worth saving," she explains.

It is the idea that we should move fast and break things as we did with social media, she adds, but at a much greater scale with technology, and that it doesn't matter if what is broken is the entirety of the human experience.

At its most extreme this movement's far future version is one where technology supersedes humanity, and it wants us to accelerate to that point as quickly as possible. "It doesn't matter if humanity is taken over by some sort of machine offspring that becomes a machine God," she says.

This sort of extremist view is techno-progressivism.

That does not make it optimistic. "You can be excited about technology without believing that technology should be adopted and employed regardless of the consequences that it has for humanity," says Williams.

The potential of technology for humanity

She says we need to challenge these sorts of narratives.

"I would suggest that it is quite a pessimistic view because it suggests that humanity is flawed and that it's not worth saving

or protecting. It suggests technology opposes humanity, rather than something that we can embrace.

“The history of humanity and technology is that they work together, and largely this a history of progress. Generally, our lives are much better today than they were even a century ago and this is because we embraced technology,” she elaborates.

Technology has the potential to enhance humanity, as seen in examples like disaster relief efforts.

But to get to that point you have to understand technology. “You have to work with it and play with it; see it as a tool. We need to use these tools and technologies to cast our votes on the futures that we want to be a part of regardless of whether others are using them to further their ends,” she says.

The simpler version of the above is that we need to get technologically literate. But to do that we need to get the fundamentals right, such as access to technology, like Wifi.

“In South Africa, not everyone has access to Wifi and data prices are sky-high. Plus to access Wifi you need electricity.

“We need need to keep the lights on so we can access these tools - tools that are already democratised that should be levelling the playing field to opportunity globally for everyone,” she says.

The future: As good or bad as we hope?

The future is never going to be quite as good as we hope or as bad as we fear. “The future is like tomorrow – there are things that’ll go wrong, and there are things that will go right, but we keep on moving on.”

She adds that she is not painting very utopian or very dystopian pictures. “My advice would be to push back against anyone who is painting a very binary picture of the future, whether it is very rosy or very disastrous.”

These, she says, are red flags and stem from someone who has not spent a lot of time thinking about the way that the world is heading.

“What we do have to understand is that the sort of technologies that we’ve created for ourselves right now do allow us to essentially have what we want when we want it.

“And if you look back at human history, that’s more or less been the progress of technology - giving us more of what we want faster.”

Bronwyn Williams is a respected figure in trend media, is a partner at Flux Trends executive consultancy, and is an influential future thinker, trend translator, future finance specialist, business trend analyst, author, academic, columnist and media personality.

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ABOUT DANETTE BREITENBACH

Danette Breitenbach is a marketing & media editor at Bizcommunity.com. Previously she freelanced in the marketing and media sector, including for Bizcommunity. She was editor and publisher of AdVantage, the publication that served the marketing, media and advertising industry in southern Africa. She has worked extensively in print media, mainly B2B. She has a Masters in Financial Journalism from Wits.

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