The future is already here; it’s just not very evenly distributed.

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The title comes from a quote by American speculative fiction author William Gibson [1] and in the original context alludes primarily to the fact that the things that will constitute the normal or everyday within the lives of those living in the future already exist for some today. Most of what will constitute change, at least in the short- to midterm, is simply the spread of these niche or minority things to become more pervasive. However, Gibson’s quote can also be interpreted to mean that the future itself will be characterized by inequalities similar to those that exist in the present. To avoid reproducing these inequalities—or at least to minimize their reproduction—it is necessary to ensure that those processes in the present that “write the future” are not irredeemably tainted by these same inequalities.

It is hard to clearly identify which elements of the present will become more widespread in the future. Throughout the 20th century, social transitions in the West often involved the trappings of wealth becoming more accessible to wider sections of society, such as automobility, better-quality housing, high-quality healthcare, and consumer technology. Many contemporary future scenarios present the future as a utopia of wealth and health furnished with a panoply of high-tech gadgets and permitted by continued economic growth. However, it is also possible that the future, for some or all, will involve a gradual or rapid reduction in standard of living. Thus, the future might consist of the expansion of the current lifestyles of either the rich and powerful, or the poor and oppressed.

The future is always created on uneven foundations. In order to understand how we can create futures that do not exclude, isolate, or exploit, we have to understand how the future is written in the present. More specifically, we are interested in how minority elements are, in this moment, unequally distributed; how these inequalities are likely to be reproduced or altered in the future; and how these inequalities may actually determine the future or futures at which we arrive. Through exploring how existing differences create unequal futures, we can begin to understand how to look forward in a way that is beneficial to those who are often excluded from mainstream narratives of change.

By considering three key domains—the social, the spatial, and the temporal—this article will briefly describe some of the ways in which we may be able to see the future as being unequally distributed in the present. It will then consider what impact these distributional inequalities have with regard to those who may play a significant role in attempting to write the future. We close by offering some possible ways of dealing with inequality that involve technologies.
**Social inequalities.** It is often the case that certain social groups (identifiable by gender, class, race, physical ability, etc.) are omitted from official/institutional visions of the future created by experts (politicians, managers, interaction designers), be it intentionally or not. However, because these visions shape policies and technologies that affect everyone, these social inequalities raise questions of power. Moreover, the unofficial futures of everyday experience, hopes, dreams, and imaginations are often not considered in these future visions.

Efforts to incorporate everybody in views of the future often result in dystopian images, highlighting current differences in exaggerated ways. Science fiction literature offers some clear examples. J.G. Ballard’s 1975 novel *High Rise* presents us with a fictional interpretation of class and futures, which is useful when assessing how social inequalities within the everyday are constructed and consumed. In the novel, class divisions are physical (the higher the floor in Ballard’s tower block, the higher the class of resident). Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) also portrays fundamental inequalities at the heart of the imagined society, though here these are built into genetics and conditioning, not just architecture.

While these fictional futures extend and emphasize current inequalities, in many ways fragments of utopia exist already. For example, in the Western world, the majority of people can access clean drinking water in such sufficiency that they flush their toilets with it; calorific food is available in such quantity that they can become obese; and free health care is available in some countries (for example the UK or Cuba) to treat the consequences. It might be naïve to expect utopia to exist only as an endpoint or a final destination. Such a view highlights that we should recognize and cherish these fragments of utopia as and when we find them, and realize that it may be necessary to fight hard to keep them.

**Spatial inequalities.** The rural-urban divide is one spatial axis that highlights differences that are apparent across potential elements of the future. New modes of transportation, such as car clubs or Uber, are increasingly available in cities but have little reach into rural areas. And expansion into rural areas is questionable, highlighting how different futures may emerge as a result of location. Moving from physical mobility to virtual mobility, access to high-speed Internet is another example of current reality in urban areas that may soon constitute a (relatively near) future for rural ones.

In terms of global distributions of lifestyles and wealth, the late 20th century and early 21st century have seen an increasing dispersion of modern, Westernized, middle-class lifestyles from Europe, North America, and Australasia to parts of Asia, South America, and Africa. In the latter we can see a rapid transition toward futures that are very different from their recent pasts, due to extended energy supply networks, availability of consumer goods, or the introduction of emergent technologies such as the Internet. In parallel, the past decade has also seen what might be considered by some as less progressive futures developing,
such as the descent into civil war and collapse of infrastructure in parts of the Middle East (e.g., Syria and Iraq) as well as uneven distributions of the consequences of the global financial crash hitting Portugal, Italy, Greece, and Spain particularly harshly.

Sometimes, though, space causes less of a divide. Mobile phones provide a fascinating case study in how fast a new technology can establish itself globally, rapidly leveling access to the services that a technology can provide. Mobile phones highlight not only the speed with which futures can arrive but also a virtual shift in the everyday, from one experienced through direct contact to one where connections transcend the physical. Here the future may also hark back to the past. Computing and the virtual realm can be seen as an extension of the oracles and shamans of the past [2], our desire for knowledge and foretelling transplanted from chicken entrails to Wikipedia and social media. We haven’t moved far from the past, and the past will always remain with us (as Rebecca Wright and Colin Pooley discuss on page XX).

Social media highlights the nature of information inequality. In an era of post-truth, access to information and how we use it has become a vital part of our present. Consider algorithms developed to reduce information overload that instead yielded undesirable results such as Eli Pariser’s filter bubbles. Or recall Facebook’s infamous experiment with tweaking people’s timelines to affect their emotions [3]. Personal newsfeeds often determine what information users see, and access to (good quality) information may be thought of as more important and influential than ever before. Thus, spatial inequalities can extend into virtual/cyber space.

**Temporal inequalities.** Short-term events and disruptions such as blackouts and supply-chain disruptions offer insight into more precarious unstable futures, as increasing energy consumption and aging infrastructure mean that energy-supply systems become progressively overloaded. Disruptions to systems may appear sudden, but they occur within the context of long build-ups of dependencies, not only allowing for a greater understanding of the nature of innovation in the moment but also revealing much about the undisrupted everyday normal. What is taken for granted now (e.g., a reliable energy supply, a stable climate) cannot be taken for granted in the future.

But how should these potential future disruptions be handled? Are we just trying to maintain the current system to stop an unstable future? If so, for whom is the current system actually stable? What is considered disruption in the first place? This is clearly relative, because in many other parts of the world, black/brownouts are considered normal.

Temporal inequalities can also manifest across generations: The aging population may be a picture of the future for today’s young. Although attempting to avoid the consequences of aging has been a long-time concern of much of the human race, this has, in the modern
West, led to a failure in adequately considering the well-being of the old. By improving life for those who are old now, younger segments of society could help design the future for themselves when that time comes.

At the other end of the age spectrum, the comfort with technology shown by Generation Z/Digital Natives provides insight for older sections of society as to how digital technology can rapidly become a given within everyday life. But it is not just in technological practices that a generation gap may be widening. In 2016, both the U.K. referendum on leaving the European Union and the U.S. general election showed very significant differences in voting patterns between the young and the old. In both these cases, there appears to be a tension between those whose views have been ignored for the past three decades and those who haven’t yet had voices (young people). It seems the youth vote lost out, potentially condemning them to live in societies determined by those who won’t live to see them played out fully.

**Structural Inequalities**

The domains above—social, spatial, and temporal—are just three ways of identifying inequalities. What matters most, we argue, is not whether differences exist, but rather the extent to which they result from the way society and institutions work (as opposed to, say, individual choices). When they arise from social structures, and particularly when leading to negative impacts, these become issues of inequality that should be a concern from a justice perspective. How these differences become structural inequalities is usually related to issues of power. Unequal power relationships determine, at least at a macro level, who gets to write the future—for example, through decisions about long-term infrastructure provisioning and the built environment, corporate (R&D) strategies, government policies, and research agendas that will shape many people’s everyday lives for years to come. These decisions are often made by a particular section of society—typically white, upper-middle class, and male. Although the demographics of decision makers are beginning to broaden, many of the organizational structures in which decisions are made limit the degree to which ideas from outside dominant mindsets can have traction. Additionally, incomes associated with decision-maker roles mean that when people from other class backgrounds take such jobs, they often become removed from the day-to-day experiences of those from similar situations. For example, believing that if they have “made good,” then it is possible for any and all. However, even when apparently benign, current differences in power have a strong impact on how the future is being written. For example, the power of people like Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg to deploy their wealth as individuals selectively to prioritize certain types of health research and action determines wider contexts of what a future free from global disease will look like.
Dealing with Inequality

How can we move forward to a more equitable future? From a Marxist perspective, many of the inequalities described here arise from discrepancies in access to and control of capital. Marx saw a potential for automation to relieve the worker from the mindless tasks brought about by the division of labor. One-hundred-fifty years later, the very real issue of wide-scale automation offers a mechanism through which to assess class and everyday futures, incorporating a new economic model posited not as utopian socialism but rather postcapitalism. Automation is often viewed as the reason for workers losing jobs, zero-hour contracts, and a lower standard of living. However, recent work [4,5] highlights how the rise in labor-eliminating technologies may ultimately benefit those who have until now depended on state welfare. Through becoming part of a narrative that views leisure and reduced work as integral to the everyday, the un/underemployed will be able to “demand the future” and become stronger participants in their own futures, rather than having their lives dictated by the current structures of labor. The extreme view is that increased technologies in the workplace will allow for everyone to work less, resulting in what Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams call “fully automated luxury communism” [5]. Other views of the future have been put forward that, rather than automating all work, propose a refocusing on work that is less efficient while being more fulfilling. For example, Tim Jackson in *Prosperity Without Growth* [6], potentially reflecting William Morris’s *Useful Work versus Useless Toil* [7], suggests a vision of the future in which worth and meaning might be seen as something to be obtained through work rather than purchased from the proceeds of work. This may, however, need to be partly obtained through the automation of drudgery.

How automation will be deployed and how the wealth generated from automated processes will be distributed is unclear. It is far from certain that automation will be used to create a better everyday for all. The futures described in the works listed here may not be that different from the present, yet they can provide a way for inequalities within wage income and work processes to be considered. Alongside full automation is the idea of a universal basic income, a concept already being suggested as part of an everyday future in several countries, such as in a recent experiment in Utrecht, Holland, and in a referendum in Switzerland [8]. Basic income is a guaranteed, unconditional amount of money, regardless of employment or social position. Changing economic and social infrastructure in such a way means state welfare becomes something beneficial to all. However, the idea that a person should be entitled to payment for being a citizen of a certain state is controversial, perhaps because those who are already financially stable view a livelihood as something that people have to earn. This highlights the importance of developing social and cultural change alongside technological change.

Futures narratives require an understanding of how inequalities could be changed culturally, economically, and politically. Significant change in current systems may be more likely to occur (at a large level) from the bottom up via revolution than from the top down—indeed,
Morris clearly saw that the wealthy would not relinquish their power without a struggle. Some people who have perceived their influence as diminishing over the past few decades are now calling for an end to the future being “more of the same.” These struggles can be interpreted as a push to have a stake in how the future is written. In recent years, protests and networks dedicated to social justice have increased in visibility. For example, the #BlackLivesMatter movement (www.blacklivesmatter.com) highlights the ways in which black people are deprived of certain rights by the state and “intentionally left powerless.” Creating a movement that is both digital (the use of the hashtag in the network’s name is demonstrative of its dependence on digital technologies and social media) and physical (through protests) shows how those who have an unequal footing in certain structures are changing their position and getting others to change as well. In order for injustices to be remedied in the future, they must be addressed now. The longer they are left, the more embedded they will become.

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Endnotes


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