

[Back to online version](#)

GuardianUnlimited: Print version

A meeting of minds tackles the big global issues

A mixed bag of thinkers raised awareness and discussed projects at last month's Pop!Tech conference in Maine

More on...

Technology

News

Research and development

Environment

Kate Bulkley

The Guardian Thursday November 15 2007



Last month's Pop!Tech think-in, held in the New England town of Camden, took some of the world's most intractable issues and applied social theory and thinking to them. Interspersed between musical performances, films and demonstrations, all staged in a restored 19th-century opera house on the coast, were a range of contributions from some 500 thinkers from industry, business, technology, academia, journalism and the blogosphere.

The ethos of the think-in is one of collaboration and the power of individuals and small groups to effect change. So on the agenda at the three-day conference, which looks at progress through popular technology, were issues including climate change, environmental damage and cultural disharmony.

If there is an overarching theme, it is that we understand humans as social animals. Says PopTech! curator Andrew Zolli, making social theory more

understandable will be a huge step forward in getting people to think about these issues. "If you want to think about galvanising people, you have to start with a structure, a map. So when we talk about the human impact it starts by charting what is," says Zolli.

At this year's conference, which was founded 11 years ago by Bob Metcalf, inventor of Ethernet technology, and John Sculley, a former chief executive of Apple, were two people who believe that graphic representations of the world's problems provide a good starting point for social engagement. Seattle-based photographer Chris Jordan uses digital photography and publicly available statistics to depict starkly the amount of rubbish produced by US consumers, from the number of mobile phones "retired" each day (426,000) to the number of plastic bottles thrown out every five minutes (2m).

Sensory cartographer

The resulting pictures (chrisjordan.com) are huge (170,000 batteries depicted at their real size requires a print measuring 26x43 feet), weirdly beautiful and frightening: they render statistics and raw data into something that we can relate to emotionally.

Meanwhile, British demographer Christian Nold creates "sensory maps" that aim to help people understand how they are interacting with their environment and with each other so that deeper conversations and interactions can take place. Nold uses devices hooked up to GPS transmitters to measure the physiological reactions of the people wearing them, namely changes in their adrenaline levels. He has become a sort of sensory cartographer. He reckons that his "biomaps" raise awareness of the increasingly urban nature of human life: 50% of the world's population was expected to be living in cities by this year, according to the UN. In 1950, that figure was just 30%. He explains: "I'm trying to bring prejudicial and personal ideas into my maps, not just neat colour-coding of a subjective view of poverty levels."

London-based Nold's work has included what he calls emotional maps, often carried out with local authorities. The idea of these is that volunteers wear a device that measures their emotional response to their environment. Volunteers walk around their neighbourhood and on their return a map is generated from the data collected by the device, which records the high and low points of their arousal by measuring their galvanic skin response. Nold's website (biomapping.net) explains: "By interpreting and annotating this data, communal emotion maps are constructed that are packed full of personal observations which show the areas that people feel strongly about." Nold has already worked on maps of Stockport, Greenwich and San Francisco. "I am trying to get them to recognise their sociality," Nold says.

Another approach to dealing with the fast-paced world came from author Carl Honore, author of *In Praise of Slowness*. He told the conference that we should slow down and wise up to the consequences of our actions. This particularly applies to technology, he remarked, pointing to the advertising campaign by mobile operator Orange, which includes a tagline that talks

about "good things happening" when the phone is turned off.

Another speaker at the conference was Dan Pink, author of *A Whole New Mind*. He suggests that people in the technologically developed world are increasingly embracing things to add depth to their fast-paced lives such as yoga, meditation and organic food. He told the conference that our lives have been altered by the way in which we work and the tools we use to work, largely as a result of technology. "In an industrial economy the tools are large and cumbersome, but now the means of production are computer chips and they are cheap enough for one person to buy as well as carry around," he said.

Pink is concerned about the effect of outsourcing. He explains that the long-term impact of offshoring has been underestimated: "In the US we have lost 400,000 jobs in total to offshoring in the last three years and this is equivalent to less than one month's worth of job turnover, which is nothing.

"But longer-term, if in a country like India a small proportion of its population becomes competitive, say 10% of 1.2 billion people, that is 120 million people [to compete against], or about the population of the UK."

Pink says that the jobs that are under threat in advanced economies are ones that he describes as "left-brained", which emphasise linear, analytical and sequential thinking. These skills still matter, but they matter less because they are easily replicable offshore, whereas more "right-brain" skills that include a level of "artistry, empathy and inventiveness" are less easy to offshore.

"The key word here is 'routine'," he goes on. "Work that has a script, a spec sheet or a series of steps with a right answer - like certain types of accounting and law - is disappearing from advanced economies," he says. According to Pink, "spreadsheet work" is becoming a commodity that is forcing developed economies such as the US, the UK and Japan to refocus on jobs that are harder to automate and outsource. These jobs, he says, are the ones that have more to do with design, creativity and "big-picture thinking".

Multiple choices

This shift in emphasis is affecting how engineering schools recruit new students so that, for example, two-thirds of engineering school Georgia Tech's incoming freshman class play a musical instrument, something the school is using as a proxy for nimble-mindedness, says Pink. "Employers are saying they don't want graduates who can fill out multiple choice tests," he goes on. "Staggering prosperity in the advanced economies has changed business in profound ways. Procter & Gamble are hiring in the art and design schools, saying 'we're in the design business, not the manufacturing products business', because that is the only way to differentiate in crowded markets."

Other speakers pointed to the problems of wealth and consumption and their effect on the environment. One project highlighted at Pop!Tech was the Global Crop Diversity Trust's work to preserve the diversity of the world's

crops by collecting seeds and putting them in an \$8m (£3.8m) vault being built in Svalbard in the Norwegian Arctic (croptrust.org).

The trust, which was founded by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, hopes that the "doomsday vault" will eventually house 1.2m different seeds that could be used to form new varieties or to re-seed arable land. Cary Fowler of the trust explained: "Plant diversity is unique among the problems of global warming in that we can solve it by ending the mass extinction of crop diversity, by collecting and preserving seeds."

Another speaker suggested the biggest hurdle to turning technology and innovation to our advantage against threats such as global warming is the difficulty the human brain has in reacting to threats that are not immediate and personal.

Dan Gilbert, a Harvard professor of psychology, told the conference that the problem with galvanising people to tackle global warming is that it seems so removed from us, both in terms of its impact on us and what it is affecting - such as the polar bears under threat as the ice melts and shrinks their hunting grounds.

He explained to the conference: "The brain is sensitive to relative changes and immediate physical threats, but global warming has been creeping up on us." He went on to explain that slow threats don't hit our "threat buttons" hard enough. "If climate change had the velocity of a baseball heading for our face or was caused by something that affected our moral sensibilities, like eating puppies, we would be massing in the streets against it."

It was an eclectic range of topics from an eclectic range of thinkers, and a conference that, according to one, provided powerful "optics on the future".

[License/buy our content](#) | [Privacy policy](#) | [Terms & conditions](#) | [Advertising guide](#) | [Accessibility](#) | [A-Z index](#) | [About Guardian Unlimited](#) | [Join our dating site today](#)

Guardian Unlimited © Guardian News and Media Limited 2007