

# Essay #1: Technological Perspectives in the News Media

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*Written by Micheal Fitzgerald, "Turning point for touch screens" was featured in the Technology Section of The New York Times on August 24, 2008. This paper explores the technological perspective evident in this news article.*

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Consumer technology breakthroughs opening up new markets and spawn the birth of new opportunities. Apple's "slick use of technology on its iPhone", says Michael Fitzgerald (2008) will pave the way for new profits for touch-screen manufacturers. Historically, the integration of touch into both consumer and commercial devices was available only for niche applications. A part from a small sect of devices, there was limited excitement for applying touch technology to the core of device interactions. Everything has changed with the introduction of the iPhone.

Electronics manufacturers from large to small are excited about the shifting perceptions as a result of the overwhelming consumer embrace iPhones. Relatively high manufacturing costs had previously stifled multitouch adoption. With the success of iPhones, more companies are looking to expand current offerings to include multitouch into their products.

Original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) like Dell who makes PCs, envision multitouch applications that are immersive; users will have the power to use both hands while they mimic common gestures on a virtual canvas.

For-profit entities like N-trig, an Israeli multitouch screen manufacturer, assume that consumers will want to leverage multitouch tech on large screens. N-trig hopes that consumers will not only want to use their fingers, but also want devices that will accept inputs from a wide array of objects including pens.

With diverging predictions about multitouch opportunities for manufacturers, some commentators cite the substantial costs as big adoption inhibitors. (Fitzgerald, 2008) Other bodies list limiting and dated software representing an even larger barrier to new consumer multitouch offerings. If software giants like Microsoft can deliver on demonstrated multitouch innovations and drive new software standards, it will become much easier “for touch-enabled applications to work on the myriad kinds of touch technology” states Fitzgerald. (2008)

As this paper will show, the author of *Turning point for touch screens* is clearly biased to the perspective of technological optimism. Technological optimism is the philosophical belief that a better life is only possible through technological progress. This goes to say, technology is “both the engine of change and the salvation of society.” (Jeffcote, 2003) With technology and progress closely tied together, a better future society is evident through individual and collective material and moral betterment. For the purpose of this paper, we can consider a better life embodied best through perpetuating techno-progress.

At the core of technological optimism are specific criteria that aid in measuring techno-progress. When pulling back the layers inherent to techno-progress we witness Fitzgerald’s technological optimism perspective in full clarity. Fitzgerald proposes that companies, both large and small, are readying to cash-in on a new wave of multitouch demand—triggered by Apple’s use of multitouch technology on its iPhone.

Part of this demand, and progress, is attributed to the **newness** of multitouch on the iPhone. Technological newness from an optimist’s perspective is attached to progress.

We see in the following excerpt, the author's bias to this perspective: "[Until now] touch screens haven't created much excitement as the main way for people to use things like phones or computers or other consumer electronics" (Fitzgerald, 2008). By conflating the ideas of novelty and progress the author immediately brands himself as a technological optimist. Fitzgerald proposes the iPhone's newness has the power to energize other forms of consumer electronics and help drive innovation into existing commodities.

With the potential to transfer the iPhone's novel application of multitouch to other consumer electronics we see another measure of techno-progress fulfilled: **an abundance of cheap goods**. Demand for multitouch devices has historically been relegated to niche applications due to cost barriers (Fitzgerald, 2008). To a technological optimist, a better life may now be possible as existing consumer electronic offerings may now integrate multitouch cheaply. Before the iPhone's introduction, states Fitzgerald, "High prices had caused multitouch to languish" (2008). Current multitouch costs are at a level where more use-applications are feasible.

Newness and cheapness aside, the iPhone also promises to be convenient to use. Technological optimists measure techno-progress through technologies **ease-of-use** as well the **efficiency** it drives. With multitouch technology Fitzgerald proposes consumers will be able to perform tasks like "resize photos with just a pinch" (2008) easily. This intuitive gesture-like support means consumers will be able to use an electronic device more conveniently and efficiently.

The final testament to the author's optimism perspective occurs in the form of **quantity**; where n increase in the number and size of technology equals progress. Fitzgerald's enthusiasm for greater exploration of multitouch screens by companies, where he asserts

"It might follow that people like using their fingers on the screen of a cellphone, they would like it even better on the bigger displays of computers." Quality of life is defined by material betterment and dictated by larger quantities of things; and so, according to technological optimism an increasing amount of companies will see success by integrating multitouch into large electronic devices.

However many opportunities within the iPhone, when viewed from the technological pessimist perspective, a far different picture of a better life emerges. Relative to technological optimism, pessimists see only negative dividends from the development and adoption of new technology.

A technological pessimist may point out the iPhone's planned obsolescence as an example of consumers striving to achieve false happiness via technological abundance. When buying more electronic devices consumers are simply projecting their happiness onto technological abundance.

By projecting their happiness onto material goods consumers, technological pessimists would argue, multitouch technology is contributing to flawed techno-capitalism where the paradigm of production / consumption is no longer sustainable. Technological pessimism is concerned about overconsumption and surely the manufacturing process of iPhones will lead to further hoarding of natural resources, excess waste and ultimately, environmental decline.

In addition, technological pessimists would perceive Fitzgerald's hope for a large company like Microsoft to drive multitouch standards in order to "make it easier for touch-enabled applications to work on the myriad kinds of touch technology" (2008) one

step closer to a dystopian world. Pushing multitouch technology across more platforms will only make consumers increasingly dependent on technology to survive—while losing more control. In addition, by trusting the technocrats at Microsoft to manage integrating multitouch into society, greater authoritarian control would be placed on individuals. Encouraging Microsoft, remarks a potential technological pessimist, would only further erode human agency by effectively rooting multitouch technology into a corporation's agenda.

Fitzgerald's article on the opportunities for multitouch screen manufacturers is loaded with values and assumptions. Fitzgerald roots his analysis in a perspective of technological optimism. His relative cognition of facts and opinions validate why society and individuals only stand to gain from the "techno-progress" evident in Apple's iPhone. Ultimately, the author's one-sidedness brings to light the importance of framing technological development in a larger context. As demonstrated in this paper, a more balanced approach to technological progress should include weighing potential risks and costs proposed by the technological pessimism perspective.

## Bibliography

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