

*Tim Wu discusses the impact that convenience has in our lives.*

- 1 Convenience is the most underestimated and least understood force in the world today. As a driver of human decisions, it may not offer the illicit thrill of Freud's unconscious sexual desires or the mathematical elegance of the economist's incentives. Convenience is boring. But boring is not the same thing as trivial. In the developed nations of the 21st century, convenience – that is, more efficient and easier ways of doing personal tasks – has emerged as perhaps the most powerful force shaping our individual lives and our economies. Convenience seems to make our decisions for us, trumping what we like to imagine are our true preferences. Easy is better, easiest is best. 5
- 2 Convenience has the ability to make other options unthinkable. Once you have used a washing machine, laundering clothes by hand seems irrational, even if it might be cheaper. After you have experienced streaming television, waiting to see a show at a prescribed hour seems silly, even a little undignified. To resist convenience – not to own a cellphone, not to use Google – is often taken for eccentricity, if not fanaticism. 10
- 3 Our taste for convenience begets more convenience through a combination of the economies of scale and the power of habit. The simpler it is to use Amazon, the more powerful Amazon becomes, and thus the easier it becomes to use Amazon. Convenience and monopoly seem to be natural bedfellows. Given the growth of convenience – as an ideal, as a value, as a way of life – it is worth asking what our fixation with it is doing to us and to our country. I do not want to suggest that convenience is a force for evil. Making things easier is not wicked. On the contrary, it often opens up possibilities that once seemed too onerous to contemplate, and it typically makes life less arduous, especially for those most vulnerable to life's drudgeries. 15
- 4 However, we err in presuming convenience is always good, for it has a complex relationship with other ideals that we hold dear. Though understood and promoted as an instrument of liberation, convenience has a dark side. With its promise of smooth, effortless efficiency, it threatens to erase the sort of struggles and challenges that help give meaning to life. Created to free us, it can become a constraint on what we are willing to do, and thus in a subtle way it can enslave us. It would be perverse to embrace inconvenience as a general rule. But when we let convenience decide everything, we surrender too much. 20
- 5 Convenience, the great liberator of humankind from labour, was a utopian ideal. By saving time and eliminating drudgery, it would create the possibility of leisure. With leisure comes the possibility of devoting time to learning, hobbies or whatever else might really matter to us. Convenience would make available to the general population the kind of freedom for self-cultivation once available only to the aristocracy. In this way, convenience would also be the great leveller. 25
- 6 Often, the dream of convenience is premised on the nightmare of physical work. But is physical work always a nightmare? Do we really want to be emancipated from all of it? Perhaps our humanity is sometimes expressed in inconvenient actions and time-consuming pursuits. Perhaps this is why, with every advance of convenience, there have always been those who resist it. They resist out of stubbornness, yes (and because they have the luxury to do so), but also because they see a threat to their sense of who they are, to their feeling of control over things that matter to them. 30
- 7 By the late 1960s, the first convenience revolution had begun to sputter. The prospect of total convenience no longer seemed like society's greatest aspiration. Convenience meant conformity. The counterculture was about people's need to express themselves, to fulfil their individual potential, to live in harmony with nature rather than constantly seeking to overcome its nuisances. Playing the guitar was not convenient. Neither was growing one's own vegetables or fixing one's own motorcycle. But such things were seen 35

- to have value nevertheless – or rather, as a result. People were looking for individuality again. 50
- 8 Perhaps it was inevitable, then, that the second wave of convenience technologies would co-opt this ideal. It would ‘conveniencise’ individuality. If the first convenience revolution promised to make life and work easier for you, the second promised to make it easier to be you. The new technologies were catalysts of selfhood, conferring efficiency on self-expression. So alluring is this vision that it has come to dominate our existence. Most of the powerful and important technologies created over the past few decades deliver convenience in the service of personalisation and individuality. Convenience is now one-click, one-stop shopping, the seamless experience of ‘plug and play’. The ideal is personal preference with no effort. As task after task becomes easier, the growing expectation of convenience exerts a pressure on everything else to be easy or get left behind. We are spoiled by immediacy and become annoyed by tasks that remain at the old level of effort and time. When you can skip the line and buy concert tickets on your phone, waiting in line to vote in an election is irritating. 55
- 9 The paradoxical truth is that today’s technologies of individualisation are technologies of mass individualisation. Customisation can be surprisingly homogenising. Everyone, or nearly everyone, is on Facebook: It is the most convenient way to keep track of friends and family, who in theory should represent what is unique about you and your life. Yet, Facebook seems to make us all the same. Its format and conventions strip us of all but the most superficial expressions of individuality, such as which particular photo of a beach or mountain range we select as our background image. I do not want to deny that making things easier can serve us in important ways, giving us many choices where we used to have only a few or none. But being a person is only partly about having and exercising choices. It is also about how we face up to situations that are thrust upon us, about overcoming worthy challenges and finishing difficult tasks – the struggles that help make us who we are. What happens to human experience when so many obstacles and impediments and requirements and preparations have been removed? 65
- 10 Today’s cult of convenience fails to acknowledge that difficulty is a constitutive feature of human experience. Convenience is all destination and no journey. Climbing a mountain is different from taking the tram to the top, even if you end up at the same place. We are becoming people who care mainly or only about outcomes. We are at risk of making most of our life experiences a series of trolley rides. An unwelcome consequence of living in a world where everything is ‘easy’ is that the only skill that matters is the ability to multi-task. At the extreme, we do not actually do anything; we only arrange what will be done, which is a flimsy basis for a life. We need to consciously embrace the inconvenient. Today, individuality has come to reside in making at least some inconvenient choices. Struggle is not always a problem. Sometimes, struggle is a solution. It can be the solution to the question of who you are. 70
- 11 So let us reflect on the tyranny of convenience, try more often to resist its stupefying power, and see what happens. We must never forget the joy of doing something slow and something difficult, the satisfaction of not doing what is easiest. The constellation of inconvenient choices may be all that stands between us and a life of total, efficient conformity. 85