The Myth and the Millennialism of “Disruptive Innovation”

Audrey Watters¹

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: a waste of desert sand;
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Wind shadows of the indignant desert birds.

Folklorists often balk at the common usage of the word “myth” to mean “lie.” A myth, by their disciplinary definition, is quite the opposite. A myth is a culture’s sacred story. It involves supernatural or supreme beings—gods. It explains origins and destinies. A myth is the Truth.

So when I say that “disruptive innovation” is one of the great myths of the contemporary business world, particularly of the tech industry, I don’t mean by “myth” that Clayton Christensen’s explanation of changes to markets and business models and technologies is a falsehood. (I have an MA in Folklore, not an MBA—so that’s part of it, for sure.) Rather, my assigning “myth” to “disruptive innovation” is meant to highlight the ways in which this narrative has been widely accepted as unassailably true. No doubt (as a Harvard professor) Christensen has faced very little skepticism or criticism about his theory concerning the transformation of industries—why, it’s as if The Innovator’s Dilemma were some sort of sacred text.

Helping to enhance its mythic status, the storytelling around “disruptive innovation” has taken on another broader and looser dimension as well, as the term is now frequently invoked in

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many quarters to mean things quite different from Christensen’s original arguments in *The Innovator’s Dilemma*.

In this vein, almost every new app, every new startup, every new tech—if you believe the myth-making-as-marketing at least—becomes a disruptive innovation: limo-summoning iPhone apps (e.g., Uber), photo-sharing iPhone apps (e.g., Path), email on your iPhone (e.g., Mailbox), online payments (e.g., PayPal), electric vehicles (e.g., Tesla), cloud computing (e.g., Amazon Web Services), 3D printers (e.g., Makerbot), video-based lectures (e.g., Khan Academy), social search (e.g., Facebook Graph Search), the entire internet, etc., *ad nauseam.*

The millennialism of disruptive innovation

The companies above might very well be innovative—in their technologies and their business models. That’s beside the point if you’re looking for disruption. Per Christensen’s framework, these could also be “sustaining innovations”—that is, products and services that strengthen the position (and the profits) of incumbent organizations.

But that’s not the mythology embraced by the tech industry, which despite its increasing economic and political power, continues to see itself as an upstart rather than an incumbent.

And as a self-appointed and self-described disruptor, the tech industry seems to have latched on to the most millennial elements of Christensen’s theories—that is, the predictions about the destruction of the old and the ascension of the new at the hands of technology: The death of the music industry. The death of newspapers. The death of print. The death of Hollywood. The death of books. The death of the Web. The death of RSS. The death of Microsoft. All predicted to be killed—suddenly or

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5 Christensen, *The Innovator’s Dilemma*, xv.
6 See the following articles, respectively: Michael DeGusta, “The REAL Death of the Music Industry,” *Business Insider*, 18 February 2011; Don Irvine, “New Study Predicts the Death of Newspapers in Five Years,” *Accuracy in Media*,
gradually or in the library with a candlestick — by some sort of “disruptive innovation.”

The structure to this sort of narrative is certainly a well-known and oft-told one in folklore — in tales of both a religious and secular sort. Doom. Suffering. Change. Then paradise.

People seemingly love to believe in the “end of the world as we know it” stories — for reasons that have to do with both the horrors of the now and the heaven of the future. Many cultures (and Silicon Valley is, despite its embrace of science and technology, no different here) tell a story that predicts some sort of cataclysmic event(s) that will bring about a radical cultural (economic, political) transformation and, eventually, some sort of paradise.


I’ll be the first to admit that the data in folklore professor Dan Wojcik’s book The End of the World As We Know It is dated (um, he was my Master’s Thesis advisor, circa 2000); he wrote the book in 1997 — oh! the same year that The Innovator’s Dilemma was originally published! Wojcik’s analysis of a sweeping societal belief in “the end of the world” was well-timed with the technological anxieties surrounding Y2K, making it an interesting and contrasting companion to Christensen’s contention that we’ll witness “the end” of certain organizations thanks to technological “innovation.”

For his part Wojcik noted that, according to Nielsen, some 40% of Americans believed that there was nothing we could do to prevent nuclear holocaust. Sixty percent believed in Judg-


ment Day, 44% in the Battle of Armageddon, 44% in the Rapture. He didn’t say how many believed in Y2K. He didn’t say how many believed in “disruptive innovation.” He did not ask how many believed in “the singularity” and such.

I’d argue that despite its staid Harvard Business School origins, Christensen’s “disruptive innovation” story taps into these same powerful narratives about the end-times — told, as always, by the chosen ones (be they Americans, Christians, Shakers, Heaven’s Gate followers, survivalists, Java programmers, or “my generation”). Folks do seem drawn to these millennial stories, particularly when they help frame and justify our religious, moral, economic, political, cultural, social, technological worldview.

**Adjustments to the disruptive innovation eschatology**

Here are a couple of (education-related) end-times predictions from Clayton Christensen:

- In 15 years, half of US universities may be bankrupt.
- By the year 2019 half of all classes for grades K–12 will be taught online.
- Disruptive innovation will be, as TechCrunch (among other acolytes) is happy to profess, the end of school as we know it.

Such is its inevitability, so the story goes, that new players can enter the education market and, even though their product is

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9 Mark Suster, “In Fifteen Years From Now Half of US Universities May Be in Bankruptcy: My Surprise Discussion with @ClayChristensen,” *Both Sides*, 3 March 2013.
of lower quality and appeals to those who are not currently “customers,” oust the incumbent organizations. (Incumbents, in this case, are publicly funded, brick-and-mortar schools.) As Christensen and his co-authors argued in *Disrupting Class* in 2008, “disruption is a necessary and overdue chapter in our public schools.”

But like many millennialist prophets are wont to do when their end-times predictions don’t quite unfold the way they originally envisioned, Clayton Christensen and his disciples at the Clayton Christensen Institute (which was recently renamed from the Innosight Institute) have just tweaked their forecast about (public) education’s future. Five years post-*Disrupting Class*, “disrupting class” will look a bit different, they now say.

In May 2013, the organization released a new white paper, detailing a new path for transformation that winds a new future between the disruptive and sustaining innovations: they call them “hybrid innovations.”

“A hybrid is a combination of the new, disruptive technology with the old technology and represents a sustaining innovation relative to the old technology.”

It’s an interesting revision (a refinement, really) of the organization’s predictions in *Disrupting Class*, the book which first applied “disruptive innovation” to education technology and that argued online learning would be a way to “modularize the system and thereby customize learning.” (In other buzzwords, to “unbundle” and “personalize” education.)

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15 Ibid., 2.
17 Michael Staton, “Unbundling Education, A Simple Framework,” 5 February 2012. See also “Leveraging Intelligent Adaptive Learning to Personalize
Not so fast, the organization now says. Hybrid innovation. “Blended learning.” A little bit online and a little bit offline. And while middle and high schools (and colleges, although that isn’t the subject of this latest white paper) might offer opportunities for “rampant non-consumption,” — that is, classically, an opportunity for “disruption” — “the future of elementary schools at this point is likely to be largely, but not exclusively, a sustaining innovation story for the classroom.”¹⁸ Computer hardware and software and internet-access in the classroom, as those of us who’ve been thinking about education technology for decades now keep saying, won’t necessarily change “everything.” (Go figure.)

Of course, even in *Disrupting Class*, the predictions of the ed-tech end-times were already oriented towards changing the business practices, not (necessarily) the pedagogy or the learning. And the promise of a thriving education technology eschatology were already muted in Christensen’s earliest formulation by the “restrictions” placed upon the education sector — restrictions by virtue of education being a public and not a private institution, of education not being beholden to market forces quite the same way that the other examples that the mythology of “disruptive innovation” has utilized to explain itself.

“People did not create new disruptive business models in public education, however. Why not? Almost all disruptions take root among non-consumers. In education, there was little opportunity to do that. Public education is set up as a public utility, and state laws mandate attendance for virtually everyone. There was no large, untapped pool of non-consumers that new school models could target.”¹⁹

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¹⁹ Christensen, Horn, and Johnson, *Disrupting Class*, 60.
Agitating for the end times

This Christensen Institute’s latest white paper on “hybrids” clarifies then that the future of education isn’t necessarily (or utterly or easily) “disrupted.” There are limits to the predictions, to the predictive models, to the business school approach to education change and such. There are, for example, lots of non-consumers of learning (a necessary piece of the “disruptive innovation” framework) if you’re willing to frame education as something that happens outside the officially sanctioned, brick-and-mortar institutions. But it’s not so easy to woo “non-consumers” if you’re really just focused on the market and policy and practices of an otherwise compulsory schooling setting. (And the distinction between “consumers,” “non-consumers,” “students,” and “learners” is important too, although all get lumped into a consumption framework by Christensen.)

Like so many millennialist entities faced with the harsh realities of faltering predictions, the Innosight Institute (now under its new name) offers a new prediction.

But, let’s be clear, the organization doesn’t just predict the future of education. The Clayton Christensen Institute does not just offer models — business models — for the future. It does not simply observe an always changing (education) technology market. It has not simply diagnosed the changes due to technological advancements. It has not simply prophesied or predicted what future outcomes might be.

It’s written a best-selling book (or two) about disruptive innovation. It has actively lobbied governments for certain aspects of its agenda (its mythology?), becoming a vocal proponent for its particular vision of a disrupted and innovative future. The Clayton Christensen Institute is a member of ALEC, for example, a corporate lobbying organization whose education initiatives include writing and pushing for legislation that enables the outsourcing of education to for-profit, online education providers
and that eases the restrictions of entry to the market of the very virtual schools.20

“Over time,” the new white-paper reads, “as the disruptive models of blended learning improve, the new value propositions will be powerful enough to prevail over those of the traditional classroom.”21 And so, according to the Christensen mythology, despite any sort of hesitation about the hybridity of disruption now, disruption will prevail.

And so, indeed, it is written. And so, it is told.

20 SourceWatch entry for the “ALEC Education Task Force”: http://www.source-watch.org/index.php/ALEC_Education_Task_Force. See also Audrey Watters, “Google Summit Answers Oregon Educators’ Questions about Apps for Edu,” Hack Education, 8 October 2010. I was contacted by a spokesperson from the Clayton Christensen Institute saying that “we have never been a member of ALEC” and asking for a correction to that effect in this article. ALEC itself does not publish the list of its members, so I cannot verify information that way. The institute is listed as a member on the ALEC Exposed site: http://www.alecexposed.org/wiki/ALEC_Exposed. It is also referenced by the public accountability group Little Sis as an education reform group endorsed by ALEC: http://littlesis.org/lists/188-education-reform-organizations-endorsed-by-alec/members.

Bibliography


