

SNG-What the devil is blockchain technology?-5-21-18

What the devil is blockchain technology?

By Jim Nowlan

This column is more musing than analysis: We don't know where we are going, and we are going there faster and faster.

That is, we need to focus more effort on understanding the consequences of the dizzying cavalcade of new technologies that are disrupting our lives. The following brought the topic to mind.

"What the devil is blockchain technology?" editor Jonathan Whitney thundered in a recent email. For 50 years, Jon has edited, published and taken out the trash at the *Carroll County Review* in Thomson, Illinois. A former president of the Illinois Press Association, Jon is the consummate community journalist.

Jon had just received a press release about a new state report on the topic of his question. It sounded to him like a cockamamie, probably taxpayer-costly boondoggle. Always eager to please a paying editor, I said I'd look into it.

Blockchain is a distributed ledger (think spreadsheet) technology that provides identical information to every block on a chain. Seemingly infinite computer power and storage make it possible.

Information in a blockchain isn't in one place, like at a government records office, but everywhere, that is, in every block on the chain.

You could possess one block, me another, and so on for up to millions of blocks. Nobody on the chain can flim-flam the other because all have the same information, updated continuously.

This is the technology that created the cryptocurrency Bitcoin, making many mega-millionaires this past year—out of thin air, literally.

Understandably, if the technology can provide a nearly unhackable platform for new currencies, IBM, AT&T, Oracle and scores of start-ups are getting into the game. The plan is to figure out how blockchain might be applied to government and business services where the verifiability of information is critical, as with property titles and where my food came from.

Some smart people say blockchain will be as big as the internet. Others scratch their heads.

To its credit, the State of Illinois has challenged its agencies as well as our state's local governments to think about how blockchain might speed transactions, increase transparency, eliminate middlemen, and reduce costs. The state has done this without spending any money.

In a recent chat, Sean O'Kelly, a chief information officer with the State of Illinois, told me the Holy Grail for government blockchain is verifiable, unhackable online voting.

This may seem far in the future, yet technology moves fast and amazes. Just a generation ago, who would have dreamed that Facebook and smartphones would be dominating our social lives, or that unmanned drone airplanes, remote-controlled from a desert in Nevada, would be fighting our battles overseas.

For most of human history, change has occurred at a glacial pace. Your great-great grandfather was a peasant farmer and so were you, and you used the same wood plow.

The rate of change picked up with the Renaissance, Enlightenment, Industrial Revolution and now the Digital Revolution. Today, the rate of change discombobulates us with its speed, and it will only become faster.

How do we keep up, adapt? Can the center hold?

For example, to use an illustration close to my world, political parties have basically been eliminated as core institutions underpinning our democratic system, in but a few decades.

The political party disrupters have been television, court decisions, micro-targeting of voters by digital technologies, and the rise of billionaire ideologues like the Koch Brothers and candidates in Illinois like Gov. Bruce Rauner and challenger J. B. Pritzker.

I think family instability, the loss of social cohesion to polarization, and the decline in work by males in the prime of life are among issues also buffeted by changing digital technologies.

There is plenty of reporting about what the cascading new technologies *do*, but little assessment of possible consequences the technologies will have for society.

At the least, we need to create academic and think tank centers that focus on the consequences of technology.

And we must have continuing national conversations about how to apply technologies constructively. Otherwise, we risk being transformed by the tech rather than being the transformers.

Editor Whitney and I sure wish we knew where we were going.