Will the next computing innovation arrive in spring 2017 on the tail of a recession?

As I was getting ready for a long flight home, my seatmate recognized the pile of IEEE literature on my lap and casually asked, “When are we going to see the next innovation in technology?”

I decided to be a bit mischievous and said, “Spring 2017.”

“That’s a very specific date,” he answered. “Why will something happen then?”

It will be the end of the next global recession, I explained. Each of the last four recessions substantially changed the computing field. The 1982 recession marked the shift from minicomputers to personal computers, and the 1991 recession saw the decline of the hardware industry in the US and established software as the major source of innovation. The next recession, 2001, denoted the rise of the Internet economy and outsourced high-tech services. Finally, the recession of late 2008 expanded the role of cloud computing, saw mobile devices become a dominant computing platform, and created new ways of organizing labor with social computing.

Our culture loves the notion of disruptive innovation and the economic theory of creative destruction. The old technology must die to make place for the new. As if to signal his agreement, my seatmate pulled a phone out of his pocket and started to tweet the idea to his followers. Nothing is apparently true in our modern age until its azimuth and altitude are fixed in the twitterverse.

If he had stopped for a moment, he might have seen the holes in my story. The dates of the recessions didn’t quite match the events I ascribed to them. PCs entered the office well before ’83 but didn’t become dominant until the end of the decade. The recession of ’91 probably had less to do with the rise of the software industry than the end of the Cold War. The burst of the dot-com bubble probably encouraged the rise of the Internet economy, but so did the 1999 WTO agreement that limited Internet taxation.

The last of these recessions probably best illustrates what really happens during economic hardships. Recessions not only move resources from one place to another, they also shift our attention. As the dark nights closed upon us, we looked for signs of economic rebirth and saw it in the social media that had started in 2004, the crowdsourcing that became prominent in 2005, and the smartphone of 2006. Looking for a sign of economic recovery, we sought evidence. Perhaps these innovations came with the recession. Perhaps it did shift resources from old technologies to new. Perhaps we just needed to notice them.

So, will the next computing innovation arrive in spring 2017 on the tail of a recession? If it does, it will involve technology currently in development and new companies that are already operating. The challenge for all of us is to get our technologies ready, fix all the bugs, and turn them into products. There may be money for your idea in 2017, and there will almost certainly be ready attention.

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