When a country starts to court computing technology and looks to build a high-tech industry, it has to accept the guests that come with the party.

I knew the risks when I asked the question, but the reward was too great. I was in the laboratory of a new university in the Persian Gulf. Four young women, each wearing a full burka, were working on a computer engineering project. PC boards covered the table, and laptop screens glowed with source code, yet the situation’s dynamics were clear. Computing was the guest at the feast, incorporated into their world rather than the other way around. “Could I take a picture?,” I asked and was politely told no.

Computing technology has moved across cultural and national boundaries with relative ease. It has operated equally well in the tech parks of Santa Clara, California, the concrete office blocks of India’s Electric City, and even the old Maoist structures that still occupy a few places in Beijing’s Haidian district.

When we invite this technology into our country, we believe that the benefits will be great and the cultural costs will be few. We hope that computing technology will make our economy stronger, our children smarter, and our country better able to compete in world markets.

Countries so desire the benefits of computing technology that they’re willing to overlook its cultural impact, or at least believe that they control that impact. My hosts at the engineering school in the United Arab Emirates were trying to expand the presence of computing technology in their country for many good reasons. Computing will help move them away from a strict oil economy, giving them other ways of earning money and new ways of engaging with the rest of the world. Yet, at the same time, it has the potential of altering the local culture.

My host acknowledged challenges of incorporating computing into the culture as we walked the campus. “Eighty percent of the citizens are going to have good government jobs,” he said. There weren’t a lot of incentives for engineering graduates to work for high-tech companies, much less to become entrepreneurs and build new businesses from scratch. Still, they were looking to encourage a small entrepreneurial culture and giving their students a course in intellectual property so that they might be more prepared to protect their ideas.

I responded that there were better strategies for encouraging high-tech entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurs are generally people who will accept the risk of a startup company because they believe that it’s the best way for them to advance the position of their families and their community.

At this point, I looked at the risks facing me and decided to take the daring path. I suggested that the children of guest workers were likely to be the best potential entrepreneurial class. They already had access to education, I noted, and a strong technology infrastructure. If the country gave them permanent residence, protection for their business, and a path to citizenship, then the UAE might find it very easy to encourage a growing high-tech entrepreneurial culture.

My hosts were polite but firm. “That’s not easy to address,” said one, “so we’re looking for other ideas.” When a country starts to court computing technology and looks to build a high-tech industry, it has to accept the guests that come with computing’s party. We know that it encourages the free flow of information and that it puts certain industries into a new competitive environment, but we also see that it exposes the basic assumptions we have about daily life and asks us to reconsider them.

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