

# The Emperor's New Clothes: How Smart Homes Are Becoming Rather Stupid

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This may get me thrown out of the fraternity of technologists, but when it comes to bringing the Internet of Things (IoT) into our homes - 'smart' locks, 'smart' bulbs, 'smart' radiators, 'smart' whatever, has anyone actually sat down and asked the vital question - does anyone need this?

I am starting to think the answer is no, and it is beginning to show. Yes, the technology needed to totally integrate our homes into one 'smart' ecosystem is there, but I struggle to see what the point of it all is. Is saying "Alexa turn on the light" really better than just turning on the light? I think not.

The growing problem with the 'smart' technology industry is that it just makes us all look stupid. So many technologies have been launched and, in the main, they do not really have a purpose.

It all boils down to one problem. Every technology innovator dreams of what Peter Thiel called a “zero to one” moment, where you create something that everyone wants or needs but didn’t know they did until it existed. Who knew we needed Google, Facebook or Amazon in our lives until they existed? Driven by this desire to create the next big thing, far too many technologists have forgotten the second part of the equation - what you create has to be useful; it has to work in people’s lives, it has to answer a question.

Right now, ‘smart’ technology in homes is only answering the question: how can I be really lazy? Though impossible to get exact figures, my reading is within the market for technology the people who want to just be as sluggish as possible aren’t enough for a sustainable business model. At present IoT in our homes is only really appealing to the 2 - 2.5% of the market that will always want to get new technology first - the innovators. The kind of people who bought a flat screen TV when tube TVs were still better, just to have the latest thing.

The vast majority of consumers do not care about having the latest thing; they just want what they already have to work. I recently installed Hive in a property I am renting out. It is a great system. I am happy to use it to control all my heating from my phone or ‘smart’ device. However, my tenant takes the opposite view, he just wants a thermostat, he just wants his heating to work.

Even the attempts to push ‘smart’ home technology in advertising have strayed far away from what can be considered its useful application. In one advert, a family is shown forgetting to turn off the iron before going on holiday and because they have a ‘smart’ home can switch it off from the car. This sounds great until you consider the practicalities. Every household appliance you have has to be IoT-enabled. Good luck with replacing your iron, your fridge, your radiators et al!

None of this is to say that IoT applications have no place in our homes. In many areas a clear ‘use case’ for this technology does exist. For example, an IoT system to monitor and alert, in real time, problems in a home heating

system has clear advantages to both the consumer and the energy company. In the very near future it will be possible, indeed even common, for your boiler to know which parts are about to fail and alert the energy company. For customers, repeat engineer visits will be eliminated, the massive cost of replacing parts of, or even the entire boiler can be avoided and the time cost of multiple days off work will no longer exist. Energy companies will be able to monitor when customers will need a service, reducing the need for 'check-ups'. In addition engineers will be able to know exactly what a customer needs and be able to provide said product immediately.

If smart homes are going to take off as a concept and replicate the success of previous innovations, companies have to stop answering questions no one asked. Instead the focus should be on making our lives easier, on solving problems we all have, but don't yet realise technology can solve.

The IoT industry is now at a crossroads. It has the potential to be in every home or it could go the way of wearables - fun, but ultimately annoying and pointless. For any technology to reach the point where it is accepted by the mass market, it must actually be useful in the lives of more than 15% of the population. The big energy companies are close to making this happen with smart homes, but must make the right decisions as to where to focus their energies. Failure to do so will mean failure of 'smart' homes and significant loss of investment. Let's watch this space.

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