THE MECHANISM SERIES

Operatorship: What Ate Technopreneurship, and What Replaced It

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Coldcode Si Labs — Harare
First edition, November 2026

Front matter

About this book

This book began as an argument with a syllabus. I was taught *technopreneurship* in a first degree in entrepreneurship — the module in which online business was made to sound like a serious subject — and for twenty years the word was accurate. Then, over about four years, it stopped being accurate, and almost nobody in the classroom where I learned it has said so out loud. Students are still being taught a description of a world in which building was hard. It is not hard any more. It is a subscription.

So this book does two things. The first is an autopsy: an account of what actually died, why, and in what order. The second is a naming: a term for the form of business that replaced it, defined closely enough to be argued with, tested, and — in the last part — falsified.

Operatorship

What ate technopreneurship, and what replaced it

by Courage Garikai

Published by Coldcode SI Labs
First edition, 2026

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How to read it

If you want the answer first, read chapter 13, then come back to the beginning. The name is *operatorship*, and the definition is one sentence long. The fifteen chapters before it are why the sentence is not a slogan.

If you are teaching, Part Four is the syllabus, and chapter 18 is the exam. It is designed to be stolen.

If you are sceptical — and you should be, because this is an argument about your livelihood written by one person with one estate — start at chapter 22, where the book states the three ways it could be wrong and the five observations that would finish it.

What this book is not

It is not a forecast that anyone will succeed. It is not investment advice, and it is not a claim that the collapse of one word's usefulness implies anything about the fortunes of any particular business. It is not a technology review: the specific models, prices and products are incidental, and they will be stale within a year, which is precisely the argument.

Nor is it a lament. The technopreneurs had a real advantage for a real period and many of them built real things. The book is grateful for that and moves on, because a word that names the abundant input cannot describe the scarce one, and the vocabulary has to follow the scarcity.

A note on the specimen

The estate described in these pages is the author's own: seven ventures, twenty-four works including this one, five publishing rails, an hourly monitor, a three-touch outreach sequence, and roughly three hours twenty minutes a week of human attention. One estate is a case, not a study. It is reported because the *shape* of the labour in it is a prediction — almost none of the week is building, almost all of

it is deciding — and a prediction can be checked. Chapter 21 says what would show it to be wrong.

Part One — The word

What this part is for: to establish what technopreneurship actually claimed, and to show that the claim was an arbitrage rather than a theory. By the end you should be able to state, in one sentence, what a technopreneur was selling and to whom.

1. What the word was doing

Technopreneurship. It is a compound, and the seam shows: technology plus entrepreneurship, welded together in a classroom and never quite smoothed out. The term is commonly traced to 1987, it gained currency when the first internet boom made the compound feel like a future, and it has been carried since by a specific institution — the university course. In South-East Asia, in India, in Nigeria, in Zimbabwe, *technopreneurship* became the module in which a business student was taught that the internet was not a channel but a place where a different kind of company could be built. It is still, in most places that teach it, not in the dictionary.

I was taught it in a first degree in entrepreneurship, where it served as the respectable name for "businesses on the internet". That is how it was used: a container for online ventures, a way of saying *this is real business, not a hobby with a website*. The word was doing honest work. It was telling a generation of students that the skills of a technologist and the skills of a founder could be held by the same person, and that holding both was a position of advantage.

The advantage was real. That is the part that matters, and it is the part that has ended.

Activity 1.1 — Recover your own curriculum. Write down the modules of any business or entrepreneurship course you have taken, in the order they were taught, and beside each one write what it assumed was scarce. Most people find that the list describes a world of expensive building: plans, projections, market research,