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Advancing the frontier of innovation

From Dr John Seely Brown and Dr William H Janeway.

Sir, Richard Waters' article "Vanity or visionary?" (Analysis, August 14) provides important insights into the research initiatives of successful Silicon Valley entrepreneurs. We are separately quoted in the article but believe it appropriate to respond jointly.

We agree that vision without rigour is unproductive and that rigorous process unfocused by vision is – literally – pointless. Certainly, however funded, Charles Darwin's research was a model of exhaustive derivation of theory from evidence. And we can be sure that the researchers who express the "impatience and ambitions of Google's founders" subject themselves to the same level of engineering discipline as have those founders themselves.

Mr Waters accurately records the retreat of government from funding frontier research at the sort of scale that generated the digital revolution a generation ago and the incapacity of private sector enterprise to invest beyond visible economic returns. We join in applauding the initiatives of individual philanthropic angels, while recognising that it is simply not possible for them severally to fill the resultant gap. In particular, in advancing the frontier of innovation in critical areas – such as in response to climate change – there is no substitute for collaboration between the public and private sectors, between diverse disciplines, between long-term, mission-oriented research agencies and competitive, commercially-focused enterprise.

In all these efforts we must also be aware that rapidly emerging tool-sets allow fundamentally new approaches to the critical problems we face. As researchers, investors and peer reviewers, we must be open to what a few years ago seemed implausible.

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