

Dehumanizing Technology

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2 history

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4 human aspects

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7 conclusion

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I want to question that mantra and the technological constructivism that goes along with it.

I can only describe the problem, I don't have a solution...

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Software developer and IT security consultant, main interests:

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- digital currencies (“Blockchain” — where necessary)

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- privacy is necessary for liberty
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⇒ **but**: I became somewhat disillusioned with mainstream tech...

definitions

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*“Technology is the collection of techniques, skills, methods, and processes used in the production of goods or services or in the accomplishment of objectives, such as scientific investigation. Technology can be the knowledge of techniques, **processes**, and the like, or it can be embedded in **machines** to allow for operation without detailed knowledge of their workings.” (Wikipedia)*

technique

Example Git and GitHub:

- technology in the sense of a (software) “machine”
- technology in the sense of a process

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In *The Technological Society* (1954) the sociologist Jacques Ellul calls this concept technique, it is:

“the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity.”

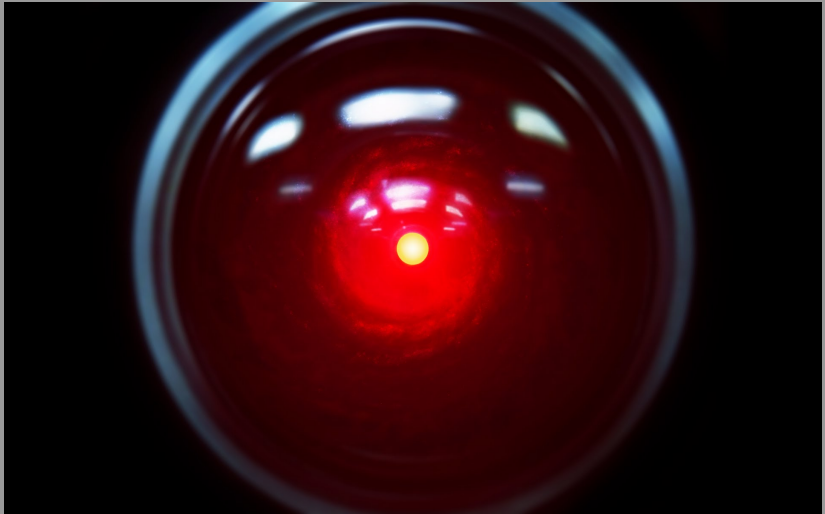
dehumanizing technology?

double meaning:

- 1 dehumanizing "humans in general" through (efficient) technology
- 2 de-human-izing of technology: taking the human element out of technology

We focus mainly on 1., but 2. is a driving factor for 1.





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⇒ individuals like to think they matter more then they actually do





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 - S. Jobs and E. Musk are idolized because *we want to believe*

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 - path dependency: HTTP/HTML/JavaScript
- countless young lives wasted by trying to understand Node.js

tech intervention spiral

Similar to the intervention spiral caused by state intervention in the free market (Austrian economics).

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A technical solution creates a problem which is fixed with a technical solution which...

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→ also known as systems failure

recent example: Puerto Rico



cascading failures (cont.)

- we connect more and more systems
- applications become business critical and security critical
- Internet of Things (IoT): **everything** becomes safety critical
- ⇒ one system failure can lead to catastrophe (not resilient)

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"I keep coming back to the way terrorism and guerrilla warfare is rapidly evolving to allow nonstate networks to challenge the structure and order of nation-states. It is a change on par with the rise of the Internet and China, and will dramatically change how you and your children view security." — John Robb, Brave New War, 2007

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- *singularity* (end of humanity)

how much choice?

- if everybody has it, how much choice do you really have?
- 2007: only 4% of American adults owned smartphones.
- January 2017: 77% of American adults and 92% of those under the age of 35 own smartphones¹
- South Korea: 88%, including **100%** of those under 35
- (SK: myopia rate for 20y-olds: 18% in 1955, 96% in 2011)
- another path dependency and potential for cascading failures
- cash is third after WeChat and Alipay in China²

¹cited in Brain Drain: The Mere Presence of Ones Own Smartphone Reduces Available Cognitive Capacity

²In Urban China, Cash Is Rapidly Becoming Obsolete, NYT, 2017

smartphone usage linked to depression in teens

effect of large scale smartphone deployments³

- boys depressive symptoms increased by 21% from 2012 to 2015
- girls increased by 50%, more than twice as much
- 3x as many 12-to-14-year-old girls killed themselves in 2015 as in 2007, compared with 2x as many boys

³Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation? The Atlantic, 2017

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In the quiet spaces opened up by the prolonged, undistracted reading of a book, people made their own associations, drew their own inferences and analogies, fostered their own ideas. They thought deeply as they read deeply."

addictive systems

prediction:

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also:

- gamification
- A/B testing
- machine learning

human aspects: summary

“Television is the last technology we should be allowed to invent and put out without a surgeon general’s warning.”—Alan Kay, pioneer of OO programming and windowing GUIs⁴

- technology adoption is increasing
 - human biology remains pretty much the same (for now)
 - problems sometimes only occur in large doses
 - **no** studies on adverse effects whatsoever (e.g., YouTube Kids)
- more unintended consequences faster
- entire generations grow up without knowing alternatives

⁴quoted in <https://www.fastcompany.com/40435064/what-alan-kay-thinks-about-the-iphone-and-technology-now>

smart contracts are a dumb idea

- machine algorithms deciding over humans

⁵The Guardian, 2017

⁶<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/18/soviet-officer-who-averted-cold-war-nuclear-disaster-dies-aged-77>

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⇒ smart contracts are a dehumanizing technology

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democracy end-of-life?

- hate speech and fake news
- propaganda
- nudging and social scores
- growing state dependance (social welfare)
- pathologization

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trinity of:

- 1 abundant consumer choices
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⇒ population too busy to question the system in meaningful way

endangered species *Homo sapiens*

- humans are unable to understand the world they live in
- they will inhabit a “magical” universe
- science: the end of the *Universalgelehrter* (polymath)
- development of *disciplines* with *sub-* and *sub-sub-disciplines*
- 90% of all the scientists who ever lived are alive today⁸
- ⇒ science drives technology and technology is going the same way

“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic”—Arthur C. Clarke, 1973

⁸<https://futureoflife.org/2015/11/05/>

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confession

*I suffer from technological biases and believe in
technological constructivism*

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 - we're gonna fix it, because technology

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- if climate change exists and is man made:
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 - we are going to build a freer world with technology!
- are you sure about that?

lack of power over own creation

Joseph Weizenbaum, 1923-2008, computer science professor
@MIT:

- ELIZA (1964), an early natural language processing program
- wanted to show supersuperficiality of man-machine comms
- doctors wanted to use the program in psychotherapy
- ⇒ Weizenbaum: *Computer Power and Human Reason* (1976)

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Robert Oppenheimer and the Manhattan project (first a-bomb):

*"Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds."
(Bhagavad Gita)*

Later lost his security clearance for his outspokenness.

Uncivilisation - The Dark Mountain Manifesto⁹

⁹<http://dark-mountain.net/about/manifesto/>

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clarification:

- primitivism is **not** the solution, no space to retreat to
- history teaches: technologically more advanced groups win

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motivations for technology

good:

- survival
- human development

motivations for technology

good:

- survival
- human development

bad:

- convenience & comfort
- entertainment & addiction
- enabling other technologies (not enough)
- (usually hidden:) domination & control
- if I don't do it, somebody else will do it anyway

heuristics:

- do I have to solve it?
- does it introduce new failure modes?

conclusion: core points

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⇒ It's time to break the denial and start thinking and acting based on that realization.

conclusion: bottom line

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We are fucked, how do we deal with that in the future?

pointers

It makes sense to look over to other camps, for example:

- sociology (Jacques Ellul¹⁰)
- history (Lewis Mumford¹¹)
- futurology (Alvin Toffler¹²)
- ecology and primitivism (Paul Shepard¹³)
- ecopsychology (Chellis Glendinning¹⁴)
- anarcho-primitivism (Ted Kaczynski¹⁵)
- tribalism (Jack Donovan¹⁶)

¹⁰The Technological Society (1954)

¹¹The Myth of the Machine Vol. 1. & 2. (1967 & 1970)

¹²Future Shock (1970)

¹³Nature and Madness (1982)

¹⁴My Name is Chellis and I'm in Recovery from Western Civilization (1994)

¹⁵Industrial Society and Its Future (1995)

¹⁶Becoming a Barbarian (2016)

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thank you very much for your attention!