5 Tools for a Post-Truth World

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ABSTRACT

This is a video-essay broaching the topic of information resistance in our post-truth world. First, it addresses the vested interest technology conglomerates have in maintaining the mystification of technology. Arthur C. Clarke once said “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” At this current juncture, complaints about technology are often akin to cloud-shouting. We’ve become increasingly suspicious of magic but have no points of leverage against it. It may seem like that is a consequence of technological progress, but in the video-essay, I make the case that the mystification is embedded and desired by the conglomerates since it keeps the power of criticism in the hands of technologists. Second, it proposes a series of 5 tips, a mini-manifesto for dealing with technological “magic.”

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Transcript

Then she got into the lift, for the good reason that the door stood open; and was shot smoothly upwards. The very fabric of life now, she thought as she rose, is magic. In the eighteenth century, we knew how everything was done; but here I rise through the air; I listen to voices in America; I see men flying – but how it's done I can’t even begin to wonder. So my belief in magic returns.

Virginia Woolf, Orlando: A Biography (1928)

The disenchanted world has become, by its patented opaqueness, enchanted. However, it is not the enchantment of the primitive man, where one can hypothesize the probable causes of phenomena, where the natural world remains to be discovered, it is technological enchantment, less like magic and more like illusion.

As Czech philosopher Villem Flusser, puts it, “The difference between ancient and modern magic can be stated as follows: Prehistoric magic is a ritualization of models known as ‘myths’; current magic is a ritualization of models known as ‘programs’.”

“How it’s done I can’t even begin to wonder”

How am I typing on this wireless keyboard?

How are my words being recorded?

How can you hear me?
“How it’s done I can’t even begin to wonder”

Arthur C. Clarke wrote, in his “Hazards of Prophecy: The Failure of Imagination” essay, that “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” The quote is somewhat misleading as it is not that technology itself inching closer magic, rather it is that technology is mystified by its makers in order to render it indistinguishable from magic. Its mystification is part of a techno-optimist agenda to sever it from the range of human influence.

An illusion is composed of three parts: the pledge, the turn, and the prestige.

In the first, the magician takes an ordinary object.

In the second, the object does something extraordinary.

In the third, the object returns to normal, but with a smell of magic still lingering on.

Every society has its magician, its illusionist. The shaman who can read the stars. The sibyl connected to the gods. The oracle who can traverse to the netherworlds. This function in modern society is now occupied by the Techno-Evangelist. The individual capable, for their own gain, of transfiguring an ordinary object into a magical one through the power of “narrative”. They have the capacity to imbue desirable, quasi-super-natural characteristics to ordinary things.

The technological object is intentionally shrouded in technical jargon to alienate its user from its inner workings. Early appliances were accessible to the modern individual. Homeowners could repair their own ovens or fix their fridges. But oligopolic conglomerates purposefully prevent access to our tool’s innards through proprietary screws and glued components.

The Techno-Evangelist says “This will change everything”.

The act of claiming engenders progress.

Progress can be summoned through hyperstition, the summoning of futures through the techno-cultural discourse.

Hyperstition is a positive feedback circuit including culture as a component. It can be defined as the experimental (techno-)science of self-fulfilling prophecies. Superstitions are merely false beliefs, but hyperstitions — by their very existence as ideas — function causally to bring about their own reality.
Capitalist economics is extremely sensitive to hyperstition, where confidence acts as an effective tonic, and inversely. The (fictional) idea of Cyberspace contributed to the influx of investment that rapidly converted it into a technosocial reality.

*Nick Land, interview with Delphi Carstens (2009)*

This mystification enables technological progress to advance unchecked until it reaches a state of naturalization. This predicament we enter is akin to the one Mark Fisher describes when he speaks of Capitalist Realism. Similarly, through the invocation of magic, technology entrenches itself within society, governments, and infrastructure to the point where its removal becomes unthinkable. To borrow from philosopher Frederic Jameson, “It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of technological progress.”

The technical language that shrouds technology acts as its armor. When enacting criticism towards it, one is accused of not possessing the proper technical background to understand it.

Isn’t it fortuitous that with every technological advance the general public is told that this new thing is highly technical and complex?

Move fast and break things

Speed is a feature not a bug, it is speed that allows technology to evade regulation and scrutiny. Speed allows it to entrench itself. Reality is slow to respond to the assaults of speed.

Allegedly, only the Techno-Evangelist holds the required knowledge to critique the fast moving limbs of technology as it attaches itself onto the body-reality and changes its composition.

We are never asked.

We suffer the second-order consequences.

We are the collateral damage of technological progress.

As technological magic permeates our daily lives, they become re-enchanted. Rapidly, estranged from the real, Truth itself becomes under attack.
We used to ask “Is this an ad?” but, in the age of Post-Truth, now we ask “Is this real?”

New technologies further the assault. The proliferation of computer-generated images is accelerating. The generative technologies are self-regenerating. Even as we run out of human-made images, models can now train on the creations of other models.

What should we do now?

**Manifesto for a Post-Truth World**

1. Demand clarity from techno-evangelists --- Object to marketing speak and statistical predictions. Ask what is this? What does it do now, today? Who can use it? Clarity is grounded in the present. Clarity is the antidote against hyperstition.

2. Become a skeptic --- The general philosophical stance to adopt towards techno-futuristic claims should be skepticism. No post unless of a mutual borne should be trusted.

3. Exercise memory --- Memory is a radical act. Evanescent shapes cannot hold a people together. Memory is the safeguard against the perversions of History. We cannot claim to know if we do not remember.

4. Embrace the unmediated --- Now is the time to embrace experiences that resist mediation. A rolling meadow is more beautiful than an AI-generated image of the Victory of Samothrace.

5. Learn to love the unknown --- There still remains a myriad of mysteries, jeremiads of things ineffable. Refuse meters, metrics, even words. Some things are better left uncounted and unsaid.

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