'Seven Billion Mutant Monkeys' playing with advanced technology… *what could possibly go wrong?*
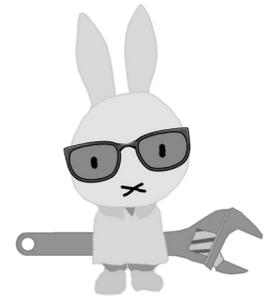
When daily technological interactions reach a critical performance tipping point, the only sure route to progress is marked, *"Exit"*

Paul Mobbs, *The 'Meta-Blog'*, issue no.12, 9th January 2021 (updated 18th March 2021)

Covid has mutated and become more menacing to the planet… *sort of like humans did a couple of million years ago.*
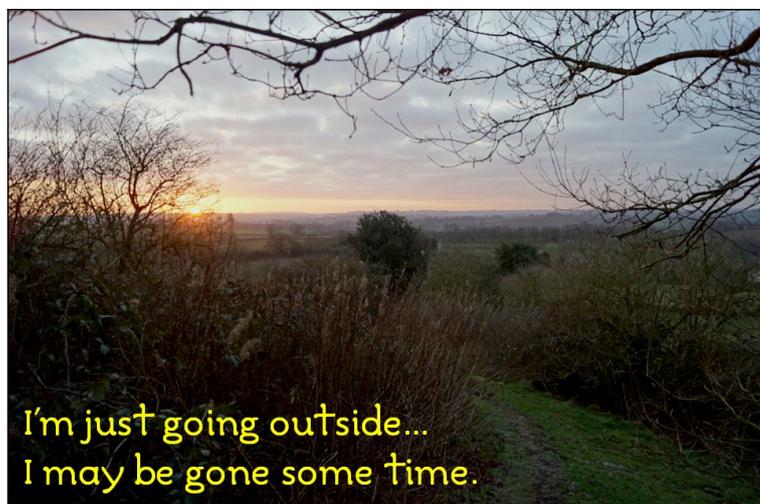
Like all mutations, small changes to the system's coding produce large, non-linear changes to the impact the species can have. In the dynamic interplay of the organism with its environment, the results for other species are not necessarily 'nice'.

That's the opening paragraph I chose. I had considered using one or another form of a phrase, oft repeated to my techno-engineering-geek son (the only other person in my immediate vicinity who understands its substance); in general terms:

"I know how to build and hack this stuff and it's still giving me grief. How do the mundanes put up with this?"

To paraphrase his response: *'They do what the machine wants because they don't understand'.*

On that general point, many seem not to have noticed my rather sparse social media interactions since New Year's Eve – *my only 'resolution' for 2021*. My last missive of 2020 was a picture (see below); the only one since, another similar image a week later (top of next page). Yes, there is a point to this (which will become apparent soon), though I haven't replied to any responses: Explaining the meaning of the memes would require continued social media interaction – breaking the resolution.

More specifically though, befuddled as they are by all this technology, would anyone out there understand the reasons why I've done this? – and why those same issues have such wide-ranging effects on many of the 'problems' people perceive today.

"Split Wood, Not Atoms"

To pre-empt the obvious cries of *"Luddite"*, let's be clear here… *I 'do' technology*: As a child I learned how to play with engines; and before my teens that morphed into building first analogue and later digital electronics. And well before the *Dot-Com Bubble* burst, I was consulting on the use of information systems by civil society groups.

My problem is not the specific nature of the technology, but the way in which technology is now used as a deliberate means of distraction and coercion. Hence my difficulty is not so much my relationship to technology, but the knock-on effects for me of the way in which people are *used by it*.

Let's take a prominent example:

People are besides themselves right now over the MAGA-army storming the Capitol building in Washington D.C. The media is wall-to-wall with people diagnosing and prognosticating about the reasons for this – but from what I have seen one of the key causes is being ignored: *Social media algorithms*.

Contrary to the current media dialogue, the issue here is not people using technology; it is the way that technology purposefully manipulates people – due to the algorithmic systems designed to encourage their interaction.

I'm just going outside…
I may be gone some time.

As recent research outlines, the presence of far right groups on Facebook does not of itself drive extremism. It is the algorithms used to increase interaction, to monetise content sharing and 'likes', that create a pathway for the *'social contagion'* to actively spread to others.

Facebook's own research showed almost two-thirds of those radicalised were not *contacted by* these groups; it was Facebook's own algorithms which put them in touch. Facebook's management then shutdown efforts to stop this as it might affect their business model.

More objectively, if we examine this in terms of politics and power, *what is new here?* Why are we worried by the US right-wing?

The Capitol Building in Washington has always been occupied by white supremacists and racists – certainly since it was rebuilt after the British burned it down in 1812. As Jason Hickel tweeted this week:

> *"It's actually not uncommon to have white suprema-cists running around inside the US Capitol building. It's just that usually they're dressed in suits."*

This 'moral panic' isn't about the 'threat' from 'radical' movements per se. What unsettles the establishment is that this movement has widespread public support, and thus threatens their 'democratic' hold over the institutions of state power.

Yet the establishment that berates fake news and populism today is the same technocratic structure which allowed – or rather, *deregulated* – the system which enables that machine to function; and is now unable to stop that machine without loosening their hold on the technocratic infrastructure of society.

As the Neo-Luddite phrase says, *'Split wood, not atoms'*. There's a deeper meaning there.

Splitting wood is actually a very technical craft: Understanding not only the character of different woods and their nature; but also the use and main-tenance of one of humanity's oldest tools, *the axe*.

With many new technologies, from DDT to finan-cial derivatives, technocratic regulation creates complex tools without first assessing their likely ef-fect on society. And like those technologies that have historically damaged society, the economic promise of social media has been held to be of greater importance than its potential threat to civility.

Hence we have a millennia-old social systems of 'laws' and 'lores' to deal with axes; but we don't have that yet for globalised information services.

Come outside, reality's lovely! http://www.fraw.org.uk/ap/

I've got this earworm that plagues me...

My current technological 'issues' are in part work related. I'm especially interested in the way similar technological debates repeat in similar ways for each generation. Lately, I've also developed an in-voluntary attachment to a song by Omnia, and it's rather catchy lyrics, which express a related idea:

> *"...and 7 billion mutant monkeys wont listen to me, Because I don't speak human, You can't understand a word I'm saying…"*

Unfortunately, I think quite a few people I've played that track to miss the deeper semantic significance of the lyrics:

'Technology' is not 'science' because technology is a product of social norms, political power, and economics – not objective scientific knowledge. For that reason technology is not 'neutral'; it reinforces the dominant economic and political culture by en-hancing and strengthening the values of that ideol-ogy in new technological innovations.

As the economic dogma of mainstream politics only measures 'progress' in terms of economic val-ues, it cannot measure 'non-economic' values. Like-wise, as the human-centric nature of technological society marginalises all non-human species and the 'living' natural world, it cannot represent the inde-pendent value of 'non-human lifeforms'.

Any ideology that cannot recognise the innate value of the natural world is bound to destroy it. Technocracy creates problems beyond its control when it cannot understand, nor apprehend, factors that contradict its core values. For example, factory farms create super-bugs by acting against natural systems; which politicians cannot halt as it requires prohibiting those 'unnatural' business practices.

In short, technocracy, as a proxy for the modern affluent society, doesn't speak *my language* – because it cannot describe the world in a way which has relevance to my specific outlook on the world.

Therefore, if the modern media's technocratic dialogue represents what it is to be human, then clearly, *"I don't speak human"*. Yes, I speak a dialect of human, but I cannot converse in its official form.

Now flip that very personal perception to be general human principle we all share:

Let's say you grew up within a specific social and economic outlook, which globalisation and neoliberal economics had trashed in the last forty years. It's fair to say the modern political dialogue wouldn't speak your language either. In fact, it would represent everything that you had come to – *or had been told to* – blame for all the problems in your life.

They too will be speaking a different dialect of 'human'; one that I find difficult to understand too. But unless you bother to learn, how will you communicate with them to see what can agree on?

This is why the mainstream media and establishment political parties find 'fake news', and populist politicians, so hard to handle. Whether based in verifiable fact or not, it challenges their 'orthodox' view of the modern world by questioning the values at the root of that dominant ideology. And while they refuse to consider those alternative viewpoints they will not address the root cause of the disagreement.

Getting Facebook to delete people's accounts will not make this problem go away. If anything, it will act as a confirmation bias for those affected by that response. But we knew this already: As the economist Joseph Stiglitz presciently said two decades ago, *"Perhaps the populists are popular because they know something that the technocrats don't"*; likewise as James Burke said at the end of his TV series, *'Connections'*, four decades ago:

"Thanks to science and technology they have begun to know that they don't know; and that if they're to

have more say in what happens to their lives, more freedoms to develop their abilities to the full, they have to be helped towards that knowledge which they know exists and that they don't possess…

See, we're on the edge of a revolution in communications technology that is going to make that more possible than ever before. Or, if that's not done, to cause an explosion of knowledge that will leave those of us that don't have access to it as powerless as if we were deaf, dumb, and blind. And I don't think most people want that."

## From *'Tetsuo'* to *'Little Britain'*, technology isn't the issue, it's *technocracy*

What has this to do with my decision to avoid the use of networked technologies? – *at least, in the way the creators of that system want me to.*

As part of some general research around how people have reacted to technocracy in the past I came across a quote from Mario Savio (see foot of page). That set me thinking about how to react to the absurd systems of technocratic influence that are emerging from the social media corporations.

Practically, the dominance of social media in 'developed' societies creates a polarised choice: You either fully participate; or, you refuse to take part.

The idea of 'dropping out' of today's technologically-enabled society represents a 'double-bind'; you can't exclude yourself from that society because the way it functions would guarantee your future isolation. Rather like a closed religious sect, turning off the technology in your life creates an automatic 'social death', that cuts you off from everything else in your life that you need or value.

The proponents the *'networked society'* always use that inherent threat of disconnection as an attack against reform; that 'turning-back progress' is impossible, and so continuing with ever-more technology is the only viable option for all humanity.
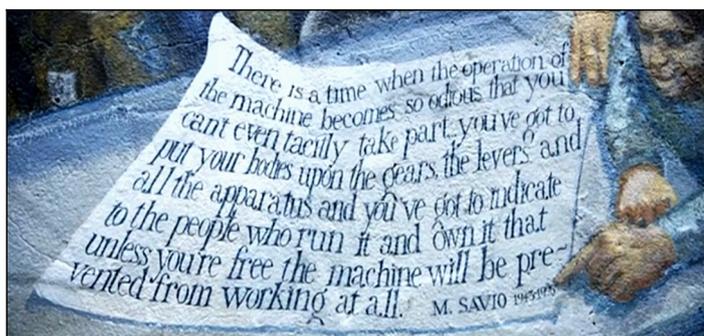
There is a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part. You can't even passively take part! And you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop! And you've got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it – that unless you're free, the machine will be prevented from working at all!

Speech by Mario Savio,
University of California Berkeley, 1964

In essence, <u>*this is the true 'extremism' here*</u> – the corporate lobbies, from Facebook to the <u>*Internet of Things*</u>, that seek to create economic dominance through the 'efficient' management of the modern lifestyle. Or, as I <u>examined last time</u>, its similar incarnation in the political sphere through <u>Klaus Schwab's</u> book for the World Economic Forum, <u>*'The Great Reset'*</u> – that, unsurprisingly, gathered apocalyptic coverage via conspiracy forums.

This seemingly unreasonable insistence that <u>*'there is no alternative'*</u> drives many movements, from Extinction Rebellion to <u>MAGA</u>. What people need to realise, though, is that this is not a new thing. We can look at how society has expressed similar concerns in the past to see that:

<u>*"The computer says no."*</u>: Is there any greater statement that sums up the petty frustrations and routine iniquities that technology enforces?; upon a public unable to have control over its form or function; and which is a major factor driving the reactionary 'fake news' agenda – from Covid vaccines, to 5G conspiracies, to perceived political corruption.

Contrast that quaint metaphor, in a different decade and a culture half a world away, with the similarly impersonal nature of the central character in the cult Japanese <u>cyberpunk</u> film, <u>*'Tetsuo'*</u>:

> *"Inside the flesh of an ordinary <u>salaryman</u> terrible things have started to take place."*

In cyberpunk literature, the *'sarariman'* does not have free will within the system they inhabit, except the illusory freedom to live the socially prescribed material lifestyle. Their role is to pliantly serve the needs of their corporation in order to make a living – albeit, with the constant compulsion that this lifestyle is just a rung or two above the depths to which society is willing to subject its least productive citizenry, if the do not willingly play that role.

The problem with advanced technology isn't that it's 'stupid'; the problem is society asks technology to do things which only make sense to those who manage that society – and as bureaucratic logic <u>is not rational</u>, so the outcomes are not rational either. That has one annoying meaning when that artificial task is to show a <u>pop-up paper clip</u> that offers help; it means something entirely different when the machine demands people – like the sarariman – comply with the arbitrary <u>values of social networks</u>, like the Chinese <u>'social credit'</u> system, as a precondition for all social participation in society.

Again though, this is not new. Aldous Huxley foresaw it in <u>a letter he wrote</u> to George Orwell shortly before the publication of *'Nineteen Eighty-Four'* – in which he opines on the driver for coercion being greater 'efficiency', not simply political control:

> *...the nightmare of Nineteen Eighty-Four is destined to modulate into the nightmare of a world having more resemblance to that which I imagined in Brave New World. The change will be brought about as a result of a felt need for increased efficiency.*

If technology does anything – in particular information technology – it distorts human perceptions. As <u>Debord said</u>, *"All that once was directly lived has become mere representation"*. But whereas that was once <u>illusory mass propaganda</u>, today, the feedback embedded within the 'networked society' enables something <u>wholly different</u>: <u>Micro-targeted</u>, individualised messaging geared towards <u>specific ends</u>.

In the backlash from recent political events and scandals, social media is going to take an almighty 'hit' from the establishment as they try and reassert control of the public dialogue. Problem is, as artificial intelligence is <u>still fairly dumb</u>, it'll inevitably take-out a lot of <u>legitimate content</u> at the same time.

Rather than be disrupted by that, I want to pre-empt it by moving to develop other means of communication and interaction. And I'm not alone here. UK conspiracy theorists <u>have already developed</u> their own hard copy journal to bypass the increasing levels of on-line censorship.

Like Covid, social media mutated – through corporate takeovers and <u>'app-culture'</u> – to become something that's antithetical to naturalistic values: When 'the machine' begins to dictate the interaction of people, and deliberately warps their perceptions by design, then we are obligated to resist; not by nihilistic rejection, but, through <u>circumvention</u> and <u>misdirection</u>, <u>actively subverting</u> the role we are expected to play within that process.

To guarantee a measure of control over our lifestyle, we must purposefully participate with these technologies on our terms, not theirs. At some point though we have to accept that this technology is creating a diminishing return of utility because of all the extra effort, and grief it creates in out lives; and at such a point, we simply have to accept reality and 'turn it off'.