Big Tech as Today's 'Reality' Brokers

by John Steppling via steve - CounterPunch *Friday, Aug 30 2019, 12:28am*
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The Reality Brokers (or the Rise of the Automagicians)

> *For those inclined to skim through slightly academic papers emphasis has been added to ensure that some important points/observations/deductions are not missed.*

"In the case of both Big Tech and governmental surveillance agencies, undergirding a commitment to the inevitable and imminent time of 'post-now' [a time After] is the appeal of science fiction aesthetics, concepts and projects, all aimed toward the new goal of having [created] 'new' places and opportunities to conquer, colonize and dominate post-now."

– Sarah T. Roberts and Mel Hogan (b-20, August 2019)

"We live in a society where capital is highly concentrated, with most commodity production carried out by companies whose fates are largely shaped by financial investors. The commodities they produce, whether material or immaterial, are made available to us in a global marketplace, delivered through complex value chains in whose operation our own unpaid labor as consumers is increasingly implicated. Information and communications technologies have so affected the spatial and temporal division of labor that for many of us the boundaries between "work and private life are inextricably muddled and few relationships are unmediated by them."

– Ursula Huws ([Labor in the Global Digital Economy](#))

"It's popular to refer to digital platforms as town squares, but the shopping mall is a more apt metaphor: they are built to approximate the participatory feel of an open market, while their corridors are ruthlessly designed for the purposes of encouraging consumption and maximizing profit. Depression, anxiety, hate-mongering, fear, and conspiratorial untruths are all acceptable outcomes so long as they are expressed, consciously or otherwise, in the service of growth."

– Evan Malmgren (The Baffler, 2018)

"Your whole life will be searchable."

– Larry Page (quoted in Douglas Edwards' I'm Feeling Lucky, 2011)

"At its core, surveillance capitalism is parasitic and self-referential. It revives Karl Marx's old image of capitalism as a vampire that feeds on labor, but with an unexpected turn. Instead of labor, surveillance capitalism feeds on every aspect of every human's experience."

– Shoshana Zuboff ([Surveillance Capitalism](#))

The endless public appetite for apocalyptic film and TV is tied into the fantasies of reconstruction. Even the various zombie franchises are really just reconstruction stories (albeit with a huge real estate porn appeal). I want to quote Sarah T. Roberts article again, because she covers several

factors that seem increasingly embedded in contemporary thinking.

"In the billionaire kingmaker class, Musk is not alone in his post-Earth predilection. Indeed, he is one of several of his echelon looking cynically to science fiction and the après-apocalypse, fantasizing about outlandish ways to spend–and make–profits via projects that deepen long-standing commitments to Western supremacy and colonization, albeit with a futuristic bent. At the 2016 Republican National Convention that heralded the political ascendency of Donald Trump, PayPal billionaire and Gawker/journalism foe Peter Thiel (Thompson 2018) hailed the conquest of Mars as a worthier endeavor than wars in the Middle East. In doing so, Thiel inadvertently showed his ideological hand by invoking both as equivalent games of conquest (Daily Beast 2016). Other projects in this vein include Biosphere 2 (once the province of former Trump advisor and professional propagandist Steve Bannon), HI-SEAS, Apple's new "Spaceship" headquarters, and the NSA's Star Trek-inspired control room, all of which posit various offworld-oriented technological solutions to a dying future. It is a future in which capitalism has already played out the dissolution of democracy and social equalities, favoring a libertarian fend-for-yourself approach for those who remain– and those who remain, according to these projects, are overwhelmingly White, wealthy able-bodied people of the Global North."

– Sarah T. Roberts (ibid)

Roberts also touches on Apple's new *campus*, which is shaped like a flying saucer and seems designed mostly to keep undesirables out as much as employees in.
Roberts again...

"The spaceship aesthetic and panoptic/open floor work spaces reinstate order and hierarchy through structural and embedded surveillance while suggesting freedom of movement and action. Ample amenities are designed to keep workers on-site and productive, ideally for longer than an eight-hour workday, recalling the company towns of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. Not to be outdone, both Google and Facebook have announced employee housing near their expansive campuses (Stangel 2017), in partial response to extraordinary housing costs in Silicon Valley (created by the demand from their own workers)."

There is also the new NSA control room, which merges sci-fi aesthetics with Benthamesque practicality and Biosphere 2 which borrows directly from science fiction. This is a long sort of introduction to what I see as an increasing anger and frustration in western white populations that is born of the unshakable sense that white modernity is coming to an end. There is an increasing global awareness that U.S. (and EU..but the EU is hugely divided in this respect) hegemony is unravelling. The global ruling class share the same goals but have mostly allowed or been served by U.S. leadership in terms of international financial institutions and the U.N. and just by U.S. military dominance. But today there are growing areas of the planet that are openly rejecting the white supremacist capitalism/Imperialism of the U.S. (and its proxies, Saudi Arabia and Israel primarily. Yes I know there are huge contradictions in that, but I will get to those). The effects of Hollywood in all this are almost incalculable. The future is built with Hollywood image and narrative, and increasingly so is the present. Narrative thinking today is tied in with Hollywood screenwriting in a near total manner.

And the effects of the internet, social media, and in general screen addictions and indoctrination have yet to be fully calculated. And this segues into the realities of content moderation. And again, a crash course on this is to listen to a lecture of Roberts here or watch.

And remember, too, what Andre Damon at WSWS wrote in 2018.

Social media is monopolized by a few gigantic corporations. And that concentration of control is going to obviously be exploited for more profit.

"…let's start with a shocking fact: bad behaviour happens on the internet. It occurs in real life, too, of course. But there is a special quality to the depravity exhibited on social media that is particular to that domain. On the one hand, it is unthinking, and in the case of Twitter, this goes along with the character limit. **But it also demonstrates a psychopathic character contradiction: an obsession with self-perception by others in combination with a disturbing lack of empathy toward many of those same others from whom one is seeking, implicitly or explicitly, validation.** For many researchers, this behaviour is not merely expressed on but actively shaped by social media. In a meta-analysis of seventy-two studies, the psychologist Sara Konrath and her research team found that empathy levels among college students are 40 percent lower today than they were twenty years ago — a development they attribute to, amongst other things, the "rising prominence" of "media use in everyday life": **"With so much time spent interacting with others online rather than in reality, interpersonal dynamics such as empathy might certainly be altered."**

– Benjamin Y. Fong (Jacobin, 2018)

There is a correlate here, found in that same Sarah Konrath study:

"One especially relevant program of research finds increasing levels of narcissism in American college students from the mid-1980s until late into the first decade of the new millennium, using similar cross-temporal methods as in the current study (Twenge et al., 2008; Twenge & Foster, 2008,2010).Dispositional narcissists have inflated self-views, especially on agentic traits such as power and intelligence (e.g., Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002). Although narcissists are extraverted, they think of others primarily in terms of their utility rather than as interdependent relationship partners (Campbell, 1999). When narcissists' egos are threatened by rejection or an insult, they tend to aggress against the source of the threat (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Konrath, Bushman, & Campbell, 2006)."

– Sarah Konrath, et.al. (Changes in Dispositional Empathy in American College Students Over Time: A Meta
Analysis. Personality and Social Psychology Review 2011)

Whether it's Twitter or Snapchat or whatever, the overriding quality associated with each platform is limited space for expression and impermanence. Snapchat is designed to literally disappear before your eyes. **Twitter is particularly pathological in that it is all but impossible to have discussions, or debates there, but excels at individual declarations of fact — the users own sense of 'fact' that is. It has been noted by several studies about social media that those who engage in prolonged use tend to increasingly feel real life face to face interaction as persecutory. My own experience of Twitter and Facebook is that it directly breeds paranoia.** And for dissident or radical left voices that paranoia is already well established, usually. It's hard to be a socialist in America and not feel paranoia.

"The first configuration is what I came to call the Vampires' Castle. The Vampires' Castle specialises in propagating guilt. It is driven by a priest's desire to excommunicate and condemn, an academic-pedant's desire to be the first to be seen to spot a mistake, and a hipster's desire to be one of the in-crowd."

– Mark Fisher (Vampire's Castle, 2013)

Now Fisher is a contested figure, and with good reason (for all this insight he remained a strangely reactionary voice, and that contradiction may have been impossible for him to live with). But what he describes in Vampire's Castle is very much to the point here. And one of the tactics of social media attacks is to stigmatize in isolation (a sort of form of essentialism). And this is akin to the bullying that high school students suffer from, too, a bullying that has led to spikes in suicide and self harm. It is ridicule that borders on arbitrary. One is tried and convicted on social media for crimes of the past, often, and of course often for crimes that never took place, and often for non-crimes. **Mischaracterizing one's opponent is the classic technique of the fascist right, but today it is cropping up more and more often on the left. But the new essentialism is also perilously close to conspiracy theory at its very worst. I know people, very smart people in fact, who literally believe that entire outlets or groups or institutions — having hundreds of members — are in the grip of secret cabals of fascists. A thought mechanism that mirrors classic antisemitism. And speaking of antisemitism, the rising and continuing anti-semitism on the left is meeting with less and less resistance from the left who feel encouraged to conflate zionism and Jewishness.**

Now the new aesthetics of the new doomsday scenarioists of online polemics, and in real life (the doomsayers who are billionaires) are the aesthetics of 1970s science fiction, if not 1950s science fiction. It is remarkable how durable the style and codes are of stuff like The Day the Earth Stood Still, Red Planet Mars, or the original War of the Worlds. And more, 70s films like Andromeda Strain or Dark Star. Even very good and rather un-Hollywood films such as Man Who Fell to Earth have shaped the current sense of what the future means, and more, what apocalypse looks like. Just look at the art/design layouts and images used in stories about global warming or the fear mongering of the overpopulationers. Tell me its not nearly always from science fiction and/or is not racist. That a global environmental crisis is being packaged by media as if it were an early John Carpenter film should cause concern.

So three things I sense are related here; one is the damage of screen addictions, and perhaps more specifically social media. And the manner of expression that is wed to the alarmists sense of environmental crises. To deal with the real and material crisis would require a capacity to think in ways that social media and screen habituation have discouraged if not erased. **The psychological affect of decades (now) of internet coercions and indoctrination — overt and incidental — and the very damages of just over-exposure to the technology itself are huge and perhaps nearly irreversible. Internet societies are more rigidly hierarchical than society itself. It is just masked better.** The second issue is the issues of synthesizing time, narration, and loss of literacy. And the third is the dying death throws of global capital and its desire to perpetuate itself even if it means mass death, and the fantasies of this capitalist ruling class, expressed in regressive tropes of kitsch science fiction and space colonialism.

There is also a strange inversion, one that is nearly dialectical, actually. On the one hand the so called advanced West, the hyper capitalist neo-liberal West and its major telecom and digital corporations, are at work 24/7 in surveillance and data gathering. And both of these activities are usually illegal. Those same mega corporations (with intimate ties to western governments) are in the business of *hiding* the production processes that build those smart phones and lap tops on which and with which the bourgeoisie of the west amuse themselves. The devices that these corporations spy on and steal from — these devices are not the product of immaculate technological conception. The mythology of the information age has, as one huge factor, maybe THE hugest factor, the presumption that all of this digital technology was just divinely created and fell to earth. The invisibility of the draconian assembly lines and factories of the global south that produce and

assemble these mythic devices is both an intentional practice and one those firms know is deceitful. They hide it because it would be offensive to the consumers of these products. A consumer base increasingly exhibiting a green awareness (sic). Not to mention the even more draconian waste sites where disposal of these devices take place, in countries such as Philippines, Bangladesh, Ghana, and Indonesia.

This does not even touch on the mining and earth extraction of rare earth minerals such as coltan (from which niobium and tantalum are taken), yttrium, lanthanum, and terbium.

"According to the Minerals Education Coalition, a baby born in the US today will use up 539 lbs of zinc, 903 lbs of lead and 985 lbs of copper during his or her lifetime, not just in phones but in other gadgets and appliances too. In terms of environmental drain from every smartphone that's made, you can add the oil used to produce plastics, the sand used to produce glass, and so on. ( ) Of the 83 stable and non-radioactive elements in the periodic table, at least 70 can be found in smartphones. According to the best available figures, a total of 62 different types of metals go into the average mobile handset, with what are known as the rare Earth metals playing a particularly important role. Of the 17 rare Earth metals, 16 are included in phones."

– David Nield (Tech Radar, 2015)

My sense is that most Americans could be convinced to give up nearly everything to ensure a liveable safe future...everything except their screen gadgets.

Larry Page of Google has used (and coined) the word *automagical*. It's the perfect word for contemporary thought. The west thinks automagically. But that sounds benign, and nothing about the trends in contemporary behaviour or thinking is benign. **Zuboff quotes John Searle about the nature of *declarations*. Searle wrote: "a declaration is a particular way of speaking and acting that establishes facts out of thin air, creating a new reality where there was nothing." This is highly relevant to the social media user. This is, in fact, that on which Twitter is based. It is the speech of Kings and overlords, of pharaohs. It is also how cops talk to suspects (i.e. everyone who is not a cop). Most importantly it is the speech of institutions. It assumes authority.**

Zuboff also notes that this sort of authoritarian speech and grammar is the province of Google, and of Google's unprecedented power. That said, it is power of a unique and perhaps unprecedented kind. For if conquistadors issued declarations that indigenous peoples were to be vassals...WERE already so...the threats behind such declarations were made clear. Google doesn't have to do that. No giant information and telecom giant has to do that. The threat is assumed. The threat is implanted.

"Google's stores of behavioural surplus now embrace everything in the online milieu: searches, e-mails, texts, photos, songs, messages, videos, locations, communication patterns, attitudes, preferences, interests, faces, emotions, illnesses, social networks, purchases, and so on. A new continent of behavioural surplus is spun each moment from the many virtual threads of our everyday lives as they collide with Google, Facebook, and, more generally, every aspect of the internet's computer-mediated architecture. Indeed, under the direction of surveillance capitalism the global reach of computer mediation is repurposed as an extraction architecture."

– Shoshana Zuboff (Surveillance Capitalism)

Everything one does is turned into code. And that code is returned to the user (as Zubhoff

writes) through the filter of *intelligent algorithms*. And if that sounds like *smart bombs*, its because it is, and that is, to put it mildly, disquieting. Anytime intelligent or smart are used in titles or branding, the opposite is usually true. Much as the use of *freedom* in any NGO title signals State Department front group. But the issue that runs alongside the literal monitoring of everything one does is the now third generation effects of the information age on the young. The bullying of social media is only one symptom. Mental illness is now almost expected of teenagers. In the U.S. and U.K. in particular the anxiety, paranoia, and feelings of hopelessness are endemic. And of course this cannot be treated by the institutions that have caused it. At best the establishment simply finds new warehousing drugs to give them. The burden to conform is enormous for teenagers and made worse by the pathologies of social media and internet habituation.

Deleuze and Guattari saw schizophrenia as the presentation of capitalist illness as it approached the 1980s, and later Christian Marazzi suggested bi-polar disorder as the new inner logic of financialized capitalism, then today the post post modern new feudalism presents as autism, a condition first brought to awareness by a Nazi doctor. If teenagers today suffer debilitating anxiety, and a generalized fear of 'doing' anything lest it appear in Snapchat later in the afternoon, the result is an increasing cognitive paralysis. One teacher I know said several different high school students have confessed their inability to act or speak, answering questions etc, that even that inability and low grades is better than internet shaming and stigmatizing. Older twenty somethings, out of school and usually unemployed, wander their American neighborhoods in what amount to semi conscious trance states. Another teacher, in suburban LA, said his small college has decided to let student homeless sleep in their cars at one end of the school parking lot. After the school board passed this measure they were startled to learn that over 20% of the student body were in fact living out of their cars and sleeping in the school lot.

The western economies, and this is certainly true of the U.S., are propped up by militarism, stock market manipulation, and the ongoing theft of public funds and social services.

Cutting across this are the pathologies and social violence of social media.

Social media is designed for comparisons and coupled to the narrowed limits for written expression, the function of image becomes disproportionately important. But the interpretation of image is equally or more important. The idea of popularity is implanted in the system by the owners and operators of that system. The capture of eyeballs is also the capture of consensus. This is particularly true for the young.

"The empty debate on the spectacle – that is, on the activities of the world's owners – is thus organised by the spectacle itself: everything is said about the extensive means at its disposal, to ensure at nothing is said about their extensive deployment. Rather than talk of the spectacle, people often prefer to use the term 'media'. And by this they mean to describe a mere instrument, a kind of public service which with impartial 'professionalism' would facilitate the new wealth of mass communication through mass media – a form of communication which has at last attained a unilateral purity, whereby decisions already taken are presented for passive admiration. For what is communicated are orders; and wth perfect harmony, those who give them are also those who tell us what they think of them."

– Guy Debord (Comments on the [Society of the Spectacle](#))

Orders, declarations. The desire to punish, the desire to be right. The isolation and atomization of social media users contributes to this sense of priesthood and specialness —

by which I mean that when one writes, for publication or just as a diarist, the activity is hugely different than writing for social media. The isolation and contemplation of the writer at his keyboard becomes a manic anxious isolation, a cruel imposed isolation that sits in stark contrast to contemplative creation. The rapidity and constant reinforcements that are built into social media are there to keep the attention of the user, for such attention is money, is profit.

What is interesting is how so much of the opinion expressed by the left today is expressed in terms of masculine power or just a replication of militarism's scorched earth policies. Carpet bombing — from what is now North Korea, terror bombing Belgrade, shock and awe, or bunker busters in Tora Bora, or the war crimes of Fallujah, the endless atrocities inflicted on the global south — the war zone sensibility of racist domestic police forces in the U.S., this is all mirrored and reproduced on social media. Social media has become a laboratory for aggression. But in tiny ever shrinking platforms. Carpet bombing in 280 characters. The sense of shrinkage and enclosure, of foreclosure and agitation, these are design elements. (Why do Silicon Valley CEOs not allow their children to use smart phones? Why do those children go to device free schools?)

The only way that socialist and radical political voices can engage on social media — it seems to me — is to find ways to disrupt the hegemonic orders of the Spectacle. Social media is designed to create a craving for attention. At any cost. Unconscious cravings. This is why the tribalism of likes and blocking and *friends* is so constantly reinforced.

In one sense the mega corporate owners have insured that class is replaced by individualism, identitarian relations and presentation.

When Twitter began the limit for a tweet was 140 characters. The average tweet at that point was 34 characters. Twitter increased the tweet count to 280 characters but the average tweet is now only 33 characters. I suspect this reflects the trend toward inarticulate semi-languages. The trend toward quick scans rather than patient reading.

"Critical theory's effort to restore subjectivity and resist domination rightly leads to the search for and rejection of all tendencies that cause the subject to introject and reproduce his own domination."

– Amy Buzby (Subterranean Politics and Freud's Legacy)

Social media, perhaps above all else, encourages obsessive repetitions. Obsessive compulsive disorder is expressed in pure form as Twitter or Snapchat or Facebook. The repetitive behavioural action of keystrokes mimics something industrial, something also nearly manic. And in this sense the bi-polar metaphor remains rather apt. But the emptiness of the screen, the temporal limits, the erasure of lasting meaning, all feel autistic. The social media addiction eventually neutralizes meaning altogether. Trump is oddly the perfect Twitter user. Lies, contradictions, more lies, repeating the lies, and on and on. All without meaning.

All social media rage is reproducing personal pain — at one level. It is also, on another level, reflecting the trauma and violence of the society in which the users live. The compulsive twitter user, or facebook troll — and in a sense perhaps everyone shares troll like characteristics simply by virtue of using these platforms — are **caught in a habituation cycle of need and pseduo gratification.** But addiction metaphors miss the broader point here. Internet use is often likely compulsive, and perhaps constitutes an habituation, but rarely reaches the level of addiction (addictions must produce serious real world consequences for the addict). What is the most

disturbing aspect of social media and internet use overall is ideological and educational.

The internet, and in particular social media, have damaged cognitive abilities, and have incrementally created two (now) generations (if not three) of people who cannot think outside very narrow [cognitive and perceptual myopic] cyber structures. Ideologically because the internet is in the business of constantly grabbing your attention and trying to keep it; and information is dispensed via attention grabbing mechanisms and strategies. No internet platform is free of the profit motive, remember. And cyber profit is based on an attention economy. The click bait model can be expanded to anything. And the repetitive nature of social media usage reinforces a tendency already present in western capitalist societies. And of course class enters in this discussion exactly here. The loss of employment opportunity and social mobility encourages a recourse to social media and the internet to replace community.

It is also important to distinguish between the attention economy and newer participatory attention economy or what Boutgang labeled Cognitive Capitalism. (see Mackenzie Wark's analysis here...

"Cognitive workers are in a sense entrepreneurs, are in a sense people who invest their knowledge, who invest their singular ability and in this sense the relationship, the integration between work, cognitive work and enterprise; and enterprise has a materialistic foundation. But at the same time this kind of integration has produced an ideological effect and a kind of psycho-pathogenic effect on the social forces of cognitive labor. ( ) The Prozac economy and the Prozac crash. The integration of cognitive work and recombinant capital has produced a kind of euphoria, of hyper-excitation and has produced a demotion, an erasing, a forgetting of the physical, the erotic and the social body of the cognitive worker. We have been taken in this kind of irrational exuberance and we have forgotten that we have a body – that we are a body. So the cognitive worker in this kind of hyper-excitation completely or partially has been forgetting the relationship to the society and the relationship to the physical body."

– Franco Berardi (Market Ideology, Semiocapitalism, and the Digital Congitariat)

Berardi's (Bifo) article is worth reading in its entirety [here](#)...

"In 1995, 10 years into the history of mobile phones, penetration in the UK was just 7%," according to Professor Nigel Linge, of the University of Salford's Computer Networking and Telecommunications Research Centre. "In 1998 it was about 25%, but by 1999 it was 46%, that was the 'tipping point'. In 1999 one mobile phone was sold in the UK every 4 seconds." By 2004, there were more mobile phones in the UK than people – a penetration level of more than 100%. ( ) The way that handsets themselves were marketed was also changing and it was Finland's Nokia, which had been fighting hard with Motorola and Ericsson for dominance of the market, who made the leap from phones as technology to phones as fashion items with the Nokia 3210 device.

"The Nokia 3210 is iconic because it is the first phone that deliberately did not display any sort of external aerial," explains Linge. "Nokia in the late 1990s cottoned on to the fact that the mobile phone was a fashion item: so it allowed interchangeable covers, you could customise and personalise your handset."

In 1999, the film The Matrix was released, which featured Nokia's 8110 handset prominently. Nokia followed it up with the 7110, which was also the first device to fully exploit the new WAP mobile data service, the fore-runner of the 3G services of today."

– Richard Wray (Guardian, 2010)

Hollywood again. The future again. One might argue The Matrix is the most influential film in history — not because its any good, its not, but because it consolidated several threads of style and futuristic fantasy and presented them in an appealing package, one that also appealed to the new automagical thinking. The reality today is that global capital can draw upon a reserve of global labour regardless of national borders. As Ursula Huws notes…"Even when casualised labour is not carried out by their direct employees, it is carried out within the scope of the increasingly elaborated value chains which these companies control." (Labour in Contemporary Capitalism, 2019)

And this casualization and global context has generated enormous resentment against migrant workers, especially in areas of industrial decline (per Huws). Hence the rise of the far right parties across Europe today. And the theft of social benefits, stuff like unemployment payments, are increasingly hard to actually receive and when received are provincial and conditional. The point is that the internet has transformed human life in its entirety. And often, maybe nearly always, for the worse. Shoshana Zuboff (ibid) has the final word here, for this is what all of this discussion is trending toward:

"The prospect of guaranteed outcomes alerts us to the force of the prediction imperative, which demands that surveillance capitalists make the future for the sake of predicting it. Under this regime, ubiquitous computing is not just a knowing machine; it is an actuating machine designed to produce more certainty about us and for them."

This is largely what Debord saw happening too. The profit from reliable forecasting and prediction means that creating the future is the best strategy — **if you make the future you can predict it with some certainty. People need to realize, I think, that EVERYTHING online is manufactured reality — its not real, its pseudo real. And marketings job is to convince you that pseudo real is REAL REAL. And if the result of this is increased mental illness and pathological degrees of aggression, and industrial levels of anti-depressant use, well, so what? Global servitude is the dream of the new reality brokers. The ruling class believes in their own fantasies (courtesy, it seems, of science fiction movies) but they are determined to control our dreams and aspirations. And unless one starts to examine all of this in terms of class, there is little hope to stop this dream of global hegemony. The mantra must be, *question everything*.**

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