

Technological Manifesto

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1 The inhuman(e) use of technology

There is a relatively recent sentiment that has been rising in popularity: the feeling that the internet is all-permeating. This is in contrast to the state of yore, where the internet was instead a “place to visit.” This wording is taken from a tweet that struck me when I read it. And I want to say that it’s true: there was a tangibility and a sense of spatial constraint to the former internet, as if it was a physical portal located somewhere in your house (your parents’ desktop, for example) that you could enter and leave just like any other room. Perhaps the *leaving* is what’s important here.

What does it say about us when we feel that we cannot enter and leave the internet; in other words, that we feel *surrounded* by it, perhaps even trapped or ensnared? The internet today is now felt as something that encompasses almost every facet of our lives, a diffuse presence that can no longer be compared to the doorway it once was. In fact, it is difficult to draw any familiar metaphor around it. We can attempt it, and we do: after all, we have dubbed it the “web”, and “net” ever since its advent, but modernity sees these names fall shorter and shorter in their ability to describe the Internet, capital I. Its presence has taken on an ineffability and generality which echoes scientific theories long-since discarded, like Heraclitus’s theory of fire as *arche*, or Aristotle’s celestial spheres made out of shimmering aether.

In 1998—now 25 years ago—computer scientist Mark Weiser coined the notion of “ubiquitous computing”, where “technology recedes into the background of our lives”. A beautiful description, to be sure, but has his vision been realized? *Has* it already been realized, only in ways that neither we nor Weiser ever considered?

I don't think it has been realized. In fact, it is difficult to believe that ubiquitous computing is a goal that anyone is striving towards anymore.

Once upon a time it was easier to use technology as a tool that you invoked if and only if you had a use-case for it. When the job was over, you could put it down, just like you could with a hammer, nails, and a half-assembled birdhouse.

If the internet once felt like stepping into and out of a portal, it now feels to me like innumerable cobwebs criss-crossing a room, impossible to avoid. Just grazing past a tendril causes it and any nearby strands to cling to you, and the more you come into contact with, the harder it is to escape, and the easier it is to fall deeper into the trap. Once you make contact with them, intentionally or otherwise, it is almost impossible to extricate yourself. The more you struggle, the more entangled you become.

What is this doing to our brains, on the chemical level? Even this is unclear, but research suggests that overexposure to electronic devices does us little good. For plenty of peripheral reasons, including but not limited to:

- Eye strain from staring at a lit screen from a close distance
- Poor posture, so-called “tech-neck” and wrist strain (i.e. carpal tunnel syndrome from poor typing technique, or trackpad/mouse use)
- Disturbance of circadian rhythm, causing or exacerbating insomnia
- The oft-maligned and dangerously addictive “dopamine rush” effect, commonly associated with notifications and social media
- Unprecedented accessibility of pornography and other shock content
- Cyberbullying and online harassment, hive-mind mentality.
- General sedentariness, which might sound like not a huge deal but has had immense ripple-effects on public health within the past century

I tried to compile a variety of factors above, encompassing detriments to both our physical and mental health.

1.1 The Internet is Made of Demons

“The Internet is Made of Demons” [Kri22] is an article from Damage Magazine by “writer and former Bolshevik” Sam Kriss.

The article draws interesting (but ultimately, allegorical) parallels between demonology and the mainstream internet. It references one of the best 4chan cypastas of all time—you know the one—with someone pointing out how computer chips and demonic symbols are...eerily similar. You should go read it, and then reread it, if you have the chance. It changed the way I viewed interactions on social media forever, and made me realize that the pros are generally not worth the cons...and demonic possession is a pretty big con.

1.1.1 What is and isn't satanic

Listen, I try not to call things “satanic” just because I don't like them, although I've been guilty of doing this in the past. It's semi-ironic, but there's a kernel of serious intent in there. When I call something satanic it's because a part of me believes that it is doing genuine damage to you whenever you use it or somehow come into contact with it. Call it a more tongue-in-cheek version of the “x is considered harmful” computer science idiom of old.

Things I've called “satanic” include Javascript web bloat, largely because it is often the result of enterprise programming practices (in other words, an unfortunate artifact of the profit-motive, even at the expense of the user experience).

Why is the use of Javascript profit-driven, you could ask. Well, unlike some of the more militant developers in the open-source movement (I know a fair amount of people who believe that we should RETVRN to the 70's, the era of Lisp and C, and that Javascript represents the demiurge reigning over a fallen, sacrilegious purgatory), I don't have a particular opinion on it as a language. I'm sure amazing code has been written in Javascript and its panoply of libraries, even if it's easy to make fun of the `left-pad` incident. My concern mainly lies with excessive advertisements and telemetry that is now common to even the most mundane of websites. Nowadays, going on the Internet is like trawling through nuclear wasteland where everything can give you either uranium burns or tetanus, or like trekking solo through a steppe where starved hyenas harangue you by land and vultures threaten you by air. Tarkovsky's perilous *Zone* without the promise of a wish machine at its

heart, and without a stalker to guide you through its myriad traps. In all: not the most pleasant of experiences.

However, I admit that without Javascript, the web would be a very boring and un-interactive place. It's simply not practical to build much of anything without *any* interactivity or automation. Unfortunately, however, tasteful and innovative web design is few and far between. So I specifically mention web *bloat* because I believe JS has a time and a place, one of my favorite examples being Desmos, the online graphing calculator. A clean, intuitive and responsive interface, pretty much impossible to complain about.

But the vast majority of documents on the web should simply be just that—documents. Based around plain text, and often nothing but plain text. When did we decide that every single website had to be its own “app”, free to devour as much compute as possible? You're a website about baking recipes, do you really need to track cookies and do all this parallax-animation-hover bullshit? Pardon my French. No wonder browsers are absolute behemoths now, the only practical options being Firefox and Chromium, both being somewhat necessarily evils (but come on, if you value yourself as a human being, please use the former).

Aside: I've heard of Arc but I've never used it before. If its Wikipedia introduction is anything to go off of, Arc somehow has achieved being more antithetical to the UNIX philosophy than either Firefox or Chromium, something that I did not previously know was possible. Congratulations, Arc. Also, its UI evokes GNOME's in an unpleasant way. I'm sorry but it looks swollen with such aggressive padding and rounding, like its just had a bad bout of pressure sickness. It looks like the infuriating Corporate Memphis art style as a browser. I know I sound petty as hell, but in conclusion, I probably won't be using Arc, or the cadre of software that is associated with this “new wave”, like Typst, or Notion—*which doesn't even let you store your files locally, why the hell would you ever use it?* Once again, sorry for my language, but when so-called productivity apps masquerading as cutting-edge knowledge management systems are so blatantly anti-user, it makes my blood boil. Notion job application descriptions will *literally mention Alan Kay* as a source of inspiration. Don't besmirch him like this!

Like Javascript, social media may have a time and place—but it often

struggles *not* to be satanic. I was going to include a brief spiel about how I didn't want to outright call it evil, because I've met a lot of interesting people through Instagram and even Twitter. Don't get me wrong, there is some fantastic art/writing/commentary to be seen on these websites. But unfortunately, anything of high quality is extremely rare to see and more often than not, you're inundated with the digital equivalent of toxic waste dumps. If you put in the effort to "prune" your garden so to speak, it's likely that you'll have a nice time on Instagram and co. But in reality, most people don't do this and instead let the dumpster fire scorch them. This is understandable; curation takes a lot of work for middling results.

I've done it, I often see my friends doing this, and you've maybe done it as well: despite it clearly giving you a lot of stress, or maybe even causing genuine anger, you continue to scroll or visit websites such as Reddit, read pointless incendiary polemics on Twitter, etc. Please, I'm begging you, just stop. Log off, take a deep breath. There's almost nothing more sad to see than someone who is clearly agitated yet unable to take their eyes off of the screen, like a rat on a cocaine dispenser. Everything will disappear with time, like tears in rain, and the only things that will remain are yourself and your relationships with the people in your immediate vicinity (whether friends, colleagues, or family).

So yes, is social media satanic? The jury is up on this one, yet the needle seems to be constantly drifting towards the affirmative. Let's just say that the effort involved in maintaining the least satanic social media environment possible for yourself just may not be worth it. Let's keep it to small book clubs, specialised XMPP rooms and webrings until we figure this out, which might be never.

Anyways, when the guillotines come out, can we publicly behead LinkedIn first? LinkedIn is confounding: a factory that creates the most ghoulish behavior and thinkpieces I've ever read. A fiendish nether world that's fallen out of Sophia's womb, spirited away from the sight of God, left to fester on its own and marinate in its mother's shame. . . ugh.

2 Is there an alternative?

What are some concrete steps you can take now in order to have a better experience in the web?

The first thing, which is also a long-term project, is creating a personal

website of your own.

Preferably, this would not be done with a third-party service such as Squarespace, WordPress, or Wix. I dislike writing HTML and CSS from scratch as much as the next person, but I can't deny that knowing how they work will be quite useful since front-end tinkering is ubiquitous, and also is not at all difficult to learn, hopefully giving any new programmers more motivation to take on other languages, whether markup or otherwise.

Then, perhaps you could move on to using a static-site generator or some other tool to manage your website files. I know quite a few people who have written their own shell scripts to streamline the workflow (I've done so as well) and it isn't nearly as difficult as it might seem.

There are plenty of ways you can host such a website, whether on an old computer or a Raspberry Pi or a remote headless server. There are also countless articles online that will guide you through the process of buying a domain name (at a low cost). You can also use a free hosting service, the prime example being Neocities, but eventually you might want to use a hosting service that provides more freedom (i.e., I believe Neocities only allows Javascript, CSS, and HTML; if you want a backend any fancier than this you will have to move elsewhere).

Practice intentional and mindful living, online and offline. Most of all practice stewardship. Build for the future (or don't—make your site as idiosyncratic and haphazard as you wish it to be). Avoid hype. And most of all believe, and let yourself be helpless like a child. Because weakness is great, and strength is worthless. When a man is born, he is weak and flexible; when he dies he is numb and rigid. When a tree grows, it is soft and pliable, when it becomes dry and hard, it dies. Hardness and strength are the companions of death; weakness and flexibility are expressions of the freshness of life.

3 The beating heart

When I bring up my dissatisfaction with modern-day tech, the other party usually relates to my observations. They're the ones we've long suffered through: ads that make the site functionally useless, constant prompts for cookies, the background (and sometimes not-so-background) noise of an oppressive surveillance capitalism, and the sterile feeling of a mainstream internet that has been corralled into a handful of big-tech kingdoms. The point where my views and their views begin to diverge is when it comes to doing

something about it.

A common response is something along the lines of: “yes, this all makes sense, but most people don’t want to have to learn HTML and CSS just to have a microblog”. This is very true and an unavoidable fact. It’s the same reason why most people use a WYSIWYG application like Microsoft Word or LibreOffice instead of an application like Emacs and/or a library like L^AT_EX (I am not making value judgements here; each has their own use case and using command-line alternatives does not make you a morally better person in any way. Except for MS Word and Adobe Acrobat, which are truly horrible and you would only use them if you were a masochist of extreme proportions, or someone who has never used a computer before, or something like that).

Even among the people who are—let’s face it—a little more autistic about tech than the population average, there’s a striation of just *how* autistic you are willing to get about it. Are you going to use a fully-featured desktop environment like KDE or a window manager like dwm (which doesn’t even have a traditional configuration file, but a C header file)? Are you going to use Ubuntu with all the bells and whistles or a minimal, do-it-yourself distribution like Gentoo? Once again, I’m not making value judgements here. I dislike when people put so much stock into their tools, and I’m of the opinion that you should use whatever tool helps you get your work done. (Just as long as you use something that lets you keep your files locally, on your own computer, for the love of God!)

I don’t think I’m some kind of evangelist or something—I’m lucky if more than a single-digit number of people actually read this all the way through, and my manifesto isn’t exactly saying anything groundbreaking when compared with the countless other “old-web” nostalgia circlejerks that are out there. I’m *extremely* lucky if, a reader having internalized at least some of what I’ve written here, actually is inspired to start a website of their own, dual-boot GNU/Linux/some BSD, or what have you.

There are other things you can do, outside of creating a website or switching to a more “user-friendly” operating system. These are really all closely intertwined:

- Avoiding “everything is a nail” device usage
 - Ironically, this may mean (at least temporarily) increasing consumption and spending. If this is not practical for you to do, then disregard this. If you have the income to spare, then look into

buying MP3 players, notetaking e-ink devices like the Remarkable, digital cameras, wrist watches (please, obviously not smart ones), “dumb” phones (or less intrusive smart phones which are more amenable to customization), and e-book readers.

- Why? Minimalism with regard to, say, the number of devices is nice, but treating your phone as if it is a computer can lead to adverse habits. Not everything needs to be categorized and kept separate—indeed, not everything needs to be a free-standing app. However, using a phone as if it were a computer ensures that you will be in the mindset of “using the computer” at all times, whenever you have your phone on your body. Whether it is for work or play, you will have no choice but to be connected and exposed to a constant stream of input.
 - Some things are simply a pain to do on phones. Sending emails is a hassle. It seems as if half of websites are either poorly formatted for mobile (and they may have their reasons) or simply nonfunctional. See what David Lynch, one of the greatest living American artists, has to say about viewing movies on a smartphone screen.
 - But we acknowledge that more and more, it is becoming outright unrealistic to live a life without a smartphone. Essential services like banking and even the confirmation of citizenship requires a phone number. This is particularly felt in countries such as China and Korea where all of these services and more are dealt with by a single company (WeChat and Kakao, respectively).
 - To stratify your device usage is to take stock of *what* exactly is it you do with devices—in other words, to live and interact with your world and its tools more intentionally. “Feature creep” in general is pernicious. Most things in your life should do one thing, and do it well.
- Deleting social media altogether
 - I realise this might not be practical for many people. For instance, social media can be tied to an income stream. But all the same, if you have an opportunity to do so, give this some serious thought. Read Kriss’s *The Internet is Made of Demons* (linked above) if you haven’t already. The easiest way to avoid “demonic possession” is not having a conduit in the first place.

- Mark of maerk.xyz has a fantastic blog post about this very thing.
- Starting and maintaining hobbies that do not depend on the Internet
 - As a rule of thumb, I often look to the past as a guideline. Of course, I want to avoid being reactionary and romanticizing a false view of history. But consider the age-old activity of sitting in front of a desk sagging with books and poring over texts. This will fulfill you in a way that having fifty tabs open on your browser cannot hope to come close to emulating. One reason is that you have the constant potentiality to be distracted, especially if you're connected to the Internet in some way.
 - This puts mental strain on you, even if you aren't yourself aware of it. “Willpower” is wishy-washy. Discipline should be less of you forcing yourself into unnatural motions, and moreso you constructing your days in such a way that deviating from your path is impossible. This way, something else makes the choice for you.
 - Your hobbies should gear you towards creation over consumption. One of the qualms with the internet is how easy it is to become a consumer. When it comes to art, or any productive activity really, it is true that being a discerning consumer can be as important as being a producer. Just make sure you strike a balance which works for you—a balance which you can sustain, and is least likely to degenerate along one tail.
- “Touching grass”, but seriously. Getting sunlight and open air is essential. Like getting enough sleep, this is frighteningly easy to neglect (especially if you're mentally ill, like I am) and yet when taken into account, provides a substantial increase in quality of everyday life.

Obviously, the general relationship between humans and their devices has become more *degenerate* over time (I don't, and will never use that word with its online chan-board connotation). Obviously, there is every incentive to further lean into the degeneracy. The culture of constant superficial productivity seems like it forces one to be plugged into the matrix at all times—the oft-cited Mark Fisher elaborates on what he called “business ontology” in this video, still as pertinent as ever, and even tech-bro adjacent figures like Cal Newport, a CS professor at Dartmouth, are known for decrying this mode of

scattered faux-productivity—refreshing your inbox, anxiously checking Slack channels, tapping away on your Satanic smart watch. (See Newport’s book, *Digital Minimalism* [New19]. See also artist Jenny Odell’s book, *How to Do Nothing* [Ode19].) Social norms around this have degraded over the years, too, especially after COVID. People will literally sit around anywhere from public parks to bathroom stalls, blasting TikTok on their phones. You’ve seen those bottom-of-the-barrel clips, with the camera that trains directly on the object of focus and the AI-generated subtitles flashing by, word-per-word, in a desperate (and unfortunately, often effective) bid for attention. No one’s deriving any enjoyment from this.

Maybe one of the last great American oracles, David Foster Wallace, depicted a man who always ate his dinner while watching TV, and so passive was his consumption that he didn’t even choose what to watch. One day he recieved a video-cassette; in the book, it is dubbed “The Entertainment”. He started eating his dinner, watching as he always did—but something about that video-cassette was so absorbing, he couldn’t stop watching. Food dribbled out of his mouth, he soiled himself, but still he sat slack-jawed and staring. His wife found him in that exact position, boneless and rancid and half-dead.

So, be slightly obnoxious. Be the so-called Luddite (does that word really mean anything anymore?), the grain of sand in the cogs. Make things slightly inconvenient for yourself, because choosing that minor catch of inconvenience versus letting yourself be corralled onto the path of least resistance is a powerful thing. You *can* derive a small glow of self-satisfaction from it. Just don’t let it outgrow itself into arrogance. Do the right thing, don’t talk too much about it.

And try, in any way, to escape the min-max teleological rat race. I had a friend who tortured herself over worrying about doing things the “sub-optimal” way (her words exactly), when by all accounts, the time and effort spent into pointless self-criticism could’ve been put into *doing the actual thing*, even if it would’ve been at a 70 percent yield instead of the theoretical 90 percent she agonised over. There are subreddits for every conceivable hobby with vast wiki pages on how to get the most out of said hobby—tier lists, reviews, the same questions being asked over and over again despite it all: “how do I get motivation to do X”? “Is X worth it?” “What would you recommend to a beginner. . .”

There’s no doubt that community-compiled guides and wiki pages are helpful, and as humans we’ve been soliciting advice in a public forum for

untold millennia, but sometimes the best thing to do is to just *start*, not necessarily worrying about adhering to some established “meta”.

Even if it’s merely in the form of using RSS feeds instead of the IV drip-feed of some faceless algorithm—be intentional. Very little is arbitrary. And once you realise you have the choice in the first place—that you have always had the choice—new avenues will open up to you. Slowly but surely, the world will seem to have taken on a different sort of light.

I realise now, months after I first started writing this, that beneath all the posturing and the discontent, the throughline consists of just a few words:

Find ways to introduce more intention into your life. Then, find ways to keep it that way.

The title no longer accurately reflects what I want to say. This essay is not just about technology, it isn’t an enumeration of my grievances with the modern web, and it isn’t an evangelical pamphlet which espouses the usual tenets of clean living and free software. All the same, this remains, at heart, a manifesto, in all its messiness and sincerity, however misguided it might be.

References

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