

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 spatial certainty 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 the important part 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 these names fall short in describing such an overwhelming yet ubiquitous and shapeless interface.

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 halfway-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

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 is an article from Damage Magazine written by Sam Kriss. I used to read Damage from time to time until they paywalled everything.

The article draws interesting (but ultimately, allegorical) parallels between demonology and the mainstream internet. It references one of the best 4chan cypypastas 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 (if they haven't paywalled this too!).

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, 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. My concern mainly lies with excessive advertisements and telemetry that is now common to even the most mundane of websites.

I admit that without Javascript, the web would be a very boring and un-interactive place. 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.

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 Notion.

Social media 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.

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). Not the karma-farming asshole on your obscure, "highbrow" subreddit.

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 think pieces I've ever read.

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).

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 most of your work done.

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.