

Technorealism

Karen Christensen interviews David Shenk, cofounder of Technorealism

Why did you start *Technorealism*, and did it get the response you hoped for?

Technorealism grew out of a series of conversations in 1997 and 1998 between Andrew Shapiro and myself. I had recently written *Data Smog*, which called for a sober look at the social and political effects of information proliferation. Andrew was writing *The Control Revolution*, about how technology was driving a huge power shift from centralized institutions to individuals. We were both amazed at how little attention there was in newspapers and magazines to the actual consequences of these new tools. Instead, everything was hyped one way or another. Either these new tools were going to make us all rich, smart and happy, or they would corrupt our children and give life to a vast new underworld of identity thieves.

All the smart people we knew realized that the truth was very different—that these were amazing new tools presenting great benefits and very serious challenges. Letting industry Pollyannas or fear-mongering politicians define the debate seemed ludicrous, and a little dangerous. We felt a need to push the discussion into a more realistic focus.

The response to our short manifesto was fascinating. It came fast and furious from many different corners. Thousands of people from around the world expressed gratitude for the injection of common sense, and people rushed to translate it into Spanish, Italian, Japanese, and Swedish. Mitch Kapor, creator of Lotus 1-2-3 and cofounder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), was an early and very public supporter.

A few tech journalists in the U.S. thought that our common sense was too commonsensical—that it was unnecessary, which seemed a funny criticism to offer considering that so many people were writing to thank us for articulating something that resonated with them.

Do you think Americans are more likely than, say, Europeans to accept technology without questioning?

I don't know Europe well enough to make a definitive statement on this, but from the Europeans I know and from what I read, my strong sense is that Europeans have a more grounded sensibility when it comes to government, infrastructure, community. That realism may rein in their extreme-end creativity and ambition a little, but it also seems to yield a healthier understanding of how things really work. A lot of Americans seem to buy this nonsense about individuals needing to be left alone to do

of radio frequency ID tags, the increasing creep of "dataveillance," the steady encroachment of electronic ads, etc.

What about things like blogs, RSS, podcasting? Do they make technology more human, and humane?

I actually don't have much experience with RSS, but I'm very excited by blogs and by podcasting. They are helping to force a genuine democratization of the media.

Blogs in particular have in many cases forced the mainstream commercial media into shifting focus on various stories.

"All around us, information is moving faster and becoming cheaper to acquire, and the benefits are manifest. That said, the proliferation of data is also a serious challenge, requiring new measures of human discipline and skepticism. We must not confuse the thrill of acquiring or distributing information quickly with the more daunting task of converting it into knowledge and wisdom. Regardless of how advanced our computers become, we should never use them as a substitute for our own basic cognitive skills of awareness, perception, reasoning, and judgment."

—from the Technorealism website

as they please. "If it's necessary, the market will take care of it." So when it comes to a new tool, the first and only question for Americans is: what will it do for me? I'm sure Europeans also make selfish evaluations, but at least they have an intuitive sense of everyone being connected and interdependent.

Are there key social issues we still haven't faced?

Are there any we *have* faced—squarely? We are hurtling into a new age, and few people are paying serious attention to what it will actually be like. The overwhelming emphasis is on how tiny and sexy our new iPods are, how flat our new screens are, how much fun it is to send or get something faster or with fewer clicks. Oh, and how great the earnings were last quarter.

I'm still kind of flabbergasted that major American publications don't have serious technology critics to look at social and political issues. We have energy writers, political writers, transportation writers—but no digital society writers. We should be discussing the massive proliferation of TV screens, the safety of cell phones and Internet access in cars, the social implications

Why did *Technorealism* stop—did it succeed, or fail? What does this tell us? Is it time for a new attempt?

From my perspective, the idea is alive and well. We put an idea out there at a propitious time. It influenced some thinking, and is certainly still very useful in my conversations and presentations.

A lot of the utopian and dystopian b.s. has now gone by the wayside, and to the extent that people are thinking about the social implications of technologies, they are doing so in a much more practical, realistic manner. So that's terrific. As I said, I do think there's a lot more room for public discourse and media attention regarding the big implications. I hope that happens. So much of our future is going to be determined by how closely we pay attention to ethical and political considerations of scientific and technological discoveries. ♦

David Shenk is the author of *Data Smog* and of cofounder of Technorealism, a movement encouraging balanced consideration of technology's effects on humanity (www.technorealism.org).