



New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future

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As the world around us increases in technological complexity, our understanding of it diminishes. Underlying this trend is a single idea: the belief that our existence is understandable through computation, and more data is enough to help us build a better world.

In actual fact, we are lost in a sea of information, increasingly divided by fundamentalism, simplistic narratives, conspiracy theories, and post-factual politics. Meanwhile, those in power use our lack of understanding to further their own interests. Despite the accessibility of information, we're living in a new Dark Age.

From rogue financial systems to shopping algorithms, from artificial intelligence to state secrecy, we no longer understand how our world is governed or presented to us. The media is filled with unverifiable speculation, much of it generated by anonymous software, while companies dominate their employees through surveillance and the threat of automation.

In his brilliant new work, leading artist and writer James Bridle excavates the limits of technology and how it aids our understanding of the world. Surveying the history of art, technology, and information systems, he explores the dark clouds that gather over our dreams of the digital sublime.

New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future Details

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Jason says

Based on the title NEW DARK AGE alone, we might well go in expecting author James Bridle to take on the roll of canary in the coalmine. If carbon ideologues cannot stop carping on their mandate to keep the lights turned on, we might expect Bridle to perhaps paint a picture of an encroaching world in which our thoughtless burning of fossil fuels has made it so that our lights cannot stay on anymore. This is not, in fact, the actual meaning of Bridle's iteration of "dark world." It is less a matter of there being no future than that the future is already here. Things will get worse, naturally, environmental calamity especially so, but our dark world is already here and has been forged by runaway computation, technological opacity, and the overflow of information (productive as this is of a multiplicity of contradictory, divisive, and over-simplified master narratives). This is the age of the network and Bridle insists that we must think the network system-wide. There is too much data and we cannot know how the intelligent machines we have produced think. Data, rather than taking us to some future point where all will be revealed, finds us in a world we can only faintly know; our perplexity and incapacity will only grow. It is not the particulars of our network that are problematic. All of our prejudices and liabilities have been brought to bear from the very inception of the apparatus, and as technologies with a military origin become increasingly woven into the fabric of everyday life, we become more exploited, more frustrated, and our societies more fractious. NEW DARK AGE is structured in ten chapters each beginning with the letter C, from "Chasm" to "Cloud." The cloud itself appears at the beginning and is brilliantly used to represent overarching opacity. Bridle: "the first criticism of the cloud is that it is a very bad metaphor. The cloud is not weightless; it is not amorphous, or even invisible, if you know where to look for it. The cloud is not some magical or faraway place, made of water vapour and radio waves, where everything just works. It is a physical infrastructure consisting of phone lines, fibre optics, satellites, cables on the ocean floor, and vast warehouses filled with computers, which consume huge amounts of water and energy and reside within national and legal jurisdictions." The network that spans the earth and conditions the world (as an ongoing culmination of human endeavour) is both virtual and all too actual. Data and computation cannot think our world. Bridle insists that only we, though positioned in the darkness of the shadow cast by that which we have built, can do that. Using data to predict the future is a losing cause; we see it fail more and more. The metadata accumulated by mass-surveillance produces far too much information to be of much use to intelligence agencies. Algorithms become just another tool of exploitation, confusion, and systematic derangement. Cambridge Analytica, troll farms, and Russian interference are emblematic. The Russians especially are a case in point. Viewers of Adam Curtis's HYPERNORMALIZATION will be familiar with the temper of revelations here: the Russians are less interested in cherry-picking Western leaders or pushing measures like Brexit through than they are in producing mass confusion and animus upon which they can capitalize. In the end it becomes all but impossible to disentangle all the players. Our economics and technology are inherently divisive and they are in overdrive. The subtitle of Bridle's book may be misleading. It is not that we have no future left. Quite the contrary. We live in darkness and there is no way out. What do we do? NEW DARK AGE ends by suggesting that the onus is upon us to become provisional guardians of our world, too complex to fully fathom and wholly impossible to steer though it is. Deeper than this outright (though somewhat vague) call to arms, is what I would call a spiritual thread running through the book. Full disclosure: like all readers I bring my own horizon to bear in my encounters with texts. I happen to be an twelve-stepping recovering alcoholic, and to me the primary spiritual principal from which all efficacious spiritual business sprouts is acceptance. We are not excused from taking action. We must. That is the only way to live. But we have no dominion over people, places, and things outside of our control. Submit to this fact ... or live in endless perturbation. At the end of his chapter on "Conspiracy," Bridle speaks of living in the "gray zone." The gray zone "allows us to sample from the myriad of explanations that our limited cognition stretches like a mask over the vibrating half-truths of the world. It is a better approximation of reality than any rigid binary

encoding can ever hope to be -- an acknowledgment that all our apprehensions are approximations, and all the more powerful for being so. The gray zone allows us to make peace with the otherwise-irreconcilable, conflicting worldviews that prevent us from taking meaningful action in the present." It is not a matter of finding our way out of darkness but rather of finding a way to live within it; this is what prompts me to speak of the underpinning spiritual register of NEW DARK AGE. I appreciate the reminder that one can live in these times, contrary to the leanings of the species at large, in a state of emotional sobriety and connection.

Vitor Capela says

It tries to convey the message and the dangers by grouping damning facts by theme. There was a lot less development than I expected, and many of the examples used have been in the press in the past few years. Even if you ooh and aah when reading all the damning evidence we're screwed, the book will feel a bit shallow.

Artem Gordin says

I can't say it's a good book, but "New Dark Age" raises questions so important and I enjoyed it so much that I feel necessary to rate it highly. Just like its subject – the interconnected cloud/network – it sprawls in multiple directions at once and doesn't present an easily discernible narrative for a moderately educated person like me, but reads more like a collection of thoughts and approaches inspired by a common underlying philosophy.

Because of this, the book will probably seem too basic for advanced techno-philosophical readers and for a completely unprepared person it will be too alarming to process and is likely to be rejected altogether. But I personally enjoyed it, found a lot of areas and questions worth investigating and reading on further and can recommend it to anyone who considered themselves a technological optimist, but is ready to question that notion.

Kim Plowright says

Mapping connections between technology, the network, the weather, and the way we think of 'computing' as other, un-human. Not hopeful, but full of a mesh of thoughts and linkages. What does it mean to have your head in the cloud?

Iskander says

Following James Bridle's work for years the book is a compelling residue of his thinking and visions. Very well written and providing the food for thought you expect from Bridle.

For people new to his work, this will introduce you to the impact of technology on our society and beyond. It will make you think, and hopefully stimulate to keep thinking. The book is the perfect ammunition.

Cecilia Domoto says

A good perspective but not what I expected. Thought would be more conceptual and philosophical, but turned out as so many facts based, details and far more common sense... don't like the writing style either...

Mehrsa says

This book had some real bright spots--the introduction was riveting and made me giddy about the book's possibilities. But it did not meet expectations. I've been waiting for a philosophical take on the internet age (the Neil Postman of the era) to tell us how the medium has changed the message and structure of modern life. The introductory thoughts of the book were as close as I've seen anyone get. The other books about the internet age are all the same--it's killing our brains and attention or the internet will fix everything. This book is on the pessimistic side, but each chapter just catalogs a bunch of problems of new tech without a coherent theory. I already know about surveillance and algorithms and worker abuse and climate change. Tech did not create all these problems and I don't think it will fix them. What I had hoped the book would get at were the profound and higher order problems of community, politics, etc. I think there is something to say here and no one has quite articulated it--I guess in the way I want to see it articulated. Maybe I'll just keep re-reading Neil Postman

eve massacre says

Wholeheartedly recommend this beautifully written cross-disciplinary argument about how computational thinking has lead to a false sense of knowability-via-data and a lack of action and about how we need a more "cloudy thinking", a way of thinking that is based in the here and now, and which is systematic as well as it embraces a loss of certainty.

LunaBel says

Unfortunately, I have not seen fulfilled the promises of the introduction. It could have been a great read was it not mainly consisting of a number of unremarkable remarks about the advance of technology.

Ryan says

A little too heavy on the metaphor sometimes, with examples that felt a little stretched, but an overwhelmingly clear message that technology and an explosion of data aren't moving us forward as a society by default.

Alexandre Coates says

I cannot sing the praises of this book enough, it is the kind of thing I have long wanted to read, and here it is,

better thought out than I could have hoped. I have thought over many of the topics in this book before, and was still inspired by the richness of thought on display.

The book covers, in readable and clear prose, the various ways technology not only works, but encourages us to think. How by asserting that technology is 'neutral' we blind ourselves to its origins and its aims. Beyond all this the author makes one point, fittingly, very clear. Despite the origins and complications of these systems. The military origins of GPS, computation, the internet. Nobody designed the world, none of this was deliberate, everyone is slightly baffled and confused. The theories don't work, conspiracies run rampant, and we all see a different world from the selfsame sky.

We cannot ban the world, unspool the optical fibres, or grasp buildings and force them back into the ground. The world is here, and this book is a call to say even if we don't understand it, we must still aim to address it. When things are unknowable, we cannot lean into the notion that more data will be the solution, the solution is more thinking. Freer, wider thinking.

As the book says in the first chapter, our tools encourage us to think a certain way, but there are so many ways to use tools if we step back and really think. We must re-enchant our tools, if we see them not as natural, colossal inevitabilities, but as things made for one purpose, which can be utilised for others. Well then we have a chance here and now in the present. After all, in an uncertain world, the only time to act is now.

I cannot recommend this book enough, go read it!

Steffi says

'Tech stuff', actually not my cup of tea which is probably a very stupid thing to say in 2018 where every aspect of our lives is in one way or another influenced by 'the internet' and 'technology' and 'artificial intelligence'. Global financial capitalism would in this form not be possible without it. And maybe that's part of what the book 'The new dark age' (VERSO, 2018) is about. As the world around us increases in technological complexity, our understanding of it becomes less. The underlying idea is that our existence is understandable through computation and the idea that if we had all the data and means to compute it we could fix just about any social problem. I am not so much interested in the tech stuff – although it is indeed unsettling of what is technologically possible and its implications on power (surveillance and manipulation) etc – but more so in its ideological implication. I feel like the idea of reasoning through computation is an expression or reinforcement or both of the technocratic post-political ideological hegemony. I am not sure if this is what the authors says, but that was my semi-epiphany: computers don't take over humans because they think like us, but because we started to think like them (technocratic, essentially a variation of supply-demand thinking).

From my own professional experience, the McKinsey approach to any social problem (public health in Africa, food franchise in the west, running a refugee camp) is based on precisely this idea of computing maximum efficiency and effectiveness based on quantifiable input data (dividing complexity into isolated process units that can be improved against KPIs) – this kind of development work could soon or probably already be undertaken by computers/ AI. Not that I understand a lot about this but this kind of technocratic thinking doesn't need humans anymore, it doesn't need critical reflection or normative choices. I was thinking that especially today's apolitical humanitarian responses– if you add to this GPS and other data – could be easily designed by computers, then dispatching and tracking the required supplies from the most efficient hub through drones. I can totally see this replacing NGOs trying to figure out stuff (essentially logistics stuff – who needs what quantity where and when) that technology could probably solve in tens of seconds and that Amazon and General Motors have figured out decades ago. Donors or crowd funders could

then push a button whether they want the drones to dispatch or not or to whom. The future of humanitarian aid. Imagine the amount of time saved in coordination meetings ? I know I am VERY late in the game but I can kind of see where all this 21st century is headed.

Jamie F says

Incredible, incredible book.

Peter Mcloughlin says

tour of the dark and surreal media and digital landscape that envelops us. We are in a world of conspiracy theories. Breakdown of knowledge and action. A world where everybody knows what is going on be climate change, Oligarchy, corruption, stultification, savage inequalities, dumbing down but nobody has a clue about what to do. Dispiriting look at our moment.

Reuben says

A sustained attack on the idea that more information equals greater understanding, that all problems have rational and logical solutions, and that, when in doubt, we can train a computer to solve them for us. Absolutely drunk on its own anecdotes, which I love--no point goes unfounded. In general, I think any work of fiction or non-fiction which challenges the assumptions we see as settled is a good thing as long as its attacks make sense. Really really good read and highly recommended to anyone who's ever engaged with modern life.
