

Self in a Digital Age: life after narcissism?

Tom Jagtenberg

As we move, inexorably, into an Anthropocene Era, it is important to register that because we are a technological species the transformation of Earth by humanity is now a matter of degree. Unfortunately, over-population and climate change mean that any hope for a return to a golden age - with pristine beaches, wilderness, and close connection to an unspoiled nature - is a forlorn hope.

But the kind of dystopia we will become is still 'up for grabs'. The question of whether we can find a way to live sustainably on a finite planet remains an open question. Answering this question will depend on the kinds technologies that we innovate, and embrace, and the kind of human beings we will become - as a partial consequence of these technologies, and the kind of society in which we live. A key issue here concerns the extent to which we can come to terms with ourselves, as individuals and collectively. The outcomes of an analysis that follows from a 'dystopian' view that is honest about human limitations may not be perfect, but, hopefully, will provide some scope for movement towards dealing with the major ecological existential threat of the day – climate change. In this essay I focus on the enabling powers of new technologies and link these to consumerism as a major anti-ecological problem. In that context the idea of narcissism will be re-assessed.

It is not productive to be overly fatalistic about the transformation of humanity by technology. Left to the natural wisdom of free market forces, or economic benefits as discerned by large corporations, new technologies are not necessarily designed for the benefit of the environment, or good because they displace human labour, or good for the health of humans – there are countless examples of the disregard of the many negative impacts of technologies (that include social dislocation, the loss and de-skilling of labour forces, the exploitation of men women and children, major pollution, climate change, the destruction of environments, habitats, and ecologies). New technologies, such as mobile phones and the internet, are ultimately commodities and advertising platforms, and should be understood in that context.

At the same time, the personal expression of individuals appear 'always' (or very nearly 'always') enabled, or facilitated, technologically. New technologies have historically increased the mechanical powers of individuals (e.g. power tools, cars and robots), their means of violence (e.g. guns, other weapons, and involvement in professional armies), and their chemical and biological control of the environment (e.g. use of fertilizers and pesticides). More recently new technologies have revolutionised our communicative abilities and rational skills (mobile phones, the internet, and computing). Moreover, technological enhancement leads to higher productivity in all sectors of the economy, and is at the heart of most, if not all, industrial and agricultural innovation. Technologies not only enhance individual powers, they increase the output of all industries and workplaces. Like it or not, humanity is a technologically brilliant species in which technological self-enhancement is becoming a routine part of daily life.

And, the experiences of self we have, or are able to have, incorporate all these technologies (we are social animals). All tool usage mediates and transforms the kinds of relationships an individual has with environments and ecologies, and the narratives of self that constitute self-

identity. That is not to say that there is no 'pre-technological' self – just that if there is, it (like 'god') tends to be silenced by the creative expansion of human technological development.

'Going forward', new technologies and our ideas of self, and the potentials of self, appear to be inextricably linked. In particular, the Anthropocene era that is now supplanting the Holocene era, is a technologically dominated era – planet Earth is becoming dominated by the activities of humanity. In short, ideas of self that we have now and that we may have in the future will be technologically enabled and technologically expanded – for good, and ill.

Nonetheless, there are limitations to self-transformation in the context of new technologies such as the mobile phone and the internet. The possibilities depend very much on ideas of self that are internalised by taken for granted practices, such as consumption, advertising and popular culture - and narratives of self that have become institutionalised in professional and academic cultures. As I go on to explore, nearly all these contemporary cultures fracture our bonds to the natural world. Indeed, contemporary self-experience is well on the way to becoming totally commodified – and that needs to be understood as a starting point for the re-evaluation of all future potentials.

In that context it is worth noting that over-consumption is part of an obsessive cultural optimism.

Technological optimism

For the most part, optimism about the potentials of new technologies abounds in all societies and cultures. There are good reasons for that. Since the Industrial Revolution new technologies have dramatically increased manufacturing and agricultural productivity. Despite all opposition to new technologies – whether opposition due to human impacts on labour markets, or more recently due to ecological impacts – new technologies have been embraced in nearly all economies. However, a more measured appreciation of the potentials of new technologies is important because as we can easily see, enthusiasm for labour saving, and for the extension of human abilities generally, is no guarantee that their impacts will not continue the degradation of our natural environments. It would appear our human potentials lag well behind the transformative abilities of new technologies. In this essay I will focus on new communication technologies, but the same arguments can be levelled at the development of robotics, and the potential of robots to thoroughly transform human society.

It seems possible that humanity will be overwhelmed by the disruptive abilities of new technologies. We might wonder why this is so, and to what extent human factors can be separated from technological innovations – in order to assess the contribution that 'human nature' makes to the unavoidably dystopian futures we will have. Of course, one important line of analysis concerns our understanding of the nature of the human 'self' and our willingness to become more socially connected in a way that benefits the ecologies that sustain us. Thus far, whatever technological innovations we adopt appear to be easily subverted because of the 'Faustian bargain' humanity so readily makes with technology: we want more wealth and greater individual power and experience, and appear willing to sacrifice the environment and other people's quality of life to get there. Some might call this a diabolical pact; from a secular position one might simply wonder whether humanity is fatally flawed? And are 'we', as individuals, fatally flawed?

The most dominant contemporary ideas of what we are can be found in the taken for granted assumption that we live as consumers – that is, we live in a *consumer society*. In this kind of living new technologies are embraced optimistically because the idea of economic growth is so

overwhelming as a global governmental policy setting. This idea of the consuming self is the dominant model in all popular cultures, and remains a potent way of characterising the anti-ecological nature of human society. Further, consumerism is a social-psychological mode of being defined by commodification. That allows for a thoroughly alienated relationship between self, society and nature. In that sense society and culture are causal – but that does not exonerate us as individuals, because ‘we’ are largely knowing in our complicity with excessive consumerism, and in our wilful reliance on destructive technologies.

Consumer Society

Being a consumer is hardly a cause for self-reproach – it is impossible not to be so - but being an over-consumer is a different matter. These days it is rumoured humanity is on track, globally, to consume 3.0 Earth’s worth of materials by 2030. Needless to say, this level of over-consumption is not sustainable; even with technological wizardry and economic magic; quality of life on Earth seems destined to decline.

According to Global Footprint Network, in 2017 humans required 1.7 planets to offset our use of natural resources each year. That meant that from August 2 until December 31 in 2017 humans were using resources that were not replenished (Trevor Nace, ‘Humanity has Officially Consumed More Than the Earth Can Produce This Year’, <http://www.forbes.com.../2017/08/03...>). Australia’s carbon footprint per capita is approximately 5 times the global average, equivalent to that of the USA and Luxembourg (based on In 2007 figures - see Wikipedia, Carbon footprint). That was then; now is definitely worse.

Of course many people on Earth don’t get to consume as much as the average, but nonetheless over-consumption (and over-production) has become a defining feature of all market economies. That is, over-consumption is necessary for economic growth, and occurs despite the fact that the distribution of wealth, and basic commodities (such as water), is increasingly inequitable in most, if not all, countries.

There is another word for the core problem here – *excess*. In most wealthy countries like Australia, excess characterises nearly every available market experience and institutional experience – including average rates of material production of most goods, which, for economic success, depend on demand increasing. It seems to have become very important to be bigger, faster, stronger, more beautiful, smarter, more successful, and of course, richer than ever before. Before dismissing all this as unavoidable market hype, it’s worth reflecting on the devastating impact excess has on our self-concepts, and on the attendant ecological impacts.

Perhaps the Australian obesity statistics are a good indicator of excess – approximately 65% of Australians are said to be over-weight, and approximately 30% are said to be obese (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019 - online). ‘We’ are definitely eating too much, and consuming too much sugar, salt and fat. It is easy to blame the food industry and poor government regulation, but in any free market society it’s hard to ignore the issues of individual choice, and self-image. The bottom line in all liberal democratic societies is that individuals are free to choose to over-consume. In fact this is the bottom line in all market driven societies; economic growth depends upon over-consumption.

What may not be adequately appreciated is the way that all the new technologies we experience magnify the demands for excess that already exist – even the act of putting solar panels on the roof is widely seen as a licence to consume more electricity. After all,

any commodity that is cheaper necessarily invites more consumption, so long as excess is imprinted on our psyches. There are two major drivers of excess globally: new technologies and advertising. Both these forces fundamentally affect self-image and project forward towards increasing consumption, increasing populations, and increasing growth of human impacts generally.

Self image

Because new technologies tend to magnify our experiences of self, without (generally) leading to greater connection with the environments and ecologies that support us, they tend to function as agents of excess. For instance, because the internet and mobile phones are, amongst other functions, advertising platforms, the psychology of excess is continuously a part of the experience of using all devices and apps. Using these devices, we are continuously bombarded with invitations to buy and subscribe - and generally to consume more.

Not only does the psychology of excess run through all advertising, it runs through all major professional institutions: education, the law, politics, science, art, architecture and religion – all are tainted by excess. All employees and managers in these professionalised institutional sectors suffer from hyperbolic mission statements and an ideology of progress that urges everyone involved to be ‘more’ – to maximise self potential, to gain promotion, to contribute to economic growth, to practice leadership, and to somehow move the nation ‘forward’. There is no room for a more zen-like approach to the world here.

Even new ‘scientific’ technologies – such as telescopes, binoculars, and microscopes, are caught up in the drive towards excess. When is a particular device outmoded and imminently replaceable? We look to the internet for advice, and are encouraged to experience a bigger, sharper, clearer and, in so many ways, ‘better’ image. And, by osmosis (or association) our self-image is also encouraged to become bigger, sharper, clearer, and so on. And if we do pull out the credit card, the magic loop is complete, together with the ecological impacts of one more device activated and another retired, passed on, or junked. Is there any escape?

Certainly one motivating factor behind (and in front of) the activation of credit cards is advertising. Advertising is an integral part of consumerism; the psychological ‘tricks’ that advertisers use in their efforts to persuade us are a key to understanding how we are manipulated by advertising, but also show how open we are to suggestion, and how it is that humanity so easily makes Faustian bargains with new technologies, with devastating consequences to the environment – and to healthy social (and personal) relations. Advertising is a cultural activity that reveals much to the analyst of ecological decline. How is it that advertising makes us desire a product, or ‘commodity’ – despite negative impacts on natural and social environments? How is it that individuals and organisations are persuaded to become bigger, stronger, faster, smarter and richer?

As we know advertising does far more than present us with images of new products and brands, or merely inform us about these things. Advertising is about persuasion – and, like politics, does not necessarily respect boundaries in pursuit of increased market share and profit. One little discussed, yet arguably central, strategy is the transformation of all consumers into narcissists. By encouraging us all to become more self focused, to become more oblivious of boundaries, to aspire to being bigger, stronger, smarter and richer (and more ‘aspirational’), we will consume more; we will become the better consumers that all advertisers want us to

become. Ironically perhaps, one of the important boundaries that narcissism erodes is the boundary between self and the natural environment. Unfortunately, greater interest in, and care for, the environment does not follow from a narcissistic expansion of self – quite the opposite. When self is at the centre of all worlds, requiring endless consumption and growth, environments and ecologies go into decline. Endless consumption and growth is unsustainable.

Narcissism?

Narcissistic personality disorder gives people an inflated sense of their self-importance, a deep need for excessive attention, troubled relationships, and a lack of empathy for others. But, the clinical condition only affects an estimated 1% of the population. So how could it be that narcissism has come to be seen as ‘at the root of everything’ (see, for example, Jessica Benjamin, *The Oedipal Riddle*, 2000, p.233)?

Certainly, if it could speak, a threatened species, or an ecology, might easily characterise humanity as narcissistic. And, indeed, most ‘normal’ people could probably identify with the disorder – at some time in any life. Like depression and back pain, ‘everybody knows’. The point is that narcissism is a set of descriptions that, in many ways, appears to characterise the consumer orientation of modern life; the personality disorder is only an extreme version of traits everybody experiences to some extent. This is, of course, underlined by the democratically endorsed behaviour of the president of the USA. Narcissism may have become a new political strategy in an excessively consumerist world order. Who could have imagined that one individual might so quickly turn narcissism into both a political and marketing strategy that is globally affective?

Indeed, narcissism is, from the point of view of advertisers, a perfect condition for any personality. Narcissists are compulsive consumers; they are particularly impressed by the symbols of branding, craving, as they do, attention and status differentiation (see, for example, Sylwia Cisek et. al. ‘Narcissism and consumer behaviour: a review and preliminary findings’, *Frontiers in Psychology* 2014; 5:232 – available online). The undiagnosed problem for advertisers is how to make individuals more narcissistic, rather than less.

The idea that narcissism was a social problem was popularised as early as 1980 by Christopher Lasch in his book *The Culture of Narcissism*. The book is important because Lasch specifically relates the idea of narcissism to the apocalyptic nature of modern societies. As the pre-eminent sociologist Anthony Giddens summarises the point:

‘[g]lobal risks have become such an acknowledged aspect of modern institutions that, on the level of day-to-day behaviour, no one any longer gives much thought to how potential global disasters can be avoided. Most people shut them out of their lives and concentrate their activities on privatised ‘survival strategies’, blotting out the larger risk scenarios. Giving up hope that the wider social environment can be controlled, people retreat to purely personal occupations: to psychic and bodily improvement’ (Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Polity, 1991, p.171).

That was the culture of narcissism, diagnosed by Christopher Lasch forty years ago. He might not have anticipated that narcissism would become a global default position: the deliberately chosen advertising strategy of industrial and political elites, a terminal condition of passive consumption in voting publics, and a monstrous form of self identity that threatens to devour the planet.

The strange world of the commodity

Consumerism and narcissism make much more sense when they are linked to the process of commodification.

A consumer society depends on far more than technology, excessive consumption and advertising strategies such as narcissism. It depends on a fundamental transformative process: commodification. Everything is for sale. This process is the aim of all advertising because it enables the commercialisation of the world, and stitches all aspects of life into market based processes. Most fundamentally, commodification is an advertising and marketing technique that enables all things to be turned into objects, or 'commodities', for sale. Self-experience is itself capable of being commodified. We can buy peace of mind; we can consume therapy; we can aspire to become healthier and fitter; and even stay younger. There are pills and potions, therapists, doctors and other qualified practitioners, who can provide, enable and deliver. All that, to a large extent, depends on our ability to see ourselves as a suitable 'object' in the commercialised world of therapy, or indeed in any other commercialised world. In any commodified world subjectivity is objectively available in a market driven process. Subjectivity may be available to a therapeutic other, who may also be an advertiser, and the self can be fixed, or treated. Commodification is very pervasive.

'Branding' is the main way that products become identified in today's world. Linking a product or service to a brand name is a very magical act. Suddenly, we have not just purchased a car, or an apple – we have purchased, for example, a Holden or a Pink Lady. Branding makes symbolic consumption part of material reality. Branding fuses semiotics and materialism. Branding is intended to direct a process of consumption towards a particular object and set of meanings, and implicitly, towards pleasure that is both legitimate and guilty - but quite normal – all at the same time.

A commodity is generally separated from its process of production, or indeed from the particularities, and accidents, of its consumption. This makes a commodity an anti-ecological 'thing'. Commodities exist in the idealised and fantasy worlds of advertising. They do not willingly reveal exploitative processes in their production, or pathways of pollution and damage to environments and ecologies. All these circumstances have to be imported into the strange world of commodities.

Technologies of connection – an interim conclusion

The great virtue of new communication technologies is their connectivity. Mobile phones and the internet, for example, enable an extended self.

As a way of summarising the analysis of technology in this essay, I am proposing four theses about technology:

1. That individual humans can overcome the 'alienation', or objectification, imposed by consumerism and commodification. For example, we can all consume less, and we can all 're-contextualise' commodities as products that have been made in particular circumstances, from particular materials, obtained from particular places, environments and ecologies.
2. Technologies can aid the extension of self to greater connectivity with everything else – for example the internet, mobile phones, remote sensing, and the technological

infrastructure of all modern natural sciences - including cosmology, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, ecology, and so on – all enable us to connect more closely with the physical and biological world;

3. Ecological sustainability is possible, even in an Anthropocene world era. For example, sustainable energy generation and food production are possible now – but require political will and individual determination to change lifestyle choices and employ new sustainable technologies.
4. There is a basic positive connection between ecological health and human happiness. This connection needs to be understood as a personal motivating factor. It is an important reason to examine the ecological impacts of new technologies, and their commodification as objects separate from their ecological circumstances.

These propositions represent a move away from assumptions about technology that assume an ‘alienated’ self incapable of overcoming the constraints of corporate capitalism and consumer society.

Even though everybody knows that endless consumption, isolation and loneliness lead to unhappiness, mainstream Australian society and culture offers no solution other than more of the same – as delivered by a growth economy, falling levels of unemployment, dilatory political leadership, and lots of sport, cooking and media consumption. It may sound cynical to say, but Australia is not alone with this obsession with consumption. In fact growth economies, falling levels of unemployment, dilatory political leadership, and lots of sport, cooking and media consumption are being marketed, as we speak, as great cultural achievements of the twentieth century (and early twenty-first century).

It’s no wonder that god continues to lurk in the constituencies of the major Australian political parties, and runs rampant in countries without secular democratic restraints. You would think that a more sober and measured realism would have triumphed in the several hundred years since the European renaissance, scientific revolution and ‘enlightenment’.

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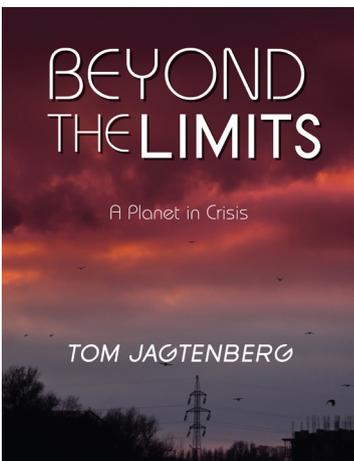
About Tom Jagtenberg

Tom has a longtime interest in the natural world and concern about its decline. His interests, whilst being inter-disciplinary, have always had a focus on nature and the environment.

He worked as a sociologist for thirty years at Wollongong University (where he was a Senior Lecturer) and Southern Cross University (where he was an adjunct research fellow). He is a published author of books and articles about the environment and related cultural fields. Tom has qualifications in science, engineering and sociology – a BE (Chemical and Fuel Engineering, Hons 1, UNSW), an MSc (Liberal Studies in Science, Manchester University) and a PhD (Sociology, University of Wollongong).

Since Tom's student days he has been concerned with the representation of nature in disciplinary fields as diverse as science, sociology, cultural studies and communication studies, natural medicine and political life. He has been a strong critic of the exclusion of non-human interests from academic fields and political parties. As his latest book suggests even Green political parties are limited in the extent to which they can be advocates for other species, their habitats, and even human environments.

Tom retired from academic life to live in Northern New South Wales with his partner. They chose the Northern Rivers region because of its strong ecologically focused community and beautiful environment.



Beyond the Limits

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