

Uncovering Histories of Techno-Optimism

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Techno-optimism—the idea that science and technology will lead to economic, political, or social good—has long been a mainstay of business, government, and popular culture globally, starting with the sublime feelings inspired by the industrial revolution (Nye 1994) and continuing through the development of many subsequent technologies including the telegraph, the radio, cybernetics, and the Internet (Douglas 2004, Dupuy 2009, Mosco 2006, Standage 2014, Turner 2006). While a charge of techno-utopianism is often taken as an insult, techno-optimism is something that some technology writers and activists embrace. Authors like Cory Doctorow (2011) have even made the case for techno-optimism, presenting it as a cautious hope for the future balanced by modest concern. In American techno-utopianism at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, writers equated advancing technology with utopia itself (Segal 1985:1); in contrast, Turner (2018) suggests that optimism may be attractive because of its relative modesty. Optimism, he notes, “can be partial: it allows room for distress and dismay, it allows room for difference. It’s not, as they used to say in the 1960s, all one all the time.”

In this panel, we explore the nature of this hope. Our cases draw from sites places around the world, interrogating the often-presumed centrality of Silicon Valley in creating these rhetorics. We ask, how has techno-optimism been produced in past and present technology projects, and what are its consequences? Techno-optimistic narratives have proved quite persistent, where the same kinds of promises may be attached to new technologies when older technologies’ stars begin to fade. Like other social imaginaries, forms of techno-optimism both reflect and shape the political economic circumstances from which they arise and may therefore serve influential societal interests. They may lead to aspirational striving and planning for desired futures, but they may also promote a silencing of social criticism when present problems resist relatively narrow, technocratic modes of defining problems and solutions. The papers in this panel explore the performances, ideologies, and practices that produce and promote techno-optimisms, as well as the aesthetics of their dissemination and their effects—for instance, by promoting social action, delegitimizing opposition, and ignoring alternatives.

It is especially important to examine these histories of techno-optimism in the cynical contemporary moment, which is marked by an increased perception of the threat posed by technology (Richardson 2015). At various points, the promises of new technologies have been tempered by fears of, for instance, state-sponsored hacking and corporate data monopolies. While techno-pessimism is on the rise again, an underlying expectation of technological progress—an expectation that tends to discount the present in light of the promise of a technologically-improved future—continues to structure technological design and policy. This combination of promise and threat associated with technology is part of a long history of anticipatory thinking (Wajcman 2017) wherein technologies are presented as the solution to problems caused by technology, as both poison and cure (Stiegler 2011). As techno-optimism becomes less of a default orientation and more of a contested ground, we have an opportunity to better understand its various instantiations, persistence, and effects.