We All Wear Tinfoil Hats Now

Geoff Shullenberger

In early 2017, after the double shock of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, the British data-mining firm Cambridge Analytica gained sudden notoriety. The previously little-known company, reporters claimed, had used behavioral influencing techniques to turn out social media users to vote in both elections. By its own account, Cambridge Analytica had worked with both campaigns to produce customized propaganda for targeting individuals on Facebook likely to be swept up in the tide of anti-immigrant populism. Its methods, some news sources suggested, might have sent enough previously disengaged voters to the polls to have tipped the scales in favor of the surprise victors. To a certain segment of the public, this story seemed to answer the question raised by both upsets: How was it possible that the seemingly solid establishment consensus had been rejected? What's more, the explanation confirmed everything that seemed creepy about the Internet, evoking a sci-fi vision of social media users turned into an army of political zombies, mobilized through subliminal manipulation.

> *The Technical Delusion:
> Electronics, Power, Insanity*
> By Jeffrey Sconce
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Cambridge Analytica's violations of Facebook users' privacy have made it an enduring symbol of the dark side of social media. However, the more dramatic claims about the extent of the company's political impact collapse under closer scrutiny, mainly because its much-hyped "psychographic targeting" methods probably don't work. As former Facebook product manager Antonio García Martínez noted in a 2018 *Wired* article, "the public, with no small help from the media sniffing a great story, is ready to believe in the supernatural powers of a mostly unproven targeting strategy," but "most ad insiders express skepticism about Cambridge Analytica's claims of having influenced the election, and stress the real-world difficulty of changing anyone's mind about anything with mere Facebook ads, least of all deeply ingrained political views." According to García, the entire affair merely confirms a well-established truth: "In the ads world, just because a product doesn't work doesn't mean you can't sell it."

Cambridge's clients, the media, and the public all fell for a flashy but

dubious sales pitch. The gullibility of the latter two may have stemmed from wishful thinking: If Brexit and Trump could be traced to the malign influence of a single company, the assumption in some liberal quarters appeared to be, then the threat they represented might be more easily rolled back. But at the same time, reporters hostile to Cambridge turned out to have been insufficiently critical of the company's own self-promotion. Ironically, those who lambasted the company's insidious power were helping it publicize its supposed ability to shape political decisions. In retrospect, the entire story starts to look like a classic conspiracy theory, attributing complex, multi-layered events to the secret machinations of shadowy behind-the-scenes operators deploying cutting-edge technology. But in a twist, it was not some paranoid crank who supplied the content of this theory, but the alleged conspirators themselves: The first people who claimed Cambridge Analytica helped Trump win were the company's own executives.

The implications of this episode transcend the question of whether political campaigns can gain electoral advantage through targeted Facebook posts. The bigger takeaway is that recent technological developments have made it hard to discern where the actual machinations of states and corporations trying to influence behavior end, and where conspiratorial claims with

similar content begin. Well before Cambridge Analytica appeared on the scene, fears once relegated to paranoia were coming true. Consider that believing that the ads on your TV or radio were directed specifically at you would have been an unequivocal symptom of a delusional state twenty years ago. Today, the same belief about the ads on your smartphone is a recognition of fact. Amidst the expansion of surveillance, advances in virtual reality and artificial intelligence, and the emergence of possibilities such as machine–brain interfaces, what might once have been hallucinatory fever dreams have become plausible funding pitches for startups. In such circumstances, how do we know when we're paranoid and when we're justifiably concerned?

The worries stirred up by the Cambridge Analytica story—whether they were an outburst of irrational panic or a recognition of new political realities—were just the latest in a long history of anxieties about technologically enabled mass deception and manipulation. The potential for such an enterprise entered the realm of the imagination well before anything like it was technically feasible. But the earliest people to imagine it were not technology critics or political reporters. They were paranoids in the original sense of the word: individuals regarded as insane.

Perhaps the first such case was James Tilly Matthews, a London tea

merchant locked up in Bedlam asylum in 1797 after shouting "Treason!" at the home secretary, Lord Liverpool, during a session of parliament. Matthews later explained to his physicians that a gang of Jacobins was in possession of a strange device, the "air loom," that used magnetic fluids and rays to directly control the thoughts of those under its influence. He blamed the political turmoil that was then consuming Europe on the machine's operations, and claimed that England's leaders were under its sway. Matthews languished in confinement for over a decade.

Only in the twentieth century did he gain recognition as an early case of what had come to be called paranoid schizophrenia, but also as an originator of the concept of technological mind control.

Those who attributed the political upsets of 2016 to secret algorithmic influence were unwittingly echoing Matthews's hi-tech conspiracy theory. Two hundred years ago, envisioning a scheme like this was such a drastic dissent from common sense that it landed you in the madhouse. Today, similar notions are among the default ways we think about technology.
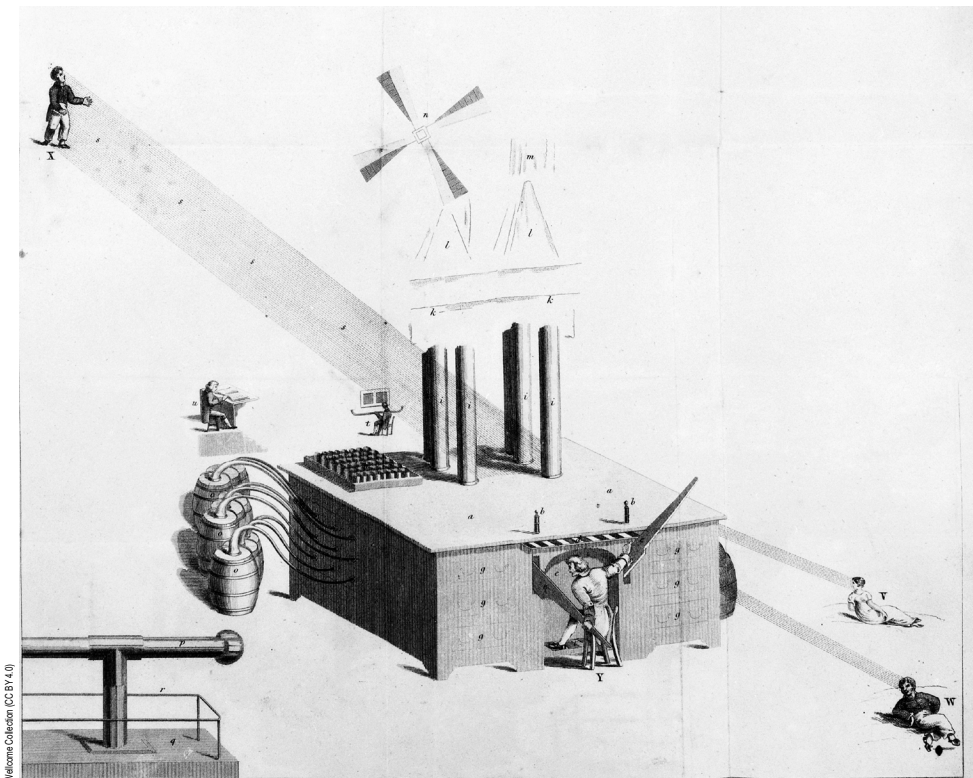
James Tilly Matthews's drawing of the "air loom," as printed in Illustrations of Madness *(1810) by John Haslam, an apothecary at Bedlam asylum*

The Technical Delusion, the new book by Jeffrey Sconce, an associate professor of screen cultures at Northwestern University, explores what it means that what were once regarded as bizarre delusions have become difficult to distinguish from mainstream assumptions. The book tracks the emergence and spread of what he refers to as the "technical delusion"—a term that may encompass any and all delusions about technology, but usually designates a belief in machines that can control, surveil, harass, and deceive humans.

The approximate historical scope of Sconce's project is the two centuries that separate us from James Tilly Matthews, but he does not proceed chronologically from Matthews's era to the present. Rather, each chapter uses a distinct conceptual lens to examine the "relationship of electronics, power, and insanity," and incorporates material from different times and places. For instance, the first chapter offers a detailed history of the controversial notion of "delusion," and reveals the ways that the concept is embedded in power relations and linked to the history of technology:

> Wires, microphones, radios, televisions, computers, cable lines, antennas, satellites, microwave towers, cell phones, brain chips, and raw electromagnetism have all been implicated as sources of physical torment and mental control, as have the various agencies believed to possess the means and motives to employ these devices.

Similarly, the fourth chapter explores varied ways that the sane and insane alike have imagined "the System": a designation that serves as a nexus between the real technological and political entities characteristic of modernity and delusional ideations about invasive machineries of power.

Sconce's discontinuous, kaleidoscopic approach reveals a wide array of points where the seemingly distinct historical vectors of technology, politics, and madness have converged. At times, this approach channels the delirious connectivity of paranoia by exposing unexpected linkages and through-lines. Yet Sconce seems to resist articulating an overarching theory. There is wisdom in such caution, but it leaves certain big questions unanswered. Perhaps the biggest question is: Under present conditions, is "paranoia"—a term Sconce deploys frequently but does not interrogate at length—still a recognizably distinct phenomenon? Or has it become mostly indistinguishable from the average person's worldview?

Sconce does not discuss Cambridge Analytica, but the story illustrates the most recent stage of the trajectory his book describes: a situation in which ideas that were "once insane" are now "generally endorsed by all." The scandal prompted the public at large to ask to what extent a sophisticated technology can dictate behavior. Or,

in Sconce's phrasing, *"What is power capable of executing through electronics?"*

Psychiatrists have had to answer this same question when their patients confront them with tales of machines broadcasting voices directly into their minds, spying on their innermost thoughts and feelings, inflicting mental and bodily tortures, and commanding them to act in certain ways. Two hundred years ago, the answer was straightforward, since neither the "air loom" nor anything like it existed. However, as electronic media became ubiquitous, two convergent trends made an answer more complicated. First, psychotic delusions began to refer to real electronics, in a manner that tracked technological developments. Schizophrenics in the early twentieth century often seized on radio, but by mid-century more on television. Second, popular ideas about electronic media began to resemble what had previously seemed to be delusional fixations. For instance, widely read works of media criticism like Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957) and Jerry Mander's *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (1977) echoed technological conspiracy theories, sometimes explicitly. Mander went so far as to state that "television does what the schizophrenic fantasy says it does." More recently, *On the Media* host Brooke Gladstone published an illustrated book, *The Influencing Machine*, on the history of the American media; the title phrase is drawn from Freud disciple Victor Tausk's landmark study of the fantastical devices imagined by schizophrenics. Sconce, a media scholar himself, shows that expert discourse on media frequently functions as a kind of sublimated technical delusion.

If the sane can resemble the delusional, equally can the delusional resemble the sane. The current edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, DSM-5, defines delusions as "fixed beliefs that are not amenable to change in light of conflicting evidence." But today, if I suspect that a machine is transmitting thoughts into my brain, I may encounter scant evidence to the contrary. The case I build up to support my belief may be largely factual and barely removed from consensus reality.

In one chapter, Sconce examines the predicament of the "chipnapped"—that is, those who believe a chip has been implanted in their brains to facilitate mind control. Matthews, again, was a pioneer. He claimed that a magnet had been implanted in his head to increase his susceptibility to the air loom's influence. Ever since then, implants have been a perennial element of technical delusions. But as Sconce notes, "at the dawn of the twenty-first century, brain chips are slowly dissolving the distinction between 'bizarre' and 'unbizarre' delusions. After all, brain chips do now actually exist." Today,

an individual who believes she is "chipnapped" might easily find support for her beliefs through a quick Google search. She might stumble upon suggestive articles about Elon Musk's brain implant startup, Neuralink. Or she might end up reading about DARPA's longstanding support of brain–computer interface research. Or she might encounter other people on Reddit who claim to be having similar experiences.

All these forms of confirmation of apparent delusions are evident in the testimonies of "targeted individuals," who are the main focus of Sconce's final chapter. The members of this diffuse online subculture find broad support for their incipient paranoia in the latest technology news; in popular culture; in the history of CIA, NSA, and FBI schemes of mass deception and manipulation, brainwashing, mind control, and targeted harassment; and on the message boards where they congregate. The targeted-individual phenomenon may be viewed as a peculiar variation on the Martha Mitchell effect, named for the wife of John Mitchell, Attorney General under Richard Nixon. Her descriptions of sordid goings-on in the White House led her physicians to believe she was laboring under a paranoid delusion. This diagnosis was only retracted after the Watergate revelations.

Similarly, targeted individuals may seem unhinged at first glance, but once one gets past their eccentric jar-gon, much of what they're describing, from the history of disturbing government-funded experiments to the reality of unaccountable corporate power, doesn't veer too far from what much of the public takes for granted. As Sconce remarks, many targeted individuals' "sentiments are not all that different from those expressed by supporters of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in the 2016 presidential election" who believed that elites were secretly manipulating political events behind the scenes. Suspicions regarding the hyper-concentration of wealth and power have attained broad bipartisan currency—in part because they are grounded in reality.

In a world in which, as Sconce explains, Silicon Valley futurists promise that "thought broadcasting and thought implantation, the signature curses of psychosis, will become deployable affordances," it's not surprising that individuals acutely attuned to the invasive potential of machines can sometimes appear reasonable and insightful, even if they also display symptoms of schizophrenia. James Tilly Matthews, on the other hand, seemed neither reasonable nor insightful to his contemporaries. The great mystery is how a technically delusional person two hundred years ago managed to describe something *not yet* real, rather than something straightforwardly unreal, as was assumed at the time.

So what provided Matthews a partial glimpse into an otherwise unimagined technological future? Sconce argues that the standard accounts of technical delusions leave us poorly equipped to answer this question. That is because such accounts rely on a model of "reflectionism," in which "delusions are said to 'reflect' the world around them." According to the reflectionist view that prevails in most psychiatric accounts of machine paranoia, the prominence of technological themes in delusional content simply mirrors the fact that we live in a world saturated with technology. But within this framework, it is difficult to explain how psychotic individuals managed to anticipate the future trajectory of technology.

In this occasional prescience, the technically delusional resemble science fiction writers. Appropriately, then, Sconce's critique of reflectionism relies on a comparison between delusions and works of literature and art. He argues that like the latter, delusions do not simply register reality, but entail a unique imaginative reworking of it:

> A novel, film, or painting does not simply appear out of nowhere to serve as a blank reflective surface that mechanically and thus passively records the surrounding world…; rather, such artifacts are the products of agents and forces actively producing, circulating, and consuming meaning.

The same applies to delusions. Sconce compares the work of the outsider artist Robert Gie, an institutionalized schizophrenic whose drawings of human bodies plugged into industrial machinery were prized by collectors of *art brut* in the 1920s, to the writings of early twentieth-century critics of industrial society such as Max Weber and Georg Simmel. Like them, Gie was engaging in a broader discussion of "the 'dehumanizing' toll of the new techno-economic order." However, like fiction writers and social critics, people with technical delusions do not merely mirror the reality of their time and place. Rather they creatively rework their reality into imaginative visions that in turn reshape popular perceptions of it, and help bring about its transformation.

Moving further into the twentieth century, it becomes easier to grasp one of the senses in which delusions help to shape rather than merely reflect the times in which they appear. By mid-century, schizophrenic visions began to leave the confines of the asylum and traveled from psychiatric case studies into popular books. Sconce discusses several memoirs of schizophrenia, such as Marguerite Sechehaye's *Autobiography of a Schizophrenic Girl* and Barbara O'Brien's *Operators and Things: The Inner Life of a Schizophrenic*, as well as the work of science-fiction writers like Philip K. Dick, who thought he might be

schizophrenic and who incorporated his experiences into some of his novels. "By the 1960s," Sconce notes, "science-fiction writers were hailing the schizophrenic as a potential ally in critiquing 'mechanized civilization.'" So were radical theorists like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, whose *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* made the figure of the "schizo" into a paradoxical icon of liberation.

By the end of the century, "influencing machine" narratives not too far removed from Matthews's air loom were standard fare in Hollywood blockbusters like *The Matrix*. Another classic of late-90s cinematic paranoia, Alex Proyas's *Dark City*, made the homage explicit by naming one of the characters after Daniel Paul Schreber, the schizophrenic memoirist of a hundred years earlier whose writings were parsed by Freud and Jung. It's no exaggeration to say that schizophrenia has made major contributions to how we collectively imagine technology.

If psychotic individuals from the past seem from the present-day vantage point to have anticipated aspects of our evolving technological reality, that's partly because the ordinary ways we represent that reality to ourselves owe something to once-outlandish visions like theirs. It is questionable that Cambridge Analytica's algorithms constituted a mind control device, but it was nat-

ural for us to think about it in those terms, because our cultural archive abounds in representations of this sort of technological affordance. So how did a full-blown techno-paranoia come into existence before it could draw upon this archive? Sconce sometimes hedges on this matter, as when he states that "the politics of the electronic coincide with…the politics of psychosis." The point here appears to be that technology happens to have become a matter of political concern in the same era that madness does. But if Sconce's position is that these two phenomena merely "coincide," he might seem to be edging close to the "reflectionism" he is supposedly trying to avoid. At other times, however, Sconce's argument seems to be that individuals diagnosed as psychotic were enmeshed in power relations in a way that gave them a unique perspective on the emergent political realities of technological modernity.

This is where Michel Foucault's famous account of madness as locus of the modern exercise of power enters the book's analysis. In Sconce's summary, for Foucault "the initial purpose of modern psychiatry was not to 'cure' the insane. It was instead to identify and segregate madness for the presumed protection of the larger social body." In the authority granted to psychiatrists to diagnose and thereby decide who may be excluded from social

and political life, scientific claims to objective truth coincide with the coercive force of the state. In this sense, the psychotic may experience more acutely than most the way that technoscientific knowledge has merged with the exercise of power.

Some recent cultural historians have argued that the ideas of the technically delusional can be interpreted as theories of modern politics as experienced by the primary targets of modern state power. Daniel Paul Schreber, perhaps the most lucid theoretician among modern schizophrenics, has been a frequent protagonist of such accounts. Schreber wrote of being subjected to "soul murder," a traumatic invasion and manipulation of his person. The supposed inflictor was his psychiatrist, Paul Flechsig (pronounced "*flex*-ick"), who in Schreber's memoirs appears as a key figure in a cosmic conspiracy against him.

Flechsig was a pioneer of an early form of neurological reductionism that saw the brain as a machine that needed to be returned to functioning order to restore sanity. According to the influential account of media theorist Friedrich Kittler, Flechsig's attempt to bypass consciousness and rationality and reduce the human mind to its material substrate was the ultimate basis of Schreber's notion of "soul murder." Soul murder, in turn, can serve as a paranoid allegory of "biopower," Foucault's term for biomedical authorities' direct exercise

of power on the body. So a psychiatrist's appearance to his patient as a tormentor of the soul, which at first seems a sign of insanity, can instead be seen as an allegorical stand-in for modernity's distinctive regimes for controlling life.

But the question remains what precisely the relationship is between abstract models of power and the typical content of technical delusions: sophisticated machines that invade the body and mind with invisible waves or rays. Why do psychotic individuals' immediate and understandable concerns about the dispensation that gives psychiatrists power over them translate into an interest in *technological* systems of coercion and manipulation? Sconce writes that technical delusions "frequently cast the electronic as a black box of power, a metonymy that reduces vast, abstract, and perhaps unknowable apparatuses of control into a single comprehensible device (even if this device is, to many, completely insane)." In the present-day world, in which electronics are embedded in personal, medical, and political life, it makes sense that "electronics have become the privileged site for conceptualizing the control, concentration, circulation, and inculcation of meaning, especially in capturing the dynamics of the individual's control by the larger social world." It now appears obvious that social control proceeds by way of technological information channels. A few decades

ago, this idea manifested itself in popular anxieties about being brainwashed by TV. Today, it feeds worries about mental reprogramming and radicalization online. The intuitiveness of this relationship in the media age explains why schizophrenic visions could become the stuff of popular entertainment around the middle of the twentieth century. It is more challenging to explain why regarding technical devices as stand-ins for vast systems of power became common in an earlier era, when complex machinery was rarely if ever encountered by most people.

Sconce's answer seems to revolve around the idea that for psychotics the boundary between a private inside and a public outside experience shifts chaotically. The outside world may seem saturated with the self, as in the case of "delusions of reference"—the belief that all variety of signs and portents in the world point back to oneself. At the same time, the interior self may appear strangely alien, as in the symptom of "thought insertion," which involves believing one's own thoughts to have been inserted in the mind from the outside.

From the earliest phases of research on electricity in the eighteenth century, it had powerful resonances with the blurring of inside and outside that psychotics can experience. To explore this convergence, Sconce examines galvanism, mesmerism, and other early attempts to apply the discovery of electrical currents directly to the control of human beings. Such practices tended to proceed from a model of the body as a machine to be manipulated by expert technicians. Given the explosive popularity of such techniques, it is not surprising that they became a common way for psychotic individuals to account for their perceptions of loss of control, manipulation from without, and bodily and mental torment.

The schizophrenic "influencing machine," on this account, proceeded directly out of a common Enlightenment view of the body as an electrical machine that could be plugged into other machines. Consider *baquets*, wooden tubs with protruding iron rods created by Franz Anton Mesmer, the charismatic medical impresario whose theories and therapeutic techniques took Europe by storm at the end of the eighteenth century. Patients grasped onto the rods or applied them to ailing parts of their bodies. This device, Mesmer claimed, could harmonize sick individuals' "animal magnetism" and thereby restore them to health. James Tilly Matthews incorporated Mesmer's theory of magnetism into his account of the workings of the air loom.

A more systematic psychotic application of Mesmer's therapeutic system can be found in the slightly later case of the German traveling salesman Friedrich Krauss, not discussed by Sconce but reconstructed by recent scholars on the basis of

Krauss's 1852 memoir, *Cry of Distress by a Victim of Magnetic Poisoning*. Krauss, convinced that a wealthy Flemish family was subjecting him to mental and physical torture from a distance, learned the principles of mesmerism from its most prestigious practitioners, and used these to make sense of his enemies' alleged use of animal magnetism to subjugate his will. Sconce discusses a number of nineteenth-century works of fiction that similarly explore the "inappropriate power relations of mesmerism." Such narratives, as he writes, "invariably center on the ego's colonization by the will of another." In this sense, mesmerism furnished the basic original language of technological paranoia.

The role of Mesmer's theories in the earliest formulations of the technical delusion implies that before anyone could imagine the body's subjugation *by* a machine, they first had to conceive of the body *as* a machine. This conclusion is echoed by Victor Tausk, the Freud disciple who theorized the influencing machine as "a projection of the patient's own body, a way to externalize onto an ego-alien machine the disturbing internal sensations of physical and mental alteration that typify a psychotic episode," as Sconce puts it. For Tausk, then, electronic technology is ultimately a means for the psychotic, and by extension, the rest of us, to think about the complex nexus between self and other. The limitation of Tausk's account is that it is, as Sconce argues, reflectionist: He seems to think twentieth-century psychotics dream of electric machines rather than demons and genies because that's what's close at hand. Sconce, on the other hand, claims that schizophrenia can offer deeper insights into the workings of power in technological modernity, and vice versa.

In the past century, the insights of the technically delusional have gained wider acknowledgment as technology has become central to most people's lives. This process has bequeathed us an enormous imaginative archive, as Sconce's book documents. However, he does not fully address the effects of this accumulation. Why, for example, is a targeted individual likely to be concerned about cell phone towers monitoring him from a distance—but not about digital surveillance of his online discussions of the same? Perhaps because the standard cultural images of surveillance direct our focus at centralized nodes of clandestine observation, but leave us imaginatively unprepared for the highly distributed monitoring typical of the era of big data.

This incongruity typifies a collective problem: Inherited ways of depicting technology are obstructing our view of the way that technological control really seems to work in the present. In the case of the Cambridge

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Analytica affair, for instance, it was far too easy for reporters and media consumers to turn the entire episode into a familiar tale of technological deception and manipulation, recapping the standard themes of science fiction and media criticism. Even the developers of the technology themselves seemed to think about their new tool in precisely these ways. As a result, we are not much wiser about the real implications of new techniques of algorithmic surveillance and behavioral influencing.

The Technical Delusion is the first comprehensive study of what psychotic visions have contributed to shared perceptions of technology. Sconce has assembled a remarkable array of evidence and stitched it together into a compelling narrative about the imaginary history of technology over the past two centuries. What's missing from this account is the shift in function and meaning of the technical delusion in an era in which it has become ubiquitous and often indistinguishable from common sense. At times, Sconce appears to see in machine paranoia the kernel of a rebellion against the accelerating technical control propelled by Silicon Valley and its state partners. He writes that "those who today see themselves in the Matrix…or involved in other delusions of influencing may signal a final stand" against new forms of technological power. Yet now that red and blue pills have become universally recognized metaphors for just

about anything, doesn't just about everyone see himself in the Matrix? How is this once-extreme perspective distinct from the hackneyed truisms of the present?

The paranoids of a century or two ago needed deep conviction to stick with a story that most of their contemporaries viewed as bizarre. Today, the bar for acquiring, elaborating, and maintaining a technical delusion is very low, since ready-made theories of this sort are all around for the taking. As *New York Times* writer Amanda Hess recently observed, today's prevailing form of online paranoia is an oddly "casual" approach that is "less about having convictions than it is about having fun," a mood infused with "irony and nonchalance." According to Hess, the Internet has not "stoked belief in conspiracy theory," as often claimed, but has "achieved something even more cynical. It has made belief irrelevant." The technical delusion, likewise, has been absorbed into the playful but complacent cynicism that defines much of online culture. Rather than a means of resisting the "cybernetic catatonia" that Sconce sees at the endpoint of our integration with network technologies, technological paranoia may simply be one more flavor of entertainment amidst the endless varieties on offer in the Matrix.

Geoff Shullenberger is a lecturer in the Expository Writing Program at New York University.

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