

## BOOK REVIEW

The DISCO Network (2025). *Technoskepticism: Between Possibility and Refusal*. Stanford University Press. ISBN: 9781503640634.



The various aspects of the technoscepticism can be traced back to the romantic and vitalist era in the European philosophy, during which numerous scholars engaged with emerging technological advancements, often imbued with an equivocal sentiment (Kircher, 2020; Rey, 1987). This intellectual exploration intensified during the early 20th century, when German and French philosophers initiated discourses on technics and technology, and the debates expanded to the Ottoman and Japan intellectual circles (Elinberger, 2018; Demirtaş, 2007; Lefracn, 1998; Guth, 2005). In the meantime, Émile Durkheim, Gabriel Tarde, Max Weber, and Georg Simmel integrated technoscepticism aspects into sociological analysis. This has since led to a perpetual discussion around technoscepticism, which has periodically evolved in its trends (Wagner, 1994). More recently, technoscepticism has resurfaced as an eminent concern, particularly with the advent of new digital technologies (Brand & Fischer, 2013).

The book of *The DISCO Network*, comprising both activists and academics in its author list, aligns, at least in theory, well with our contemporary *Zeitgeist*. The authors clearly articulate their viewpoint in introduction by stating “[t]echnoskepticism mediates between the two poles of optimism and refusal” (p. 8). From this point on, technoscepticism appears in various context as a chance for new possibilities, instead of mere critique. However, even from the outset, the book diverges significantly from what its title suggests; technoscepticism is not the central theme but more a framework that inspired the authors to explore diverse sociological and philosophical issues.

In their initial chapter titled “Desiring Diagnosis,” the authors engage with diagnosis from both philosophical and media standpoints, aiming to offer novel insights by centering on individuals with disabilities. This

methodology enriches our understanding by amplifying voices often overlooked, yet it also risks oversimplifying complex issues by focusing solely on a singular case. For instance, claims such as “[d]iagnosis implies a promise that is rarely, if ever, met” (p. 13), find resonance only within the specific context of the authors’ USA experience. In their second analytical segment of the chapter, which is rather a discourse analysis of various social media posts, the authors shed light on the correlation between neo-liberal policies and the utilization of artificial intelligence (AI) in health services within the USA context. Amidst the neo-liberal fervour for reducing healthcare costs for so-called “efficiency”, health institutions in the USA undergo significant shifts (Card & Hepburn, 2022). Hospitals and health insurance companies replace doctors and personal with ambiguous chat programs, leaving the pure existence of the people in the hand of the buggy algorithms (p.18-19). Furthermore, this inclination leads to data extraction companies intensifying their efforts to strip any privacy from digital realms by amassing every conceivable information for expansive chatbot databases (p. 35-36). Although the authors do not mention, this issue is also related to the particular context of the USA, as many federal states lack comprehensive digital privacy legislation, unlike numerous European states that strictly adhere to digital privacy laws (Bincoletto, 2020). Despite the tendency towards US centrism in analysis, highlighting the particular USA experience as a universal/global phenomenon, the chapter nonetheless provides significant insights into the transformation occurring within health services in the USA.

The chapter II, “Searching for Digital Wellness”, pivot from a structural perspective to an individual one, effectively linking back to the preceding discussions. At this point, the authors assert: “[w]ellness sector, self-improvement and life-coaching apps share same neoliberal logic. Outsourcing medical infrastructure on the individuality.” (p. 40) While health services in the USA have been significantly impacted by deliberate neo-liberal policies, emerging start-ups exacerbate this issue. For instance, the proliferation of numerous apps by start-ups have collectively placed health squarely in the sphere of individual lifestyle. This narrative positions individuals as solely responsible for enhancing their wellness, insidiously overcast the economic and social conditions of those people (Kasperbauer & Wright, 2020). In this context, this narratives claim that it is the fault of individuals being regularly sick, since they do not invest on their wellness enough using all these apps, as if a billionaire and an unemployed user of these apps acts in the same context (p. 50-70).

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Considerably different from the first two chapters, the subsequent chapters delve into the digital experiences of black individuals. In Chapter III, “Nostalgia Gone to Bits”, the authors draw parallels between social phenomenon of nostalgia and nostalgia for some online platforms. They note that just as there are varied collective memories, different social and identity groups exhibit distinct nostalgic sentiments towards the same online platforms (p. 89-90). The Chapter IV, “The Longing for Home: Nostalgia for Digital Platforms”, applies the theoretical insights from the previous chapter to concrete cases. Drawing heavily on discourse analysis of social media content from the USA, the authors assert that while white individuals express clear positive nostalgia for 1960s, 1970s, or 1980s, this sentiment is markedly negative for black Americans, who associate these decades with violent police actions and deep racial discrimination (p. 102). Furthermore, the authors highlight a significant transformation in digital platforms across the USA. They contrast early internet blogs, which offered substantial freedom to design and target audiences personally, against today’s social media accounts that enforce a uniform structure and design for every user. This shift is attributed to alterations in the foundational business strategies of startups in the USA. The authors argue that during the early phase of internet usage in the USA, there was a greater focus by companies on delivering services rather than data control or monetization through interaction. This led to personal blogs creating distinct community dynamics compared to the structured nature of today’s social media platforms, where users have less control over who they engage with. Conversely, contemporary US American social media sites are designed to promote toxic behaviours in order to foster numerous interactions and generate advertising revenue (p. 109).

The last two chapters of the book concentrate on the topic of artificial intelligence (AI) and its connections with blackness. The authors address key concerns about bias in Large Language Model (LLM) chatbots, which predominantly draw from a database that is seen as white male-centric. The authors illustrate how such LLMs often yield peculiar results when questions about black individuals are asked or tasks related to blackness are requested. For example, these models frequently depict an overly sexualized image of a black woman (p. 144-145). The authors conclude with a compelling argument: these LLMs merely reproduce extant power dynamics that are both racial and discriminatory (p. 160). The book then explores the concept of alternative relationships between LLMs and blackness, advocating for a kind of black AI. For the author, simply exposing some filters to LLMs to

reduce their racial bias is not enough, “[b]lackness [must be]... the default setting for AI rather than as an add-on...” (p. 131). For instance, a LLM that communicates in black vernacular style, distinct from the highly formal language favoured by elite white speakers (p. 160-170). Nevertheless, the core issue persists: many people continue to utilize existing toxic LLMs, readily available and accessible globally. This ease and freedom also pose a significant risk: they contribute to an unchecked proliferation of harmful content across all digital platforms (p. 131).

In these two chapters, terms like Afro-optimism appear without context, being used by authors as mere synonyms for black optimism (p. 125). Yet, this proposed equivalence between Black Studies and African Studies does not align with current research discourse. In fact, these disciplines, fundamentally distinct from one another, continue to be debated among scholars and activists about whether a connection can be forged between them (Akomolafe 2022; Carr, 2011). Consequently, discussions on Afro-optimist or Afro-pessimist AI within the chapter do not accurately depict reality in Africa; they mainly reflect upon the blackness in the USA. For instance, different from the USA, there have been Small Language Models (SLMs) across Africa focused on local languages (Olarinde *et al.*, 2013). These developments contrast with the hypothetical query about the existence of black or African AI in the chapter—there are indeed African AIs already operational in numerous countries (Gwagwa *et al.*, 2020).

The concluding chapter of the book aims to cohesively connect all preceding chapters through the lens of technoscepticism, which appears quite consistent. However, the promise of title of the book remains largely untouched, considering most elaborations are grounded in discourse analysis of various US American social media contents. This leaves an impression that the core idea of the book was never a comprehensive analysis of the technoscepticism. It is entirely legitimate to write a book centred on personal observations and analyses of selected US American social media contents, inspired by certain concepts. It would have only been much better if the title of the book was chosen as “Discursive Analyses of Selected US American Social Media Contents on the Issue of Technoscepticism: A Contribution to the Media Studies”. With this title, the book would align more closely with the authors’ intended contributions.

Overall, the book offers a significant contribution to a narrow field and context. Regrettably, the authors seem unaware of this specificity, embedding themselves in numerous general remarks throughout the chapters as if their empirical data were not solely derived from US

American contexts. For readers specializing in Media Studies within the USA, this may not pose an issue, as they are indeed the intended audience for the book. Conversely, the broader social science community might perceive it as merely a collection of tweets and blog posts, potentially interesting without expecting academic depth. In addition to that, the striking questions of technoscepticism, such as the role of the technical and legal regulation for new digital technologies as well as global power relations behind the recent developments, remains unexamined.

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