

The Rational Optimist Podcast

Stephen McBride // The Rational Optimist Society

Louis Anslow // The Pessimists Archive

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Stephen McBride: Today I'm joined by Louis Anslow. He's the founder and editor of The Pessimist Archive, a truly brilliant project that jogs a collective memory about the moral panics and technophobic freakouts that so often greet new ideas. It's maybe the best historical anecdote, pessimism that I know of, and a reminder that most of the things that we once feared are now things that we love, rely on, and use in our everyday lives.

So Lewis, you've obviously studied so many panics, from novels to chess, to Walkmans, to all these things. What are the most common reoccurring arguments and tactics that you see deployed time and time again?

Louis Anslow: Yeah, so these repeating panics are rooted in human psychology. That's what I realized. You know, like history doesn't repeat, but it rhymes and it rhymes because human psychology doesn't change, right?

So you've got a bunch - I actually have a kind of a framework I've come up with recently. The three P's of pessimism, which is protectionists, parents and patriarchs.

So, you know, the parents freak out about their kids that are growing up in a world they don't recognize anymore, different from the one they grew up in. That's where the moral panics around kids come from.

Then you have the protectionists who are incumbent industries and workers who are scared of being threatened by new technology or automation.

And the patriarchs - it's a reoccurring thing going back, which is like women are being corrupted. This is like a very common occurring theme where men worry about women being corrupted by technology. So you saw this with the bicycle and novel reading and, you know, like music and dancing and jazz and like, you know, all of these different things and cultural changes. It's almost like, you know, the next generation of women are being corrupted and you kind of see that, you know, with TikTok dancing or whatever.

So I'd say there's probably a fourth P - I'm still developing this framework, but I'd say the, you know, protectionists, patriarchs, parents, and precaution or the precautionary principle or something, which is like a very high tolerance to risk and just really like overvaluing the predictability of status and undervaluing the risk of stagnation, which I've written about before. I call it the Frankenstein fallacy.

And so you see that with like nuclear power or genetic engineering or on a smaller scale with sort of e-cigarettes. Like, we know regular cigarettes are bad. We know the harm they do is completely unarguable, yet 3 billion people in the world can't buy e-cigarettes over the counter, but they can buy tobacco. So it's like a weird, irrational thing, which I think has sort of become a kind of norm around governments around the world since the kind of seventies, which is a real problem.

So there's four - the four P's are the kind of repeating patterns that you see, and it is a good way of predicting panics. And also like, obviously technologies do create risks and we need to accurately predict those risks, but it's really hard and if you are not willing to admit that we get it wrong most of the time and we are wired to fear change, you are probably not going to make accurate predictions about tech risk and you're probably not going to make the right prescriptions to mitigate them, right?

So it's really important and I think people sort of the more hysterical sort of fear mongers around new tech, you know, they generally are offended by the project and they get really triggered. And they say, well, this has no predictive value whatsoever. Just 'cause that bad thing didn't happen doesn't mean this bad thing won't happen.

And, you know, I think Scott Alexander did a piece about the sort of resistance to coffee and sort of panic about coffee and prohibition against coffee in the past, and how he said it's such a stupid analogy to fears about AI. And he wrote this whole post which basically said he cannot understand what on earth people are citing us for. Like what predictive value does this have? What predictive value does any like tech panics in the past have in regards to AI risk?

So yeah, it was, it felt like the whole thing felt like a very big sort of attack on the very thesis of the whole project. And the truth is, and I think irony is when I sat down and thought about it is, coffee is an amazing analogy for fears about AI because it's a stimulant that augments human intelligence. You know, there's this thesis that like the rise of coffee and coffee houses helped spark the enlightenment and if you look, there's a good argument to suggest that that stimulant really helped people think bigger, connect dots and the establishment, then the ruling elite then found that very, very threatening.

Stephen McBride: And in Scott Alexander's piece, he said the coffee - people who were against coffee were bright, like there was a revolution, the elites were taken down and it's like, well, yeah, I mean it was an existential risk to them, but like new technologies always are an existential risk to the ruling elite, right? In many areas. So, yeah. The ruling elite. Well, and I guess you could say that, you could always say that, right? Oh, the ruling elite are right. It is a risk, but it's like, yeah, to them. But like, we got the enlightenment, so...

Louis Anslow: I couldn't get my head around why he thought it wasn't a good analogy. I guess perhaps his version of AI panic is very sort of rooted in existential killing everyone risk. But most of the AI panic we see, you know, there's a tiny fringe that think it's going to kill every human, or could kill every human, and they need to avoid that. But most of the resistance we're seeing now is from societal elites, cultural media, you know, creative, wherever it is.

It's like actually in this moment, elites in every area of society from law to movies to music, like, there's so many areas where the internet and AI is like threatening elites that I think we're due for a very big - like we haven't seen before, because usually it's one industry at a time, one set of elites at a time. Not like every area of the economy and society and culture all at the same time.

Stephen McBride: When you analyze technology and the world today through the four P framework, where is kind of ripe for that big pessimistic backlash, obviously we have against AI. Do you see it anywhere else? Maybe robo taxis, you know, genomics, things like that?

Louis Anslow: Oh yeah, you've got the robotaxis stuff heating up now. The protection protectionism, protectionists are going to come in. Obviously you have the parents panicking. In the UK we just have this new law where you have to prove your age and a bunch of different websites and maybe Wikipedia and maybe like an ex at some point. Like it's crazy and scary actually, I think.

'Cause usually moral panics, parental moral panic would result in stupid laws, right? Historically. And you, you know, the UK bands tried to ban like EHS horror movies or something, but often those stupid laws kind of affect one area of life, right? But like the internet is such a big part of everyone's lives and it touches so many areas of our lives that this is such a dangerous moment because these reactionary laws are going to affect everyone's life, every adult's life, every day.

And it's huge risks to freedom, anonymity, privacy. It's wild. So I think, yeah, it is probably, that's a big deal. So the parents and the protectionists right now are that they're driving the conversation and they're researching society.

Stephen McBride: You mentioned the kind of seventies and the rise of precaution in the seventies. I'm wondering, as you look out over history, is it always the case that new technologies and new inventions have been met with this pessimism? Or do you think there's like, are we in a golden age of pessimism or is that just wrong?

Louis Anslow: Yeah, that's a funny one. I flip flop 'cause I'm like, am I just giving into the same nostalgic narratives that I fight against? Right? It's like a weird, it's like, oh, that, you know, there's this idea of the great stagnation, which is real in many ways. But I think that I just did a piece on the moon landing and, you know, most of America didn't want to go to the moon, and there's this recounting that, oh, everyone was so optimistic about technology and the future until like the 1970s, and then it dropped off after the moon landing and half of America didn't want to go to the moon. So I think that I think it's a generational thing and I think that like as people get older, they get more conservative and they don't really like change and I think when you look back, it's kind of always there.

I do wonder whether it does feel to me that modern politics has managed to politicize this sentiment more, and it's become more of a political tool than it has in the past. And I guess you could argue as technology accelerates, the stuff picks up. So the quicker things are accelerating, the more backlash there's going to be.

So I'm still getting my head around whether like how much of this has just always been a thing going back to like thousands of years and how much of it is, has become a modern dysfunction in the way that our media works and our government works? Yeah, I think doing like, I like the idea of using some AI tools to like look at massive trades of these three archives and sort of map out sentiment and kind of get an idea of how this stuff has changed over time.

Stephen McBride: How do you think, because I mean, up until a decade or so ago, the only way to measure this was with the excellent newspaper clippings and archives that you collect, and now you have social media. How does that change the pessimism dynamic? It seems like all the stuff, all the stuff on social media is pessimistic, but in some ways, you have access to information that you never would've had.

Louis Anslow: Yeah, it's, well it's funny 'cause the newspapers aren't a very good, you know, the newspapers are the elites, right? This is the thing I realize, like it's the elites of society have the power to publish historically. So that's, you know, I think sometimes you can get the wrong impression that like everyone's against technology all the time in history. It's like, no, it's the cultural elites that are against technology mainly.

And I realize that like regular people kind of find it quite exciting, but it's also important to remember when I say regular people, I'm talking about people who aren't in really strong positions of power in society, right? Like kids, right? Like look at kids. Kids always love new tech. They're never against it. And it's partly because they don't have a conception of the good old days, but it's also because they don't have much power. They're just kids. They don't have anything to protect, they have nothing to lose.

And, you know, that's where the, yeah, the three P's or the four P's or whatever each of those groups are like have some kind of power authority in society. So, you know, the parents have heard over the kids, you know, most of the sort of most of the leaders or CEOs or whatever in society are men. And the, obviously the protectionists have the economic power or monopoly on a certain industry they've had for a certain amount of time.

And often the precaution, the P that stands for cautionary, that's often used by all these groups to assert their power. So they say, oh, we need a law to stop this because of the risk of, but actually when you, when you scratch the surface, it's one of the other, no, it's the parents. It's the protectionists using precaution to protect their power. Lots of peace going on.

And, and so yeah, that really is what it comes down to. And, you know, some technologies don't actually, some technologies don't offend any of these people sometimes and you realize, you know, they get a lot less heat. But all of them generally create change. There's always some pushback. But the bigger, you know, the more changes that's going to happen, the faster things start accelerating, the crazier people get.

So I think with the AI stuff, I think, you know, one of the real risks I see, one of the only risks I take seriously from AI is just how anti AI people are going to react to all this change. Like that feels like the biggest threat. And you're seeing it with the internet now. You know, the privacy stuff, the free speech tax on free speech, like these are all risks born of fearing the new thing.

Stephen McBride: I'm curious, of all the panics that you've documented, do you have a personal favorite?

Louis Anslow: Man, there's so many. The Walkman's a fun one. It wasn't that long ago, relatively. It's something that is universally loved now as an, as a nostalgic icon of the eighties. But it was controversial. You know, people were, you know, augmenting an entire sensory input. They were wearing a thing on their head outside. You know, it was quite controversial. And, you know, there was a lot of talk about this being an age of isolation and a sign of increased individualism. And, you know, it was a really big deal and there was a lot of legal stuff.

So some one town in New Jersey tried to make it illegal to cross the road while wearing headphones. There were a bunch of other, there was a big regulatory debate and, you know, about people covering their ears while they're driving. And some states don't allow that. And some states allow warning phone in some states don't have any laws at all.

And then sort of it, it was sort of, there was also this debate about car radios. It was like, should you be allowed to play music in your car? Should cars even be allowed to have radios in them? And so, you know, there is a possible, there was a possible future where it was illegal to listen to music or podcasts while you drove, right? Which just sucks. Like commutes are boring and especially in certain places they take a long time. There's a lot of traffic. And the idea that you're not allowed to listen, I mean, what greater American joy is there than driving down the highway, playing some music. Sublime.

And there's a, there's a time when that would've been illegal and, and in some places it is illegal to wear headphones and listen to music while you drive. And, you know, you can debate whether that's a good thing, but everywhere allows you to have the radio cranked right up. So the idea that that's any different from having headphones is a debatable thing. And it is just one of, and the thing about the whole walking thing is like, we've forgotten that it's just gone. It's completely memory old.

Stephen McBride: A friend of mine recently visited America and he, he was, he's a South African living in London, and he commented on how optimistic people were and the, you know, the kind of cultural attitudes toward risk taking, innovation. How do you think about pessimism as a, as it shapes across cultures? Is this pessimistic thing, a western phenomenon? Is it even worse in other places? Have any insights into that?

Louis Anslow: That's a good point. Well, I certainly think that it's funny, I was looking at, there's some interesting study about AI coverage, sentiment on AI coverage between West and East and like in China versus the US and China's much more optimistic about it. And obviously I think that the Chinese Communist Party obviously want the population to be optimistic about the future, right? Obviously they want them to think they're doing everything right and the future's right.

But obviously the trade off there is you're living under communism or a communist dictatorship without a free press. So, you don't want that. And so I think, you know, the free press, having a free press has a bunch of trade offs and you know, one of them is you are going to have a bunch

of, you know, the power of the press is going to condense into a few hands. It's coming an inevitable thing in a free press.

And I think the other inevitable thing in a free press is that like, that also means that the cultural and economic elites are going to control the press. This is what happens. And if the cultural and economic elites control the press, then they're going to get weird about new things 'cause they're going to feel threatened and that's going to shape the coverage.

So, so I think that unfortunately, freedom the free world to have a free, open democracy and press, you're going to end up having this dynamic. And I think it's important for the regular people who aren't elites to kind of make sure they can organize to push back on this stuff, which you do see happening in certain ways, like in the UK this age verification stuff is seeing a lot of ground grassroots groundswell against it.

When they tried to ban Uber in a bunch of states, regular people sort of push back and I think this will happen with chat GPT a lot of regular people using chat GPT and like if there are, you know, if it gets overly regulated in certain areas and places, then there's going to be pushback there. And I think thankfully the internet has allowed non elites to kind of have some kind of sway.

So there's a question. I think it's, it does feel like this pessimism is often more pronounced in the Anglosphere right, than it is in other. But that's probably because the anglosphere is like the dominant elites of the world, right? Like America's the most powerful nation on earth, and there's NATO and this and the other thing. So, so it would make sense that the, you know, the elites of the Anglosphere are more pessimistic because they have the most to lose because they're the most powerful elites in the world.