

# The Rational Optimist Podcast

**Stephen McBride** // The Rational Optimist Society  
**Louis Anslow** // Founder, Pessimists Archive

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**Stephen McBride:** Today I have the pleasure of being joined by my friend Louis Anslow who is the founder of [Pessimists Archive](#). It's a brilliant project that jogs our memories about moral panics and freakouts that so often greet new ideas.

It's my favorite historical anecdote to pessimism and a wonderful reminder that most of the things that we once feared are now things that we love, rely on and even laugh about.

So Louis, we've been going back and forth for a while and planning this podcast for a while. And you've identified seven groups in society that reliably resist technological progress. And I think it's a brilliant breakdown. So why don't you share it with us?

**Louis Anslow:** Yeah, so a little context for listeners. Started Pessimists Archive 10 years ago. Had the 10th anniversary in late 2025. And it was a lot of looking into this stuff over the years. And I was hoping to come up with some kind of framework. What does it all mean?

Some people think the project is not great, doesn't have much predictive value, things are different this time, you're cherry picking. Other people see it as a really amazing reflection of human psychology and repeating history, and there's lots of lessons to learn. And I really wanted to boil it all down and come out, synthesize something new to mark the 10th anniversary that will help people think about this stuff. And I think I did it.

And I'm calling it The Seven Deadly Cynics. All the seven Ps of pessimism.

And these are... When you look through the Pessimists Archive's work, you realize that all of the people that resist new technologies almost always are groups in society who feel threatened. And their power specifically is threatened by new technology.

And new technologies generally change power dynamics in various ways. And they change who has power in society. So the seven deadly cynics are these subgroups in society that resist new technology reliably. And I'm going to list them.

It's **protectionists**. You know, they're incumbents in a market. They want to protect their market share or their job.

There is the **politicians**, who generally, you know, they get funding from incumbents and the establishment. They need donations. They write the laws. So protectionists generally look to politicians to protect them.

Politicians generally want to do that for various reasons, including a big donor might be asking them, or a union with lots of voters might be asking them. So generally, you find politicians are quite warm to this idea of slowing down or suppressing new technologies at the behest of protectionists. And there's also, so that's two, protectionists and politicians.

And then you have **patrons**, and generally patrons of the sort of old money, wealthy elites who in many, a lot of the times they are protectionists of the old order. And they fund politicians, and they own companies, blah, blah, blah, crony capitalism, 101.

So these politicians try and appeal to other groups, like **parents**. So parents is another group, the seven deadly cynics. And parents worry, they worry about their kids, they worry about the new generation, they miss the good old days, they've got this nostalgia develops as you get older and you miss your youth and you get worried about your kids.

There's this sort pyramid of pessimism, I call it, where you have these sort of protectionists saying to politicians, "hey, like, can you protect our power?" And then the politicians need votes as well as donations.

So they say, "OK, let's scare parents. And let's write a law that appeals to parents. We're going to protect the kids, but also we're going to protect the protectionists. We're going to protect the older-order incumbents."

And something that plays into that dynamic is **preachers**. That's another P, the seven Ps of pessimism. Preachers are groups that like to assert moral authority. They can be secular or religious, and they generally say, "this thing is corrupting us, or this thing is corrupting this group or that group."

They're very persuasive. They're very good at telling stories and scaring people. And they're very, very useful for politicians and protectionists.

These people, you know, there's a few high-profile ones at the moment around smartphones and screen time. You've got Tristan Harris, you've got Jonathan Haidt, you have a handful of others. And they generally sell a lot of books. They get a lot of, you know, paid speaking gigs. They get a lot of attention.

I think someone's, I think there was a book about this, they sort of, especially the secular ones are sort of moral entrepreneurs. And that's where the preachers come in.

And **publishers**, another P.

The publishers, this is the gatekeepers of, you know, the media gatekeepers, gatekeepers of information, the publishers, the newspapers. Generally, historically,

they've been enmeshed with the old-order establishment because it cost a lot of money and blah, blah.

So you find newspapers generally amplify this stuff. They generally sway negative. They generally amplify the narratives of the preachers that are pushed by the politicians in service of the protectionists to scare the parents to get votes.

The other P is **professors**. So what you find is when there's a panic about a new thing, there's this fight to prove it. You want evidence.

So there's lots of studies that are funded. We always hear about studies being funded by industry to say something's safe. We know that this happens, and we know that that kind of research, you have to take it with a grain of salt.

Don't dismiss well-designed studies, but take it with a grain of salt. There's obviously some bias there.

But we generally don't talk about the stuff that goes the other way, which is when there's a panic about a new thing, and there's a lot of protectionists looking to protect themselves. There's also a lot of funding going into research that's looking for a problem.

So there's this massive incentive for academics to do research and studies that kind of set out to prove this scary thing is a problem. And there's very little downside, you know, you don't get accused of being a shill or a sellout.

You know if it turns out that you these papers were wrong. Yeah, there's very little consequences, you know if you do a study that says "don't worry about this thing and then it turns out it's bad, you're basically done."

There's a pessimism privilege, actually in general, where there's very little downside to being pessimistic about something. And even when the consequences are dire, like nuclear power development being slowed down or golden rice causing millions of deaths in the developing world or the overpopulation panic, nothing really happens.

A lot of these people are still tenured professors. There's actually pretty solid examples of millions of deaths and mass campaigns of sterilization. And it's weirdly just like, huh, well, you know.

So yeah, that's the Seven Deadly Cynics: protectionists, professors, politicians, publishers, preachers, parents, and patrons, which are generally sort of the people that fund a lot of this stuff going down.

And when you look at all the work of Pessimists Archive over the years, you realize, wow, they can almost always be grouped by one of these sets of people.

These people are generally, again, they're the elites of society. They're the ones with control, they're the ones with power, and the reactionary hysterical responses to new

things are because they're protecting their power. And this runs through history as a trend.

**Stephen McBride:** You could have called this Louis's hierarchy of pessimism.

**Louis Anslow:** I love it.

**Stephen McBride:** And why I frame it like that, why I frame it like that is when you either today or throughout history, or has it changed over time? Is there someone, is there one of these groups that's at the bottom as the instigator of the pessimism, or is it this kind of weird like they're all in sync thing? And again, has that changed over time?

**Louis Anslow:** Yeah, it's always one or a few. Sometimes it's all of them. I think right now with AI stuff, it feels like all of them at once, right? Because it depends on what area it's touching in.

But it's always a few sort of together. And again, it depends how fast is this technology accelerating, and how much disruption and how much power redistribution is happening because of the technology. And it always depends on that.

But what's funny is there's an eighth P, which isn't part of the Seven Deadly Cynics, and I say it's the **proletariat**. It's the regular Joes that don't have much power, don't have much control. And obviously when it comes to automation, they can get, certain groups of the working class can get angry.

But generally, they embrace this stuff because it empowers them because they don't have that much to lose. It can only benefit them. It can only, you know, the ability to broadcast or publish things on social media again.

That's a net positive for an individual without any, you know, they don't have contacts to do an opinion piece, they don't own a newspaper, that, you know, their voices would never really be heard.

So, another fascinating thing I find is children are always so optimistic about technology, they embrace new things with very little hesitation to the...

Adults hate this, and they feel very uncomfortable with it. But again, kids don't really have much power. They don't have much autonomy, they don't have any money, they can't drive, they can't, you know, they don't have much control over their lives, and they don't have much power.

The parents do. They have a lot of control over children, their children and other people's children in schools. And so that's part of why there's always this big sort of generational clash around the new technology and the adults, right?

The pagers were banned across America, blaming apparently drug dealers were using them to sell drugs in schools, and they were made illegal in a bunch of states, and age limits were brought in.

The Walkman around a similar time frame, know, and it's parents... The adults just, didn't like that, you know, the kids were listening to music they didn't approve of in private with headphones on, or they were paging each other and communicating without, you know, adult supervision.

And smart things are very similar, you know, it's sort of bringing all this together into one device where there's this whole world that adults don't have access to. It's intimidating, and it's scary, and it's a loss of control and power.

And obviously parents have to exert some authority and control over kids. So it's part of bringing kids up, but you see it spill out into really hysterical stuff, which ends up being pretty unproductive generally.

But the sort of lesson over the 10 years of Pessimists Archive was like, oh, everyone hates technology. It's like, no, the newspapers stuff we work with... I realized this is just the elites because it's newspapers. They own the printing presses, know, the newspapers.

So the mainstream media are the elites. And the reason the mainstream media is so cynical about new things is because it threatens their power. And you saw this...

There's a fun post we did about War of the Worlds and how there was this famous story of it. People were hearing this dramatized radio address about aliens landing, and there was hysteria in the streets, and someone had a heart attack. There was uprisings and riots.

It turns out that that basically was almost completely fabricated by the newspapers who felt threatened by the radio, who saw it as an unreliable source of news and information, and it was eating into their ad revenue. Now, that sounds familiar, right?

So yeah, that's the big lesson. And actually, it's quite an elitist, classist thing to be anti-tech. There's a certain set on the left to see this as class solidarity, anti-tech stuff. And they sort of idolize the Luddites and things. But if you actually look back at the Luddites, the Luddites weren't working-class peasants.

The Luddites were actually an elite creative class who didn't like the idea that suddenly lower classes would be able to, without a seven-year apprenticeship, which is what a lot of them were demanding, could just work in a factory because it downscaled the ability to make clothes.

Obviously, there's a lot more depth to that stuff. The factory owners weren't treating people fairly. They were hiring children. There were lots of legitimate things to critique there. But the Luddites were not a bedraggled working-class set. They were...

That reactionary hysterical response was rooted in a loss of power, which again is the running theme here. Because at the end of the day, actually we all embrace technology. Clothes, shoes, glasses, house. I mean, no one's actually scared of technology. They're scared of a loss of control and power, essentially.

**Stephen McBride:** The seven deadly cynics, they work together. It seems like an incredibly powerful, incredibly powerful group when they get going. You've studied, I think, more history of technology more than anyone I know. What ends up defeating this group? What's their kryptonite?

**Louis Anslow:** Yeah, so well, so what you find is in a free and open democracy, there's something there.

In a free open democracy and a free market or a free-ish market, this stuff can proliferate. If it proliferates fast enough, then it becomes a liability in an election. So Uber did this. They were like, people love using...

There's a tipping point where something spreads so fast and is so useful, and the regular people are using it so much that the politicians are like, "okay, well, we could do the union thing and we'll get all the union votes and the donations from unions, but there's a lot of regular people that want cheaper taxi rides."

You need a free market or free-ish market, and you need technology to spread at a certain rate where it becomes untenable. And what you find in undemocratic countries, or not—in many undemocratic countries, you find protectionism prevails unusually because the P, the powerful group that is worried about losing power, is the government. Because they're the main power and society.

And you look at Iran right now with the internet shut down. It's a great example. They were very wary of having the internet. And obviously they built the infrastructure to shut it down, to preserve power.

But the interesting thing about the internet was that it wasn't really tenable for a country to not be connected to the internet, unless you were North Korea, right? There's no way you could interface with the West without having a semi-free and open internet, which is kind of interesting.

We're seeing... Iran's a great example, there's all these Starlinks that have been smuggled in that are empowering the people, and the politicians are scared of losing that power.

So I think what defeats it: freedom, democracy, free markets.

**Stephen McBride:** The example of Uber is very good, and guess Airbnb is kind of fighting that battle right now. How do you think about the ones that have lost, at least over the past 50 years, nuclear kind of lost, supersonic, drones was losing for a decade.

Is that because that stuff is a little bit more in the background, it's not as in your face, or how do you think about that?

**Louis Anslow:** Well, nuclear was... The thing about nuclear is, as a technology, you can make a convincing case for it being an existential risk or a catastrophic risk with the weapons side of it.

And then obviously the civil civilian use, again, there was this scary idea of meltdown—certainly a risk, certainly an overstated risk. And it was very easy to do a horror story around that. And I think you had lots of things at play.

You had, obviously, the Soviet Union wanting to suppress that stuff in the West. There was probably propaganda going on around with that. You also... There was also the West being weird about countries that weren't like part of the kind of alliance having, like Iran...

You're worried they're enriching uranium, so there was certainly, the east was trying to stop the west doing it, the West was trying to stop the East doing it.

And then obviously you have the useful idiots, environmentalists, that were very, I'm sure there was some of that was probably funded or helped in some way by the Soviet Union.

And then obviously there were Western politicians that were leaning into that. So the nuclear stuff is, you know, it feels like a modern-day sort of Prometheus myth come to life and this sort of amazing lesson in risk and reward and fear, and we're now seeing the consequences of that.

So, but there's a shift in our thinking around it, I think, which is good, especially with Ukraine and Russia and Germany stuff happening.

GMOs, so I would say that the pessimists have won on some of the key critical technologies for, like, the future of civilization.

So nuclear energy is one, genetic engineering is another. It's still extremely hard to develop genetically engineered crops.

Europe's still very hostile to them. The Philippines and some other countries keep, the Philippines specifically, still preventing golden rice, vitamin-A-enriched rice being grown by farmers, which would save millions of kids' lives and stop many more going, hundreds of thousands going blind. Still happening. So that's a big deal.

These fundamentally... Nuclear, genetic engineering, where we're kind of starting to make technologies that reprogram physics and biology. And I think to me artificial intelligence feels like the sort of third pillar there.

And it scares me that the narrative around them is so similar to the nuclear stuff and the GMO stuff, the reactionary speculative risk stuff, the horror stories, the ignoring the upsides.

And ironically, part of the AI fear mongering is around someone could build a nuclear weapon, someone could genetically engineer this. So they're sort of pulling all that stuff in. Meanwhile, it's like, wow, global warming is much worse than it needed to be. Russia's had much more leverage than it needed to have relative to having nuclear power developed.

And so yeah i would say in some ways, technologies are inevitable, and then in others, it's like, no, we really can't stop them, especially when they're sort of zero to one crazy reprogramming atoms stuff. That feels like there's a big risk there.

So the smaller stuff, you know, the Walkman or a Game Boy or smartphones, will cause some backlash, but it's the really key technologies, which I think are at bigger risk of this stuff. And I would say, again, the internet and the decentralization of broadcast and information is another key technology that's emerged in the last 50 years.

It's currently under massive attack. Anonymity is under attack, age-gating the internet, encryption is being attacked, VPNs in the UK are maybe going to be banned.

There is this full-frontal attack on the free and open internet, which has consequences around free speech and privacy. So in some ways, technology is accelerating and proliferating, and it feels unstoppable.

And then in other ways, you've got these key technologies, like totally new things that are just being massively suppressed and in the name of creating a safer tomorrow, in the name of avoiding technodystopia, and I wrote last April, I wrote in The Guardian about how *Black Mirror* conditioned us to feel like we should fear the future and we need to get back and that actually, historically is a mistake.

Historically, you jump back a hundred years, things are worse, things are more dystopian, things are more risky. And we seem to be doing that, we seem to be running backwards and fearing the future more than the past and the present, which I think is a terrible mistake.

**Stephen McBride:** I was reading an old Tim Urban blog post today about his trip to North Korea, and he said North Korea is the only place that you go where the museum about the past seems like actually you want to go back there.

Usually it's you go into a museum about the past about a country, Britain, America, whatever and you're like God thank God I don't live you know 200 years ago. Whereas in North Korea it's like wow, you know, the 40s or 50s were great times.

Before we get back to the seven deadly cynics, how do you weigh the balance of power between the optimists and the pessimists on AI today? Because it seems like it's really shifted over the past year or so.

**Louis Anslow:** Yeah. Yeah, it's a weird one. I know that the Biden admin had a lot of the sort of effective altruists who believe AI existential risk is a very possible outcome. We're quite embedded and influential there.

Obviously Trump's in now. There's a lot of AI optimism rhetoric.

But then at the same time, there are different sects of the right in America. And there's the tech right, there's the MAGA right, which has sort of like more leans towards Steve Bannon. And Bannon is very reactionary on AI. He's very sort of anti-AI.

**Stephen McBride:** He said we should nationalize SpaceX as well when the old Elon stuff went down, which was crazy.

**Louis Anslow:** Yeah, I mean, he's very actually... It actually, so there's also this strange sort of small clique of people on the right that kind of like the Unabomber's Manifesto.

It starts talking about culture war, and it's quite sort of anti-left and anti-feminism. And they kind of latch onto some of that stuff. And it's been, I think, I imagine Bannon probably, you know, feels warmly towards parts of that thing.

At the end of the day, technophobia is quite a populist and reactionary thing in the context of, I think, certainly in the context of jobs. So I said how like, the less powerful generally in favor of it, but if you can sort of make vague predictions that this is a threat to livelihood, then you can certainly whip regular people up into a fervor to be anti-AI.

I think there's been states in America that have banned lab-grown meat. It's not going to be commercialized for another 10, 15, 20 years, but Texas just banned it, completely banned it. And that, again, it was appealing to of popular sentiments around culture. "We love steaks, we rear cattle, we're farmers, blah, blah."

So in some ways, it can be used to appeal to a wider audience in cases. So I worry that, and I've long seen this, is because generally the main political parties are sort of enmeshed with the establishment in various ways...

I think in the US, it's the Democrats more enmeshed in academia and the mainstream media that lean progressive. And then the Republicans are more enmeshed with business and big established businesses, and they lean more right.

And both those groups, from the seven deadly cynics, it's the protectionists, the big businesses, the professors in academia. And the publishers, they're sort of, whether it's right or left, they're progressives or more right. They generally have lots of reasons to oppose new things.

And generally what you find is libertarians, true libertarians, are really, really great on tech stuff, emerging tech stuff. They're really great on, you know, not being principled, not giving into fear mongering, and not justifying, you know, stay over each because of a bunch of theoretical risks.

So they're very reliable when it comes to good tech policy. And you saw this in the late 90s, early 2000s with encryption in the US. A lot of libertarians helped stop this stuff. And I think in, yeah, so...

There are some exceptions. think that especially politicians appealing to younger voters are generally more pro-tech because, again, younger people have less to lose and they don't, they're not all sort nostalgic.

So you see politicians like AOC, who has a lot of younger voters, surprisingly, she's like, pushes back on some of this stuff to appeal to younger voters generally.

I think in the UK you have the rise of reform. This is Nigel Farage's alternative right party. And it has a lot of young voters for whatever reason. They just lowered the voting age to 16 too, which is interesting.

Meanwhile, all the major parties in the UK are like behind this age-gating the internet. Give us your ID. You know, ban kids from here, there, and everywhere. Lock down the VPNs. And reform is like the only party against it. The only mainstream, becoming mainstream every, more and more every day. And it's again, it's because they're appealing to younger voters.

So I think when it comes to politics, the reliable pro-tech people that aren't going to give in to these seven deadly cynics is ones appealing to younger voters and principled libertarians, generally. And I think everyone else is going to end up being pulled in.

**Stephen McBride:** If I'm a founder building a disruptive technology, new, which of the seven groups do you think I should try to win over first? Or is it a case of building a great product? Should I have a strategy for this?

**Louis Anslow:** Great question. Well, it's interesting. So e-cigarettes are an interesting example because I think some of earlier companies sold to the big tobacco, which ended up, it became an incumbent. Now, obviously that was pretty bad PR. But that's certainly, I'm not saying sell out. I just thought I'd bring this up as an example.

The irony around e-cigarettes is that the people that e-cigarettes threaten didn't end up being the tobacco companies, which could have been the enemies of e-cigarettes, but they ended up acquiring them. They were like, "we just want to sell people nicotine. We don't care if it's in a leaf or not form."

So the funny thing about the anti-e-cigarette stuff is that there was whole industry, nonprofit industry, around lowering tobacco consumption, it was like the anti-big tobacco set, e-cigarettes were an existential risk to them.

Because what are they going to, you know, if everyone starts doing e-cigarettes, then it's not tobacco, then many of the older health scare stuff disappears. And so what you saw was, very weirdly, the people resisting e-cigarettes and fighting e-cigarettes were the people that were fighting cigarettes.

So that's an interesting thing where sometimes the power that it threatens isn't always obvious. So sometimes it's the people that opposed the old thing now oppose this.

It kind of feels a bit like nuclear, where the anti-environmentalists were like, "if everything's nuclear, what are we going to do?"

But your question was, "who would you try and win over first?" You don't try and win over none of them. You try and win over people. You try and win over the people.

You try and get this thing scaling. You try and get it growing fast and so fast that it becomes a liability to oppose it. And so with Uber, like you saw with Uber, they would encourage people in certain areas to write to their lawmakers and things.

So you win over the people. And that's going to make it much easier to win over the politicians because they need votes. That would be my advice.

**Stephen McBride:** If I look at this group, it's usually the politicians painted as like, "those are the bad guys, those are the ones that make the laws." Is there any group that you think people really underestimate in these seven? For me, parents, I have three kids, think parents is an incredibly powerful one.

**Louis Anslow:** Yeah parents is a really powerful one. think especially when you have some awful tragic thing where there's a freak accident involving a new thing and you have parents going through the worst imaginable grief.

And sadly what happens is politicians sort of use them to get a law passed. So they'll wheel them out in Congress, and nobody, you know, no one's going to argue with grieving parents. And oftentimes something bad will happen to the child, and the parents will be looking for something to blame.

So this happened with comic books and novels, and the kid does a terrible crime, or they kill someone and they blame... Often, I think often it's defense lawyers as well. Like what could we blame this on?

And they blame it on comic books, radio, video games. You know, a school shooting happens. They blame it on video games. This happened with Columbine. And so the parents, and there, the parents give this opportunity to protectionists, politicians, and publishers.

So the newspapers love a big front-page story. "Video game causes school shooting," you know, sell loads of newspapers, you know, these great stories that get attention. Politicians love it. They get to write a law, and wheel out the parents, and get all this attention and make it look like they're protecting kids.

Even professors, they're like, "great, there's grant opportunities for video game violence research. I'm going to apply for that."

So I think parents certainly, and we're seeing this with the smartphone stuff, that the free and open internet in the free world is collapsing before our very eyes. And it's happening partly through preachers, which is like Jonathan Haidt.

And then it's like this grassroots or semi-grassroots parental thing, like parent-teacher associations and stuff. And it's doing a massive amount of harm.

So I'd say parents are that underestimated group. And I would say beyond just people, I'd say it's probably worth winning over parents if there's any way of doing that.

**Stephen McBride:** If you could remove one group from the loop, what do you think would most weaken the cycle?

**Louis Anslow:** Well, politicians, but then you just have anarchy, which I didn't think is practical.

I think publishers, so centralized publishing. It's obvious publishing is becoming less centralized over the last two, three decades. So that's quite interesting and promising. And what you find with TikTok, there's a part, partly why TikTok is so derided, I think. And there's some good critiques of it, whatever.

But it's the first time that the youth have had a broadcast—a real broadcast medium with video, audio, everything. They have a camera in their pocket, and they're able to broadcast and stuff. And that feels very threatening.

Obviously the China stuff's very real in terms of their influence over its algorithms and things. But there is this element of the youth seizing the means of broadcast, which is very interesting.

And what you find on TikTok is you... It's just a very different narrative around technology. It's much less cynical. It's much less hand-wringing. There's a lot more looking at positives.

It's not all that, but it's an interesting thing to look at that group on the list, publishers being disintermediated and having a less powerful group being able to broadcast, and seeing what happens.

So I'd say publishers, I think in many ways they are, that sort of group is, their power is waning. It's part of why they're so hysterical and aggressive. And I do hope that more decentralized media in the hands of more people, younger people, less powerful people will mean less predictable cynical narratives around technology.

**Stephen McBride:** You might say publishers are falling in status. Which of the groups is rising in status?

**Louis Anslow:** Right now... Yeah, I mean right now parents and politicians seem to be, you know, you've got Haidt, you've got all these politicians getting behind the stuff left and right, you have all these parents groups, it does feel like there is this politicians, parents and preachers, as they do, coming together and they've never been more powerful and dangerous in my opinion. I think the impact they're having is scaring me and...

Yeah. And obviously... yeah.

**Stephen McBride:** Are politicians the group that are most historically effective at killing a breakthrough or has that changed over time?

**Louis Anslow:** Yeah, because at the end of the day, if... At the end of the day, people are just going to do it. It's going to scale. They're going to sell it.

At the end of the day, there are more optimists than pessimists. It's just where's the power? Which groups have more power? So the diffusion of innovation theory as a loose framework for this stuff is a good example. And you have the sort of groups in society that adopt things really early and a bit later and then really late.

In a free and open market system where there's a freedom of press, so you can hear about these technologies and there's not overregulation, which has certainly become a problem, these things are just going to end up happening. And politicians are able to just... stroke of a pen, and it's over. Too much red tape, and it's over. Too much risk and uncertainty, and it's over.

So it really does come down to the politicians and this is why, you know, there's this like, "oh, you know, big tech is spending so much on lobbying." It's like, oh yeah, I mean, yeah, because they can just stroke of a pen and it's all over. And of course they are.

And I think people say, "it's, yeah, they're spending a hundred million on lobbying and, yeah, it's undemocratic. They're manipulating democracy." People just... It's like there's a reason because the power that politicians have is to just stop things dead.

There just doesn't seem to be a concept of freedom of technology. There's a freedom of press. There's... in America, right to bear arms, right? It's like there isn't a constitution on Earth where there's sort of a right to innovate or something, or something along those lines, or treating innovation as speech, right?

And so I think it's important to think along those lines too, like what is freedom, what is free in society, what is the free world? I think the free world, everyone agrees the free world has free and open elections, free press, free speech, right to assemble, and then sort of innovation, or innovating or doing something in a new and interesting way. It's like, oh, you can't do that without a license, can't, so.

There probably needs to be some more thought along those lines in the context of regulation and politicians.

**Stephen McBride:** How do you think about the entry of China into all of this? And where I'm going is that I often think about China as this magic word. If you say it in Washington three times, a politician will come out of the woodwork and hand you a billion dollars.

It seems like, we have to unban drones because China's getting ahead in drones. China is doing a lot more nuclear than us. Let's accelerate nuclear. China is trying to build supersonic jets. We have to unban supersonic.

So in a weird way, China is obviously a closed society. But it's almost the reason for re-accelerating technological progress in the West right now.

**Louis Anslow:** Yeah. Yeah, I mean, this sort of played out in the Cold War and the space race, right? It's good. Some healthy competition is good. And China is this interesting.

China is interesting because they do steal a lot of technology from the West. They sort of reap the fruits of the capitalist system themselves. And they also, because they're an autocracy and the press is controlled by the government, they're able to scale that technology quicker than us, right? Which is a funny thing.

And because they own the press, so there are no elections, some of this stuff... Obviously, again, like I mentioned previously, they're going to want to preserve their power in various ways. There's a great firewall and all this stuff, and they don't want stuff that's going to undermine their power.

But they're not going to let a protectionist, know, semi-private company start influencing the media.

Although I would say the state in China does whip up fear around some Western technologies. I think iPhones, there was a bit of stuff around that. Yeah, they scale faster, there's less oppositions to stuff. And partly because they don't have a free press.

And like I said, the free press are like an integral. A free press inevitably becomes centralized to a few wealthy groups. And those wealthy groups are generally part of the establishment incumbent class. And so they do end up leaning tech pessimists because they are protectionists.

And they're generally older generations, which also plays into it. And China doesn't have that. So I think when it comes to competing with China, we need to figure out, yeah, the conversation needs to be, how does the free world with a free press and free and open elections also innovate?

Like, how do we have a free world with the freedom to innovate as well as the freedom of speech, free and open elections? I think it's really important that if we don't get on top of that, we don't figure it out, yeah, we could lose. We could lose.

So I think, yeah, stuff like this framework is very useful to untangling that conundrum, that riddle, whatever.

**Stephen McBride:** Yeah, just on the winning point, I guess AI is the perfect example that's playing out in real time right now.

Do you think I mean we talked we talked about the balance of optimism and pessimism in AI, but how... Basically who was playing which role right now of the seven deadly cynics in the AI kind of battle? And it seems like politicians have kind of flipped pro.

**Louis Anslow:** Yep, yes. Wow. There's a very weird dynamic where it's growing so fast.

That you have these AI companies sort of becoming incumbents really fast. Open AI and anthropic. Obviously you've got Google there, which is much more of an older incumbent.

But you have a weird merger of like preachers and protectionists together, which is these AI-effective altruists ex-risk people who are like incumbents, they're sort of protectionists and they're also preaching "the end is nigh."

And they're working the politicians and the publishers really well. The press love this stuff, and the politicians love this stuff.

And they're also embedded in academia. So because there's a lot of these AI ex-risk people in academia in the Ivy League, you have protectionists, preachers, and professors all wrapped up into one set group of people.

Then there's patrons, so these billionaires who are funding this AI ex-risk stuff, who are funding their protectionists, professors, and preachers who all in one group to lobby the politicians and publishers. They're doing a very good job of it.

And they're trying to scare parents now. Parents are sort of the next frontier. Chatbot staff, a lot of them are funding lawsuits around AI chatbot harm. So it's all playing out. It's every single one of them, all playing out at once. And it's a very good way of understanding the space, I think.

**Stephen McBride:** I almost think of this as like a criminal case, like these are all witnesses. And which witnesses are, you know, which person involved in the case, which one is most likely to flip pro tech under the right incentives?

Either not specifically in AI, but just in general, studying the history of technology, which one's the easiest to flip?

**Louis Anslow:** You know, like, I think, so there's publishers and editors, do think, know, editors, I think editors are more cynical and manipulative than journalists. I think journalists want to be accurate, want to tell the truth, and they feel very uncomfortable when they make mistakes, and they're not, you know, this isn't, I'm not talking about tabloid stuff, I'm talking about legit stuff.

So I like the idea that Pessimists Archive has helped, and hopefully some editors too, to get a bit more perspective and has had some journalists sort of go, "is this story really, like, am I just doing that thing? Like, is this a cliché? Do I want to think about this in a more interesting and deeper way?"

So I think I have a lot of faith that journalists and some in publishers have a shot. Again, when I say professors, don't mean all professors. And lots of academics care about truth in the same way. And I think, again, they need more encouragement and more backup around this. There's some really great ones out there.

So those two, professors and publishers, journalists, are probably good. I think there could be a lot more done to say to parents, "your kid's watching CocoMelon on their iPad, but like, there's a whole world of information."

Kids are creative, and they're curious, and they have a magic pane of glass where they can explore any interest they want. You can control that consumption via parental controls.

This is an amazing tool. It's not a TV. TVs were much more static, much more hard to regulate. They had a lot, you were prescribed content more than searching it and exploring interests.

So I just think there's a massive missed opportunity around saying to parents, they could waste a lot of time and just sit around watching slop or something, but like there's this amazing opportunity.

Yeah, publishers, parents, professors, there's a good opening there. Preachers are going to keep preaching. know, politicians downstream I think. If the publishers and the professors and the parents, you win over some of them, then it's going to be downstream from politicians.

But I would say that there is a kind of, so I'm calling it also the pyramid of pessimism because it's sort of a pyramid of power, where at the top you have the patrons, and then you have the protectionists and the publishers, and it's sort of a hierarchy of power going down.

I think parents are sort of at the bottom. And I came up with this idea of having, like, what's the reverse? Like, what's the inverted here? What's the pyramid of progress?

And so I think the pyramid of progress is patrons that believe in the future, so wealthy people that believe in the future. And there's lots of them. I think Bill Gates is a great example of this. He fights anti-GMO stuff. He fights anti-vaccine stuff. He's become a sort of tech antichrist for a lot of reactionaries.

We need patrons that are optimistic and they want progress in the same way that you've got the ones that are protecting.

And then you have the Prometheans. So they're the daring innovators. You want publishers that don't sway cynical. You know, Freethink Media's a great one. They do big think, and they have a very specific angle. You have people like Cleo Abram doing great YouTube content and TikTok content about the future.

So you want to build this pyramid of progress. You want preachers who are preaching progress. And you have the progress movement, progress studies. You have some great voices there.

Again, you want professors that are getting good funding for their research that isn't inevitably going to try and come to some cynical conclusion. It also needs to not end up being just sort of industry-funded research, which ends up being ignored anyway. You've got to figure out that.

And then you want politicians who sell hope, they sell solutions, they don't sell problems. And I think Obama was a good one. His rhetoric was very optimistic. Biden felt like he was always talking about problems.

And I guess that I've tried to do seven, and the last one is just pragmatists of all types everywhere that are just pragmatic. They're looking for solutions.

So I think there needs to be, when you understand the pyramid of pessimism, you need to understand these are very specific demographics. And I think personality types in a way, very specific personality types.

There needs to be, and there is in some ways, it's not that organized, but there needs to be a counter to it, which is kind of a similar pyramid that's sort of structured in a similar way to fight back against that very organized, concerted, predictable pattern of pushing back on things, which I think stretches back thousands of years.

If you look at the Prometheus myth in Greek mythology, it feels to me like they were just describing this, right? So the gods had fire, and then it was democratized by Prometheus.

They were really angry, and then they persecuted him for it. So it feels to me like the Greeks understood that powerful people preserve power protesting progress, right? And that's just how it is. And this is the thing. And I'd say the last 50 years has showed that that's, as technology accelerates, that becomes more... that accelerates too.

And it becomes more extreme. And it feels to me like we're really at this scary sort of point where it's coming at everything from all angles: anonymity, the open internet, freedom to compute, and AI, and privacy.

And I just can't get out of my head that we're creating the kind of things you read about in 1984 in the name of avoiding techno dystopia, somehow, these people are ending up making it more likely. Yeah.

**Stephen McBride:** Do you think, as you mentioned, the anti-tech sentiments, anti-innovation sentiments have been around for thousands of years, and you've documented that brilliantly at Pessimists Archive, but do you think they've grown in strength over the past 50 years?

**Louis Anslow:** Yeah, just because things have accelerated. Nuclear, space, genetic engineering, we're really becoming gods among men.

Yeah, it certainly has. And I think it's important to remember also, change... New technologies bring new order, and new order brings new disorder, right? Like, things do start disorderly, and then you have to figure out how to make them orderly. It's the history of human civilization.

So new technologies do bring new order, and new order does bring new disorder.

The old order tend to say, "look at this disorder. You need to give us more power back in order to bring back order to things." So they always want to do that. They want to take things back. But generally, we just need a bit of time to reorder things and manage the new disorder.

And I think that disintermediating broadcast certainly made it easier for more disinformation to be published, right? It doesn't mean it got distribution. It didn't necessarily increase the demand or the time people have for it, which I think is always an assumption.

But Wikipedia very early in the internet proved that we can have disintermediated publishing and broadcast, and it's possible to create new ways to manage disorder. And I think Community Notes is a very interesting extension of that.

Which the old order who have sort of monopolized the conversation about disinformation and truth aren't interested in talking about community notes. They're not interested, even though it's a very good tool for dealing with disinformation that's more subtle or contextual or not, it's not the kind of thing that can be put on a list of things to moderate, right?

It's like very flexible, and it can deal with a slight distortion of a fact or a breaking news story that's just happened. It can correct some misunderstanding right away. So when you have people talking about tech ethics and tech risk reduction and safety around stuff, you have to figure out what's their motivation.

And what you generally find is the more prohibitory they are, the more likely it is that they're a protectionist or they're a preacher. So they think the end is nigh and we must stop it. So like some of these AI people.

So yeah, so when it comes to thinking about technology risk, that's what you need to do. You've got to figure out who is worrying in good faith, and they're not just worrying about their own power and influence.

And the reason that's important is because a lot of time is wasted worrying about or focusing on the wrong things. Predicting outcomes and risk of new technologies is pretty hard in the same way that predicting the upsides is hard.

So this is what investors do, right? They're trying to predict the upsides of technology. And we know the hit rate is extremely low while actually accurately predicting what those upsides are.

So, but I know of anti-tech people laugh at how, you know, how many companies tech VCs end up losing money on, right? But then for some reason, they don't think that applies in the other direction, that their cynical narratives about how technology is going to cause problems is also, you know, 99 % of the time, probably not going to pan out.

And if it's really hard to predict the risks of a new technology, and there are all these misaligned incentives, self-interest, cognitive biases going on, then if you really want to identify problems and mitigate them early, you have to take all that seriously.

And what I find is people who have a kind of knee-jerk dismissal of Pessimists Archive, it's just such a tell that they're not acting in good faith because generally they're part of one of those groups, and I think deep down they know it and they get really defensive and sort of, and it could just be subconscious but they go, "oh, it's different this time, doesn't, know, things have changed."

And I say, well, for a new medium or new technology to even become to scale, it has to be sufficiently different and better than the previous one, right? So it has to be more entertaining, it has to be faster, has to be whatever.

So it's always different this time. It's not a good reason why these fears are suddenly much more... Often it's not a good argument, really. And I always say it's because it is different this time, it's always different this time, but human psychology isn't different, it's the same.

And when it's in a similar area like publishing, then the psychology that plays out is the people who are gatekeepers to publishing and what's thought of as truth feel threatened, and they act out, and they overemphasize problems with the new thing. And so it's just really important and useful to think about it through that lens.

**Stephen McBride:** Is there anything different about this era of tech pessimism? Is there anything unique or just like literally the same playbook we saw on the early internet, same playbook we saw in the 70s and gone back forward?

**Louis Anslow:** It's different because things scale faster, is good. And then it's different because regulation can be, in some areas, can be applied so quickly.

So in the UK, suddenly, online safety act, "everyone show me your papers, give me your ID," and that happened overnight. So there's a duality there where things scale faster, which is good, they can reach tipping point which makes people, politicians, more wary of coming down on this stuff.

But also, especially in the digital world, there's more danger of overregulation because things can happen very quickly. And we know governments aren't very good at organizing things and scaling things, but in the digital world, the competency level needs to be, doesn't need to be as high so they're able to roll draconian things out much more quickly, which is why we should be a lot more worried about the risk of knee-jerk reactions to new things.

**Stephen McBride:** How optimistic or how are you thinking about the renaissance in hard tech? So you're seeing a nuclear supersonic drones, cloud seeding. It seems like we've kind of less SAS is dead. You have a bunch of recovering SAS investors that are

really excited about deep tech, hard tech, which is actually, when you think about it, 80, 85 % of GDP, the actual physical world. How do you see that fitting into the framework?

**Louis Anslow:** It's exciting, but it doesn't feel like...

Yeah, it doesn't feel like people are treating technophobia as a risk to the future enough still. And you have the *Black Mirror* kind of narrative around fearing the future, and technological acceleration begets dystopian outcomes.

It's hard to... And then the same... Another part of me is like maybe all of the worrying is focused on AI and social media and smartphones, and perhaps there must be some limit to this stuff, and perhaps that absorbs all the panic, and the world of atoms can be left alone a bit more to develop.

I'm not, yeah, it's hard to...

**Stephen McBride:** There's definitely going to be a bull market in lobbyists that's for sure.

**Louis Anslow:** Yes, well of course. I mean, the world of atoms, as Thiel says, has been extremely constrained, and the world of bits has had a sort of freedom to develop and accelerate.

So yeah, mean the competition with China will hopefully make that seem more urgent.

**Stephen McBride:** Maybe as we gear towards closing here when people look back at Pessimists Archive in a hundred years from now what do you think is going to be the most hilarious moral panic of the last 20 years?

Something now that seems...

**Louis Anslow:** I think right now I think the things are changing so fast and kids need to be ready for that new world. And I think we're going to look back and go, what on earth are we doing?

Banning them from chatbots, taking smartphones out of schools, forcing college students to not use AI and start doing paper exams. Why would we take an entire education system and moving it back 50 years?

While the whole world was moving forward 50 years every month, like what were we doing? What a failure of the whole institution is supposed to get people ready to work and be adults and have a career. And the whole system has just taken this Luddite turn. And it's just gonna seem just embarrassing and ridiculous.

**Stephen McBride:** To end, Louis, we could play a little fun game so I'm gonna give you seven one-liners that sound like something that one of the seven deadly cynics would say, but I want you to... I'm gonna say the line, and you have to tell me which of the seven deadly cynics is most likely to say it. Okay?

**Louis Anslow:** Okay, that's good.

**Stephen McBride:** Technology is moving too fast

**Louis Anslow:** Parents.

**Stephen McBride:** Only the super-rich are going to benefit from this.

**Louis Anslow:** Politicians.

**Stephen McBride:** We need to hit the pause button for safety.

**Louis Anslow:** Protectionists.

**Stephen McBride:** It's gonna take all the jobs.

**Louis Anslow:** Protectionists.

**Stephen McBride:** There should be a law against this before someone is killed or someone else is killed.

**Louis Anslow:** Preachers and politicians.

**Stephen McBride:** It will ruin the very fabric of society.

**Louis Anslow:** Publishers and preachers, they work hand in hand.

**Stephen McBride:** It's rotting our brains.

**Louis Anslow:** Parents.

**Stephen McBride:** Louis Anslow, founder of the Pessimists Archive. Where can people find out more about you? Tell everyone what they need to know.

**Louis Anslow:** My Twitter is [@Louis Anslow](#). The pessimist archive is [pessimistsarchive.org](http://pessimistsarchive.org), and the Twitter [@PessimistsArc](#).

**Stephen McBride:** And I know you have something big cooking for 2026 with the Pessimists Archive. What can people look forward to?

**Louis Anslow:** Yeah, lots of website relaunch. I'm gonna publish something on the seven deadly cynics, some... a long essay. Probably gonna print a booklet for that. Gonna be doing a lot more podcasts and have a lot more guest posts and probably gonna be doing some video stuff.

**Stephen McBride:** Love it. One of my favorite websites on the internet. Make sure you check it out. Talk to you soon.