

I got an email about resistance

This will be kind of an unusual post. I got a recent email about my writing that I thought was such a good articulation of one common criticism that I'd like to share it (and my response) in full.

Here's the email, from William Murray¹:

Hey Sean,

I have enjoyed your writing but your recent essays frustrate me.

You say that getting paid for deep thinking in software is coming to an end. You even admit that it makes you sad. But in the name of “usefulness” you refuse to rock the boat. The way I see it, if you are right there are only two reasonable responses, pursue other work or resist. You present your elegiac approach as mature / pragmatic / realistic. I'd call it complicit. You know when Willy Wonka says,

There's no earthly way of knowing Which direction we are going
There's no knowing where we're rowing
Or which way the river's flowing
Is it raining, is it snowing? Is a hurricane a-blowing? — uh! Not a speck of light is showing
So the danger must be growing
Are the fires of Hell a-glowing? Is the grisly reaper mowing? Yes! The danger must be growing
For the rowers keep on rowing
And they're certainly not showing Any signs that they are slowing!

And the audience is thinking, “isn't Wonka kind of in control of this situation?” You remind me of Wonka². You write like a passenger on a crazy train going who-knows-where! But you are an agent. You are in control of your life! Either admit that you actually like where the crazy train is probabilistically going or get off at the next stop.

You have a lot of reach and you are using it for... what exactly? Showing off how pragmatic you are by being more black pill'd than the next guy? Broadcasting your

resignation to the unstoppable trends of technology is a waste of a voice.

You may find this argument absurd, but I don't so I'll make it. This is a very important time in history. I hope humanity survives and continues to grow exponentially. In that case the supply of historical people will stay fixed while the supply of contemporary people will keep growing. There will come a day where for every 2026 staff software engineer there are dozens of historians specializing in 2020s era software engineering culture. It's plausible that your essays will be remembered for all of time and your actions will be judged by history. Do you want future humans to see you as a rationalizing careerist or something cooler?

Sorry for the haranguing email from a stranger, I'm sending it for the small chance that it awakens something in you. If I'm way off I'm sorry.

And here's my response:

Hey William, thanks for emailing.

I wish everyone who thought this way emailed me so I could think harder about this kind of position. Despite what my writing might suggest, I do in fact think a lot about it. Let me see if I can explain my position in a way you'll find satisfying.

I agree that this is an important time in history. For programmers, I think of it as analogous to the Industrial Revolution in England: we are a group of high-status craftspeople who find ourselves alternately threatened and empowered by automation. The developments today, as then, obviously have far-reaching implications — but what those implications are is very non-obvious. Would a framework-knitter in the early 1800s have been able to predict the ramifications of the stocking frame on the world of today? What should they have done about it, in order to be kindly judged by history?

Well, we know what many of them did do. They shot factory-owners, smashed machines, burned down the factories — in some places delaying the spread of automation; in other places encouraging it — prompting a crackdown that saw tens of thousands of British soldiers occupying British counties in what was clearly a police state. History judges the Luddites kindly for this. Does that mean it worked?

I don't care about the judgment of history. They'll think what they want. What I care about is the people in my industry who don't know what to do. I get hundreds of emails from junior and mid-level (and other) engineers who say "I'm scared, I don't know the rules post-2021, thank you for helping me keep my head down and keep my job". That's why I write the way I write. I have seen lots of idealistic engineers stick their necks out, and post-ZIRP those necks often get cut off. That's a damn shame.

I think it's morally wrong that so many engineers — either in safe sinecures in big tech or literally retired — seem to be trying to foment a second Luddite revolution. Many of their readers will be experienced enough to handle it sensibly, but not all. Every "AI is fascist, stand up and resist!" post that goes viral ruins some poor idealistic junior's career³. Someone needs to be out there saying "hey, if you do X it's going to have consequence Y". I hope that's me.

Of course this is complicit, or anti-revolutionary, or whatever you like. But if I were a textiles worker in 1810s England, I would not be telling my friends and loved ones "it's time to fight, let's go smash up the factories for Ned Ludd!". I would be telling them that this was the most dangerous time in the industry (perhaps ever), and that they ought to be very damn careful so they don't get shot, or arrested, or hanged. If I then went and told a few hundred thousand strangers the opposite, I would be a hypocrite.

Anyway, I do take this view seriously — seriously enough to vehemently disagree, at least — which I hope you'll find better than me just shrugging it off. I do accept the existence of some kind of line: I think Industrial-Revolution-collaborating was OK but Nazi-collaborating wasn't, for instance. But in the current situation, the way I'm spending "my voice" is to try and prevent the most vulnerable of my colleagues from making career-ruining mistakes.

Sean

In this blog, I try to encourage people to work with the system, to [learn its rules](#), and to try and [exert influence safely](#) from a position of power, instead of openly [picking fights](#) with their employers. I've written and read about the [Luddites](#) before, but I remain deeply [ambivalent](#) about the movement itself, and about modern-day [attempts](#) to resurrect it in service of anti-AI activism.

I want to explicitly thank Murray for writing such a thoughtful email, and being willing for me to publish it on the blog.

edit: this got some comments on both [Lobste.rs](#) and [Hacker News](#). The Lobste.rs comments are *much* better this time: I recommend Murray's own [comments](#) in the thread, [this](#) prediction about how AI automation will go, and [this](#) correction that the Luddites only shot one factory-owner. I knew that from my previous [research](#), so I shouldn't have overstated, but in my defense they did shoot *at* William Cartwright (and a handful of others).

1. Shared with permission, of course. I've lightly edited both Murray's email and mine for typos and the like.



2. I didn't pick up this point in my reply, but I'll briefly mention it here: Wonka is in control because he owns the factory and the rowers in question are *his employees*. I don't think the position of any engineer (or of almost any manager) is like that.



3. In hindsight, I think this is a little overstated, but it does happen and causes a lot of needless suffering.



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Here's a preview of a related post that shares tags with this one.

You have to know how to drive the car

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gets built, not just how it gets built. You can climb the ladder to staff engineer and above, or you can take it easy and focus on your hobbies. But whichever of these you choose, you have to know how tech companies work.

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