

Cutting through BS

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Being part of the all-singing, all-dancing trap can make us forget our individual selves. A recent conversation with [Daniel Hastik](#) in May gave me a few jolts of inspiration to write about something that's been bugging me.

It's about the choice to go into the new tech economy that a lot of young people make.

I am surrounded by authentic hipster startup BS. But how did I get here?

1 The cappuccino drinking hipster node.js artisan

You wake up in the morning and aeropress™ yourself an americano while checking out the latest gonzo vice news featuring a manic reporter writing about the emerging pour-over barista scene of Arstotzka and their post-ironic man-staches.

After taking your fixie to your organic Kreuzberg office that offers not only one, but two different types of certified, small batch, biodynamic coconut water, you place your MacBook Pro, which you took home to continue figuring out why gulp.js keeps throwing up in your face, on your hot desk and start coding. A coworker who is part of your extended family wishes you a good morning. Unfortunately you are not able to hear him over the sound of generic trap music blasting out of the intricate SONOS™ setup installed in your artisanal office. That is the price you have to pay when you want to be in an open plan office. Hiding in your own office like some kind of corporate bozo would mean a decrease in team communication. Being out in the open gives you cred.

Not knowing what your colleague shouted at you, you respond with a “YEAH!”.

You might get some work done over the day, but most of the time you have to fix outdated npm dependencies. How quaint.

Slowly you start questioning your purpose in life. Why do you need to chug out crappy js callbacks that only slow down the inevitable demise of a product you claim to be the *next big thing™* and will definitely empower and change the lives of billions of people.

Your deadlines are overdue and your previously PSYCHED investors are starting to grow impatient. They are starting to doubt your approach of spending 2 Euros in marketing for every 1 Euro of revenue.

Maybe it's the quinoa infused cold-pressed mlkshk, but suddenly everything is starting to spin.

2 The Origin of Bullshit

Having a sense of belonging can be one of the strongest desires an individual can have. This could be belonging to a community, family, company—in short any type of human group that gives us a sense of anchoring and serves as a moral compass. Having a moral compass allows us to do and not do things that will create approval or disapproval inside that group. This is where another human quirk kicks in. We are inherently afraid of being embarrassed and feeling shame. This fear keeps us from doing things that will compel a group to shun and ostracize us.

Let's say we are in a group that thinks that an action or belief is morally wrong and yet at the same time on a personal level we do not share that sentiment. What are we to do? The most common reaction would be to suppress our outbursts of individual inclinations and try even harder to belong to the group. Many religions, another form of human group, even offer intricate rituals to cleanse oneself from deviant thoughts that would otherwise mean expulsion. Going to confession is still preferable to being sentenced to death after committing apostasy (this turned morbid quickly). This is the point where being a doubter will make you an even stronger believer. It is the easiest way of resolving your cognitive dissonance of “I am a member of a group that disapproves a behavior” and “I still want to engage in said behavior”. The conclusion for most is “I will try even harder to belong to the group!”. Repeat ad nauseum.

3 Instead of single-origin coffee, ...

Neither small-batch quinoa nor single-origin coffee is a shameful thing. It is the moment where a set of rituals and consumer choices becomes groupthink that worries me.

If not small-batch quinoa and disrupting, what can give us meaning instead?

Perhaps, disruption is not meaning. Perhaps, a startup is more about finding out how to best optimize the equation $\text{PROFIT} = \text{REVENUE} - \text{COST}$. A repeatable business transaction, so to say. At the same time, stories sell, numbers rarely do. But it hardly helps to engage in self-deceptive practices that revolve around finding sceneric narratives justifying why coconut water equals shareholder value. Why not cut the crap and be honest with ourselves that our motivation is primarily economic, with only a hint of man-bun raw denim, not the other way around.

As soon as you get into polaroid kombucha territory, the meaning of running a profitable business is lost. Some investors react by voting out the CEO and replacing them by a [much older and much more experienced CEO](#)

By the time the ventures were three years old, 50% of founders were no longer the CEO; in year four, only 40% were still in the corner office; and fewer than 25% led their companies' initial public offerings.

Now, CEO replacement is not always a result of turning hipster, but in the grand scheme of things it is always about boards being afraid that the CEO is not able to turn a business profitable and has lost focus.

Wasn't it Dropbox that has just dropped their lavish employee perks that have cost them more than [\\$25,000 a year per employee](#)?

In a company-wide email in March, Dropbox said it was cancelling its free shuttle in San Francisco and its gym washing service, while pushing back dinner time by an hour to 7 p.m. and limiting the number of guests to five a month. (Previously it was unlimited, a big perk given its open bar on Fridays.)

4 Authenticity

People in general try to be authentic. Authenticity can have different meanings which belong to roughly to groups:

- Reliability, being trustworthy and keeping promises
- Genuineness, being true to what you say, both on the inside and on the outside

When people say they want to be authentic, they rarely are. What are the odds of all startup employees loving *Club Mate*? Or for that matter, riding a single-speed bicycle? Many behaviors we exhibit are expressions, a code, that signals belonging to a group.

Or let's say your group believes XP is the *best thing since sliced bread*, every time you discover it does not work the way you imagined it to work, the cognitive dissonance will make you scream “FATHER FORGIVE ME, FOR I HAVE NOT BEEN AGILE” and through acts of self-flagellation and retrospectives you dig yourself even further into your behavior set.

I don't think any one is authentic. We are not living in Curb your Enthusiasm, where thinking out loud is constantly getting us into trouble. Quite the opposite; thinking out aloud is utterly self-destructive. Participating in [Radical Honesty](#) may have some serious side effects.

Just take this hilarious article about [being yourself](#) as an example:

A decade ago, the author A. J. Jacobs spent a few weeks trying to be totally authentic. He announced to an editor that he would try to sleep with her if he were single and informed his nanny that he would like to go on a date with her if his wife left him. He informed a friend's 5-year-old daughter that the beetle in her hands was not napping but dead. He told his in-laws that their conversation was boring. You can imagine how his experiment worked out.

On the other hand, deceiving and lying to yourself about feeling comfortable in your environment is quite stressful. So what are you to do?

5 Quit Your Job

Yes, correct! You, dear reader, are most likely highly educated and will have not difficulties finding another job. If necessary, become a barista. You will earn 8x less but at least your job is a lot more honest and does not consist of increasing the price of shares by inventing useless AI technologies that predict the next time you have to go to the bathroom. Even as a barista you will be a cog in a machine, an employee. Perhaps you will just keep coding in your free time. And, who knows?, maybe you'll spin up [shodan.io](#), find some open MongoDB instances and leak some juicy MD5 hashes to the world.

You can do all kinds of shenanigans knowing that whoever set up this shitty MongoDB instance truly hates his job while you're grinding coffee beans.

6 Create your own startup

Excellent idea! But perhaps you should cut down on coconut water. And remember: 10 years later you will end up being the owner of a startup your employees hate working at. Thus, the corporate bozo cycle continues.

7 Become a consultant

This is the only job were you can realistically stay inside tech, tell people that what they're doing is bullshit and help them improve AND GET PAID FOR IT.