



## From the Editor's Desk: Peak Oil, Heretical Thought, Complexity, and the Future of The Oil Drum

Posted by [Prof. Goose](#) on November 11, 2006 - 11:32am

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Tags: [future](#), [futurists](#), [heretics](#), [jamais cascio](#), [jerry michalski](#), [leif utne](#) [[list all tags](#)]

Lately, I have been thinking a lot about the direction of The Oil Drum. Much of my thinking on this set of ideas has been brought about by some soul-searching, trying to understand the problems we face as a community, and then figuring out how to "positively push the future." My thoughts under the fold.

**[editor's note, by Prof. Goose]** If you haven't done so yet, check out [this podcast](#) of the [Jerry Michalski](#) interview that was one of the forces prompting this post.

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### Section One-Heretical Thought and Social Trust

One of the pieces that brought me down this journey of thought is [this podcast](#) of [Leif Utne](#) (of the Utne Reader and [worldchanging](#) fame) interviewing [Jerry Michalski](#) (a technology consultant, writer, and futurist); in the interview, they talk about two of my favorite subjects: heretical thinking and the development of social trust and norms.

I bring you all a few quotes from [Michalski's interview](#) (and you should listen to the entire (I think inspiring and positive) eleven minutes...it's quite worth your time, and it will probably help you understand where I am heading with this post):

"There is one incredibly strong pattern [about heretics] [...], their critiques of society [...] say that the current systems and institutions in our society are designed to not trust us."

"If you begin to design systems that have in their core a basis of trust, you begin to see wonderful things show up."

"When you come in and start to play with us, we will happily teach you how to play this particular game, and maybe we'll learn how to cooperate. That's really earth-shaking for a lot of people."

"What if we trusted you?"

"When you think about these systems a little differently, and begin with an opening gambit of trust, you can actually build highly resilient systems, in fact, systems that are more resilient, less likely to take us into conflict, less likely to create dysfunctional things inside the system."

First, Michalski brought to mind what we have been trying to do here at The Oil Drum, on most days and with most posts and most of the comments, fits his model to a "t." We are building a wonderful empirically-based place to discuss the controversies surrounding our energy problems

grounded in the notion of social trust--we have open comment threads with 200-plus responses that are, on some days, worth reading. (Though, of late, some of our comment threads have gotten rather chippy and disturbing, I would still argue that, after you sort through the crap, we have the best, most informative and engaging comments and learning going on out in the 'sphere.)

The next question of course is "what else can we accomplish while maintaining these norms?" Michalski's example of a (energy-based in our case) wikipedia is an easy one, with as much information as we have available that has passed through here, it seems to that's a slam dunk. But what other resources can we produce? What other good can we do?

The other thought that Michalski inspired was the role of heretical thinking in peak oil thought and research. The Oil Drum challenges the conventional wisdom with its empirically-based and theoretically-interesting arguments every day. I hope this can continue, so that we can continue educating individuals and policymakers about the details of their energy situation, so they can make more informed choices about our energy future. I hope we can learn from and continue improving on Michalski's model, improving our chances of our heretical evidence affecting the mainstream.

## **Section Two-Complexity, Social Trust, and the Future of TOD**

Because the topic of energy is beyond complex and interrelated to so many of the main arteries of society, we need not worry that the empirical study of energy will get boring any time soon. Whether it is understanding energy's dynamic impact on global temperatures, the consequences of the maximization of the world's oil supply on our security and well-being, the sciences of increasingly available alternative energy supplies, consumer and corporate behavior, the economics and fungibility of energy supplies, oh, I could keep going all day. (By the by, [Jamais Cascio](#) does a very nice job summing up America's post-hegemonic future [here](#), so go there to do more thinking about the meta-impacts of observable trends when you're done thinking about this little missive.)

Anyway, the point I am trying to make is that what we are doing every day here at TOD is difficult--and the people here do amazing things on a daily basis to make it work.

Ad hominem, purposefully obtuse, or not-even-related-to-anything comments do not help. They only defile our contributors' hard work, discourage others from participating, and really contaminate what is, most of the time, a really interesting and informative place to be.

The staff here mostly consists of academically-trained individuals or specialists; this is about ideas and knowledge for us, and from our perspective that is why this site succeeds. We are gearing this site towards the people who want to learn and think about and understand the problems we face and solutions we can credibly espouse in the policy arena. That's right: we want to bring the smartest people who think about this stuff together into one place and talk about ideas, solutions, and policy.

We all know that other sites on this topic have had a life cycle that began with smart, informed comment and became less and less informative over the course of their existence, becoming places where doomer v. anti-doomer troll battles and screechfests take the place of interesting and informed dialogues.

Frankly, most of the people who work hard to keep this site functioning so well would like nothing more for the screechers, trolls, malcontents, and ad hominem players to go elsewhere. Seriously. Please. Go start your own blog if you wish.

I am reminded of a Quaker saying: *"Be silent until you can improve upon the silence."*

We really don't care if we lose a lot of readership over this little declaration, because the aforementioned people are creating a level of toxicity that cannot exist if we are to continue to credibly and enjoyably do this. The people who come here to read and learn should not have to sort through crap to find the knowledge they seek.

The people who write here already have credibility in the peak oil world; we are not going to lose the credibility we have accumulated over a bunch of trolls. We'd rather we shut down the comment threads altogether than allow that.

Don't get me wrong, many (if not most) of the commenters are wonderful and we want to keep it that way, and many of you folks really really add to the discussion. It's sometimes beautiful how much one can learn from the discussions here. There's good satire, there's good (and on-point) humor. And also, don't get me wrong, there's nothing ever wrong with constructive dissent either. However, yelling loudly or profanely just to make sure you're heard over and over and over again or calling attention to yourself, well, it's juvenile, and it's just been getting ridiculous in some cases. (Believe me, as the person who primarily mans the TOD mailbox, I see the complaints daily.)

We here at TOD are here to facilitate education, empirically-centered debate, good policy, and learning, not create a battlefield on which people can try to foist their normative views on others: and I think most of us here agree with that vision.

And while I am not one to quash dissent (I have never deleted a comment here at TOD, and I never will), I also know that there are times when we will have to defend what we believe in.

Also, just an FYI: in the next version of TOD (3.0), we are tossing around some mechanisms, including disabling comments completely, comment ratings (slashdot style), comment moderation, making folks pay nominal fees to make comments, and other mechanisms to try to retard the growth of some of negative things we've been seeing of late. Again, just to be clear, we would rather not do any of that and keep things as they are--abiding by Michalski's model of social trust to allow people to be their best in an unconstrained atmosphere. But that may not be possible.

Until we make those changes, it is up to the community that is TOD to police its own comment threads. Feel free to hit that suppress comment button and not engage the trolls, it's much better than creating a 19-deep thread of ad hominem that no one wants to read. Really.

I think this place and its approach is worth defending. I also believe that a large majority of our readers feel the same.



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