

Dystopian Imagery in AI Campaigns

Affective Capitalism's Absorption of Critique Into Spectacle

CORPUS · n=27 NEWS ARTICLES · OCT 2024 – FEB 2026 · CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

10 Artisan AI | 10 Friend.com | 7 replacement.ai

Disparity in news article count is itself analytically significant — less coverage for the satirical counter-campaign reflects the attention economy this thesis examines.

THREE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1

How does the dissemination of news on these campaigns participate in affective capitalism by producing, circulating, and monetizing emotions (loneliness, rage, fear), and what does this reveal about the commodification of dissent under contemporary capitalism?

RQ2

What forms of feminized labor are targeted for automation in the circulation of these campaigns, and what does this reveal about why these particular forms of work are positioned as replaceable?

RQ3

What visions of 'the social' does the coverage of these campaigns promote, and how do they reshape the limits and possibilities of critique and structural change?

1

ARTISAN – Administrative AI BDR
Dec 2024 · San Francisco & London Jun 2025

2

FRIEND.COM - AI companion pendant (\$129)
Sep 2025 · New York City · Paris Feb 2026

3

REPLACEMENT.AI – 'Anonymous' Activism
October 2025 · San Francisco & New York

AFFECT

Ahmed (2004) + Terranova (2000)
emotions and free labor circulate value,
including outrage and critique.

LABOUR

Adam (1998) + Atanasoski & Vora (2019):
history of AI development encodes masculine work as
'intelligent' and feminized labor as disposable.

SPECTACLE

Debord (1967/1994) + Turkle's (1984)
spectacle replaces direct social experience with mediated
representation as technology is a 'second self'

FINDINGS Three Campaigns, One Spectacle

ARTISAN

Rage as Revenue

Labour anxiety converted into brand equity through feminized AI surrogate

- Billboards seeded anonymously in anti-Al Reddit communities
- CEO admitted: "The goal of the campaign was always to rage bait" (Boyden, 2025)
- Even Senator Bernie Sanders' critical tweet became free amplification for the brand



FRIEND.COM

Loneliness for Sale

Structural social disconnection reframed as a consumer problem

- \$950k NYC subway campaign — 11,000 in-car ads, Graffiti vandalism explicitly welcomed by CEO as free content
- Taglines target the residue of actual friendship failures - not loneliness in the abstract



REPLACEMENT.AI

Satire Absorbed

A counter-campaign pulled into the same circulation logic it meant to oppose

- Satire loses critical distance when dystopia is already profitable marketing
- Possible ties to Future of Life Institute a longtermist AI safety agenda, not labor rights, “Call Your Legislators”
- Gap between emotional engagement and political action



**For Bernays (1928):
Billboard → Reaction → Coverage → Brand → Capital.**

The billboards and news articles are two nodes in the same AI dystopia propaganda circuit.



"Emotions are bound up with the securing of social hierarchy... they align individuals with communities through shared feelings, and these bonds have economic dimensions."
Sara Ahmed, Affective Economies (2004, p. 4)

REAL TALK

Bystanders Horrified by Slightly-Too-Honest AI Billboard

"Building AI tools to fix the world's most pressing challenges is an unprofitable waste of time."

BAY AREA

'If this is a joke, the punchline is on humanity': Replacement AI blurs line between parody and tech reality

by: Alex Baker
 Posted: Dec 25, 2025 / 01:01 PM PST
 Updated: Dec 25, 2025 / 01:01 PM PST



TECHNOLOGY

The Most Reviled Tech CEO in New York Confronts His Haters

Avi Schiffmann says he's enjoying the angry reaction to the Friend AI pendant. Is he serious?

By Matteo Wong



Terranova (2000) argues that free labor is not simply exploited from outside by capital as it is *"a desire of labor immanent to late capitalism,"* shaped by the same cultural and economic logics that structure the digital economy as a whole (p. 39).

devaluation of feminized labor is historically
inherited and monetized
 Alison Adam, Artificial Knowing (1998)



BAY AREA

San Francisco tech startup advertises replacing people with 'AI employees'

by: Alex Baker
 Posted: Dec 3, 2024 / 10:56 AM PST
 Updated: Dec 3, 2024 / 02:46 PM PST



Photo: Jerrett Knapp, KRON4.com

"Contemporary automation narratives build on long histories of positioning colonized peoples, enslaved labourers, and feminized workers as replaceable mechanisms rather than fully human subjects."
Atanasoski & Vora, Surrogate Humanity (2019, p. 2)

SOCIETY / OCTOBER 20, 2025

AI Will Never Be Your Friend

The Friend necklace promises constant companionship and understanding. But this isn't friendship—it's a soulless, cynical way to prey on our loneliness and fear.

ZITO MADU

SHARE ▾

"The spectacle presents the existing order as natural and inevitable — not through suppression of opposition but through the absorption of opposition as a feature of the spectacle itself."

Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle
 (1967/1994, p. 29)

TECH

AI Company's Billboards Say Workers Are Disposable. But Are We?

San Franciscans hated them, and they were right. These billboards suck — and our rage is their gain.

WENDY LIU



When Dystopia Becomes Profitable, AI Critique is Absorbed by the Spectacle

Recognition ≠ Disruption

All three were transparent about engineering controversy & succeeded affective economy's logic of accumulation by dispossession

Critique as Capitalist Fuel

affective capitalism absorbs dissent
converting critique into spectacle
same mechanisms of emotional circulation that produce profit.

The Limit of Satire

allure of AI as a dystopian spectacle distracts from the lived reality of material inequalities
critical distance is needed for structural change and capacity to reimagine futurity

There is a meaningful difference between participating in a system and naming what that system is doing, it is this distinction that critical research depends upon.