



Cool Tools Show Podcast Episode 297: Jeff Yang

September 2021

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Mark: Welcome to the Cool Tools Show. I'm Mark Frauenfelder editor-in-chief of Cool Tools, a website of tool recommendations written by our readers. You can find us at cool-tools.org. I'm joined by my co-host Kevin Kelly, founder of Cool Tools. Hey, Kevin.

Kevin: Hey, it's great to be here.

Mark: In each episode of the Cool Tools Show, Kevin and I talk to a guest about some of his or her favorite, uncommon and uncommonly good tools they think others should know about.

Mark: Before we introduce this week's guest, I wanted to give a shout out to our Patreon supporters. Patreon is a great way to support everything Cool Tools does, including our newsletters, podcasts, video channel, and our review website. This week, we want to give a shout out to Sarah T. Willis, Jamie Urman and Brian Brooks. To become a patron of Cool Tools yourself, visit Patreon.com/CoolTools.

Mark: Our guest this week is Jeff Yang. Jeff is a cultural critic, author and futures thinker whose latest book *Rise: A Pop History of Asian America from the Nineties to Now*, will come out from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt in January, 2021. He also co-hosts the podcast, *They Call Us Bruce*. Hey Jeff, how are you?

Jeff: I am great. I'm a little sweaty, but that is the air, I guess.

Mark: What's the weather there in Manhattan?

Jeff: It is one of the 15 seasons of Manhattan. I think this is the season of humidity and instant perspiration. But yeah, it's all good. I'm actually doing this podcast outdoors because I literally bolted from the subway in order to achieve access to wireless signal and tune into this. [crosstalk 00:01:50]

Mark: I love that.

Kevin: It sounds great. So we're so delighted, you can join us sweaty or not. We're looking forward to some cool stuff to share with our listeners.

Jeff: Looking forward to sharing.

Mark: Yeah. So you've got some amazing tools lined up to tell us about. Why don't you tell us about the first one, Authority.

Jeff: Yeah. So my tools collectively really speak to the way I would say both my life and I think the lives of a lot of other people have evolved over time. It's really kind of needing to assemble a persona and a platform on demand all the time from a fragmented series of different sites and locations, forms of connectivity, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

Jeff: So Authority is a site that actually I discovered when it was still in beta and I signed up for it because it sounded almost too good to be true. And it kind of has been good enough to be true with all the [inaudible 00:02:46]. So Authority is a site that automatically aggregates all the articles on your byline, all the articles you've published on all the platforms that you contribute to.

Jeff: It doesn't just gather them as links. It actually pulls together legible text, formatted versions of those articles, even when they're behind firewalls. And it makes them available for you to make available either again, on demand to individuals or making even public for other people to read.

Jeff: Really kind of stunning because I tried other kinds of sort of aggregators of my content, my personal stream of content, if you will, in various places. And that firewall thing has been one of the hardest things to really resolve. This kind of works. I'm really quite happy with it.

Kevin: And I assume the host of the material that is fire-walled is okay with it appearing on Authority?

Jeff: I have to I assume so. I mean, it's a subscription service, so you pay for it. I assume that they have some kind of licensing relationship with the underlying entities where they're transmitting value, because otherwise it would be hard to imagine.

Jeff: I know that there are ways to end run firewalls of which we will not speak. I'm also assuming that because this is a commercial platform that works with journalists and as a result, it has to keep its nose clean, I think, with their employers that this is a fully legit operation. It keeps on evolving. They add additional publications and platforms. Again, so far it's been mostly stumble free.

Jeff: The only thing actually I've found is it is still essentially using your name and some sense of the kinds of things you cover to try to identify articles that are yours. Yang and Jeff are

both not uncommon names these days, I suppose. So there are more than zero false positives. No false negatives from what I've seen.

Kevin: And so, the idea is that this does it automatically. It's not that you are telling it to. It's actually just scraping the web and doing it for you.

Jeff: Exactly. You add the platforms that you're contributing to, and then it actually just looks at those platforms and every time your byline comes up. It snags it and adds it to your list.

Kevin: Okay. That's really convenient.

Mark: And does it go beyond... So let's say you have like New York Times, Wired. Will it look beyond those URLs, too? Or is it just the domains you give it?

Jeff: It looks like it actually looks at stuff that I haven't specifically rostered for it, but it definitely will keep a sort of a closer eye on the ones that I've designated as places that occasionally help feed me.

Kevin: And what do they charge?

Jeff: You know, I don't even remember, but it's not... I will pull it up right now and confirm.

Mark: \$8 a month.

Jeff: Yeah, \$8 a month. You can give it one of the 12 streaming platforms that you're subscribed to-

Mark: Exactly. I kind of do that with my software subscriptions. It's like a one in one out. I just canceled my Squarespace subscription and picked up [Annoy 00:06:09].

Kevin: Right. You limit it to 230, right?

Mark: Exactly.

Kevin: So, I don't want to derail the list of tools you have for us, but Jeff, I do want to come back to great ways to circumvent paywalls.

Jeff: I mean, just in the context of being able to get a quick peek, obviously most paywalls these days do provide you with limited access, like a certain number of articles per month. And of course there are ways to sort of briefly trick those paywalls to say, "Hey, this is not me who's talking. It's some other me who's talking." And as a result, kind of grab a new set of free article axes. But again, you can't really share it that way. It's just unwieldy to do that for the [inaudible 00:07:03].

Kevin: I thought one of the genius inventions recently was the New York Times gift mode. I don't know if you know about that, but if you are a subscriber to New York Times, you

are allowed to gift 10 articles a month and that gift does not count on the recipient's tally that they would normally have for the free amount. And you can also gift one publicly, like on social media and then all those can receive it.

Mark: Cool.

Jeff: It's pretty brilliant. [crosstalk 00:07:38]

Mark: That's so good. I didn't know that. I subscribe to the New York Times, but I haven't taken advantage of that.

Kevin: Right, right. So there's a little wrapped gift icon somewhere in the top or bottom. And then you hit that and then you are gifted articles and they don't count against the normal tally for recipients.

Jeff: Honestly, I think there's something more paywall than subscription-based services if you really think about it.

Kevin: Absolutely.

Jeff: If you could gift an episode of a television show from Hulu or whatever. It makes a big difference and it's viral transmission. It'll get other people in under the curtain, you know?

Kevin: Yeah. I'm mentioning it because I'm hoping other people will imitate it; other platforms. So Jeff, what's your second cool tool?

Jeff: Descript is a transcription tool that takes audio. It could be conversations, could be podcast episodes and it transcribes them into text. It's kind of a holy grail for those of us who do a lot of audio interviews, or again, we're podcasters; not least because it just a manually time-consuming thing, to transcribe conversations. Like an hour of conversation is like three hours of painstaking transcription in many cases.

Jeff: Descript was something I'd been following for a little while. I finally bit the bullet and decided to try it. And when I got in and was kind of in the good enough stage. It basically transcribed things well enough that I could just scan through documents, identify quotes I wanted to drill down into, and then automatically listen to the underlying audio and kind of just correct them for the purposes of using those quotes, but it's gotten better over time.

Jeff: And I think now it's actually good enough that I and my podcast co-host Phil Yu, are potentially looking to using it to go back to our hundreds of episodes of our podcast and transcribe them for people who are hearing impaired. Obviously, accessibility is a giant and important thing and a challenge for us. And this might actually be good enough to do something with.

Jeff: I know it's not the only transcription software out there, but it's certainly one of the first I've seen that's really this almost plug and play, drag and drop. And then output text that is quite readable; quite close enough to the original conversation to be able to figure out what's going on.

Kevin: And how much does that cost?

Jeff: There's a free version actually. And that's what I started using. But then if you want to go beyond that, dig into having unlimited projects and being able to do things like screen recordings; 10 hours of transcription a month, it's \$12 a month. So here we are, we're throwing another streaming platform into the ocean and [inaudible 00:10:30].

Jeff: But the other thing that's kind of cool about Descript is that when it does a transcription, it's not just taking the audio, pumping out text and then kind of leaving you with a bunch of words. It actually connects the transcription to the underlying video or audio recording. And it allows you to, in fact, edit using the transcription.

Jeff: So if you have a sound bite you want to pull out and move to the beginning, let's say, of a recording. You could just copy and paste that chunk of text, copy it and paste it somewhere else and it will move the audio or video along with it.

Jeff: You can use it to kind of do a very rough edit of stuff, especially if you're trying to figure out kind of a narrative flow for something. And I found that to be really, really powerful as well.

Kevin: So you're saying that it does the transcription of say your monologue and you decide you want to change the order of the sentences, you could change the order of sentences in the text?

Jeff: Yeah.

Kevin: And that then is reflected by changing the order of the sound, of the audio.

Jeff: Yes, and there are lots of little kind of additional bells and whistles since it sees itself as much as an editing program as a transcription tool. So it'll do things like go back and remove pause syllables, pause words, like um and ah.

Kevin: Oh, it can take out um, um, mm, will just disappear.

Jeff: Right. And then all of a sudden, the podcast is half as long.

Mark: And also from what I understand, you could actually like insert a word that you never said, and it will put it in there in your voice.

Jeff: You know, I haven't tried that, but that's almost leading into shallow, fakey-type territory.

Mark: Yeah. It is. And I actually played around with it early on with a beta and it was like really good. And I was thinking like, yeah, you could do like deep fakes of voices and stuff, but they apparently have a bunch of safeguards in there that make it hard and it's really limited. You can just do like a couple of words that has to be within the context of the podcast that you're doing, but it seemed pretty natural to me.

Kevin: Yeah. Well that's, yeah. I hate it when they make things worse just on purpose.

Mark: Yeah. Yeah.

Kevin: But I guess it'll take some time for us to get used to it. So there is a free version and then there's a premium? There's a freemium and a premium?

Jeff: They're like three premium tiers. The tier I'm on is creator. That's 12 bucks per month. That gives you... 10 hours of transcription usually covers me. It allows you to do things like timeline export, video export. So you actually can move your rough edits into other programs and then use those timelines to edit it in a sharper way.

Jeff: Above that you've got the Pro level, which has basically everything as the prior levels, but then for some reason, there's a pro attached to it. It's like Filler Words Pro, Audiograms Pro, Published Pro.

Mark: Of course.

Jeff: And then there's Enterprise Level, which is again, let's not even worry about that.

Kevin: That sounds really great. I know there's a bunch of different transcription services available, but the idea of integrating it with editing is genius and I think that's really cool and I'm going to try it out myself.

Jeff: It was actually founded, I believe by the guy who founded Groupon. And I like to think that it's kind of his act of redemption.

Mark: Making amends.

Jeff: All the useless crap that's been injected into the world because of Groupon. Anyway.

Kevin: And so you have another audio related tool to tell us about?

Jeff: Yeah. So Audacity is my go-to audio editing program. And it's also kind of my example of open source can be awesome. Right? I mean, there are a lot of great open source programs out there. A lot of them require a little bit more lift in terms of learning curve and interface.

Jeff: It's not like Audacity is perfect, but literally, I picked it up and was using it, and using it in fairly complex fashion with a bunch of the plugins they have, a bunch of the audio

clean-up and manipulation effects that they have built in. It's actually, to me, more convenience and more intuitive in a lot of ways than GarageBand or other tools that I know that friends of mine use.

Kevin: Yeah. I've been using Audacity for my editing tool. I would say it's a venerable one, been around a while and I think for open source, it's really, really great.

Mark: Yeah. I agree. I mean, the only thing I can compare that says... Well, there's probably a few, so it's unfair, but I started using Blender, that 3-D animation and modeling.

Jeff: For audio?

Mark: No, just for animation. We're just comparing like great open source platforms.

Jeff: Oh, open source. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Mark: It's amazing. And it compares, I think with the way that Audacity is such a useful, full-featured tool that allows you to add things onto it.

Mark: The only thing is, does it still force you to like download the MP3 plugin from the Fraunhofer Institute or something like that, because they're afraid of like some kind of-

Jeff: When I first installed it, I had to do that. And I felt like that almost felt like the jagged edge of where we sit in terms of the expanding crisis of intellectual property.

Mark: Yeah.

Jeff: But the very fact that you can actually get the tool, but bundling the tool is the thing that actually is the limitation, just makes my brain explode a little bit.

Mark: Yeah. It's true. Well, cool. So, yeah. So do you actually edit your own podcast?

Jeff: Yeah, I will say that I do it much less than Phil Yu, my podcast cohost, but when I do do it, I do it on Audacity. And you can kind of tell that we self-edit. We don't have like a dedicated professional doing it because ours is probably a little rawer in feel and sound than any podcast. Also partially because we're often recording like this, sitting in McDonald's outdoor atria or when our kids are screaming in the background and stuff like that. But we've tried to make that actually part of the sonic ambience.

Mark: Yeah. Do you have one basic like trick for how you use it? Do you apply compression to it or leveling or is there anything that's... It is a kind of cure-all for your recordings?

Jeff: I will say that, yeah, definitely compressor is an important thing just because levels can sometimes all over the place, especially when you're recording remotely. Right?

Mark: Yeah.

Jeff: You know, you'll see that on a platform like this, where we're all kind of capturing local audio, the levels are going to be very, very different. There actually is a pretty good noise reduction effect in Audacity. It's always dangerous because when you overdo it, it's sort of like hitting an image with too much saturation tool and stuff like that.

Mark: Yeah.

Jeff: Too many Instagram filters, whatever.

Mark: Yeah.

Jeff: But it's not bad for just kind of capturing a little sample and then removing say a persistent low hum or baseline buzz or something if you need to yeah.

Mark: Yeah, like a 60 Hertz.

Jeff: Oh yeah. That 60 Hertz.

Mark: Yes, exactly. It'll get you every time. Okay. So moving out of the world of software, we've got one that is your final pick and it sounds pretty cool. Tell us about it.

Jeff: So, especially in this time of quarantine, right? Gyms are all closed. Lots of public places were shut down. The one thing that was kind of a saving grace, even living in Los Angeles, where in general moving any kind of transportation that doesn't involve at least four wheels is verboten, right?

Jeff: Bicycling came back into my life and I've always biked when I lived in New York, I biked for sport, but I didn't really bike for transportation in Los Angeles. It was just much less efficient.

Jeff: With fewer cars on the road and more need to do things like a run to the market, et cetera. I pulled my Brompton M3L bike out of not quite storage. I mean, again, I would take it down to the beach and bike every so often, but it became like my go-to, my real go-to in terms of just point-to-point transport.

Jeff: And for those guys who are not familiar with the Brompton, it's a folding bike and it's a folding bike with, I think the cleverest and certainly the most compact fold of any bike that actually rides like a bike. It basically collapses almost like in Z formation or something. It bends in the middle and then the back wheel flips under and the front wheel kind of clips to the back wheel. So you end up with a package once you've put the handlebars down on top of the front wheel, that it's almost the size of a wheel.

Kevin: Wow. And those wheels are small wheels, too.

Jeff: Slightly small, but they're a little bit... Basically about the size of like, well, a little smaller than like a BMX bike. But the way the chain works, it gives you enough leverage that it really does feel quite a bit like biking a regular bike.

Jeff: I've had a lot of folding bikes over and a number of Bromptons. I've had three Bromptons, probably a dozen other folding bikes of various types. The Brompton has never been surpassed in terms of just sheer convenience and mobility on demand.

Jeff: I'm a kind of a nerd when it comes to last mile type stuff. I did a South by Southwest panel on it. And to me, the whole notion of a backpack bike, or something which allows you to get onto public transportation, get off and then do your mile and a half or whatever to your final destination has always seemed to me for able-bodied people like the holy grail.

Mark: Yeah.

Jeff: And the Bromptons, again, I've never seen anything come quite as close to the Brompton for that purpose.

Kevin: The Brompton makes a bunch of different models. I mean, first of all, it's another venerable item that's been around many, many years and they make a bunch of different models. Do you have a particular model that you recommend?

Jeff: Well, the one I have is an M3L.

Kevin: M3L?

Jeff: Yeah. The three speed has got the kind of traditional Y-shaped handlebars. So you're kind of riding fairly erect. Right?

Jeff: It's a really nice sort of street bike for urban transport. I wouldn't do triathlons with it or anything like that. I wouldn't do triathlons.

Kevin: Right.

Jeff: But for the purposes I need it like riding from borough to borough in New York City, for instance; or getting down to the beach from where I live on the west side in Los Angeles, it has been kind of perfect.

Kevin: So, I know that they make two gear versions or six gear versions, and you said three. Is that because you think it's sufficient or is there a cost difference or why three gears versus say two or six?

Jeff: I think for me, this was just a matter of, I bought it used. I actually bought all my Bromptons used. Every time, in fact, I've seen a used one pop up in my various like Craigslist/other kinds of used good feeds. I will actually price it and if it's worth it, I'll just

buy that sucker because these things are expensive. They are imported and just finding one in good condition. They last a long time, but finding one in good condition and getting it for a reasonable price is kind of a godsend. It just happened to be that this was the one that most recently was available.

Jeff: I mean, look... I love 10 speed, eight speed, other kinds of more gradation if you're somewhere hilly especially, but most of the cycling I've done has been on fairly reasonable grades. And my life tends to sort of fall neatly into three-way S-M-L type... Small, medium, large type things or good, better, best type things. So three-speed is good enough for me.

Kevin: So yeah, Brompton seems to be sold out of most of their stock. And it seems as if the cheapest new is \$1,000 and maybe between \$1,000 and \$2,000 for the basic versions. So that's if you find new.

Jeff: Absolutely. If you see a used Brompton and it's basically under \$1,200 and a clean, recent vintage and so forth, you're getting a bargain. So that's part of the reason I keep my eyes peeled.

Mark: It's amazing.

Jeff: Yeah.

Mark: I wonder why there's a run on them all of a sudden?

Jeff: The arc of the world is bending towards things like the Brompton.

Kevin: Yeah.

Mark: It seems like it.

Kevin: And so once it's up and folded, how much does it weigh? What if you have to pick it up and carry it onto the train or the subway or wherever you're going, onto a bus... How much does it weigh?

Jeff: I'd say 25 maybe pounds. I'm really bad at like translating from kilograms.

Kevin: Well, how many kilograms is it?

Jeff: I'd have to look it up, but I believe that heft-wise, it's not too much more than... I mean, I carry a backpack, which feels like it weighs not much less than the bike itself. And that's to me actually, the end goal, right? I mean, I feel like somewhere along the way, somebody might create like a true backpack bike that is more effective and efficient and well-designed than the Brompton, but I haven't seen it yet. And until then, that's this, you know?

Mark: I have to say, I'm looking at AliExpress right now. And they have a Mita 14 inch folding bicycle that looks a lot like a Brompton for \$47.31.

Kevin: I think you should buy it, Mark, just as the cheapest folding bike on Alibaba and then we can write a review.

Mark: Oh, wait, get this. Shipping \$232.00.

Jeff: Oh, boy. Still a bargain. I will say, I've actually bought bikes and all the things via Alibaba, and they ship. They also don't insure shipping and getting parts for anything that you buy is almost impossible. You know there's the site Wish. Right?

Kevin: Yes.

Mark: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jeff: It kind of offers the same sort of like really low prices for [inaudible 00:26:44] type goods from China directly. Alibaba is basically You Wish. Whatever you dream of, you can ask for it.

Mark: That's great. I love it.

Jeff: Rolling the dice.

Mark: Totally.

Kevin: Well, this is really great, Jeff. Why don't you tell us about your new book?

Jeff: Yeah, so obviously during quarantine, lots of people were talking about how it was just sort of prime time to do the project you've always wanted to do, right? To get out there and write your King Lear or whatever.

Jeff: While I'm not going to quite compare this to Shakespeare, this is definitely a passion project that I and my two co-writers Phil Yu, my podcast co-host and longtime friend and Philip Wong, another old friend of ours, who does is one of the co-founders of the YouTube platform, YouTube channel, Wong Fu Productions.

Jeff: The three of us were just talking over Zoom and noting... This is fairly early on in quarantine, the world was really shifting. We'd kind of gone from this moment where we were exalting over all the different ways that Asian American voices and creators were being uplifted. Crazy Rich Asians was still very much on our minds. And then coronavirus happened and Trump happened, of course, and here we were with people getting beaten in the streets and Asian Americans being called plague dogs and the like.

Jeff: It really felt a little scary, like all the advances we might've made over, not just the past couple of years, but decades, were being suddenly, if not erased, then put in deep freeze, and we didn't know what was going to come next.

Jeff: Kind of combining that with the fact that a number of people who were mentors of ours, people who maybe we're a slightly older generation, were actually starting to pass away. We realized how temporary, in many ways, the remembrance of history can be. And especially if all these achievements we've done as a community, as a culture, were going to be stymied or put on some kind of hold.

Jeff: If there was a need to be built and to be launched, we'd spark what we'd started, we figured we needed some kind of blueprint. And that led us to come up with idea for Rise. Rise is a pop history of last 30 years of Asian America. It actually happens to cover three decades in which I, Phil and Philip each kind of consecutively came of age... Me, the 1990s; Phil Yu the 2000s and Phil Wong the 2010s.

Jeff: We also covered three different types of kind of creative expression platforms. It sounds quaint now, but I founded one of the first Asian American magazines and the first flush of the Arab desktop publishing.

Jeff: Then Phil created Angry Asian Man, which is even to this day, perhaps the best read Asian American news and culture blog, and then Philip Wong was one of the pioneers of Asian Americans on YouTube.

Jeff: So through those three lenses and with all the different connections we have individually and collectively, we just did tons and tons of interviews, roped in tons of collaborators of a wide array of different backgrounds and heritages and identities. And we put together this 500 page document of these last 30 years.

Jeff: It was exciting to do. And in some ways, probably a project we could never have done, except for the fact that we weren't the only ones just sitting around on Zoom in the evenings. We actually found it remarkably easier to connect with a bunch of people who were probably too busy otherwise, simply because all of us were stuck at home.

Kevin: So for our readers, that is Rise, R-I-S-E, Rise: A Pop History of Asian America from the Nineties to Now. And this that will be coming out in January of next year? Is that right?

Jeff: Yep. Yep.

Kevin: We'll have links to that if that's on Amazon pre-sale, which I assume it was.

Kevin: So we really, really, really appreciate, Jeff, your suggestions, which are really cool. I'm going to immediately go and try out Descript and thanks for the other suggestions and lesson on audio stuff, which we are always eager to hear. So we really appreciate your joining us.

Jeff: Thank you so much, Kevin. This has been a real joy. Anytime you need anything, guys, let me know.

Mark: Hey everybody, it's Mark from the Cool Tools podcast. I want to thank you for being a listener to Cool Tools. And I also would like to let you know about our Patreon page.

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Mark: Thanks to all of you for supporting the Cool Tools Show. We really appreciate it.