

Caught in the Net

– notes from an era of cybernetic delirium

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Back when this article first began coming together, a telling story appeared among the sensationalist reports of the British tabloid papers. A 89-year-old retired art teacher and former Royal Navy electrician, named only as Anne, retired to the Dignitas clinic in Switzerland in order to end her life alongside others seeking less-restrictive assisted suicide laws than in their country of origin. Nothing remarkable in itself. What was more noticeable was her comments about what had led her there; namely that she could not keep up with technological-industrial society and found the world as it is today unnavigable and unbearable. *“Why do so many people spend their lives sitting in front of a computer or television?”* she asked in the feature. *“People are becoming more and more remote. We are becoming robots. It is this lack of humanity.”*

No-one on these islands could be confused as to what Annie might be speaking of in these statements. Whether you consider it an exciting advance or perhaps even a necessary evil, it is indisputable that in the “developed” world these days there are few places to find refuge from the many faces of the screen; and, more specifically, from the networks that now bind together these devices and more. And not just in the sphere of communications media as we have previously understood it as limited to, nor to the workplace or home – from airports, country trails, churches, places of organised leisure, the web of signals and interfaces has spread, rather like a virus, throughout almost all corners of the cultures it emerged from or has colonised subsequently.

These days it’s rare to attend a concert where the front row is made up of attentive faces rather than those bathed in the glow behind the camera-phone lens, eagerly consuming the performance through a secondary medium or even perhaps absently recording to peruse at a later date, with no remaining need to be “in the moment” to be able to exchange opinions with our friends about what was truly the highlight of the night. Indeed, often it feels as if the event itself (whatever it may be) is of secondary importance to the flurry of digital activity that crowds around it; from the social media promotion beforehand to the online reviews appearing simultaneously with the evening’s running order taking its course. *“The most obvious use of Twitter,”* according Eric Schmidt while CEO of Google, is in situations where *“everybody is watching a play and are busy talking about the play while the play is underway.”* Meanwhile, to text message your neighbours instead of dropping around unannounced has become entirely reasonable (finding acceptance even among age-groups who would previously have balked at the idea), more appropriate, more... neighbourly. Computer games, previously thought by some to be found among the lower reaches of detachment from the social realm, have now been ousted from that scale by new depths: watching other people playing computer games becoming a mass spectator sport.

The writer Daniel Goleman gives us a familiar anecdote. *“The little girl’s head only came up to her mother’s waist as she hugged her mum, and held on fiercely as they rode a ferry to a holiday island. The mother, though, didn’t respond to her, or even seem to notice: she was absorbed in her iPad all the while.”*

There was a reprise a few minutes later, as I was getting into a shared taxi van with nine female students who that night were journeying to a weekend getaway. Within a minute of taking their seats in the dark van, dim lights flicked on as every one of the women checked an iPhone or tablet. Desultory conversations sputtered along while they texted or scrolled through Facebook. But mostly there was silence.

The indifference of that mother, and the silence among the students, are symptoms of how technology captures our attention and disrupts our connections. In 2006, the word ‘pizzled’ entered our lexicon; a combination of puzzled and pissed, it captured the feeling people had when the person

they were with whipped out their BlackBerry [mid-conversation] and started talking to someone else. Back then people felt hurt and indignant in such moments.

Today it's the norm." Sociological literature has labelled an instance of such a behaviour an 'away' – a gesture which tells another person "I'm not interested in what's going on here and now", now epidemic in a saturated media environment of continuous partial attention, from the boardroom to the living room. The new digital era is becoming so normalised in the minds of its participants that people born directly into the tech-boom of the 1980's and '90s onward can barely imagine the world another way – and yet there are many who remember a life less clustered by gadgets and some still of them who have not submitted to their embrace. *"They say adapt or die. At my age,"* stated Annie, *"I feel I can't adapt, because the new age is not an age that I grew up to understand."* That it is probably so easy to write off the complaints of an aged woman and her generation speaks of the callousness that has become so commonplace in industrial society towards its 'spent resources', as age-old respect for and wisdom from elders (that is, those deemed to have earned the title) becomes the scorn of the tech-literate towards the dismay of many of our predecessors at the dizzying pace of techno-acceleration, in a deskilled society less guided by attained and lived human wisdom than externally-implemented machine updates. The assumption is that it is they, as well as their more familiar technologies, that are 'obsolete' – without a place, without a future.

Yet these observations could elicit the retort that what's at issue is simply mis- or over-use of the options that the digital medium are aligned towards. The tool is what we make of it, we tell ourselves. Here we encounter a classic trap in analysing a technology: focusing on the *content* (i.e. what information, stories, arguments etc. are conveyed, or what task performed) at the expense of examining the *form* (i.e. what the physical medium entails) to work out how it influences how we think, feel and act. How in control of the affects of the digital medium are we by choosing what we access through it? Or what, in itself, goes with the territory?

Each technology carries within it a reflection of the ideology that it was crafted in the context of. What we are experiencing at the moment is a change that is maybe similar in scale and depth to that which heralded the industrial revolution; a paradigm shift in the way that we encounter the world, born from the productivist and capitalising mentality and yet perhaps distinct in many ways from the previous era in terms of how we are conditioned to operate by the tools we use. Some have called this the 'interface revolution'. At the centre of this, reaching even to a physiological level, is the internet. Before moving on to what this might mean for those of the anarchist space (or others) in search of a way out of the dominant culture, we would do well to examine these shifts. In much of the world the Net is no longer felt to be a distinct destination we access in a specific moment through a designated technology, but rather an environment we inhabit permanently, always on, always present, always transmitting and receiving; and despite the degree to which we almost accept it as a part of ourselves, to recall facts or retain social ties, one which simultaneously seems to fade into the background of many people's awareness.

The Message & The Medium

"I can feel it too. Over the last few years I've had an uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain, remapping my neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory. My mind isn't going – so far as I can tell – but it's changing.

I'm not thinking the way I used to think. I feel it most strongly when I'm reading. I used to find it easy to immerse myself in a book or a lengthy article. My mind would get caught up in the twists of the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration starts to drift after a page or two. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. [...] Whether I'm online or not, my mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a jet ski. [M]y brain, I realized, wasn't just drifting. It was hungry. It was demanding to be fed the way the Net fed it – and the more it was fed, the hungrier it became. Even when I was away from the computer, I yearned to check e-mail, click links, do some Googling. I wanted to be connected."

– Nicholas Carr

Until relatively recently, for centuries the dominant Western culture has operated under a prevailing model of linearity, as can be seen in the development of literacy for example: reading meaning pursuing a single body of text, with a priority on contemplation, solitude (in at least a mental sense), and attentiveness. The form which the internet takes, with the simple leaf of a book replaced by the scramble of toolbars, links, hypertext, advertising, automatically-streaming video and so on, is cultivating a shift into a non-linear realm. Today we who are immersed in the online world often don't necessarily read left to right or top to bottom anymore, but skim around the page trying to pick out titbits of 'key' information rather than try to absorb the piece as a whole. It's no secret that by and large the media industries consider that "print is dead", and the cultural direction is towards any and all publication eventually being virtual. Some researchers have claimed that their studies in topics such as subject, composition and narrative flow show creative writing to have steadily become less imaginative and diverse over the last decades, whereas graphic art for instance has shown an opposite trend as culture becomes even more spectacular and symbol-manipulating.

Do you remember how you feel when you come away from any prolonged time on the internet? How it feels like you struggle to 'readjust' to the elements of our daily life which remain non-digitalised? Is there even much space between these moments for you anymore, fluttering between phonscreen, tablet, desktop? We could consider the scientific narrative which has come to the fore among neurologists (those who study the brain) about "neuro-plasticity", as one potential story to consider among others in theorising our situation (obviously with an eye to the limitations, framings and biases inherent in its scientific tradition). Nicholas Carr quotes such a scientist, Michael Merzenich, who "*ruminated on the Internet's power to cause not just modest alterations, but fundamental changes in our mental makeup. Noting that "our brain is modified on a substantial scale, physically and functionally, each time we learn a new skill or develop a new ability," he described the Net as the latest in a series of "modern cultural specializations" that "contemporary humans can spend millions of 'practice' events at [and that] the average human a thousand years ago had absolutely no exposure to." He concluded that "our brains are massively remodeled by this exposure." He returned to this theme in a post on his blog in 2008, resorting to capital letters to emphasize his points. "When culture drives changes in the ways that we engage our brains, it creates DIFFERENT brains," he wrote, noting that our minds "strengthen specific heavily-exercised processes." While acknowledging that it's now hard to imagine living without the Internet and on-*

line tools like the Google search engine, he stressed that “THEIR HEAVY USE HAS NEUROLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES.”

What we're not doing when we're online also has neurological consequences. Just as neurons that fire together wire together, neurons that don't fire together don't wire together. As the time we spend scanning Web pages crowds out the time we spend reading books, as the time we spend exchanging bite-sized text messages crowds out the time we spend composing sentences and paragraphs, as the time we spend hopping across links crowds out the time we devote to quiet reflection and contemplation, the circuits that support those old intellectual functions and pursuits weaken and begin to break apart. The brain recycles the disused neurons and synapses for other, more pressing work. We gain new skills and perspectives but lose old ones. [...] Calm, focused, undistracted, the linear mind is being pushed aside by a new kind of mind that wants and needs to take in and dole out information in short, disjointed, often overlapping bursts – the faster, the better. John Battelle, a onetime magazine editor and journalism professor who now runs an online advertising syndicate, has described the intellectual frisson he experiences when skittering across Web pages: “When I am performing bricolage in real time over the course of hours, I am ‘feeling’ my brain light up, I [am] ‘feeling’ like I’m getting smarter.” Most of us have experienced similar sensations while online. The feelings are intoxicating – so much so that they can distract us from the Net’s deeper cognitive consequences.”

Again, the temptation might be to blame the sheer volume of data which is available to us (the message) for all this – and indeed there’s more to be said on this point – yet, again, we can’t help but feel that there is something in the form itself (the medium) which pushes in this direction. Would this not be the roboticness, the remoteness to living social contact ‘off-screen’, which had so distressed Annie? Though in no way terminally ill, she feared ending up in the hospital or the nursing home. Perhaps what left her seeing no way out but a dignified end to a long (and, by her account, proud) life was seeing the world around her slip into delirium faster than herself.

Digital Dementia

“While dementia is a disease that typically plagues the elderly, a new type of cognitive condition is affecting younger individuals in their early 20s and teens – a disorder known as “digital dementia.” Digital dementia is characterized as the deterioration of brain function as a result of the overuse of digital technology, such as computers, smart phones and Internet use in general, Medical Daily reported. This excess use of technology leads to unbalanced brain development, as heavy users are more likely to overdevelop their left brains, leaving their right brains underdeveloped. The left side of the brain is generally associated with rational thought, numerical computation and fact finding, while the right side of the brain is responsible for more creative skills and emotional thoughts. If the right brain remains under developed in the long term, it can lead to the early onset of dementia. “Ten to 15 percent of those with the mild cognitive disorders develop dementia,” said psychiatrist Park Ki-jeong. Common symptoms of digital dementia include memory problems, shortened attention spans and emotional flattening.”

– New ‘Digital Dementia’ Plaguing Young Tech Users

Obviously, it’s not as easy as reductionist science [*ed. – see ‘A Profound Dis-ease’*] would have it to separate one aspect of relative unhealth from another, the “emotional” from the “physical”

and so on. But clearly all is not at ease with human well-being in the civilised world, and the symptoms commonly described as “neurological” are increasingly prevalent. One study across the Western world, “*focusing on the changing pattern of neurological deaths from 1979 up to 1997, found that dementias were starting 10 years earlier – affecting more people in their 40s and 50s – and that there was a noticeable increase in neurological deaths in people up to the age of 74. [T]he speed and size of the increases in just 20 years points to mainly environmental influences.*”¹ Here in the U.K., new charities have appeared specifically for young sufferers of dementia and Parkinson’s Disease, joining those already responding to surging cancer rates².

Incredibly, it wasn’t until 2013 that the authors of the DSM, the official psychiatrist’s diagnostic manual, considered ‘Internet-Use Disorder’ enough of a worldly phenomena to warrant locking up into a discrete, individualising diagnosis for that year’s edition (complete with the usual standardising ‘solutions’). By around that time, others were estimating 5-10% of internet users to be addicted; as in, “unable to control their use”. In South Korea, home to the world’s largest population of internet users, addiction has been recognised across age groups as far back as the ’90s. It was there that the term ‘digital dementia’ was coined, designating a deterioration in cognitive abilities that is more commonly seen in people who have suffered a head injury or psychiatric illness. South Korean doctors have since reported a surge among young people who have become so reliant on electronic devices that they can no longer remember everyday details like their phone numbers. By the time the DSM had published their diagnosis, the amount of people aged 10-19 who use their smartphones for more than seven hours every day was close to 20%, with children more likely than adults to suffer “emotional underdevelopment” because their brains are still growing.

In Korea, as in other Asian countries such as Taiwan, addiction among the young to gaming, social media and virtual realities is recognised as a national health crisis. But from where we are, you needn’t travel that far to see the withdrawal symptoms of nervousness, anguish and irritability when kids (and not only) are separated from their devices. As the age-range of “digital natives” grows, their maladies become more recognisable and widespread.

Generation App

“[Howard Gardner and Katie Davis explore] how young people view themselves and their relationships when smart devices are nearly ubiquitous, social rites happen via

¹“What might these environmental features be? In the past 20 years, we have quadrupled our road and air transport, with the inevitable increases in air pollution exposing us to a range of noxious substances; our background radiation has increased with the use of technological devices; there are organophosphates in our food chain. We need to recognise the interactive relationship between these minor irritants that collectively affect human health. We are beginning to acknowledge the human impact on the natural world, but forget that we are part of the natural world, too” (Why Modern Life is Making Dementia in Your 40s More Likely).

²“Dr Denis Henshaw, Professor of Human Radiation Effects at Bristol University, the scientific adviser for Children with Cancer UK, said air pollution was by far the biggest culprit, accounting for around 40 per cent of the rise, but other elements of modern lifestyles are also to blame. Among these are obesity, pesticides and solvents inhaled during pregnancy, circadian rhythm disruption through too much bright light at night, radiation from x-rays and CT scans, smoking during and after pregnancy, magnetic fields from power lines, gadgets in homes, and potentially [sic], radiation from mobile phones. [...] More than 4,000 children and young people are diagnosed with cancer every year in Britain, and cancer is the leading cause of death in children aged one to 14” (Modern life is killing our children: Cancer rate in young people up 40 per cent in 16 years).

text message and the currency of popularity is traded in likes and comments on social-sharing apps. [...] Gardner and Davis ask whether modern social networks are larger yet shallower than those of their parents and grandparents[...] The app mindset, they say, motivates youth to seek direct, quick, easy solutions – the kinds of answers an app would provide – and to shy away from questions, whether large or small, when there’s no “app for that.” [...] But the external polish often hides deep-seated anxiety, outwardly expressed as a need for approval. In their conversations with camp counselors and teachers, Gardner and Davis were repeatedly told that youth today are risk-averse; the app generation, said one focus group participant, is “scared to death.” ”

– *Is There an App for That?*

In Londonderry, Northern Ireland, one primary school has turned to speech and language therapy to try to ‘rehabilitate’ children three or four years old; who have become dependent on tablets and smartphones. “*We find that they are less communicative. They prefer their own company,*” reported a teacher. “*When we give them blocks to play with you find them using them as pretend iPads or phones.*” The therapist herself recounted it as “*a general trend throughout the schools I go to. [...] Attention, listening and turn-taking are necessary skills and they just don’t have them.*”

Meanwhile, a sizeable chunk of those who have reached youth or adolescence casually report themselves to be pretty much always online through one device or another (or even several simultaneously). However, a good few also report their disenchantment with this “new normal”. Goleman cites one student who “*observes the loneliness and isolation that goes along with living in a virtual world of tweets, status updates and “posting pictures of my dinner.” He notes that his classmates are losing their ability for conversation, let alone the soul-searching discussions that can enrich the college years. And, he says, “no birthday, concert, hang-out session, or party can be enjoyed without taking the time to distance yourself from what you are doing” to make sure that those in your digital world know instantly how much fun you are having.*” Many who have interacted with those who have been raised in digital immersion comment on the devastating impact it has had on adventurousness and imagination; how many of today’s teens have never been lost (literally or metaphorically), nor seen the point in random walks or other ways of building resilience and independence. By short-cutting the exploratory path to knowledge via discovery, a host of apps and search algorithms diminish engagement with the world and lead to standardised possibilities³.

The costs of all this digital engagement surpass the obvious deficit in face-to-face interaction which leaves Generation App unable to pick up on the nuances of non-verbal communication. To return for a moment to the Far East, in some countries there as many as 90% of children are deemed short-sighted (myopic), up from under 20% just a couple of decades before – a significant increase in time spent indoors (and, more than likely, plugged-in) is suspected the cause. In the

³This conditioning and reduction is mirrored on an institutional level in an increasingly standardised school system. As one brief example, Carr writes how already in 2009, Edexcel, the largest educational testing firm in England, introduced computer-automated exam testing on essays for language proficiency. “A testing expert told the paper that the computerized evaluation of essays would be a mainstay of education in the future: “The uncertainty is ‘when’ not ‘if.’” How, I wondered, would the Edexcel software discern those rare students who break from the conventions of writing not because they’re incompetent but because they have a special spark of brilliance? I knew the answer: it wouldn’t. Computers, as Joseph Weizenbaum pointed out, follow rules; they don’t make judgements. In place of subjectivity, they give us formula.”

West, around one person in three is now myopic. A recent survey of children in the U.K. found that a fifth of them didn't play outside at all on an average day, while one in nine hadn't ventured into environments such as parks, forests or beaches for over a year. It was noted that, based on the same study, three-quarters of children in Britain spent less time outside each day than the one hour guideline which the United Nations advises for prisoners [*ed. – though, it must be said, this can regularly be denied to inmates in reality*]. It's probably unnecessary for us to use up space here detailing all the profound spiritual and psycho-social intelligences undeveloped or engaged with as a consequence [*ed. – see 'The Stories Which Civilisation Holds as Sacred'*], besides the more limited "health" ones as commonly recognised.

We could continue at length about the results of this increase in sedentism; diabetes turning from a rare disease into a pandemic in the industrialised world; the links between WiFi signal exposure and cancer, reduced fertility, decreased ability to concentrate, and disturbed sleep⁴; or the specific deleterious effects of computer-time in general⁵, but for the purposes of this essay we'll now turn to a modern sickness of another kind.

Information Pollution

“The pace of life feels morally dangerous to me,” Richard Ford, the novelist, wrote six years ago. It has only gotten worse since then, complains David M. Levy, a victim of information overload who is also a computer scientist at the University of Washington's Information School. Levy is all but helpless, he says, when new e-mail arrives. He feels obliged to open it. He is similarly hooked on the news, images and nonsense that spill out of the Internet. He is also a receiver and sometimes a transmitter of “surfer's voice,” the blanched prattling of someone on the phone while diddling around on the Web. “We are living lives of Web fragments,” he said. “We don't remember that it is part of our birthright as human beings to have space and silence for our thoughts.” [He admits this affects not just him but,] in his view, most of the developed world.”

– *Information Sickness*

It was 1981, long before the internet and the rise of the virtual, never-off, always-connected world, that the novelist Ted Mooney coined the phrase 'information sickness', and today many of

⁴The established theory of electromagnetic communication between cells, tissues and organs means that WiFi radiation would overlap and interfere, impacting the central nervous system, immune system and protein synthesis. Of course, taking this into account has to be considered as yet another accumulative source next to “radio and TV antennae, radar platforms, high tension wires, military stations and dozens of different electrical household appliances [which] have already been disseminating waves for decades that, even if trifling taken singly, together and with continuous exposure could have effects on the health of living beings” (The Enemy is Quite Visible).

⁵It's a long time since this was first decried; take for instance Jerry Mander's words published in 1991. “There have been medical reports for many years about complaints such as fatigue, eye strain, migraines, cataracts, and, among pregnant women who use VDTs (video display terminals), miscarriages, birth defects, premature births, and infant deaths. At first it was not believed that computers could have such effects. Recent research, however, has concentrated on computer-related radiation. VDTs generate a range of electromagnetic radiation, from X-ray, ultraviolet, and infrared, to low-frequency (LF), very-low-frequency (VLF), and extra-low-frequency (ELF) wavelengths. At one time it was believed that these low-frequency radiations were incapable of causing harm to human beings, but it has now been shown that people are far more sensitive to any radiation than previously believed, and that causal relationships are beginning to emerge.”

us are not only receivers but often to some degree transmitters of this white noise of data overload. Indeed it has almost become a social expectation in the fast-moving blur of this stage of modernity that we be present in a media environment that more and more *becomes* 'the environment', that we participate in the never ending conversation about nothing, and *respond*. The weight of blocks of information hurtling towards us like a Tetris game leaves us too little time simply to reflect on what they really mean, while the constancy of paths these interruptions can take to now reach us (being in most Western consumers back-pockets at all times) scatter our thoughts, weaken our memory, and make us tense and anxious.

To bring us back to the question of the message and its medium; Jerry Mander referred in decades passed to his early stance against the television, continuing his attempt to understand *"what was happening to the way that we think and understand information in the television age; our minds were being channeled and simplified to match the channeled and simplified physical environment – suburbs, malls, freeways, high-rise buildings – that also characterized that period (and continues to do so today). This effect would take place, I argued, even if the violence and sex shows and the superficial comedies and the game shows were all removed from the medium, because the process of moving edited images rapidly through a passive human brain was so different from active information gathering, whether from books or newspapers or walks in nature. As a result people would become more passive, less able to deal with nuance and complexity, less able to read or create. People would get "dumber," and have less understanding of world events even within an exploding information environment.*

[...] In our society, speed is celebrated as if it were a virtue in itself. And yet as far as most human beings are concerned, the acceleration of the information cycle has only inundated us with an unprecedented amount of data, most of which is unusable in any practical sense. The true result has been an increase in human anxiety, as we try to keep up with the growing stream of information. Our nervous systems experience the acceleration more than our intellects do. [...] As information is moved through different channels its character and its content change; political relationships, concepts, and styles change as well. Even the human spirit and human body change. Because of the way television signals are processed in the brain, thought patterns are altered and a unique, new relationship to information is developed: cerebral, out-of-context, passive."

Our faculties of memory itself are now significantly shifting to accommodate the online medium. David Brooks commented on it thus: *"I had thought that the magic of the information age was that it allowed us to know more, but then I realized the magic of the information age is that it allows us to know less. It provides us with external cognitive servants – silicon memory systems, collaborative online filters, consumer preference algorithms and networked knowledge. We can burden these servants and liberate ourselves."* What he here celebrates as a liberation strikes us more as an evacuation, an emptying-out of our imaginative capabilities and an increased dependence on depersonalised machine inputs. *"We are becoming symbiotic with our computer tools,"* one research group at Harvard concluded, *"growing into interconnected systems that remember less by knowing information than by knowing where the information can be found."* Some, such as Paul Suderman, identify how the Net *"teaches us to think like it does,"* arguing that *"it's no longer terribly efficient to use our brains to store information."* For those of us who consider that encounters with the unknown – and all the tangents, encounters and experiences that follow – to be a vital

part of any process of knowledge-constitution, the 'Googlisation' of increasingly precise search results can only speak of another narrowing, another dumbing-down⁶.

The 'human resource' managers and technocrats are often aware of the destabilising effects of this information-overload for the smooth functioning of capitalist labour; hence studies' recommendation for office workers to take time from computer work or diddling around the 'social networks' between tasks to walk in the park; or even just to retire to a quiet room to look at photographs of 'natural settings', to allow the restorative powers the researchers wish to instrumentalise time to work their efficiency-boosting magic. However, it's far from clear that there are many stable mechanisms as yet to dissuade employees in the gigantic factory this society has become from repetitively losing themselves in the endless, mesmerising buzz of the Net; especially when they are conditioned (if not outright expected) to pursue this dependency outside of the traditional workplace.

An aforementioned article uses Levy's perspective to assert that "[i]nformation-polluted people need to organize and protect psychic space and quiet time, Levy believes, much as environmentalists organized in the 1960s to protect wetlands and old-growth forests." The implication of this statement seems explicit; that the defeat of these 'previous' struggles must be not only acknowledged (which, thus far, of course it must) but also accepted, and the survivors must retreat one trench deeper into anthropocentrism [ed. – see *Return Fire vol.2 pg11*] to defend something identified as a separable, essential human quality. Yet, outside of this reductionist framework, what is the psychic space formed between a digitally-intoxicated breed of humanity and its relations, not with sun-dappled glades, the flash of the deer or our reflection in the brook, but with the myriad screens it has raised between itself and its world?

Techno-Industrial Enclosure

"Now and in the future, everything must be in its place. Wonder would break a frantically desired monotony, a sorry excuse for life, where the daily humdrum is broken by the ceaseless melodies [ringtones] that resound everywhere (from delirious concerts in non-places like the subway, to the solitary symphonies in the most unexpected places like at night at the top of Stromboli [ed. – a volcanic island in the Tyrrhenian Sea near Sicily]). The desire is to know everything – place, time, activities – in order to cry: I am here, I am there, no problem, no worry, nothing unknown; the buried desire for the unknown is utterly dead, replaced by security. Because waiting is no longer part of this life, capital urgently needs space and time to be occupied; and no squandering is allowed, no elaboration of fantasy is tolerated except that of accumulating more; no misunderstanding, no anticipation lived with passion, determined by desire, sought after in itself for the satisfaction it brings."

– *Mobile Prosthesis*

Surely, one of the most ruinous elements of the information-age onslaught has been the hobbling of imagination, on a scale dwarfing the process already previously begun by the loss of our

⁶Another prerequisite of cyber-reality is the imperative to multi-task; which, while leaving us with the impression we are nimble in our mental awareness, leaves us prone to become less deliberative and more likely to rely on conventional ideas and solutions rather than challenging them, hence making it harder to break out of robotic normative circuits. In the words of the Roman philosopher Seneca, "to be everywhere is to be nowhere".

story-telling to TV⁷. What we can increasingly expect the psychic space occupied by many people to be was resonant with an experiment relayed to us via Bellamy Fitzpatrick on The Brilliant podcast. “[The researchers] felt that today’s youth, specifically the teenagers in the case of this study, are so used to being stimulated all the time, are so used to being on telecommunications, are not used to sitting with their own thoughts (as crazy as that sounds) – and I would definitely say this applies to a lot of people who are older than this as well – and they wondered whether ‘kids today’, as the saying goes, could sit and entertain themselves with their own imagination. And it was exciting to me because actually they used that specific word. And so there was a study on 68 teenagers between 12 and 18 who voluntarily spent 8 hours alone without access to any telecommunications (so no internet, no phones, no computer, no TV, no radio) and instead what they were allowed to do during this time were other activities like writing, reading, playing musical instruments, painting, needlework, singing, walking and so on. Out of the 68 only 3 were actually able to go the full 8 hours[...] 3 of the participants described themselves as having suicidal thoughts. 5 had panic attacks. 27 experienced symptoms like nausea, sweating, dizziness, hot flushes and abdominal pain; and everyone described themselves as feeling fear and anxiety. Almost all of them bailed by the second or third hour, and only 10 people were able to go 3 hours before experiencing anxiety. And so I think they didn’t quite go there in the article that I read, but it seems pretty obvious to me the symptoms that they’re describing are those of physical withdrawal, those that we are used to hear being associated with substances like cocaine or heroin...” Indeed, growing numbers of teens are apparently hoaxing symptoms of so-called Attention Deficit Disorder in order to get prescriptions for attention-heightening stimulants to offset the scatterbrain characteristics of their generation, while their parents seek these drugs and those for narcolepsy as routine ‘performance-enhancers’ to keep up with their jobs.

As we have said, the system’s engineers are attentive to these problems, and don’t hesitate to encourage their ‘resources’ to grant themselves the occasional ‘digital detox’: “[i]nitiatives are blossoming that encourage people to disconnect occasionally (one day per week, for a weekend, a month) in order to take note of their dependence on technological objects and re-experience an “authentic” contact with reality. The attempt proves to be futile of course. The pleasant weekend at the seashore with one’s family and without the smartphones is lived primarily as an experience of disconnection; that is, as something immediately thrown forward to the moment of reconnection, when it will be shared on the Internet” (Google Dégage). At the more lucrative end, users of computer technology are invited to retire to designated ‘camps’ where, as the arrivals to one such place in California were assured, “the most important status we’ll be updating will be our happiness”. Rather than any attempted break with the social paradigm that pushes these technologies as necessary, such efforts generally serve to perpetuate their use by making it more ‘sustainable’. The ‘detox’ is the exceptional time, not the grave effects of intensive digital interfacing, and in the last case the retreat destination sees no need to dispense with the relentless Net-jargon such as the “human-powered search engine” of the camp notice board, or the ominous camp slogan: “Disconnect to Reconnect”, take your break then back to work⁸.

⁷Quinn Norton lamented how hard it is today to tell stories in “a world where falling in love, going to war, and filling out tax forms looks the same; it looks like typing.”

⁸Another managerial response to employee ‘wellbeing’ – i.e. productivity – that goes in the opposite direction (though part of a much longer historical trend in Western culture), in this case often self-managed, is the Quantified Self movement. Following its slogan – “Self-knowledge through numbers” – adherents quantify their life via recorded or machine-taken data points: blood pressure, heart rate, food consumption, sleep, quality of exercise, as well as the nature and range of social media and real interactions, and adjust themselves accordingly. In an effort to battle

Many, many more will never have even considered such a 'disconnection', as perturbing as it is for many people now in the post-industrial heartlands to even have a short trip suggested without their devices in tow. This shift first became so noticeable within our generation's living memory with the advent of the modern leash, the mobile phone. At the time, the authors of 'Mobile Prosthesis' analysed how "[t]his great invention isn't necessary to support a part of the body, but, if anything, a part of the mind. The mobile or cellular phone (this ill-omened name hits the mark so well), this indispensable tool linked to individuals in such a blatantly unhealthy manner, is not just electromagnetic toxicity, nor just a revolution in interpersonal relationships, nor even just a stupid consumerist gadget that fattens the usual pocketbooks as always.

Above all, it is the replacement of that bit of the unknown that this world still reserves for us, the very small wonders of a sought after solitude, of a journey with oneself, of a time away from known and unknown human beings. The terrifying unknown, inconceivable and unimaginable for those who are afraid of their own life, for those who don't want to cut themselves off from the cord that links them to the other puppets of this little sham theater even for a moment, for those who want to know and inform others about their life, or more accurately about their own and other people's physical presence." Not so many years later, the children of today in many cases have exemplified an acceleration of this trajectory (see the last study mentioned above), and the social trend shows no sign of decreasing⁹. Undoubtedly one of the aggravating factors is the prominence which social networking via online platforms has assumed for even those supposedly on the margins of techno-industrial society. 2005-2008 saw an increase of Facebook users from 5.5 million to 100 million. By the end of 2015, Kevin Tucker recounted that "23% of the entire global population uses Facebook monthly, that's up from 20.5% at the end of the first quarter of 2015. Short of fire, this is the most widespread and rapidly acquired social change in the history of the human species. That's fucking insane." This is far from a uniquely 'First World problem': the Algerian city of Constantine was only one of the more recent from the growing list around the world to open a clinic specifically to counter Facebook addiction, in a country whose users are growing around

the number one enemy of global productivity – "stress-related illness" – a German startup called Soma Analytics pioneered a system to measure the early-warning signs of anxiety and sleep deprivation (nevermind the idea that monitoring stress levels might itself be stress-inducing). Perhaps our thoughts could be forgiven for flying to Aldous Huxley's 'Brave New World', the novel where the drug this company gets its name from maintains the World State's command economy. One adherent, Alistair Shepherd, claimed from his office in Google's incubator campus just off 'Silicon Roundabout' at the junction of City Road and Old Street in London that "[w]e like to think of ourselves as special and unique, that a computer cannot tell me who I am, which is wrong because of computer mostly can." Google famously employs a team of industrial-organisational psychologists, behavioural economists and statisticians who use tools including the annual 'Googlegeist' survey of every employee to experiment with each detail of campus life, from the size of dinner plates to the space between screens.

⁹"[I]t is nearly impossible for the inhabitants of this closed world to imagine being disconnected from the machinery of artificial life [and] one could truly ask oneself, and justifiably so, what ruinous condition this human species would come to if it were to be definitively deprived of the impulses transmitted by its machinery. So that the improvement of its connective apparatus is for many the most realistic solution: "The only escape for our children: to put on a suit implanted with all the biosensors that Moore's law has been able to supply us with in order to feel, see and touch virtually, to swallow a good dose of euphoric drugs and to go at the end of each week to the country of their dreams with their favourite star, to a beach from before the sixth extinction [ed. – see Return Fire vol.2 pg17], with their eyes fixed on their visor screens, without a past and without a future." This is not an excerpt from some homage to the visionary genius of the Philip K. Dick of The Days of Perky Pat; it is the conclusion of a very well documented work (Jacques Blamont, Introduction au siècle des menaces, 2004) written by one of the members of the scientific establishment who, having come to the end of his professional career and settled into retirement, sings like a canary" (Jaime Semprun & René Riesel).

10% year-on-year. *"In the past,"* reflected one writer in 'Points For Further Discussion in the Digital Era', *"the idea of abstaining from Friendster or a particular digital social network seemed plausible, to do so simply meant not going on the computer and/or limiting computer use. Computer use largely took place at a specific site, something that we could essentially choose to interact with. In many cases, that is no longer possible. Over the past few years, the Internet has essentially become all pervasive. Through smart phones, the Internet is everywhere. While there are exceptions outside of so-called "industrialized" countries and among those who cannot afford smart phones, for the most part the discussion is more a question of when people will get the capabilities, not if (see for example, all the efforts to get computers to everyone across the world and to enclose the entire world in the web).*

This has all had a real impact on how we relate to each other. Seemingly everything is mediated or interrupted by computer-based communication. There are relatively few private moments left, as shown by the numerous studies that track the phenomena known as "sleep texting" or the numbers of people who admit to checking their phones during sex [ed. – cited in one study as 20% of young adults]. The particular studies matter relatively little, what is important is the way in which this activity has more or less been normalized."

Connecting to our earlier theme it would be a mistake to think of platforms as merely facilitating networking activities; instead, the construction of platforms and social practices is mutually constitutive. After going through the social changes wrought by the shift in Western literacy from the habit of reading out-loud and often communally to the habit of reading silently, Carr went into the direction he was already seeing in online culture. *"Now that the context of reading is again shifting, from the private page to the communal screen, authors will adapt once more. They will increasingly tailor their work to a milieu that the essayist Caleb Crain describes as "groupiness," where people read mainly "for the sake of feeling of belonging" rather than for personal enlightenment or amusement. As social concerns override literary ones, writers seem fated to eschew virtuosity and experimentation in favor of a bland but immediately accessible style. Writing will become a means for recording chatter.*

[...] A striking example of this process is already on display in Japan. In 2001, young Japanese women began composing stories on their mobile phones, as strings of text messages, and uploading them to a Web site, Maho no i-rando, where other people read and commented on them. The stories expanded into serialized "cell phone novels," and their popularity grew. Some of the novels found millions of readers online. Publishers took notice, and began to bring out the novels as printed books. By the end of the decade, cell phone novels had come to dominate the country's best-seller lists. The three top-selling Japanese novels in 2007 were all originally written on mobile phones.

The form of the novels reflects their origins. They are, according to the reporter Norimitsu Onishi, "mostly love stories written in the short sentences characteristic of text messaging but containing little of the plotting or character development found in traditional novels." One of the most popular cell phone novelists, a twenty-one-year-old who goes by the name of Rin, explained to Onishi why young readers are abandoning traditional novels: "They don't read works by professional writers because their sentences are too difficult to understand, their expressions are intentionally wordy, and the stories are not familiar to them." The popularity of cell phone novels may never extend beyond Japan, a country given to peculiar fads, but the novels nevertheless demonstrate how changes in reading inevitably spur changes in writing."

Similarly, the so-called 'social' behaviour conditioned and reproduced on the online networks could be said to be at least in part produced by these means themselves. In this whole internet-

social world, where the interactions between humans which have generally been so consequential in the past are relegated to shadow-presences that can be summoned up or banished with a flick of the wrist and a click of the finger, the broadcast becomes the key point, not necessarily the quality or relevance of the content itself. Yet simultaneously, the image created by the user of a social media profile is often intensively combed, with presentation of an identity (or, as we shall see later, *a brand*) at least as important as ostensible communication needs. The identity models generally conform to pre-existing roles even if from a widening pool of potential uniforms to wear. *“The potential employee deletes last night’s drunken party photos to present a serious tone, while the frat boy eagerly shares photos of the previous night’s debauchery. Moreover, depending on the particular social network, the presentations differ. While “compartmentalization” is something we all have done in civilized social contexts for quite some time, the speed and frequency at which it happens is different. The constant maintenance of how we present ourselves results in a compulsive “need” to “check” everything, seeing what is “happening” on “social media” at all times. There is always something better “happening” elsewhere, whether that be the cool event that we didn’t know about or something “happening” entirely in the digital realm. Consequently, the real “event” may not be the one that we are physically at, but the “conversation” that happens online. “Reality” is increasingly redefined as that which is documentable online, and “conversation” is the “discussion” which happens through social media. Something is always happening elsewhere and we are never really present anywhere (while at the same time, we are stuck in a seemingly ahistorical constant present)”* (Points for Further...).

Documentation replaces experience. The self becomes the selfie¹⁰. Moreover, the celebrated ‘connectivity’ of the information age seems as often to distance us from one another in real terms as well. Already when acquaintances ‘connect’ in the virtual world, typed exchanges may even feel more intimate than face-to-face conversations, and thus cause them to disclose things they dare not in actual presence. But the content itself can never be the same, being dis-embodied thus; losing the give-and-take, richness and depth, of real communication. Jason Rodgers perceived as much in the arrival of texting. *“Due to the addition of text messaging the cellular communication is trapped between orality and literacy. It has neither the improvisation and open ended nature of spoken language, not the complexity and depth of written language. This contributes to a poverty of language. The exchange is constant, yet nearly meaningless. This poverty of language contributes to a poverty of thought.”*¹¹ The rise of Twitter et al. has only compounded this. Proliferating cameraphones add a visual dimension, and the ascendancy of even the most banal pictures trading currency on Instagram etc. merely spectacularises the fact that every selection and representation is indeed an amputation, the context and specificity shorn. An image can tell a thousand lies, the main one being its own objectivity, it is always a viewpoint *from a particular place*. The feast for the eye on offer speaks of a dissociation from the depth depicted and the present moment

¹⁰The author who was first transcribing our notes for this article accidentally typed ‘selfie’ first time round; we could comment on the irony, regarding the glammed-up and rose-tinted presentation users feel they must give themselves online...

¹¹This in itself being one step further along a trail already blazed by the telecommunications boom decades previously. This was condemned already by Stanley Diamond’s 1974 critique (of civilisation more broadly also): “The imperious ring of the telephone [interrupts] all other activities. Its trivial, dissociated and obsessive use reflects both the alienating character of the society that prizes it so highly, and the transnational corporations that profit from it. Thus the telephone as ordinarily used becomes a sign, not of communication, but of the lack of communication, and of the consequent compelling desire to relate to others, but to relate at a distance – and in the mode of frustrated orality.”

slipping away by the second; yet a dissociation that can pull on our heartstrings in a myriad of predictable, robotic ways.

“The media era is also the era of loneliness,” recognised Jacques Ellul even decades before the ever-present Net fully wove its way into our most intimate ‘private’ spaces and moments. More than half a century since he wrote on the alienating character of society traversing this technological trajectory, social fragmentation and a concomitant rise in the experience of isolation has travelled hand-in-hand with the arrival of TV, mobile phones, the internet. In 2014, Natalie Gil described loneliness in the U.K. as *“a silent plague that is hurting young people most”*, in response to studies suggesting that 18 to 34-year-olds surveyed were more likely to feel lonely often, to worry about feeling alone and to feel depressed because of loneliness than the over-55s (who at least have services on the assumption that they will be lonely in modern Western society).

On the other hand from the ‘groupiness’-as-euphoria, without the deeper emotional investment and vulnerability of more complicated, in-person relationships, the increased distance and decreased depth that formulates mediocrity and narcissism¹² also facilitates racist, (hetero-)sexist and classist attacks which probably would no longer be attempted so often in person in certain societies. (Perhaps this is significant in allowing a pressure-valve of sorts in the interior of a democratic pluralism which frowns on such statements when in company but is in fact built on a foundation of racial ideologies, gender hierarchies and social stratification, which it must adept and reproduce to itself exist.) The self-aggrandising cruelty of this commentary is constitutive of shifting and often anonymous strands of domination, parallel with what was highlighted in one of Alex Gorrion’s essays. *“The new apparatuses of social networking also begin to quantify informal power (the very informal power that has always held primary importance, even and especially in the institutions of formal power, which could not work without it) in “likes”, “friends”, and “followers”. But this version of informal power is not the kind created by protagonists, it is the kind produced by a mill wheel set spinning by a hundred chained bodies each chasing after their own loneliness[...]*

[These are the lost creatures] who fumble around in smug devices looking for love or distraction. They are children who have never learned to read maps or ask for directions, children whose intimate haunts that they never needed to impose on paper in order to navigate have now been thoroughly mapped by the devices they carry with them. The impoverished oral culture that remains has been forced through this new apparatus.” (We could note that these same children will have been conditioned by what the YoungMinds charity in the U.K. describe as an *“unprecedented toxic climate children and young people face in a 24/7 online culture where they can never switch off,”* citing cases such as the 2012 suicide of 15-year-old Tallulah Wilson¹³.)

¹²A 2012 study examined the Facebook habits of 294 students, aged between 18 and 65, and measured two “socially disruptive” elements of narcissism – grandiose exhibitionism (GE) and entitlement/exploitativeness (EE). GE includes “self-absorption, vanity, superiority, and exhibitionistic tendencies” and people who score high on this aspect need to be constantly at the centre of attention. They often say shocking things and inappropriately self-disclose because they cannot stand to be ignored or waste a chance of self-promotion. The EE aspect includes “a sense of deserving respect and a willingness to manipulate and take advantage of others”. The research revealed that the higher someone scored on aspects of GE, the greater the number of friends they had on Facebook, with some amassing more than 800. Those scoring highly on EE and GG were also more likely to accept friend requests from strangers and seek social support, but less likely to provide it...

¹³It seems unsurprising, if we remember that Facebook itself started life as a site that rated students by their looks, that the digital networks have led to the mixture of insecurity and cyber-bullying that the head of ChildLine described as “the biggest challenge we have ever faced. [T]here is no point in turning off their phone, because the messages will just be there waiting for them.”

Compelled to Communicate

“The cerebral flattening to the preordained schemas of intelligent machines, the homogenization of the cultures of peoples to the new languages of communications and production are the aim of the new imperialist colonialism. Cybernetic universalism, or multimedia communication, is a tool of the systematic and quantitative reorganisation of the new world order, in the sectors of the market, of capital, of the institutional order and of the territorial infrastructure...”

– Pippo Stasi & Karechin Cricorian

While such apparatuses of power dynamics as we described in the previous section could by now be described as to some degree self-regulating and self-replicating, there is certainly a stake held by some of the more explicit institutions in the capitalist order and the nation-state in the new technological phase industrial society has entered. We will come in short order to the tech-industry giants themselves; but what we are speaking of here runs deeper, taking for granted the involvement of such multinational corporations in an ongoing change of such proportions and far-reaching implications for the future, yet penetrating into a tangled complex of statescraft, scientific research and ideology, and perhaps even technological determinism itself.

While it can barely be done justice here, in order to frame the topics which follow, the term ‘cybernetics’ cannot be far behind. “Cybernetics,” defined Lutz Dammbeck on the conceptual level, “is concerned with how the transfer of information functions in machines and living beings. The basis of cybernetics is the assumption that the human nervous system does not reproduce reality, but calculates it. Man [sic] now appears to be no more than an information-processing system... thought is data processing, and the brain is a machine made of flesh. The brain is no longer the place where “ego” and “identity” are mysteriously created through memory and consciousness. It is a machine consisting of switching and controlling circuits, feedback loops, and communication nodes.” In terms of potential ways to understand how this plays out today (and to trace its background), bear with us through a lengthy quote, where the authors of ‘Google Dégage’ speculate that “at the same time that the new communication technologies were put into place that would not only weave their web over the Earth but form the very texture of the world in which we live, a certain way of thinking and of governing was in the process of winning. Now, the basic principles of this new science of government were framed by the same ones, engineers and scientists, who invented the technical means of its application [and] laid the basis of that “science” that [the mathematician Norbert Wiener] called “cybernetics.” A term that Ampère [ed. – one of the founders of the science of classical electromagnetism], a century before, had had the good idea of defining as the “science of government.” So we’re talking about an art of governing whose formative moments are almost forgotten but whose concepts branched their way underground, feeding into information technology as much as biology, artificial intelligence, management, or the cognitive sciences, at the same time as the cables were strung one after the other over the whole surface of the globe.

We’re not undergoing, since 2008, an abrupt and unexpected “economic crisis,” we’re only witnessing the slow collapse of political economy as an art of governing. Economics has never been a reality or a science; from its inception in the 17th century, it’s never been anything but an art of governing populations. Scarcity had to be avoided if riots were to be avoided – hence the importance of “grains” – and wealth was to be produced to increase the power of the sovereign. “The surest way for all government is to rely on the interests of men [sic],” said Hamilton [ed. – one of the U.S. ‘founding

fathers', he established the nation's financial system as well as *The New York Post* newspaper]. Once the "natural" laws of economy were elucidated, governing meant letting its harmonious mechanism operate freely and moving men by manipulating their interests. Harmony, the predictability of behaviors, a radiant future, an assumed rationality of the actors: all this implied a certain trust, the ability to "give credit." Now, it's precisely these tenets of the old governmental practice which management through permanent crisis is pulverizing. We're not experiencing a "crisis of trust" but the end of trust, which has become superfluous to government. Where control and transparency reign, where the subjects' behavior is anticipated in real time through the algorithmic processing of a mass of available data about them, there's no more need to trust them or for them to trust. It's sufficient that they be sufficiently monitored. As Lenin said, "Trust is good, control is better."

The West's crisis of trust in itself, in its knowledge, in its language, in its reason, in its liberalism, in its subject and the world, actually dates back to the end of the 19th century; it breaks forth in every domain with and around the First World War. Cybernetics developed on that open wound of modernity. It asserted itself as a remedy for the existential and thus governmental crisis of the West. As Norbert Wiener saw it, "We are shipwrecked passengers on a doomed planet. Yet even in a shipwreck, human decencies and human values do not necessarily vanish, and we must make the most of them. We shall go down, but let it be in a manner to which we may look forward as worthy of our dignity". Cybernetic government is inherently apocalyptic. Its purpose is to locally impede the spontaneously entropic, chaotic movement of the world and to ensure "enclaves of order," of stability, and – who knows? – the perpetual self-regulation of systems, through the unrestrained, transparent, and controllable circulation of information. "Communication is the cement of society and those whose work consists in keeping the channels of communication open are the ones on whom the continuance or downfall of our civilization largely depends," declared Wiener, believing he knew.

[...] Officially, we continue to be governed by the old dualistic Western paradigm where there is the subject and the world, the individual and society, men and machines, the mind and the body, the living and the nonliving. These are distinctions that are still generally taken to be valid. In reality, cybernetized capitalism does practice an ontology, and hence an anthropology, whose key elements are reserved for its initiates. The rational Western subject, aspiring to master the world and governable thereby, gives way to the cybernetic conception of a being without an interiority, of a selfless self, an emergent, climatic being, constituted by its exteriority, by its relations. A being which, armed with its *Apple Watch*, comes to understand itself entirely on the basis of external data, the statistics that each of its behaviors generates. A *Quantified Self* that is willing to monitor, measure, and desperately optimize every one of its gestures and each of its affects. For the most advanced cybernetics, there's already no longer man and his [sic] environment, but a system-being which is itself part of an ensemble of complex information systems, hubs of autonomic processes – a being that can be better explained by starting from the middle way of Indian Buddhism than from Descartes [ed. – see 'A Profound Dis-ease']. "For man, being alive means the same thing as participating in a broad global system of communication", asserted Wiener in 1948.

Just as political economy produced a 'homo economicus' manageable in the framework of industrial States, cybernetics is producing its own humanity. A transparent humanity, emptied out by the very flows that traverse it, electrified by information, attached to the world by an ever-growing quantity of apparatuses. A humanity that's inseparable from its technological environment because it is constituted, and thus driven, by that. Such is the object of government now: no longer man or his interests, but his "social environment". An environment whose model is the smart city [ed. – see *Return Fire* vol.3 pg31]. Smart because by means of its sensors it produces information whose process-

ing in real time makes self-management possible. And smart because it produces and is produced by smart inhabitants. Political economy reigned over beings by leaving them free to pursue their interest; cybernetics controls them by leaving them free to communicate.”

In this light, what would our enmeshment in the circuits of the world of the web (and not only) tell us about our propensity to *become governable*; even (or especially) as we take this access to be evidence of our freedoms, our connections, our *selves*?

These are not popular questions to ask in today’s climate in the West, let alone hazard answers to. Yet some qualms, if undeveloped as yet, can be perceived in even the popular culture, such as the thoughts of novelist Benjamin Kunkel. *“The internet, as its proponents rightly remind us, makes for variety and convenience; it does not force anything on you. Only it turns out it doesn’t feel like that at all. We don’t feel as if we had freely chosen our online practices. We feel instead that they are habits we have helplessly picked up or that history has enforced, that we are not distributing our attention as we intend or even like to.”* More dominant, though, is an enduring belief that these vaunted new technologies not only can be understood as separate from the institutions and ideologies from which they emerged; but that they are in some way inherently ‘progressive’, liberatory even. Among the ranks of these techno-utopians (or at least among those who consider technologies to be inherently value-free and neutral) can be found not a few staunch critics of capitalist social relations, and maybe even of the State-form itself. Now would seem as appropriate time as ever to turn our weapons on these arguments.

Updated Illusions

“The truth is that technology magnifies power in general, but the rates of adoption are different. The unorganized, the distributed, the marginal, the dissidents, the powerless, the criminal: they can make use of new technologies faster. And when those groups discovered the Internet, suddenly they had power. But when the already powerful big institutions finally figured out how to harness the Internet for their needs, they had more power to magnify. That’s the difference: the distributed were more nimble and were quicker to make use of their new power, while the institutional were slower but were able to use their power more effectively. So while the Syrian dissidents used Facebook to organize, the Syrian government used Facebook to identify dissidents.”

– *Power in the Age of the Feudal Internet*

Never before has such a hoard of data existed on so widely-accessible platforms concerning the aspects of the world today we might consider to be horrors. Rapes, climate-induced flooding [*ed. – see Return Fire vol.2 pg15*], hostage beheadings, industrial ‘disasters’ [*ed. – see Return Fire vol.1 pg28*] and police violence come tumbling out of our news-feeds and video-tubes, circumventing censorship and State borders. And yet never has so little been done relative to the immensity of the dangers we face. On the one hand, some positively see the potential for this visibility to spark revolts against whatever atrocity in question, rebellions of the type that have not been lacking throughout pre-digital history [*ed. – see Return Fire vol.3 pg87*], if yet to be decisive. On the other hand, others see the mere existence of this ‘democratisation of information’ as a counter-balance to the excesses of our rulers. Both seem to rest on an assumption which we ourselves do not find to be true: namely, that there is a simple causal relationship between *information* and *action*.

However, another angle to take would be that uprisings continue to exist *despite* the prevalence of digital media (including their protagonists' own use of it) not *because* of it; and that the feast of information famishes our appetite to weaponise and make use of it, to *make it our own*.

For example, the online patterns of media consumption seem geared in the opposite direction to reflective engagement. A study some years ago reported that most web pages are viewed for ten seconds or less. Fewer than one in ten page views extended beyond two minutes, and a significant portion of those seemed to involve unattended browser windows left open. And as mentioned above, when the floodgates of information overload are running full-steam, if you don't have time, or make time, to live with that information, to reflect on it, it can simply have a numbing effect, or tend towards imparting pre-packaged options rather than critical thinking. How often do we come across some ostensibly exciting or horrifying case, or convincing or intriguing argument, online; only to promptly forget all about it until we are reminded again while back online? Obviously this isn't the case in every instance, but its regularity should tell us something about how little this 'information' is finding ways to sit in our daily lives, when it is so hard to find time and space to make use of it – and specifically to make use of it with any depth of reflection. Combined with a 'social' life increasingly consisting of remotely exchanging banalities, the result is often individuals sitting alone staring into screens, 'Liking' topics that momentarily engage them or events they may or may not attend, then going to bed. Even when we do meet face to face, it sometimes feels harder to practice our being-together, to develop a tangible sense of encounter and openness not defined by the exigencies of our mediated communications (texts, tweets, comments, etc.).

The results are visible in many of the modern so-called 'social movements', which often feature highly tech-savvy elements perceived by some to be important or even pivotal aspects of whatever struggle. This affects many on-the-ground activities, from banners and placards made more for the camera than street-level communication, reduction of dialogue between participants and bystanders to that of promoting a specific hashtag, and further 'dumbing-down' of ideas in order to produce text for leaflets that can easily be 'scanned'. Whatever creativity and spontaneity remains in moments of contestation is domesticated on the spot via the reduction of whatever intervention into representational data to be broadcast via the media, however self-published. Again, the platforms themselves alter the way struggles are conceived and received, regardless of the content, and the more dependent movements become on them the less likely they seem to be to criticise them. Kevin Tucker looked back on the beginnings of this shift (in North America at least) in his eyes. *"Through the anti-globalization movement and street riots that take root in the late 90s through the 2000s, you saw this element of involvement form into spectator roles. There was a change in focus on taking part in resistance to documenting everything. Suddenly Indymedia [ed. – independent self-publishing platform formed originally to facilitate and communicate action against the World Trade Organisation summit in Seattle, U.S.A., 1999] was the focus. There were certainly pros to it, but at the time it felt like it stole the spotlight a bit. In hindsight, it absolutely did.*

And it made sense in a way, as repression raised[,] the need to document it was important. But in some ways we made the documenting the story, not the means. The spread of the internet was really the necessary piece of the puzzle to make that happen. I'm not sure if you can say it's coincidental or not, but there's a mirroring of shifts within the milieu and the culture at large towards a more internet savvy approach to radicalism."

What kind of movements are created through such a shift? How are they different from what came before? These were the questions asked by Zeynep Tufekci, after she identified their lack of attention-maintenance and staying power. *“The boom and bust cycle of consciousness-raising and resignation may only be a phase in the life of networked social movements. Or, it may be their distinct feature. [...] Digital infrastructure may be said to follow a trajectory common to other disruptive technologies. Governments’ initial waves of ignorance and misunderstanding quickly gave way to learning about the medium’s strengths and weaknesses, as well as the development of new methods to counter dissent. However, changes to a movement’s capabilities that broaden its ability to coordinate actions or to publicize its cause are real as well. [...] Social media have greatly empowered protesters in three key areas: public attention, evading censorship, and coordination or logistics. Old forms of gate-keeping, which depended on choke point access control to few broadcast outlets, neither work as effectively nor in the same way as they did in the past. Digital technologies provide a means by which many people can reach information that governments would rather deny them. Street protests can be coordinated on the fly. However, this does not mean that social media have exclusively empowered protesters; they have also aided governments and other factions of society by providing them with tools they can also use to their advantage. [...] By allowing protesters to scale up quickly, without years of preparation, digital infrastructure acts as a scaffold to movements that mask other weaknesses, especially collective capacities in organizing, decision-making, and general work dynamics that only come through sustained periods of working together.*

[...] Hence, digital technologies certainly add to protester capabilities in many dimensions, but this comes with an unexpected trade-off: Digital infrastructure helps undertake functions that would have otherwise [required] long-term organizing which, almost as a side effect, help build organizational capacity to respond to long-term movement requirements. Working together to take care of the logistics of a movement, however tedious, also builds trust and an ability to collaborate effectively. Consequently, many recent movements enter into the most contentious phase, the potential confrontation with authorities, without any prior history of working together or managing pivotal moments under stress.” After looking to the insurgencies of Turkey, 2013 [ed. – see *Return Fire* vol.2 pg48], and in the so-called Magreb, 2011 onwards [ed. – see *Return Fire* vol.2 pg87], she used the analogy of the 1963 March on Washington during the U.S. civil rights movement. *“Once the march happened, it was no longer just a march of thousands of people, but rather, it signaled to those in power that an organizational capacity could threaten their interests[...] In contrast, the massive Occupy marches that took place globally in over 900 cities on 15 October 2011 dwarfed most historical precedents in terms of size, yet were organized with approximately two weeks’ notice [but] without similar organizational capacity. While this appears a shortcut for protests, it also engenders weaknesses, as these protests do not signal the same level of capacity as previous protests, and do not necessarily pose the same threat to governments and power.”*

Moreover, for those of us less interested in being boxed in and defined by whatever social movements our actions are unavoidably in the context of, it is harder to avoid exactly such an enclosure. Relatedly, the text ‘Fighting in the New Terrain’ touches on the way that *“the internet has transformed anonymity from the province of criminals and anarchists into a feature of everyday communication. Yet unexpectedly, it also fixes political identities and positions in place according to a new logic. The landscape of political discourse is mapped in advance by URLs; it’s difficult to produce a mythology of collective power and transformation when every statement is already located in a known constellation. A poster on a wall could have been put up by anyone; it seems to indicate a general sentiment, even if it only represents one person’s ideas. A statement on a website,*

on the other hand, appears in a world permanently segregated into ideological ghettos.” Once more, this finds resonance in ‘Point for Further Discussion...’: *“The rather laughable digital utopianism has proven to be untrue – we haven’t arrived at an equal society as a result of equal access. Even in the best cases of open source tools, their challenge is a drop in the bucket and they can often be just as easily mobilized towards non-liberatory ends. Moreover, the Internet and computer technologies have contributed to a situation of information overload and the fragmentation into a seemingly unlimited number of different identities, making it harder than ever to be seen on the digital networks, arguably the ultimate goal. Added to this, the increasing fragmentation and personalization – enabled through sophisticated forms of behavior and browser tracking – assure that there is no universally accessible network that one can simply have access to, but rather a series of largely closed and overlapping networks. These technologies extend the logic of computers into all realms: success is the documentable and quantifiable number of “friends” or “connections” we have on various sites, future activity, preferences, and “personalization” are predicted by algorithms informed by massive amounts of stored personal data, and everything is ranked and rated.”*

To address those who feel that the mere existence of information in circulation constitutes an effective check on those in power; information is weightless without the will and ability to make something out of it, contrary to the narrative of truth-as-power promoted by, say, the Wikileaks case [*ed. – see Return Fire vol.3 pg48*]. Video footage taken of the police, as another example, can help them refine their public image by limiting them from doing things that look bad in the representational game of liberal democracy. But that’s different than actually enabling people to take action that would change the power differential, and has in some cases been used to strengthen their case for the increasingly-present bodycams they wear, leading to a further intensification of surveillance at points of potential confrontation. These days we are endangered additionally while confronting our enemies by the plethora of mobile filming devices wielded by members of the crowd, most of whom will not be as obliging as those the Mi’kmaq warriors and their allies requested to turn of all such equipment before torching the police cars forcing further extraction prospecting on their territories [*ed. – see Return Fire vol.2 pg61*].

Another argument used in favour of utilising digital platforms during social movements, often to the detriment of more embodied communication and encounter, is that those who don’t engage in that way will be ‘left behind’ the (real or imagined) ‘masses’ who are attentive to whatever issue in question. That’s as may be (though such thinking clearly prioritises quantitative aims, i.e. the amount of people ‘reached’, over qualitative factors such as the depth of the communication and the solidity of any affinities discovered), yet it would seem a danger in ‘catching up’ via uncritical engagement is also advancing the evolution of digital media out of our hands. The ubiquitous and mostly either banal or highly-toxic comments sections many websites now host started out as an innovation of the Indymedia network, while the SMS text messaging program developed by the Institute for Applied Autonomy for protests at the Democratic and Republican National Conventions served as a model for Twitter.

Ironically, given all the talk about the diversity offered by the internet, many anarchists and (other) radicals – even many who reject digital optimism – seem compelled to opt for the convenience of the all-encompassing Facebook et al. in the ‘informational mainstream’ above autonomous channels. This largely seems to facilitate continuing ghettoisation of radical critiques into just another identity niche online, another status in your profile, and accelerate the further

fractioning even within these critiques into a series of silos in which one can be confident they will hear only voices similar to their own¹⁴.

Rather than bask in the escape from the artificially-narrow debates which have characterised mass media paradigms in the years gone by (in many ways having been the glue that held the democracies of latter modernity together) – which social media indeed moves away from – we would do well to think about how the *production of opinions* still takes place in this new democratic terrain. As we've seen in past weeks, a candidate can win the U.S. Presidency despite the hostility of almost all mass media nationally, suggesting that social media platforms now command higher influence than these institutions. But of course, rather than signifying any kind of horizontalism or levelling of power, enormous disparities in influence, presence and resources continue to characterise the social network terrain, making it perhaps more accurate to describe as a *polycentralisation* of these spheres rather than decentralisation. More to the point, the ideology of democratic pluralism which these technological platforms sit comfortably within declares any opinion (liberal, conservative, anarchist, feminist, capitalist) to be equally valid – so long as it remains just that, *opinion*. Hence the departure from a central stage of social discourse and 'fact production' actually in this case speaks of a further atomisation – these various online niches never need cross one another, people are used to any opinion having a homepage and set framework and thus actual debate and contestation of ideas (i.e. tools, toys or weapons we might take in our hands and actually use) becomes more difficult or ephemeral. Rather than (for the most part) censor online activity, today's and tomorrow's democracy assuages which demographics hold what influence, bring which votes, generates how much advertising revenue and occupies which consumer niche. Alienation has actually deepened in this context: from experience it would seem that the more fertile spaces for building subversive relationships with an inclination to actually act on our conditions in fact come from *disputing* different ideas about the world and how we might inhabit it. By annulling space that could give rise to such conflicts and hence potential deepening of analysis and affinity, the web leaves us weaker.

“What I hate about the Internet, of course,” identifies Aragorn!, “is that it has quickly moved from a decentralized cacophony of voices, perspectives, and mediums for transmitting different ideas, into a channeled, mediated, controlled, and censored medium replicating most of the media flaws that lead to the popularization of the Internet in the first place. In the context of the anarchist internet this means that the first wave of anarchist controlled internet [sites] have almost entirely disappeared. Anarchist Internet discussion has almost entirely moved to Facebook and/or the ephemeral snapchat, instagram, and twitter contexts.” Sure enough, despite commendable online initiatives (some by him, as well as others) attempting to buck this trend, the atmosphere that accompanies most 'radical' conversational spaces online is one of cynicism, self-policing or total thoughtlessness, with 'winning the argument' by whatever means seemingly taking precedent over all else. *“Within a few short years, the internet comment forum transformed into a repressive apparatus,”* observed the text 'Robots of Repression', *“albeit democratic par excellence. With nearly everyone taking part, internet comment forums created and used within anarchist struggles have become acceptable spaces for the intensification of sectarian divisions based on barely a shadow of critical difference, the proliferation of superficial or aesthetic affinities, snitch-jacketing, rape-jacketing, the publishing*

¹⁴At the very least, even if some conversations do reach a wider and more diverse space on occasion when compared to pre-digital social networks, it doesn't discount the alarming degree to which real embodied association is repeatedly shunned for the supposed 'efficiency' of the Net.

of legally endangering information, the compromising of anonymities, the erosion of solidarity and its replacement with flippancy and instant gratification, and a deepening of the culture of TLDR [Too Long; Didn't Read]."

Even if social network sites and comment boards fail to ensnare us, it's just as easy to allow oneself to become intoxicated by the update stream of the specifically-anarchist online media. Our contemplative and creative ways, which have at times distinguished anti-authoritarian interventions in aspects of social life, succumb to the constant hum of the information exchange (often hyping formulaic and under-contextualised events/actions), and we become much like many other surfers experiencing momentary thrills on their topic of choice. This is perhaps an under-evaluated part of the conceptions of 'anarchisms of action' (often with many exciting qualities, to be sure) which has come to the fore in recent years. Aside from the perfectly evident strength which often comes from recognising hearts in some more-or-less distant part of the world beating to a similar rhythm to our own, it's useful to question what effects the dominant cultural 'groupiness' feelings this inculcates in us too via these mediums can have on our struggles. Maybe never before have we 'performed' on a stage where the 'audience' is so many (and often probably so exclusively) other anarchists, even if none exist locally, rather than primarily inhabitants of whatever social environment we frequent.

While we recognise that complex factors both cause and result from our actions – as well as accepting the socialised or perhaps even just all-too-human subliminal drive for recognition – and thus feel no need to ascertain 'pure' motives to act, we should be conscious of the potential for such actions to be taken mostly for the sake of being able to participate in a virtual arena by claiming them. Or at least, when this is to the exclusion or detriment of attempts to affect our more daily surroundings and conditions.

At what point does it become less about spreading signals of solidarity to bolster an actual projectuality, or descriptions of methods used – which all strengthen us in real-world struggle – and more a question of self-gratifying web-games? Clearly this must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, without generalisations, but we think that Antonio Antonacci [*ed. – see Return Fire vol.3 pg71*] might have meant something of the kind when he said that “[p]ersonally I have several concerns on projectual aims and spectacular propaganda. Even if I recognize that these can have some potential, I also think that they belong to the society of appearance, based on nothing and immersed in a time of hyper-information where the centralization of the will to communicate, or an excess of communication, risks creating confusion and degenerating into exaltation as an end in itself.” This new terrain feels seductive, and doubtless holds some potentials; and anyway, like it or not, it is the wider sea many of us now swim in. In part of their written contribution to a 2013 gathering at the Nadir anarchist space in Thessaloniki, Greece, on the topic of anarchist 'counter-information' structures to disseminate action claims, news and analysis, the administrators of 325.nostate.net argued that “we believe that the information war is a defining operational environment for the anarchist new urban guerilla as much as the metropolis or the border between the urban and rural areas was for revolutionaries of the past.

[...] We want to make it very easy for those who hear of the direct actions via the mainstream media to easily find the communiques and context for the attacks, and for the informal counter-information groups to be able to grow and steadily produce the environment for widespread subversion. The access to information must be turned into a weapon against the system, which relies on its dominance of the media.” Yet later the same paragraph admits that “[n]ot only is the new media environment increasingly self-published, it's able to take in and assimilate all points of view, even

realities of attack.” In which ways does this interlace with the aforementioned tendency towards democratic assimilation and ghettoisation? How can we maintain a presence to provide context for actions and such in the digital realm, while minimising the degree to which it is merely assimilated as another ‘edgy’ aesthetic for a distinct class of viewers, and robbed of its proper repercussions? It would indeed be a wasted opportunity if, when conditions hint at chances to push any uncontrollable situations into a direction amenable to the experimental forms-of-life we want to realise but perhaps also generalise [*ed. – see Return Fire vol.2 pg19*], the dialogue we were most familiar with was publishing self-promoting texts to each other via the Net.

Yet increasingly this would seem to be many people’s entry-point for what it is that certain types of anarchists *do*, as well as the bar for participation. This was a point highlighted in one issue of the Aversión paper: *“Internet forces you into constant updating and everything is done at a speed well beyond human capabilities. What’s the point in knowing what happens all over the planet in real time? Our ability of intervention within our nearest reality is very limited in itself. Up to which point does this produce the same anxiety deriving from the speed with which, for example, technology and fashion change, thus losing their previous value and meaning? [...] Many of us became anarchist by participating in talks, writing letters to prisoners, reading pamphlets, visiting anarchist libraries, subscribing to periodicals from the other side of the planet, discussing with old saboteurs and fighters, etc... But at the moment formation occurs mainly through blogs and social networks. [...] It seems that today internet includes many aspects of our existence and profoundly affects human relations, thus contributing to isolation, atomization and alienation.”* In other words, as many people now ‘learn’ their anarchism from Wikipedia, forming their ideas from representations at a degree or few of removal from the actual lived complexities of attempts to live inside them, they are radicalised on a terrain only marginally within our actual influence; the form in some ways contradicts the content. Our question must be; in which ways does the Net open up space and in which does it enclose us? In which does it aid self-creation and inspiration, and which entail mere enlistment, or an online space to mouth off discontent to our own demographic?

Upon announcing their resignation from maintenance of the online source anarchistnews.org, ‘Worker’ observed that *“[i]t used to be that anarchism (the set of people who use the term) was filled with a bunch of people who did things. Since the rise of the Internet this has become increasingly NOT the case. My greatest disappointment in running anarchistnews.org is that it has witnessed this degradation of interesting activity of anarchists. The Internet does not inform interesting activity, it kills it stillborn. Most new anarchists fear the attention of the broader anarchist community because it almost never comes off as supportive (and when it does it tends to be in the style of NGO shit sandwich [compliment-insult-compliment] rhetorical kindness). The Internet is now at the center of how we communicate with each other and it means our communication is worse than ever.*

While I was not particularly naive about what I should hope for when I started anarchistnews.org I did not realize how powerful the medium of the Internet would become in terms of shaping everything that happened here. It is nearly impossible to start a new DIY website in 2015 and have it noticed beyond your social scene. The big players absolutely dominate what is talked about and I am not motivated to play that part of the modern media game. I find Facebook, Twitter, etc to be absolutely repulsive and, while I use them, I can’t support their use and see them as utterly opposed to our project here.” Currently, exactly these corporate platforms are entrusted by a large proportion of general dissidents with the kind of personal information which even the less paranoid among them would never entrust so readily to a national authority. Now we move to the consequences

that no radical should be able to treat as a non-issue when internet technologies define so much of our reality: the landslide policing advances they offer.

Inviting Big Brother In

“Computer systems are not, at their core, technologies of emancipation. They are technologies of control. They were designed as tools for monitoring and influencing human behavior, for controlling what people do and how they do it. As we spend more time online, filling databases with details of our lives and desires, software programs will grow every more capable of discovering and exploiting subtle patterns in our behavior.”

– Nicholas Carr

As if it needed saying, our enemies are also active in the digital field in many forms. Tellingly, one of the first people to actually be targeted in Spain by the new (and much-protested) 'Public Safety Act', known colloquially as the 'gag law', was a salesman on Tenerife who chastised the police on the mayor's Facebook wall for being "slackers". Within six hours of hitting 'send', police were knocking on his door, despite his protests that he wasn't a "*perroflauta*" (hippy/tramp) like those in the social movements the law was presumably drafted against¹⁵. More direct interventions against the organisational capacity associated with the new technologies include shutting down service to iPhones and the like within a 'protest area' (similarly to when phone signal for a particularly conflictual part of Berlin was cut during the annual May 1st mobilisation of 2010), but often it seems more in the authorities interest to monitor such situations than impose a disruption – hence the appearance in the U.S. of white single-engine planes circling flash-points such as Ferguson [ed. – see *Return Fire vol.3 pg76*], Baltimore [ed. – see *Authorities Finally Confirm Stingray (MSI) Use in Prison Island – in Scottish Prisons*] and most recently Olympia during a brief railway blockade to hinder fracking components reaching North Dakota's Bakken oil fields in solidarity with the Standing Rock camp [ed. – see *Special Hydraulic Fracture*]. These are thought to be used by the FBI to suck up all cellular communications within their range, presumably for real-time sorting and analysis. The military are naturally attendant to the implications for warfare in the information age and the increasingly asymmetric conflicts of the present day. In a very tangible sense, this already takes forms such as the three U.S. guided munitions which destroyed an alleged ISIS headquarters less than 24 hours after the division tasked with combing social media picked up someone's bragging selfie within the base and triangulated from there. But, as General Nick Carter proclaims as part of the drive to make the British Army he heads 'smarter', contemporary military formations recognise that "*the actions of others in a modern battlefield can be affected in ways that are not necessarily violent and [new strategy] draws heavily on important lessons from our commitments to operations in Afghanistan amongst others.*" Indeed, 'digital warfare' is described as central to British Army operations during this period, with 1,900 extra security and intelligence staff recruited. Two "innovative brigades" consist of regular and

¹⁵"The gag law forbids a variety of online content, including video footage like that which is increasingly been used to expose police tactics in the US and which last month showed police beating demonstrators in the Basque country, according to the New York Times. The law also sets hefty fines for a range of offenses involving perceived affronts to the police or unauthorized protests: €600 for insulting a police officer, up to €30,000 for spreading damaging photos of police officers, and €600,000 for taking part in an unauthorized protest outside Parliament and other sensitive locations" (Man calls police 'slackers' on Facebook, falls foul of Spain's new 'gag law').

reserve troops with expertise in offensive and defensive digital warfare, warriors who don't just carry weapons, but who are also skilled in using social media, and the dark arts of 'psyops' – psychological operations. In this we see the trend towards a blurring of military and policing functions in their 'classical' senses, as part of a trajectory of generalised counter-insurgency¹⁶ [ed. – see *Return Fire vol.3 pg12*].

Clearly any use of digital tools becomes at the very least a double-edged sword; as people flee from the aftermath of those lauded 'Facebook revolutions' in the Arab world and beyond, since 2015 the European transnational police force Europol started a fresh partnership with the major social media sites to scan for any suspected agents facilitating this flight, under the supervision of none other than the European Counter-Terrorist Centre. To state the obvious, such platforms are in certain terms a godsend to intelligence agencies compared with the work they would have had to do in days gone by to infiltrate target groups. (Narrowing down which individuals to actually target out of the millions is another matter, but it can't be said that the authorities have had no success in this regard, perhaps as the science of network analysis combines with older intelligence efforts.) It's rare these days for governments to attempt the kind of autocratic internet shutdowns (such as the one that saw the last days of the Mubarak regime in Egypt) during social upheavals – though not unknown, as was the case in the capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo during 2015 anti-regime clashes – when this so clearly furthers the experience of rupture with daily normality and harms economic activity. Perhaps some tweeking is in order, like the trolling footnoted above or the almost complete absence of news about the Ferguson uprising Tufekci reported on her Facebook feed algorithmically-edited for 'personal relevance' (while there was apparently no other subject on Twitter), but the fact of the matter is that these tools are as apt for re-stabilisation as de-stabilisation. See for example the Twitter mobilisation that brought out the volunteers armed with their brooms to sweep away the aftermath of the 2011 riots in London [ed. – see *Return Fire vol.1 pg61*], coordinated by CrisisCommons, a "global network of volunteers working together to build and use technology tools to help respond to disasters and improve resiliency and response before a crisis". The 'self-organisation' facilitated by these technologies is in no way inherently liberatory.

Ruling parties, corporations and institutions must themselves be adept at playing the social media field, and playing it to their advantage. After those 2011 uprisings across England, the director of its Police Foundation published a piece on the blog of British Telecom (BT). "Moving from a more traditional and stable society to a much faster, consumer-oriented world creates many challenges for the Police. People become disconnected from the communities in which they live and, ultimately, from each other.

This sense of disconnection leaves people feeling insecure which in turn contributes to fear of crime and anxiety about incivility in public spaces. In a world where the rule of law, equality before the law and respect for rights and freedoms provide the glue for a fragmented society, they become ever more essential in sustaining the principle of policing by consent. If the public trust the police as legitimate authority figures, they are more likely to comply with the law and to engage with their community, coming forward to report concerns and wrongdoing.

¹⁶The less sophisticated end of what this might look like would be the 'Twitterbots' (automated accounts, with one person controlling 25-50 profiles) used during ongoing social revolts in Mexico to spam trending hashtags hostile to the regime – earning them their nickname 'Peña-bots' after the country's president – creating banal trends as a counter-weight, and running smear campaigns against activists and journalists on a weekly basis.

These challenges formed the opening session of the second annual Police Foundation Conference, 'Police Effectiveness in a Changing World', which took place at the BT Centre last Wednesday. It was opened by Stuart Hill, Vice President of Central Government and Home Affairs for BT and included a stellar line up of speakers, including Professor Sir Anthony Bottoms [influential criminologist], Shami Chakrabarti [politician and member of the House of Lords], Sara Thornton [then Chief Constable of Thames Valley Police], Nick Herbert [then Minister of State for Police and Criminal Justice] and Nick Gargan [then Chief Constable of Avon and Somerset Constabulary].

Seldom, if ever, have the police been under such scrutiny – both in a social and a political sense – and it's widely accepted that they need to protect their operational independence, resisting any political pressure to solve social problems.

They need to use the power of communications and social media to their advantage, working with these innovations rather than against them. The recent riots highlighted how protesters could use social media to move more freely and speedily than police units so a logical response is for forces to establish a Twitter presence and use the medium to gain the trust and confidence of followers.¹⁷ After that spell of disorder itself, not a few suspected rioters saw prison as a result of their social media activity (or even just those who glorified and advocated for the like online, receiving sentences of 2-4 years for Facebook posts).

While the keyboard brazenness of some British insurgents or their admirers from those days perhaps could be partly put down to inexperience and naivety about police monitoring, it is mystifying why many with a greater exposure to criticism of the surveillance State are not more adverse to such exposed platforms. In 2012, the Nadir tech-collective noted the same thing; "having worked for years – and sometimes [earning] a living – with the net and with computers, system administration, programming, cryptography and lots more, Facebook comes as something like a natural enemy. [...] We just hadn't realised that, after all the stress out on the streets and all those lengthy group discussions, many activists seem to have this desire to prattle at length on Facebook about everything and with everyone. We hadn't realised that [the activist] along with everyone else enjoys following the subtle flow of exploitation where it doesn't seem to hurt and, for once, not having to resist. Many people suffer from a bad conscience. While this may lead them to anticipate the fatal consequences of Facebook, it does not seem to translate into action. Is it really ignorance? Just to give a short outline of the problem; by using Facebook, activists do not just make their own communication, their opinion, their 'likes', etc. transparent and available for processing. Instead – and we consider this far more important – they expose structures and individuals who themselves have little or nothing to do with Facebook. Facebook's capability to search the net for relationships, similarities etc. is difficult to comprehend for lay people. The chatter on Facebook reproduces political structures for the authorities and for companies. These can be searched, sorted and aggregated not just in order to obtain precise statements regarding social relations, key people, etc., but also in order to make predictions, from which regularities can be deduced. Next to mobile phones, Facebook is the most subtle, cheapest and best surveillance technology available.

¹⁷The choice of venue for the conference in question was by no means arbitrary. BT, the massive telecommunications player who provide IT infrastructure to the British prison system and police while reforming civil life around an insidious digital/wireless grid with government and technocrat cohorts, last year alone also hosted the futuristic multinational technology 'Policing 2020' convergence at BT Tower, as well as being deep in battlefield technology. Even before those most recent widespread U.K. revolts discussed, anarchists burned their utility vehicles in aforementioned Nick Gargan's ward of Avon & Somerset (where in Bristol a BT building had also been attacked and graffitied) during solidarity actions against prison society.

[...] That is why we see Facebook users as a real danger for our struggles. In particular, activists who publish important information on Facebook (often without knowing what they are doing), which is increasingly used by law enforcement agencies. We could almost go as far as accusing those activists of collaborating. But we're not quite there yet. We still have hope that people will realise that Facebook is a political enemy and that those who use Facebook make it more and more powerful. Activist Facebook users feed the machine and thereby reveal our structures – without any need, without any court orders, without any pressure.” The same year they wrote these words, police based their round-up of Bolivian anarchists, syndicalists and feminists largely on information from Facebook profiles [ed. – see *Return Fire* vol.2 pg68], and five anarchists were jailed in Spain for ‘membership of a terrorist group’ based on their involvement on Facebook groups. Continuing from their contribution to the gathering in Thessaloniki, 325.nostate.net underline the “urgent and serious need for the insurrectional groups and individuals to stop using regular corporate services (i.e. Yahoo, FaceBook, Gmail, Hotmail, Wordpress, Blogspot, etc.) and learn about basic computer security. This task is urgent for anarchists in all countries but especially those with significantly repressive regimes. These companies will immediately co-operate with the authorities at the slightest excuse/pressure. This must be replaced as much as possible with movement services and encryption. From as early as 2003, at an anti-prisons gathering in Barcelona, it was confirmed by a lawyer of the movement that the European police and security services were using the internet corporations to identify, spy, track and monitor anarchists using their services. This has enabled Europol and the various state police services access to vast amounts of analysis data concerning location, content, who-talks-to-who etc. Anarchists are being systematically targeted by the security services through the software they rely on for communication/publicity and we should aim to prevent, as much as we possibly can, their ability to disrupt us. The authorities aim to turn our use of the internet into a weapon against us, through IP [ed. – Internal Protocol address, identifying the location, technical details and service provider of an internet connection] tracking and dataveillance, leading to our prosecution – or attempted neutralisation.”

Already in France, opening ‘terrorist internet pages’ can get you two years in prison, while in 2013 the administrators of the anarchist web portal non-fides.fr were accused of “public defamation of public officials” and “incitement to the commission of an attack against a person without effect” for spreading a text denouncing the Parisian ‘night correspondents’¹⁸. (Both comrades refused to cooperate or voluntarily appear for hearings, or give fingerprints, DNA and biometric photographs, stating “we know that this affair is only a pretense for the pigs and the courts to further harass us, after having thrown us in prison for some months in 2011 for another affair¹⁹, and after about three years of various almost-uninterrupted legal monitoring, during which we theoretically could not see each other, nor leave the country, and were required to check in with the police every week and pay a ransom of €4,000 to the state. All these measures (that affect us as they have impacted other comrades before us and tens of thousands of people everywhere) aim to break us, by

¹⁸ “Night Correspondents” are a sort of citizen-police initiative in France similar to “city ambassadors” in some American cities. They maintain social peace by surveilling and harassing the poor, as well as snitching on crime. Their propaganda encourages residents to report neighbors who play their music too loud or gather in public spaces” (waronsociety.noblogs.org).

¹⁹They were caught writing solidaristic graffiti with the ‘Arab Spring’ insurrections, and imprisoned due to violation of their judicial controls; they were prohibited from seeing one another for earlier charges of explosive/incendiary attack during a campaign of sabotage of banks (among others) in 2008/2009, in solidarity with a prisoner revolt that entirely burned Vincennes, the biggest immigrant detention center in France, in 2008. Something like a hundred ATMs were smashed/burned/blown up or put out of use with acid around that time.

isolating each of us from the other and isolating us both from a movement, but also by breaking dynamics of struggle.”)

As cited in the anonymous 2011 text 'Desert', “[a]ccording to a UK military mid-term future projection: “By the end of the period [2036] it is likely that the majority of the global population will find it difficult to ‘turn the outside world off.’ ICT [information and communication technology] is likely to be so pervasive that people are permanently connected to a network or two-way data stream with inherent challenges to civil liberties; being disconnected could be considered suspicious.” We are moving to such a future fast. When the French anti-terrorist police invaded the land community in Tarnac in 2008 [ed. – see Return Fire vol.3 pg58] one of the public justifications they gave for suspecting that a terrorist cell was forming was that few on the land had mobiles!

The agreed convention is that the first step for those who, having planned the future, now wish to bring it about is to make oneself known, make one’s voice heard – speak truth to power. Yet “the listener imposes the terms, not the talker” [‘Silence & Beyond’]. Much of the low-level contestation that characterises activism, and the limited social spaces that make up counter-cultures, actively mark out areas, and people, in need of potential policing. That’s not to say that all resistance is futile [nor] that we should desist from growing communities in which to live and love; rather that we would be wise to understand that many ‘subversive’ actions – and social relations – increasingly serve the needs of power as well as liberty. The balance of advantage should always be taken into consideration. We need to always ask ourselves the question: To what extent is the planned action or method of social relationship likely to haemorrhage data on potentially resistive identities? With increasingly powerful surveillance states and storms approaching, our responsibility to each other, especially to those as yet unimplicated, grows.”

This also shines light on one part of the governmental and corporate fervour to encourage people to use the internet. (“[E]ncouraging the disconnected to hop online” was described by one Washington Post journalist as “a national priority.”²⁰) The high-selling political book ‘The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of Peoples, Nations and Business’, authored by Google’s (now former) CEO Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen (the director of Google’s ‘Ideas’ division), openly proposes the centrality of the digital sector in a global counter-insurgency strategy against the many threats that haunt their securitarian nightmares. *Tech companies, according to them, are in a privileged position to combat ‘radicalisation’ internationally: they can go where governments cannot, without the impositional legacy of the local State; they can talk to people without diplomatic caution; and they operate in the ‘universal’ and ‘neutral’ language of technology. (Moreover, they recognise the pernicious influence their products have on children of all sectors, that kids are the “real demographic breeding ground for terrorist groups”, and that it is the tech industry and not the State who produce video games, social networks and mobile phones. “It is only when we have their attention,” the authors conclude, “that we can hope to win their hearts and minds.”)*

“To be sure,” in their words, “there will be people who resist adopting and using technology, people who want nothing to do with virtual profiles, online data systems or smart phones. Yet a government might suspect that people who opt out completely have something to hide and thus are more likely to break laws, and as a counterterrorism measure, that government will build the kind of ‘hidden people’ registry we described earlier. If you don’t have any registered social-networking profiles or

²⁰The Facebook project internet.org aims to broadcast free internet to the poor in remote districts around the world; that is, a version of the internet only able to access 35 specific websites; in first place being Facebook. Facing widespread accusations of censorship, Facebook leader Mark Zuckerberg’s smug retort was that “it is always better to have some access than none at all”.

mobile subscriptions, and online references to you are unusually hard to find, you might be considered a candidate for such a registry. You might also be subjected to a strict set of new regulations that includes rigorous airport screening or even travel restrictions.” We have already anecdotally heard of the German police arriving on the doorstep of one person’s friends after a burglary in the same housing complex, based on the fact they were the only inhabitants without Facebook profiles; did they have something to hide? And let’s not forget that the ‘The New Digital Age’ co-author Jared Cohen is the American government’s anti-terrorism adviser who, during upheavals in Iran in 2009 and that regime’s censorship of Twitter, directly urged that company to retain its services; or that Google themselves are primary partners of the universal PRISM spying program of the National Security Agency and others.

Just as important as recognising the machinations of various elites with their generals and bureaucrats are the behaviours inculcated into many more people as a result. Returning to ‘Robots of Repression’: *“In the world at large, comment forums have been seized on by internet news sites to increase reader interest and also to further mold reader opinion. Given that the public has always been an imaginary force used to discipline collective and individual behavior, the opening of a new potential manifestation of a collectivity, on the internet, had to be replaced by a new public. And that public, as all publics, had to be disciplined. In the beginning, this was done by astroturfing: mercenary trolls in the employ of public relations firms or government agencies posting comments that would generate favorable opinions of specific brands and policies, and on a larger scale create a majority disposed to social peace and consumption. Increasingly, astroturfing is being automated as the PR firms and governments that carry it out increase their labor efficiency by turning their opinion workers into the overseers of multiple computer-generated opinion-spreading machines that create the impression of a sycophantic mass hostile to the extremists, favorable to the products, and unquestioning of the tropes and lenses with which the media represent the world.*

As machines condition the workforce with increasingly mechanical behaviors and apparatuses condition their captives to act within the suggested channels, we can surmise that the roboticization of the workforce carrying out the informational and affective labor of the internet forums is of secondary importance to the inculcation of robotic attitudes among the remaining organics. In other words, the horror of the mass production of an imaginary public through internet comments is not to be found in the image of real people being overwhelmed by corporate-employed robots who endanger a prior democratic balance; it is to be found, rather, in the image of real people becoming steadily more like the robots who replaced them, in their own turn making the robots redundant (but no less useful).” The forms of diffuse and anonymous power that abound online can expand pre-existing structures of domination as easily as they can throw disparate groups of people together. As a rather more dystopian twist on the ‘global village’ effect we were promised that digital communication would bring, the online neighbourhood group NextDoor is notorious in the U.S. city of Oakland for the rampant racial profiling by its white-identified users who encourage each other to call the police (over suspects with little more description than “black” or “wearing a hoodie” being near bus stops, standing in ‘shadows’, making U-turns, and hanging around outside coffee shops), share tips on how to reach law enforcement, and sometimes even alert cops and security guards about suspicious activity they’ve only read secondhand from other commenters. In 2014 the Oakland police and NextDoor (who estimate 20% of the city’s households use the site) launched a formal citywide partnership, and today police regularly publish alerts, suspect photos and crime statistics on it, and the company is partnered with more than 1,200 government entities – mostly police departments – throughout the U.S.

New Frontiers of Capitalist Accumulation

“If for nearly thirty years environmentalists, even the most radical among them, have kept almost silent over the computerisation of the world introduced by the microchip, it’s because they have failed to grasp the role that it has played in the modernisation of domination. Since they first appeared in the 1950s, the technosciences of IT and communication have constantly been gaining ground. In the most industrialised states, since the end of the 1970s their roll-out has impacted most areas of society. Things really took off with the arrival and multiplication of personal computers, partly as a consequence of massive opposition to “big science”. “Small science for the people” became a reality, on the basis of the rehashed illusions of a previous, particularly Californian, era. By way of robotics, it proved an effective weapon against the revolts which broke out at the end of the 1960s, especially against the long-term Taylorist mechanisation of work [ed. – see Return Fire vol.2 pg28]. It brought about a change in the depth of the behaviour of the dominated classes, particularly in their cognitive behaviour, involving sensitivity, language, memory, imagination, relations with others, as well as their relationship to space and to time. People became accustomed to viewing the world by way of algorithmic logic. Technological power – which is part of, and a representation of, social power – tends to see the human mind as working in the same way as a computer and a focus on forecasting and calculation overshadowed any desire to understand the world. First of all, behind the great IT obsession with “smaller, cheaper and faster”, lurks the “time is money” of our old enemy, Capital. In the period of deep mutations to the system which we are currently experiencing, the gaining of time, at every level, is more important than ever in trying to accrue benefits. And given the central role played by the handling of information in the exercise of modern domination, the increase in the speed of microprocessors and networks, as well as in the mass of data handled, are sources of increased power. The totalitarian utopia of power is no longer Bentham’s Panopticon [ed. – see Panopticons Then & Now], the model of prison discipline, but the “global brain” envisaged by Bill Gates [co-founder of Microsoft], the model of control exerted by the network of networks.”

– André Dréan

Capital has always seemed to need its high priests, its visionaries, those with both ambitions for the direction of the system and the economic, technical and political power to influence it. The big tech elites today hold that function. One of the clear gains this class has achieved in the digital era (while obviously they themselves will in many cases also be victim to it on an individual level) is the extension of the workplace into pretty much all of time and space. It is often expected that employees (or the self-employed) will be available nigh-on 24/7; even though the German Labour Minister admitted to the press that it is “*indisputable that there is a connection between permanent availability and psychological diseases*”, the norm is still that you answer emails on the train to work, publish blogposts over lunch, field work calls or Skype long after office hours, etc., just to keep up with the pace the tech giants enable. Already in the 1980’s some were calling office work the ‘electronic assembly line’; now, work has escaped the office as much as the shop-floor, and we all must produce value to be capitalised upon, even without recognising it. “*Think about what people are doing on Facebook today,*” enthused its chairman Mark Zuckerberg. “*They’re keeping up*

with their friends and family, but they're also building an image and identity for themselves, which in a sense is their brand. They're connecting with the audience that they want to connect to. [...] It's almost a disadvantage if you're not on it now."

The authors of 'The Smartphone Society' recognised as much, without the same enthusiasm. *"When we use our phones to text friends and lovers, post comments on Facebook, or scroll through our Twitter feeds, we're not working – we're relaxing, we're having fun, we're creating. Yet, collectively, through these little acts, we end up producing something unique and valuable: our selves. [...] Individuals don't get paid in wages for creating and maintaining digital selves – they get paid in the satisfaction of participating in rituals, and the control afforded them over their social interactions. They get paid in the feeling of floating in the vast virtual connectivity, even as their hand machines [Chinese term for smartphones] mediate social bonds, helping people imagine togetherness while keeping them separate as distinct productive entities. The voluntary nature of these new rituals does not make them any less important, or less profitable for capital."* This means profound reshuffling of the productive system we are ensnared within, including shifting roles of power-over dynamics (while in no way necessarily an undoing of them in any universal sense). "Today," according to Alex Gorrión, *"affective dedication and creativity are required of all those desolate souls who must inhabit a prison, regardless of their level of relative privilege."*

The forerunner of this dynamic, now repeated at a greater intensity, is the patriarchal system of bribery that allowed any expendable proletarian or peasant man to play at being tyrant, and taste a small dose of the drug that made misery enjoyable. [...] While capitalism has always relied on unwaged labor, until now that labor has been provided by patriarchy or colonialism. In the Wikipedia age, the voluntary character of unwaged production is largely different." So despite Google owning their own attack jet, the force employed by these modern-day conquistadors need not always be so indiscreet, building as it does on the pacification and disciplining achieved so far and continually re-inscribed on the body by those prior drives for accumulation of wealth and power. We'd concur with those who wrote, in 'Deserting the Digital Utopia', that *"new corporations like Google are updating the Fordist compromise via free labor and free distribution. Ford offered workers greater participation in capitalism via mass consumption; Google gives everything away for free by making everything into an unpaid job. In offering credit, Ford enabled workers to become consumers by selling their future as well as present labor; Google has dissolved the distinction between production, consumption, and surveillance, making it possible to capitalize on those who may never have anything to spend at all."* Yet compared with accumulation drives such as the attack on European commoning [ed. – see 'A Profound Dis-ease'], the mechanisation of industrial work [ed. – see *Memory as a Weapon*; "An Outragous Spirit of Tumult & Riot"], the relegation of a private and 'feminised' sphere for social reproduction, and the occupation and extraction of value from foreign territories, all this has met with relatively little explicit resistance so far. Rather, many celebrate the online worlds they both co-create and inhabit as liberatory, even as it becomes increasingly involuntary when we're obliged to perform digitally for work, education and social life. We become both producer and consumer here too, both conduit and captive.

"Until the end of the 20th century," reads a passage from 'The Internet as New Enclosure', *"mass media was essentially unidirectional, with information flowing one way and attention flowing the other. Critics generally focused on this aspect of its structure, charging that it gave a small cabal tremendous influence over society while immobilizing everyone else as spectators. In contrast, underground media championed more participatory and decentralized forms. Participation and decentralization suddenly became mainstream with the arrival of widely accessible digital media. In many*

ways, the internet offered a liberating and empowering terrain for new modes of communication. Since the basic model was developed by researchers funded by the military rather than the private sector, it was designed to be useful rather than profitable. [...] The networks offered by Facebook aren't new; what's new is that they seem external to us. We've always had social networks, but no one could use them to sell advertisements – nor were they so easy to map. Now they reappear as something we have to consult. People corresponded with old friends, taught themselves skills, and heard about public events long before email, Google, and Twitter. Of course, these technologies are extremely helpful in a world in which few of us are close with our neighbors or spend more than a few years in any location. The forms assumed by technology and daily life influence each other, making it increasingly unthinkable to uncouple them.

[...] As our need for and access to information increase beyond the scope of anything we could internalize, information seems to become separate from us. This is suspiciously similar to the forcible separation from the products of their labor that transformed workers into consumers. The information on the internet is not entirely free – computers and internet access cost money, not to mention the electrical and environmental costs of producing these and running servers all around the world. And what if corporations figure out how to charge us more for access to all these technologies once we've become totally dependent on them? If they can, not only power and knowledge but even the ability to maintain social ties will be directly contingent on wealth.

But this could be the wrong thing to watch out for. Old-money conglomerates may not be able to consolidate power in this new terrain after all. The ways capitalism colonizes our lives via digital technologies may not resemble the old forms of colonization.

Like any pyramid scheme, capitalism has to expand constantly, absorbing new resources and subjects. It already extends across the entire planet; the final war of colonization is being fought at the foot of the Himalayas, the very edge of the world. In theory, it should be about to collapse now that it has run out of horizons. But what if it could go on expanding into us, and these new technologies are like the *Niña*, *Pinta*, and *Santa María* [ed. – ships used by conquistador Christopher Columbus in his first voyage to the Americas] landing on the continent of our own mental processes and social ties?

In this account, the internet functions as another successive layer of alienation built on the material economy. If a great deal of what is available on the internet is free of charge, this is not just because the process of colonization is not yet complete, but also because the determinant currency in the media is not dollars but attention²¹.

²¹ed. – Douglas Rushkoff similarly described the precarity of a market system that had already insinuated itself into virtually every territory and beyond every sphere, before even bio-technology was offering a dependable frontier for further expansion (as key as biotech, increasingly paired with nano-science and the like, may be in the future [ed. – see *Rebels Behind Bars*; *Let's Relaunch the Struggle Against Nocity*]). “But we found a new territory in human attention, in human time. So we started to commodify – to mine – human time for its value. And then the words that started to describe Net development were things like “stickiness”, and “eyeball hours”. Wired magazine announced that we were living in an “attention economy”; we might have infinite real estate online, but there are only so many “eyeball hours” in a day. So the object of the game now was to extract those eyeball hours from people in terms of their attention. So we end up taking an asynchronist device, like the internet, and turning it into an always-on device like an iPhone; we strap the internet to our bodies, and have the internet interrupt us every time someone does a Facebook update or tweets about us or sends us an email or wants our attention, or an app wants to tell us that something new is going on. And we live in a state of perpetual emergency interruption, that the only people who endured that before this were 911 operators or air-traffic controllers; and they did it for only four hours at a time, and they got drugs for it!”

Despite having worked out how to stay the most dynamic sector of Capital and to continue to profit from enterprises outside of themselves, the tech majors are nonetheless consolidating their fiefdoms. Silicon Valley and the like must constantly harvest the 'cream of the crop' of intellectual capital internationally (programmers, designers, scientists), and it becomes increasingly hard to make a living in the sector without enriching these companies. Independent developers might reach a huge audience through YouTube, for example, thus generating revenue for its owners Google not themselves first, but with the prospect of having to achieve sales into the thousands to recoup costs for the expensive design software: or utilise free or cheap versions, which entail relinquishing personal information and being spied on for the privilege.

In their narrative, the makers of the 2012 documentary 'Metropolis' redeploy "the maggot man", a figure from the work of philosopher Frederick Nietzsche, to describe this new vanguard of the capitalist class. *"The maggot man is the final human being, consuming up the rest of humanity that has been left for dead. The maggot men are the recuperative arms of virtual capital seeking nourishment, finding resistance and assimilating, appropriating and overwhelming, and at last conquering digitally-nomadic proletarians. Hopelessly mediocre, he sees himself as the pinnacle of human history. The maggot man transforms living energy and labour into electronic replicas of a dead culture's skin, and then crawls inside. Not a cultural stone is left unturned by the maggot. In the spirit of digital capitalism, the maggot man is the machinery of dead labour and virtual value. He is a creative leader of virtual capital, feeding off dead flesh, the last harvester of human senses before their transition from human to cyborg. The maggot man, sick of himself, needs technology. In his future, technology separates from the human species. The human animal breaks off into the networked intelligence of digital technology."* If this latter vision sounds far-fetched, it is but a pale shadow of the rhetoric from the over-heated minds of the futurists who staff these companies up to the highest echelons [ed. – see *'The Stories Which Civilisation Holds as Sacred'*]. Their technocratic ideologies already take shape within the vast 'lights-out' factories which have already been roboticised, shedding their human appendages almost entirely, while those not ejected from some sectors and pushed to the economic margins face the prospect of virtually life-long training and retraining to keep up with the evolution of the machines. There is only a certain threshold such a costly program of human updating is likely to reach. As humans become more disjointed and unreliable – in the ways described early in this essay – and combined with the technological fetishism of our culture, machine control will be justified by the bosses as more reasonable; as if they needed the excuse for choosing workers they don't have to pay.

The bigger tech companies seem to be endeavoring to not just play loyal stooges to government, but in some cases to try an active hand in the miserable political process itself (besides lobbying). Sure, capitalists have been key players in this field as long as capitalism and democracy have existed, but in some ways this is more blatant. When the leader of the Canadian Green Party was pointedly not invited to a televised debate, Twitter announced that it would shoot and post video responses to moderator questions in near-real time, knowing such platforms to already be central points of political discussion. However, it's already long ago that players from the industry were providing less to-your-face impetus for global affairs, along with more long-standing stalwarts of the capitalist elite: for instance, in the guise of philanthropy. A good example would be Bill Gates, until recently the CEO of Microsoft. *"The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation [ed. – see Return Fire vol.1 pg36] dispenses the large amounts of money all across the world, selectively promoting and facilitating the growth of emerging technologies and cultural trends [and funding] various methods of population control. Not only does the Foundation promote the use and integration of Microsoft*

computers in the Third World; it is attempting to take control of the global food supply, by forcing countries to grow Monsanto Golden Rice, a genetically-modified crop that is copyrighted and tightly controlled. [...] In 2012 a group of Microsoft company leaders met to discuss how Shakespeare's *The Tempest* would help them make better decisions. The leaders were equated with the colonisers landing on the island. Any problems these leaders might encounter were equated with the dark-skinned native Caliban, and his mother Sycorax, the witch" (Metropolis).

Hi-Tech Heavens, Hi-Tech Hells

"In the event of non-accidental injuries (including suicide, self mutilation, etc.), I agree that the company has acted properly in accordance with relevant laws and regulations, and will not sue the company, bring excessive demands, take drastic actions that would damage the company's reputation or cause trouble that would hurt normal operations."

– mandatory clause for employees of the FoxConn assembly plants in China

However much we allow ourselves to be wrapped up in its allures, our inheritance is a world disfigured by the digital on more than an individual level. As these technologies mould and colonise our minds and social interactions, so too must they and their industrial base expand materially, consuming electricity, land and labour. These technologies don't appear from nowhere; rather, they are inseparable from the rest of the techno-industrial capitalist world system which spawned them. They require the gargantuan electricity flows sent arching through pylons that leave destruction in their wake [*ed. – see Power Down*], and the wireless transmission from routers or phone masts toxifying the species that surround us not just ourselves; and the ephemeral physicality of 'the Cloud' and such takes form in the vast server-farms like those vast plots of cooled hangars industrialising the Oregon high desert, sanctuary no more from the detritus of civilisation. Behind the polished, aseptic exterior of the sleek devices which fill consumers' backpacks in the Global North (and not only, at an ever-fastening rate), lingers the death and misery they wreck mostly in the Global South. As we are reminded by Gianluca Iacovacci [*ed. – see Return Fire vol.3 pg71*], "[t]he technological race is financed by hi-tech companies such as Amazon, Apple, Samsung, Sony etc., which unscrupulously feed the market with computers, bio-computers and devices, all useless stuff producing imbecility, good for mass control and statistics, responsible for the polluting extraction of minerals used in the fabrication of circuits; the very circuits that at a later stage and in an absurd consumerist cycle will be dismantled with bare hands and the help of acids in China, Ghana, Vietnam and India; even by children whose little hands are particularly fit for the purposes."

Key components for the production of modern electronics, besides highly-toxic synthetic chemicals, are a variety of heavy-metals and 'rare-earth' minerals. Coltan is one classic example of the latter that is essential in managing the flow of current in electronic devices. War and deforestation in Central Africa has exterminated precarious species and claimed literally millions of human lives as State and non-State actors vie over territory for their prison-labour mining facilities for this heat-resistant mineral ore. China supplies the world market with the vast majority of 'rare-earth' metals used in phones, hybrid vehicles, wind turbines, etc. A substantial portion of the Chinese workforce for extraction, likely to result in cancers and other serious conditions, comes from the occupied territory of Tibet, where the Chinese military forcibly disbands com-

munities and dispatches them to such labour camps. As of 2014, a fifth of the Tibetan population (1.2 million and counting) had died in mines like these.

Upon surveying the sprawling industrial zone of Bautou, a desolate stain of endless smokestacks, refineries and waste-pools on the plains of Inner Mongolia, a BBC journalist noted that “[i]t’s the kind of industrial landscape that America and Europe has largely forgotten – at one time parts of Detroit or Sheffield must have looked and smelled like this. [...] The intriguing thing about both neodymium and cerium is that while they’re called rare earth minerals, they’re actually fairly common. Neodymium is no rarer than copper or nickel and quite evenly distributed throughout the world’s crust. While China produces 90% of the global market’s neodymium, only 30% of the world’s deposits are located there. Arguably, what makes it, and cerium, scarce enough to be profitable are the hugely hazardous and toxic process needed to extract them from ore and to refine them into usable products. For example, cerium is extracted by crushing mineral mixtures and dissolving them in sulphuric and nitric acid, and this has to be done on a huge industrial scale, resulting in a vast amount of poisonous waste as a byproduct. It could be argued that China’s dominance of the rare earth market is less about geology and far more about the country’s willingness to take an environmental hit that other nations shy away from.” Yet in a competitive and insatiable capitalist economy, diverse sources are needed, and you can also die by the droves as an indigenous Piaroa worker in the coltan mines south of Inírida in Colombia, while ‘rare-earth’ prospecting begun for a mine at almost the most westerly point of Europe; near Vigo, on the north Atlantic coast of the Iberian Peninsular.

“Apple’s supply chain links colonies of software engineers with hundreds of component suppliers in North America, Europe, and East Asia – Gorilla Glass from Kentucky, motion coprocessors from the Netherlands, camera chips from Taiwan, and transmit modules from Costa Rica funnel into dozens of assembly plants in China. [...] Apple insiders refer to FoxConn’s assembly city in Shenzhen as Mordor – J. R. R. Tolkien’s Middle Earth hellhole. As a spate of suicides in 2010 tragically revealed, the moniker is only a slight exaggeration of the factories in which young Chinese workers assemble iPhones” (The Smartphone Society). This specific industrial nightmare grew on the back of the mobile phone alone; thirty years ago, this urban hive of 12 million was a fishing village surrounded by rice paddies. When the iPhone first came out, Apple leader Steve Jobs was said to be so upset that the screen could be scratched more easily than he wanted, he insisted that FoxConn use new screen coating that turned workers blind. In 2012, over 300 workers at a FoxConn plant manufacturing X-Box gaming consoles for Microsoft climbed to the roof and threatened to commit mass suicide. Under pressure to clean up Apple’s image, FoxConn addressed a run of suicides on the job – by hanging large nets from the factory building to catch any jumpers.

Yet to just fetishise these spectacular (and increasingly known) examples, especially within the borders of a nation widely-maligned in the West for labour and environmental policies which are in many ways an attempt to squeeze the centuries-long defilement and proletarianisation which birthed industrialism in Europe into less than a century to catch up, does not address the more general dispossession and stultification. We could consider the depiction given by the narrators of ‘Metropolis’ of the Microsoft headquarters east of Seattle. “The city of Microsoft is a desert. Its headquarters stretch across one-third of the geographical space of the municipality of Redmond, with 150 campus buildings[...] Employees are given access to their own indoor mall, and circulate every day through the parking lots, restaurants, cubicles and distractions provided by their employer. They are watched every moment of the day and are surrounded by advertisements for the commodities they helped create. This is the army that is digitising the world, turning all life into circuitry, metal

and glass. [...] Redmond campus is a hive mind, an apparatus of psychic repression that keeps its often-depressed employees in a long narcosis that destroys their ability to comprehend the limits of the natural world[,] their creativity and psychic energy sucked out and emptied. Everything they create is created for something else. In return for their services they are rewarded with an alienating and insular life, where work is all and all is work. Their individual efforts all contribute to unified products and the objects they create have objectified them in turn. Together they build the hive-mind. Together they strive to create the purest form of information; the digital cloud severed from all constraints [through] which the natural world is networked into the digital one.” In many ways these labyrinths of the hi-tech giants are the new ‘company towns’ of the 19th and early 20th century: office workers might be offered colourful surroundings, vegan canteen options, free on-site laundry or ice-cream machines, but only to deaden the blow of still being only so many pounds of cubicle-fodder for the bosses.

In certain cities, around the world, the tech sector does not confine itself to its private compounds; rather, it seeps out to cannibalise and transform whatever it can use to fuel itself onwards. A fairly classic example of this is in the San Francisco Bay Area of the U.S. west coast. “Ironically,” remark the author/s of ‘Precarity in Paradise’, “it was probably San Francisco’s status as a rough and gritty haven for street culture that made it interesting for the yuppies of Silicon Valley. Over the course of decades, counterculture was turned into cultural capital, and the city became a playground for the employees of Google, Facebook, Twitter, and other IT firms.

This playground, however, is not the typical service sector zone designed to capture the salaries distributed by an adjacent large employer, like the towns of bars and strip clubs that invariably border army bases. Perhaps the most significant element of this new economy is that the playground is first and foremost a productive model. As intelligent and ruthless as the tech sector is, does anyone really think they would ever let their employees stop working? Far from it: the days of punching the clock and going home are over.

Just as cellphones nefariously increase worker productivity by forcing all of us to be perpetually on call, IT employees are increasingly being centralized in culturally stimulating neighborhoods where they can socialize with other yuppies, display their gadgets, and brainstorm ever newer applications for the latest technologies. They are not always on the clock, but they are intended to take their work home with them. The playgrounds where they frolic, therefore, need to have the infrastructural backing to interface with the new apps that make up a large part of economic production today, and they also need the social and cultural allure that make such apps exciting, both for their designers and their consumers. These can include apps for dating, finding hip restaurants and clubs, and linking people with shared hobbies. A city that doesn’t cater to a wide range of hobbies, that doesn’t have good infrastructure, and that doesn’t boast first rate cuisine and night life won’t be able to attract the brightest young minds necessary for growth in the tech sector, nor will it inspire them to keep producing all around the clock. Just as work and leisure are fused, cultural production, material production, and intellectual production become indistinguishable.”

Perhaps there are only so many cities that genuinely can meet this standard, but a good many are certainly bidding to make themselves among them. More generally, as the applications of digital networks permeate public and private space, our environment is recast by programmers and engineers, with lines of inclusion and exclusion sometimes more subtle than others. When, amongst other issues, Google supplying dedicated bus routes in the Bay Area to shuttle its employees from residential areas to campus led to landlords along the routes deciding to hike rents 20% and issuing eviction notices, anti-eviction organisers threw up a few blockades of the vehi-

cles. The attitudes encountered, as recounted by an author on the Mismanaging Perception blog, were telling as to the entitled demeanor the companies feed on. *“Echoing the slogan of New York City’s former Mayor Ed Koch – “If you can’t afford to live here, mo-o-ove!” – one Google employee yelled from a blockaded bus, “This is a city for the right people who can afford it.” [F]rom Portland, Oregon, to Miami, Florida, the same pattern keeps reappearing. Jobs are relocated to concentrated corporate campuses, while the higher-salaried employers settle in the inner cities, and cities are able to re-establish dominance over the periphery. Google’s control over much of the information flows through which the periphery connects to the center evinces the colonial quality of mass media in the era of hyper-modernism [ed. – see ‘A Profound Dis-ease’]. [...] Is not Google Glass²² precisely the manifestation of the crisis of the intelligibility of urban space[?] Here, two classes, one rich and one poor, can co-exist in the same city while literally living on two utterly different levels of intelligibility. For the rich, the city is comprised of data and information that may provide elite accessibility, while the lower class, which lives outside of the city and works in the service industry, perform the role of automatons, reproducing a city that they, themselves, have no chance of experiencing.”²³*

Without returning to the ‘public’ vs. ‘private’ canard raised by too many anti-gentrification efforts²⁴, ‘Precarity in Paradise’ turns to the specific niche the Catalan city of Barcelona has

²²A head-mounted wearable-computer with a display in the shape of eyeglasses, where users navigate the Internet via voice commands. Some police departments are especially interested. After provisional introduction in 2013, Google retracted the technology after much criticism over ‘privacy’ concerns of the headset’s camera continually recording and scanning for data, including some public venues banning the glasses and the ‘Glassholes’ wearing them, and in at least one case a wearer being assaulted and relieved of the glasses for their invasive presence in a San Francisco bar. Tentatively, Google have announced they will advance a revised prototype in 2017 (presumably the headset of which will appear slightly more unobtrusive).

²³ed. - Indeed, the first protests in San Francisco against big tech apparently followed a speech by bio-technology entrepreneur Balaji Srinivasan in which he decreed that the rest of America was holding Silicon Valley back and it was time to consider secession. Lest this be taken for a joke, a venture-capitalist investor named Tim Draper duly filed a petition to split California into six, with an independent Silicon Valley – putatively the richest state in America – abutting Central California, which would be poorer even than Mississippi.

²⁴“Traditionally, activists who confront gentrification, commercialization, and the imposition of social control champion the dichotomy between public space and private space. [...] But some of the anarchists and other anti-capitalists participating in these movements find the dichotomy misleading, presenting people with an artificially constricted choice. Their interventions in the movement against the privatization of healthcare highlight a third option; neither private, nor public, but communal. This trichotomy is at the heart of the analysis presented in the [Catalan] book, ‘Health in Peril, Bodies in Struggle: From the resistance against the cutbacks to the self-organization of healthcare’, itself a product of the anarchist participation in that struggle. The vision contained calls progressives to task for their shortsighted embrace of public healthcare, ignoring the many ways the service prioritizes economic needs over human needs, treating bodies like defective machines, and the ways it is pervaded with a patriarchal practice. Instead of simply reversing the cutbacks, the book argues, we should allow the current spirit of solidarity to transform us and transform the very institution of healthcare, occupying and self-organizing the existing hospitals and clinics, rethinking medicine itself to promote a holistic, ecological, and preventive concept of health, and fully communalizing healthcare, taking it into our own hands rather than entrusting it to the government or to private corporations. The same trichotomy can be applied to the battle for space and the fight for the city. Contrary to democratic mythology, public space does not belong to us, it belongs to the State, and it is a relatively simple matter for the government to turn it over to private administration. In fact, it does not really matter if space is policed by private security guards or by the police themselves; the critical feature is that in neither case does it belong to us, nor are we allowed to directly determine its use, its framing, its construction, or its disappearance. [...] While developing its civic behavior ordinances, passed in 2006, Barcelona hosted ex-mayor of New York Rudolph Giuliani, who advised l’Ajuntament [Barcelona’s City Hall] on “Broken Window” policing [ed. – see Return Fire vol.1 pg18], “Zero Tolerance,” and cleaning up the city’s image. The “civismo” laws have since spread across Spain, and Giuliani has been cited as a major influence on [then] Barcelona mayor, Xavier Trias. [The civic behavior ordinances] were not in fact a privatization measure, but they heavily restricted people’s access to space all the same. The new laws greatly increased state control over space by instituting or increasing fines for many popular, working-class uses of public space, such as playing

found in this arrangement, and what this has meant for its inhabitants. *“With increasing success, Barcelona is branding itself as an ideal location for work/play, complementing rather than replacing the existing giants. [T]rade fairs encourage networking among the global delegates of a given industry, allowing them to show off their products and make new contacts. But they are also meant to have an element of fun. No one wants to go to a trade fair in Des Moines. Barcelona is not only a city with pizzazz, it is also a site of innovation in IT and other industries. Barcelona is the number one city worldwide in the number of conference delegates it hosts (in fact 40% of visitors who overnight in the city come to town for an international event), and the third ranked city worldwide in the number of international conferences. Its most important fair is the Mobile World Congress, which is the largest cellphone and app trade fair in the world. The Congress is a source of resentment, and in past years it has been targeted by protests or even partially interrupted by riots. Though many people rely on the economic activity associated with the MWC, the jobs generated are temporary and stressful, and the thousands of delegates who attend occupy the city with a grand sense of entitlement. Like any macro-event, the Congress also entails a heavy police presence and extreme security measures, imposed on adjacent neighborhoods and on its own workforce. This year [2015] the police blacklisted at least a dozen people who had already been hired to work the fair. Mostly anarchists, many of those on the blacklist did not have any criminal records, and none of them had been arrested for anything that would present a legitimate security concern for temp workers. Nonetheless, the Catalan police are in charge of security at the Fira, the large complex that hosts the major trade fairs in Barcelona, and they reserve the right to impose whatever conditions they wish.”*

To host a trade fair, a city needs a great deal of disposable, precarious labor. The Mobile World Congress employs over twelve thousand people every year, most of them for just over a week, often working them 14 hours a day. The only people who would work in such conditions are those who live month to month and, lacking stable employment, have to take whatever job they can get. With youth employment around 50%, Barcelona has that kind of labor pool.” Whilst this serves as a specific case in which the presence of the tech industry interests are rising influences in the composition of certain centres of capital, the projected reach of that industry’s creations is far wider. From architecture, utility placement, new veins of information and energy supply, traffic control and policing or exclusion techniques, the digital sector proposes its various ‘solutions’

music or drinking in the streets, hanging laundry from balconies, graffiti, and so on. Some of these measures directly benefit privatized spaces, for example criminalizing someone drinking on a bench but legitimizing someone drinking at a table a bar has placed on the street (after paying l’Ajuntament for a permit, of course). This just underscores what the now dominant development model of the “public-private partnership” already makes plain: that there is no profound tension between public and private spaces. The two ideals exist on a continuum that is bound by common interests. After all, if you compare the relatively mild urban conflicts generated by the recent privatization of public space with the centuries of enclosure, warfare, mass executions, deportations, evictions, and uprooting that modern states had to go through in order to destroy the vestiges of communal space and to universalize the institution of public space, it becomes clear where the true difference lies. The real question is not: which external power governs the spaces we are forced to spend our lives in? but rather: do we or don’t we have direct control over our vital spaces? That is the logic that constitutes the concept of communal space. Why is this theoretical nuance so important to the battle against gentrification? Because everything that doesn’t kill capitalism makes it stronger. If we squander all this mobilized anger and energy by demanding a mere reversal of the most recent outrages, blocking one specific gentrification plan but continuing to entrust the city to an elite that has different interests at heart, at best we will only forestall a deepening of our misery, just as the social welfare state forestalled revolutionary workers’ movements with a new array of public services [ed. – see Return Fire vol.1 pg48], only to sell those services off once the movements had disintegrated and neoliberalism could emerge” (Precarity in Paradise).

for the impending crises generated in the urban monstrosities of the world: the Smart City²⁵, the nightmare-fantasy the State and Capital walk hand-in-hand towards. In this light, the further abandonment of subversive or resistant activities in physical and public spaces by radicals who instead privilege the online forms of contestation assumes a new gravity. The challenge appears to be the re-embodiment of the force of willful insurgence which threatens to become ever more ethereal, at the same time as the spaces of our actual lives are gentrified, securitised, further paved-over and digitalised. But how to resist these encroachments in more than discourse alone? What are the precedents, and what is the terrain on which we stand today?

Chuckling Rocks at the Google Bus

“Today someone will wake up, and as every other morning before anything else they will check their Facebook account or some other virtual media [developed] to turn our forms of interaction into mere algorithms used for continuing to feed their capitalist machinery. Today the vast industry has become essentially financial, and the development of technologies is yet another tool of this big monster to establish greater domination. Today their internet, telephone and television will not emit any signal. This morning will be extended several days, in which the enterprise will try to resolve what was caused by this act of sabotage.”

– claim for the arson of a junction box belonging to Telmex [ed. – see *Memory as a Weapon; A Shorter History of a Northwest E.L.F. Cell*], Mexico City, 05.04.15

On May 22nd, 1971, a series of explosions rippled through the Special Branch HQ in Tintagel House, the London Metropolitan Police building on the Albert Embankment of the Thames. (The bombing, carried out by the 'Angry Brigade', was coordinated with simultaneous attacks in Paris by other European anarchist groups against a British Rail office, Rolls Royce showroom, and suppliers of Land Rover. It responded, amongst other things, to the arrest and accusation of two men in England with Angry Brigade membership and actions.) One of the blasts in Tintagel House was aimed at the police computer – a 'state of the art' U.K.-designed ICT 1301 mainframe. In their communique taking responsibility for the action, they wrote that: *“We are getting closer. We are slowly destroying the long tentacles of the oppressive State machine... secret files in the universities, work study in the factories, the census at home, social security files, computers, TV, Giro,*

²⁵“L’Ajuntament is still marketing Barcelona as a “Smart City,” a city where the new information technologies are not only developed, but immediately put into practice, boasting the responsiveness, the flexibility, and the willingness to mold the urban terrain and the lives of its inhabitants to interface more compliantly with all the new communications, consumer, transport, networking, and surveillance apps. Both a marketing scheme and a technology growth sector, the Smart City showcases a number of methods for mollifying the plebs, using communications technologies and the novelty they still command to create the illusion of citizen participation (similar to how comments sections were once supposed to revolutionize the news media). One example, mobileID, is a smartphone app that lets citizens securely access government websites, consult the census, copy tax documents, locate polling places on election day, and find where their car has been towed to, as the official Smart City website proudly explains. The Smart City concept has bamboozled the moderate environmentalist crowd, promoting models of rational urban planning that highlight a few feel-good features like electric cars while distracting from the global view of economic growth that is increasingly, and not decreasingly, destructive of the environment. A study published on triplepundit.com (“people, planet, profit”) ranks Barcelona third worldwide for “climate-resilient cities” that “have decided to forge ahead, taking action on climate change and participating in the 21st century.” The analysis of Barcelona’s ecological footprint does not take into account the airplane and cruiseship traffic that bring many visitors to the city, highly toxic computer and cellphone production, nor the major greenhouse gas emissions caused by the internet, on which the city’s economic model relies” (Precarity in Paradise).

passports, work permits, insurance cards. Bureaucracy and technology [used] to speed up our work, to slow down our minds and actions...” Allegedly, damage was minimal.

If there’s one thing we can be sure of today, it is that to imagine the foci of digital domination to reside in such facilities is no longer the case. Still, it is instructive to see the trajectory of some others who, standing at the same precipice of the technological wave to come, initially utilised the same tactics. The example we’ll use of the anti-authoritarian group CLODO (‘Committee for the Liquidation and Subversion of Computers’, or ‘clodo’ in French also being a slang word for the homeless) arose from a context of sabotages on company or State properties related with nuclear construction (amongst other targets) with fire or explosions in southern France in the 1970-80’s. In the course of the series of actions they claimed over the years, most of them involving torching or otherwise destroying computer centres, they denounced the “domestication” (domestication and mystification) this technology brought and pointing to “*the abuse of the quantitative and the reduction to the binary*” at its very point of origin, whilst also in cases linking their targets to U.S. imperialism. Their methods and discourse were often playful and informal, and they to this day have never been caught²⁶.

Interestingly, they claimed they were actually computer workers themselves, and so “*consequently well placed to know the current and future dangers of data processing and telecommunications*”²⁷. (If that’s what they actually were, then we must say we prefer their approach to that called for by the famous Wikileaks founder-in-exile Julian Assange’s appeal for computer programmers to defend their interests as a class; by analogy, CLODO’s aims could be read as *abolishing* themselves as a class...) In their final communication, the group pledged to gear future actions specifically towards the impending telecommunications explosion (presumably abandoning claims), action which would apparently be less ‘spectacular’ than the firebombing of the Sperry-Univac computing facility for which they were most famous.

In the wake of that telecommunications explosion, where the computer proficiency skills to a fairly high levels are – while certainly not generalised – at least much more common than they used to be, we have seen the phenomenon of hacking increase and diversify. Certainly, it’s interesting to notice events like the ‘largest cybercrime ever uncovered’ which between 2013-2015

²⁶In 1983 the group noted that “[f]or more than three years a security court of the State (may it rest in peace) and several dozen mercenaries have been looking for us: their material resources are sophisticated but pretty insufficient and our last action against the information center of the Haute Garonne municipality must have shown them we know more about them than they know about us!”

²⁷When asked in a mock (self-)interview why they sabotage computers, they respond: “[t]o challenge everyone, programmers and non-programmers, so that we can reflect a little more on this world we live in and which we create, and on the way computerization transforms this society. [...] We are essentially attacking what these tools lead to: files, surveillance by means of badges and cards, instrument of profit maximization for the bosses and of accelerated pauperization for those who are rejected... [...] Faced with the tools of those in power, dominated people have always used sabotage or subversion. It’s neither retrograde nor novel. Looking at the past, we see only slavery and dehumanization, unless we go back to certain so-called primitive societies. [...] By our actions we have wanted to underline the material nature of the computer-tools on the one hand, and on the other, the destiny of domination which has been conferred on it. Finally, though what we do is primarily propaganda through action, we also know that the damage we cause leads to setbacks and and substantial delays. [...] These actions are only the visible tip of the iceberg! We ourselves and others fight daily in a less ostensible way. With computers, like with the army, police or politics, in fact, like with all privileged instruments of power, errors are the rule, and working them out takes up the majority of programmers’ time! We take advantage of this, which undoubtedly costs our employers more than the material damage we cause. We’ll only say that the art consists of creating bugs that will only appear later on, little time-bombs. To get back to your question – what could be more ordinary than throwing a match on a package of magnetic tapes? Anybody can do it! The act appears excessive only for those who don’t know, or who don’t want to know, what most computer systems are used for.”

saw a Russian-based group use computer viruses to infect networks in more than 100 financial institutions worldwide and spirit away £650million, or the hack which seized and ransomed all the files of judges and the Udine prosecutor's office in Italy. Besides expropriation, there was the case of an attack (of unknown origin) on a German steel mill which managed to inflict serious physical damage to the plant by causing outages after hacking into the mainframe. The increased interconnectivity of many objects and processes would seem vulnerable in this regard. In terms of hacks from a more explicitly 'radical' space, many will have by now heard of the umbrella-group #Anonymous and their exploits; including issuing an ambiguous threatening message the night before the New York Stock Exchange temporarily suspended trading on all securities due to a 'technical issue', and United Airlines briefly grounded all of its flights due to a systemwide failure. Sometimes hacking corresponds to or complements other, 'real-life' interventions, such as 2012 vandalism of the Facebook wall of Egypt Air while anti-deportation activists in Cardiff, Wales, clogged up their phonedlines, smashed windows at the U.K. Border Agency office and attempted to block the coach carrying their friend to their 'removal' from reaching the motorway. The year before, anarchist arson of the upper floors of a €200million Rabobank skyscraper in Utrecht, Holland (for the third time over a nine-month period, and while the arms that bank invests in were being used to suppress insurgencies in Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Israel, Greece...), also happened simultaneously with a cyber-attack on their website.

From where we ourselves stand, without much technical knowledge to gauge the impact certain types of electronic disruption would entail, it's hard to tell how effective some of these strikes must be. The ethereal quality that 'cyber-attack' seems to entail is something that perhaps feels reduced to those who have spent the necessary amount of time tinkering with computers; certainly the State seems keen to either severely punish the digital renegades it manages to ensnare [ed. – see *Return Fire vol.2 pg72*] or to enlist talented hackers to become 'white-hat' assets of governments and corporations. Is there a potential for electronic saboteurs to launch an offensive that seeks to undermine and implode cybernetic governance and the reproduction of computer technologies themselves, rather than simply appropriate these technologies for supposedly 'liberatory' ends, or even just to continue the naive narrative of democratically distributing 'facts' which a 'tyrannical order' would like to conceal from the masses? We'll leave that question to those better qualified to answer it; those with the patience, resources and resilience to subject themselves to even more screen-time than is already prescribed in daily life. For our part, we will turn to a more embodied resistance, and what that might hold.

If TV shows like 'Black Mirror', novels like Dave Eggers' 'The Circle' and Hollywood films like 'Transcendence' are anything to go by, there is definitely something subliminal in the pop-culture *zeitgeist* about our imprisonment by digital technologies and an impulse to escape it. (Those who speak too stridently of this outside of the steam-vent of the entertainment industry, however, have yet to be spared the accusations of paranoia or outright insanity which have stigmatised such critics in the past.) Considering this, attacks which could be said to mostly have a symbolic element (from repeated attacks on the Greek headquarters of Microsoft [ed. – see *Return Fire vol.1 pg35*] to general 'subvertisement' of tech industry propaganda, visible harassment of employees and managers, etc.) perhaps have more resonance than before, to draw out clearer lines of conflict between the digital and its discontents. Just this June, a man was arrested in California after striking a vehicle mapping for Google's StreetView feature with two molotovs, in a rage over its intrusiveness. (Police linked him to two more acts in the days preceding; gunfire breaking glass at that corporation's Mountain View premises, and torching another StreetView vehicle.)

“An enterprise that maps the planet Earth, sending its teams into every street of every one of its towns, cannot have purely commercial aims,” the authors of ‘Google Dégage’ warn. *“One never maps a territory that one doesn’t contemplate appropriating.”* If only more people recognised this preliminary occupation as such, and responded in kind! How many similar projects might be discovered quietly unfolding in our neighbourhoods were we to investigate, which count on not facing such opposition?

It’s easy to forget that the internet also has a more general physicality to it, and not just in terms of the less accessible nodes like the remote server farms, the under-sea cables linking continents, or even the interchanges known as ‘carrier hotels’ normally housed in urban facilities of the communications industry. In a district of Porto Alegre, Brazil, the group ‘Hostility Against Domination’ forced access undetected to the transmissions antennae of NetSul – serving the State, the army and various private companies as well as a fibre-optic network, internet and TV – in May this year and set a destructive fire²⁸. Similarly, in the run-up to the opening of the European Central Bank headquarters in Germany [*ed. – see Return Fire vol.3 pg10*], arson inside the control panel of a pylon near Eschorn by opponents of the bank and its world was enough to cause outages in the data centres of Frankfurt.

In a world economy highly dependent on high-speed and uninterrupted data-flows, new long-distance private fibre-optic lines are thrown up in some places for an advantage of literally milliseconds. It is precisely this digital backbone which the FBI in California is investigating at least 14 anonymous attacks upon since the summer of 2014. Following one such sabotage, where two fibre-optic cables belonging to AT&T (and legally considered a critical piece of the nation’s internet infrastructure) were cut in the Bay Area suburb that’s home to the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory and many high-tech commuters, you could read in the news that *“[t]he high-capacity lines, which aren’t much thicker than a pencil, carry vast amounts of data. Everything from phone calls to computer transactions, emails, and even the security camera feeds watching the cables themselves travel down the plastic or glass fibers as pulses of light. The cables are the interstate highways of the information superhighway. The FBI says whoever has been attacking the cables usually opens a underground vault, climbs inside and then cuts through the cables’ protective metal conduit before severing the lines themselves.”* (The investigators also said that whoever is responsible may be dressing as telecom maintenance workers or *“possess tools consistent with that job role”*.) Back on this side of the Atlantic, we could take the example (among others in that country) of the blaze in a data centre of the mobile operator Base which temporarily knocked out their coverage in all of Belgium for 2G, 3G and 4G internet a couple of years ago.

In terms of otherwise confronting the social processes through which the digital capitalist model is being imposed, we already mentioned the commuter blockades in San Francisco, although the execution and discourse leave much to be desired from our standpoint. When the forms of power we are up against are more ephemeral, opportunities still might not be outside our grasp in some cases, as mentioned once again in ‘Robots of Repression’: *“One possibility opened up by the participatory nature of the internet is the crowdsourcing of repression. “Crowdsourcing” itself is an internet-era neologism reflecting the previously unimaginable phenomenon that has followed riots from London to Toronto: the police publishing thousands of megabytes worth of photo and video and calling on the public to help them trace and identify lawbreakers, qualita-*

²⁸This they claimed along with the burning of two items of machinery forcing urban expansion through a forest in the region.

tively surpassing the predecessor of this phenomenon, the good ole fashioned “Wanted” poster. Of course, to every action a reaction a reaction: this crowdsourcing of repression has already been sabotaged by anarchists spamming police identification efforts, sometimes with the help of computer programs that automatically flood the database with thousands of fake and funny names (the equivalent of ripping down the “Wanted” poster, drawing a moustache on it, or, à la Robin Hood, shooting a freaking arrow through it).”

Wherever the advance of the cybernetic monstrosity takes its own specific form, different possibilities might exist to undermine it, were we to seek them. In their case, the author/s of ‘Precarity in Paradise’ assert that “[t]he Catalan government has no hope of projecting Barcelona onto an international IT axis if it cannot control its own population. People, after all, are supposed to be resources, not self-organized beings with their own dreams, an ability to define their own desires and needs, and their own visions of what their neighborhoods should look like. Some Catalans are buying in to the new model of city, studying web design, imagining their own tech startups, or contenting themselves with jobs in hip bars and restaurants. But many residents of Barcelona are not at all happy with the new arrangement, and they are increasingly constituting a force capable of blocking the plans of investors and l’Ajuntament. Trade fair delegates who get spat on and insulted in the streets, or who have their work-vacations interrupted by a student riot or a transport strike, do not come back. Tourists who get robbed, or who can’t find cheap accomodations, look for other destinations. If neighbors collectively resist evictions, the character of their neighborhood can’t be changed as quickly.” All the better if such actors begin to link their struggles to a desire for a more generalised disruption, to a conflict against the environment as it boxes all of our lives into one or another form of metropolitan isolation, without continuing to valorise (a preceding form of) that isolation via lacklustre political groupings such as ‘poor people vs. gentrifiers’, ‘citizens for a more democratic city’, etc.

Provisional Conclusions for Adoption, Amendment or Advancement

“A specific space inhabited by an apparatus – a website, for example – functions as a shell. Even in the absence of management, its very shape suggests a certain use and flow which serve to regenerate it. [...] There are many anarchists who have run for the mountains, as it were, ignoring anarchist websites entirely and foregoing all the civilizational wonders of internetland, consigning themselves to discursive forms that are illegible from the lowlands. Through avoidance, they protect themselves from the recuperating trap of trying to resolve the problem, but they also run the risk, historically repeated, of losing a battle fought on a field from which they are absent, ensuring that they will subsequently be overrun and disappeared. Faced with the superficiality of internet communication and its pernicious effect on our own behaviors and networks, what are we to do? I don’t offer you a solution to this question. I intend the question itself as a subversion, an invitation to counter the flow of the apparatus that is already leading you along to click on the hypertext that leads to the next article before even reading the middle of this one (because you skimmed, didn’t you?) by pondering – at length and unproductively – an invitation to look away, causing your eye muscles to remember distance and focus, to breathe in deeply and remember that you hadn’t been, and to remember your back and your shoulders, that should be straight, ready for a

fight or a long walk, but are instead hunched, as though under some great load that you must carry with you wherever you go. What are we to do?"

– *Robots of Repression*

Once, not so very long ago, it seems like a *de facto* position for radicals (or even 'counter-cultural' types more generally) was not owning a TV. Now, though the digital medium, there is a screen in almost all of our rooms, if not every pocket. It feels typical for such radicals as much as anyone else to be hooked on the latest series; and for those of us who aren't, how differently do our actual lives play out if the media we avidly consume is anarchist rather than pop-culture? The acceptance is more-or-less apparent that, despite our misgivings, for us too socialising, shopping, politic-ing and finding dates (to the degree all these are currently separable) now happen online. But these forms of activity are not the same as they were; more and more they are shaped into varieties of production of the self, to be sifted into demographics and subject to cybernetic governance. The medium, once again, can determine as much as the content.

Far be it from us to suggest some type of politics of purity or consumption, miserable like all politics, which only leads to confusion between the choices of those who design, produce and disseminate digital technologies and the rest of us who must navigate the terrain it imposes; a confusion which dampens rebellion²⁹. Yet how can we move, without only perpetuating the dynamics we've detailed above? The blogger Ian Erik Smith pondered a similar question about his own online activity. *"Like so many others, I feel a compulsion to produce something, to express myself, and to advance a particular point of view. But I also experience a recurrent feeling that the effort is futile and potentially even counterproductive. As if everyone is shouting and my foolish but perhaps natural response is to attempt to shout even louder than the crowd. Nothing can possibly be heard and so, in truth, I'm merely adding to the noise.*

I can generate what is now commonly called "content" – able to produce fodder for a format – and can then, in one way or another, place it into the world. I can make paper copies and stash them into the hidden letter boxes that are to be found in abandoned stone walls or I can stuff them into glass bottles and hurl them into the sea. But more likely, I will deposit whatever I produce into the digital marketplace of ideas where ideas aren't ideas but are simply content filling a space. At this point, it's likely that my every move has been anticipated and my purposes already circumvented; my efforts may be effectively channeled to serve purposes that are not my own. By contributing content to the digital realm I am propping up what I wish to tear down and yet throwing a bottle into the sea doesn't seem promising.

[...] It doesn't matter how insightful or well-crafted something is if there isn't the space for it to be understood, considered, or comprehended. During the writing process one might focus on clarity and precision which are qualitative considerations; but once put into the digital realm it is almost exclusively quantitative considerations that remain relevant. What we want is for our content to be loud enough to silence everyone else; to command space. If not the smartest voice perhaps we can be the loudest voice.

²⁹Perhaps the same confusion reigns amongst those who assert that 'modern humanity' love their gadgets so much that in any potentially-transformative situation the pull of this addiction would bring them straight back to the order capable of supplying them. That's as may be, but do we have any examples to consider? From 'disasters' [ed. – see Return Fire vol.2 pg19] to insurrections, it would seem some moments have the potential to drag us forth into a space of new possibilities and priorities. How stupid would it be to think, despite the systemic disruption and 'practice' we might achieve from causing temporary black-outs in the present, that a more definitive severing of our digital umbilical chord would happen in a void from the general overturning of social relationships?

But are things really this grim?

Even in the noisiest of spaces we are generally able to make out coherent bits and pieces. Civilization is a homogenizing, totalizing force but it is not yet fully realized, not yet perfect. There remain cracks. There remains space for learning, dialogue, and ultimately resistance. One need only consult his or her own experience and will likely recall numerous times when something significant reached one's eyes or ears in a most timely way prompting a change in direction.

In 1964 anarchist and art critic Herbert Read lamented that "the fall of the last civilization will not be heard above the incessant din". This lament of a past anarchist can be a source of hope for contemporary anarchists who do not see civilization as something to be preserved or mourned but rather thrown off. [...] We should not expect to individually steer the direction of mass society in any direction as though we were generals on a battlefield; instead we should imagine ourselves as mice and rats chewing at the wires... soon there will be flames." Although we may read much online that we forget again as quickly as we type the captcha for the next page, some things do stick, and finding a way to bring them off-screen into our lives becomes necessary.

How can we create less-digitalised spaces or moments, ones which make it possible to look into each other's eyes again to voice our desire and joy for a life in hostility to what degrades us? If forms of online activity exist that actually equip people to engage in insurrectionary struggle that can transform our conditions (as some have cited virtual mapping programs doing during recent upheavals in Turkey) while actually undermining our wider dependency on the medium itself by contributing to spaces where potential rebels – and, why not, those they will have to learn to distinguish themselves from in the process – can meet in person, perhaps they are worthwhile to use for our aims. The key would be distinguishing that which creates upheavals in which the kind of surveillance that is possible on the internet is no longer possible on those who are in the struggle because they are acting outside of the field of representation, rather than coalescing new fields easily legible to our enemies. Such a focus would need at its base a recognition that the more dependent a struggle becomes on technologies produced out of its partisans' control, the more vulnerable it would be.

To combat the digital delirium within our own anarchist circles and beyond, one (deceptively simple) proposition we'll make it that comrades could take turns gathering news, updates, communiques and analysis while others were relieved of the need to trawl the Net for these details, and then share the (printed?) information at regular get-togethers in the flesh. In this way the media in question would find a way to sit back within a more social context rather than a more individuated and passive one, while also allowing a crew to develop real-world affinities and projectual direction off the back of it. Perhaps this face-to-face aspect could (at least potentially?) dilute some of the needless bravado and dehumanising aspects which seem to flourish online. Admittedly concerning a slightly different proposal, the authors of 'We Are All Very Anxious' hit on some likely obstacles such a process would face in societies such as our own. *"One major problem will be maintaining regular time commitments in a context of constant time and attentive pressure. The process has a slower pace and a more human scale than is culturally acceptable today. However, the fact that groups offer a respite from daily struggle, and perhaps a quieter style of interacting and listening which relieves attentive pressure, may also be attractive. Participants would need to learn to speak with a self-expressive voice (rather than a neoliberal performance derived from the compulsion to share banal information), and to listen and analyse."* (Another pitfall could be the creation of mere talking-shops to let off steam, were a drive to identify courses of action lacking.)

Whether by these means or another, it feels true that making sure we find the space to actually talk with a friend or few about whatever topic makes it more real, whether identifying a social dynamic, rescuing a prisoner from the oblivion and forgetfulness repression aims to instill, or highlighting a vulnerability in the system to be exploited.

Despite the horrific effects which are obviously non-reversible on ourselves and the rest of the biosphere from creating digital gadgets, there is reason to hope that at least some of the haziness that the Net clouds our vision with might be escaped, however temporarily. Carr recounts his experience of an experimental disconnection: *“I cancelled my Twitter account, put my Facebook membership on hiatus, and mothballed my blog. I shut down my RSS reader and curtailed my skype-ing and instant messaging. Most important, I throttled back my e-mail application. It had long been set to check for new messages every minute. I reset it to check only once an hour, and when that still created too much of a distraction, I began keeping the program closed much of the day.*

The dismantling of my online life was far from painless. For months, my synapses howled for their Net fix. I found myself sneaking clicks on the “check for new mail” button. Occasionally, I’d go on a daylong Web binge. But in time the cravings subsided, and I found myself able to type at my keyboard for hours on end or to read through a dense academic paper without my mind wandering. Some old, disused neural circuits were springing back into life, it seemed, and some of the newer, Web-wired ones were quieting down. I started to feel generally calmer and more in control of my thoughts – less like a lab rat pressing a lever and more like, well, a human being. My brain could breathe again.

My case, I realize, isn’t typical. Being self-employed and of a fairly solitary nature, I have the option of disconnecting. Most people today don’t. The Web is so essential to their work and social lives that even if they wanted to escape the network they could not.” However, at least within the sphere of our online lives which revolves most around our radicalism (while never cleanly separable), we might be able to address the content which the form contains, to the degree that’s possible, aside from minimising our individual screen exposure as described above. One suggestion, in terms of the content which crowds the counter-information networks, would be to prioritise pieces with a notable analytic, ‘how-to’, poetic or otherwise inspirational content, even (or especially) if it results in a slowed output: if we must contend with the propensity for ‘groupiness’ the Net seems to hold, we could at least attempt to raise the bar for participation and challenge ourselves more. Doubtless there is a way this transparently-subjective approach could degenerate into elitism; ourselves we certainly don’t want an anarchy of the intellectually-athletic or practiced orators alone, but we do want to challenge the assumption that any and all of our anarchist lives should (or even could!) exist online, only feeding the quantitative frenzy. It should go without saying that we ourselves highly value the continuation and revival of print-based, fly-postable or hand-to-hand propaganda, which might offer a more suitable format for the types of content which wouldn’t fit so much into what we described above anyway. A question to ask might be; what purpose does it serve to upload whatever in question to the internet, or to what degree does it become the easy option above seeking ways to give it a life we can more easily identify in the streets where we actually live and spend our time?

Also, in situations where the sources of online dialogue are known to individuals in the offline world, authors could be engaged with face-to-face (confrontationally or not, as the case requires) by those who consider their activity especially toxic, misleading, or a security liability; hence reducing the alienation between what one presents via an online avatar and the very real consequences this has in reality. Lastly, we echo the 325 contribution to the Nadir gathering that “[t]he

distribution of “computer security guides” for beginners is really important, like the one produced by the comrades of America [‘Anonymity Security’] and it is especially valid for those using electronic means to organise and communicate in the insurrectional tendency facing police surveillance and investigations. It is the same as learning to do anything else in the struggle. Some things are maybe not for everyone, but without reinforcing our struggle, sharing the skills and actually helping out others who ask for/need technical solidarity, we’ll allow the enemy to outflank us, because there are too few people with the technical knowledge. The general problems of internet and computer security is part of the general ‘problem’ of repression; specialisation hierarchy within the movement leads itself to decay and rapid degeneration during episodes of crackdown.”

To the degree that whomever of us do engage with the digital sphere, this choice entails responsibilities and dangers, which we would be fools to take lightly.

These are simply provisional and partial thoughts, yet to be properly hammered-out. So we won’t put too much store in the proposals specifically, beyond the urgent need we feel to start more conversations to address the digital delirium we are sliding into. We’ll wind down this survey of the thoughts of others and ourselves on the topic by reiterating: using the field of online representation as a means to disrupt the power structures which are preserved and intensified by the ongoing digitalisation of our lives is the only intervention which feels justified on that terrain, and it is far from clear what chances of success such an aspiration has. At best it is making the best of a profound disadvantage we find ourselves at; at worst it is a losing battle so long as the techno-industrial structure enabling the Net still stands. Far from the digital utopian illusions on the one hand or a moralistic boycott on the other, our assertion is simply that as the ecological, existential and economic crises deepen in the coming years, it is and will be force in the world off-screen that would leave us more mobility, and allow our ideas to become tangible through lived practice.

It would seem that, from reports of reported disenchantment with the new digital age among even younger tech-users, to even the unexpected explosion in rediscovery of embedded, embodied presence that was experienced in the Occupy movement from 2011 onwards (despite its practical and conceptual shortcomings, and the unfamiliarity of many digitally-native participants with the complexities of in-the-flesh interactions), there is at least some latent desire for an escape from the Net. While truthfully our own hopes aren’t high (nor need they be as a criteria for our struggle for meaning and dignity), we see no need to assume that this spark will necessarily be buried entirely, and that it might yet give us flames to light this long social twilight.

All this forms a certain sphere, albeit a phenomenologically dominant one, of our predicament as civilised beings in search for a way out of our culture. What we want to dismantle beyond the industrial system itself is the actual way of understanding the world that we’ve been brought up with; if this can often be done by drawing attention to one particular way it mutilates us. Our greater strength is measured by the degree to which, rather than stopping at different issues, we’re able to intertwine them by deepening our critique and continuing the path to liberation. There, on the axis of passion and clarity, intuition and hate. Just as we despise the digital elites not just for their future visions but for the now-global trends into desensitising, depersonalising and deskilling that the computer has brought with it, our perspective reaches beyond civilisation to a way of life without class hierarchies and human-supremacist divisions. Ultimately, our hostility to the digital is but a partial aspect of a wider question of human cultures, what they have been in some cases, what they have in some cases become and what in some cases they could be.

It’s distressing enough to us that we and many in similar cultures spend the majority of our lives in

constructed surroundings that simply mirror the neuroses of the civilised back upon ourselves, at a tremendous cost to the more-than-human and with it everything we hold dear. The further reduction into a virtual world where we experience literally nothing else, for a rising proportion of our waking hours, is simply one pathway of this, and perhaps a logical one for Western literate cultures as investigated by David Abram. “The apparently autonomous, mental dimension originally opened by the alphabet – the ability to interact with our own signs in utter abstraction from our earthly surroundings – has today blossomed into a vast, cognitive realm, a horizonless expanse of virtual interactions and encounters. Our reflective intellects inhabit a global field of information, pondering the latest scenario for the origin of the universe as we absently fork food into our mouths[...] clicking on the computer and slipping into cyberspace in order to network with other bodiless minds, exchanging information about gene sequences and military coups, “conferencing” to solve global environmental problems while oblivious to the moon rising above the rooftops. Our nervous system synapsed to the terminal, we do not notice that the chorus of frogs by the nearby stream has dwindled, this year, to a solitary voice, and that the song sparrows no longer return to the trees.”

To live differently here and now, whatever the future may bring, defying the embrace of a web of anthropocentrism and ideology we would lose ourselves and our relations to (however 'radical' – 'anti-civilisation' even – its varieties the screen can serve) would entail a process that Robinson Jeffers described as *falling in love outwards* with the Earth around us. Are we still capable?

We can think of no better words to end on than those plastered so recently on the streets of Paris, in the anarchist wall-paper 'Blaspheme'.

“We’ve almost forgotten that when we want to talk with someone, we can go to their place and knock on the door. We’ve almost forgotten what it means to communicate in person, with emotions, laughter, or anger that can be read on our faces, in the tone of our voice, or in the trembling of our hands. We’ve almost forgotten that not so long ago these machines weren’t part of our lives, that we weren’t closed into these digital worlds that take more and more control over our days, that people lived, loved, communicated, and kept up to date on the news without these invasive technologies.

Sometimes in the metro, we feel like intruders, as one of those rare individuals not absorbed by their little screen and headphones, oblivious to the people around them. By folding in on ourselves in this way, we don’t even notice how society is changed by these technologies.

[...] And if we relearned how to live without these machines? What if we cut the virtual cord and reconnected with each other, weaving complicities in person to fill the void created by our atomisation? We could reconnect with time, space, and each other, everything that the cold interaction with machines has pushed to the background.

What if we openly blaspheme against the religion of connectivity? What if we storm this much-vaunted technological heaven, but which seems more like a science-fiction nightmare?

What if we destroy the machines...”

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