Finding Autonomy In and From the Internet

An Imaginative Rethinking of our Relationship with the Network

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Research Question:

How can people self-govern their internet experience?

Introduction

With more than half of the world's population connected to the internet we can argue that it is part of the modern human experience. The development of smartphones, social media and online messaging has blurred the distinction between online and offline, physical and digital, real and not real. Most smartphone-owning teens and adults live in a state of permanent connectedness, constantly jumping in and out of the internet at the command of their devices. The platforms that connect us employ complex and opaque algorithms, which are becoming increasingly visible by the common person – if not their inner workings, certainly their effects. They carefully mediate our behaviour in and outside the internet and the data they generate affects our lives beyond the computer screen (O'Neil, 2017).

In this paper, I depart from the argument that the modern internet has a subjugative effect on its users, making people dependent on a profit-driven system that has control over them (Orlowski, 2020). There is an illusion of control, but most actions we perform online are predicted and often determined by the companies who develop these algorithms. They might make life easier, but freedom and convenience are not the same, and more often than not one needs to be sacrificed to have the other.

This realisation brings forth the following questions: How can people self-govern their internet experience? How can they obtain autonomy *from* the internet while still being able to use it according to their needs? In order to answer these questions, I will start by defining some key terms.

Autonomy, in the context of this paper, refers not only to the freedom of an individual but mainly to the freedom of entire communities of users in and around the internet. Autonomy entails, in most cases, collective autonomy, and is connected to ideas of resilience, self-governance, collective ownership and safety.

The **internet** and the **web**, albeit entirely separate pieces of technology (the 'web' referring to the World Wide Web (WWW) protocol, and 'the internet' to the underlying system of computer networks it runs on), will be used here as synonyms. They refer to the broader network of connected devices.

In the next section, I will provide a comprehensive overview of particular aspects of internet history and culture that relate to autonomy, discussing the impact of different categories of internet users, from conspiracy theorists to hacktivists, and making the case for a project of a better internet. This will be followed by an analysis of how

today's 20-30 year olds see and live with the web. Further on, I will reflect on the different facets of internet autonomy and expand on the ideas and design methods I utilise on my graduation project, in which I attempt to reimagine (our relation with) the internet. In conclusion, I argue that this reimagination of the internet will align the power structures that govern it with its decentralized architecture.

1. UNBOXING THE INTERNET

The internet is a complex structure with many branches. In order to understand the human relationship with the information super-structure that contains the virtual lives of 3.7 billion people, the following paragraphs reflect on what the stories of researchers, idealists, trolls, activists, conspiracy theorists and businesses can tell us about autonomy on the web.

Cybernetic Dreams

The Kids' Guide to the Internet, video by Diamond Entertainment Corporation, 1997

January 1st, 1983 is considered the birth of the internet. This marks the day when ARPANET, a network connecting several academic and research institutions in the US, adopted a new communications protocol. This protocol allowed different computers on different networks around the world to connect to each other. ARPANET was a tool for networked research, built to allow researchers in different institutions to exchange information. Its architecture was what made it special: unlike phone lines at the time, ARPANET transmitted information digitally through a node-like network. Data was split in small fragments that travelled the network of nodes and got 'reas-sembled' by the receiving computer. This decentralised structure made it resilient

and reliable: if one of the cells got taken down, the information could still travel through a different path. It was developed by a culture of forward-thinkers who saw potential in computers beyond very expensive calculators.

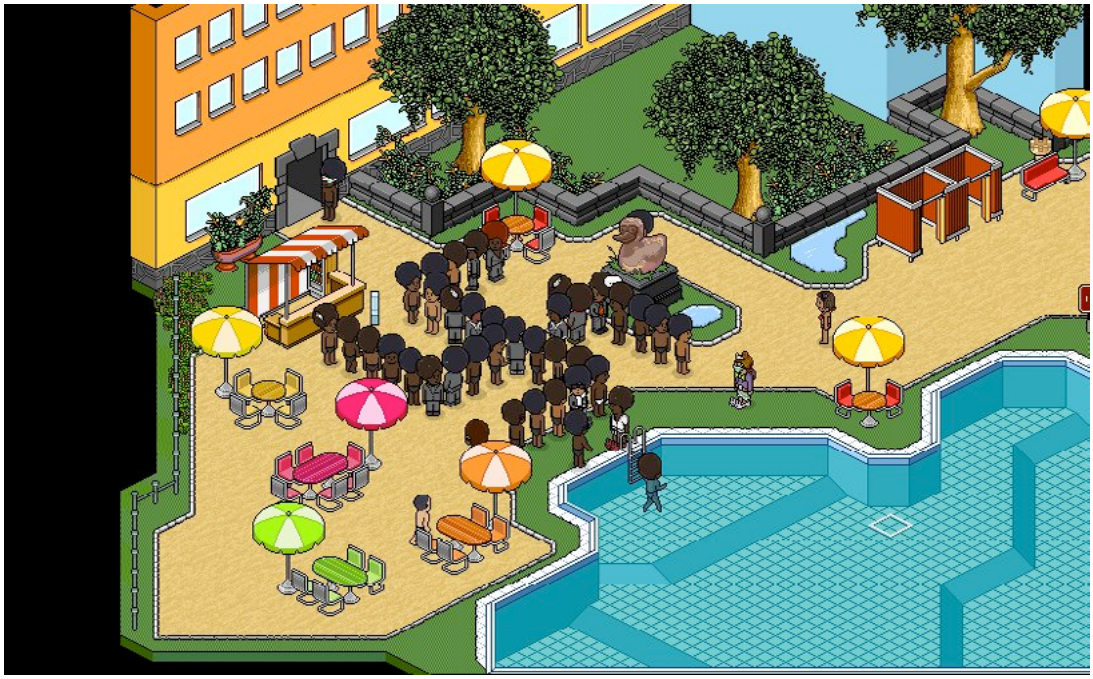
The idea governing this group of thinkers, as described by Katie Hafner (1998), leaned more towards machines expanding the human mind in the name of science than that of overthrowing the hierarchical society. However, experts such as Alain Touraine had been predicting the arrival of a post-industrial 'information age' (Barbrook, Cameron, 1996) for a few decades, and in the 1990s, the internet would become the tool that accelerated the advent of this new age. The dominant idea was that the web was going to become an utopian form of democracy, where freedom of information is absolute. But it would also be a way for people to exchange information, services and goods that was not mediated by governments or institutions. This technological determinism was backed by a McLuhanian belief that the emancipatory power of new information technologies would create what Barbrook and Cameron (1996) called the *electronic agora* – a virtual place where everyone could express their opinions.

In the 2011 documentary *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace*, filmmaker Adam Curtis makes the case that the technology that we built to emancipate us has turned us into computational thinkers, distorting and simplifying our view of the world, a point that I will expand on later. His documentary tells the story of a virtual class of writers, hackers, artists and venture capitalists who believed in a cybernetic dream, where interconnected people would create a self-regulated, self-stabilising system. A system of computer networks where everyone could be their own hero, free to follow their desires without central control from a government.

The Petri Dish

In the years to come, services such as email, instant messaging, message boards and online shopping tremendously impacted culture, communication and commerce. For a while, the web was a very unregulated, liminal space that existed between 'real-life' and the 'virtual'. But as its reach grew across the world, so did the impact of people's actions online, which made the necessity of regulation versus the right to internet freedom a legitimate discussion.

Real-life events are often the topic in online forums, which allows communities to digitally get together and coordinate actions. The anonymity of forums and message boards has an emancipatory effect – people can now speak up against their repressive governments or abusive employers without their names being made public. The archetype of this phenomenon is the anonymous imageboard website 4chan. Users of 4chan's boards often joined in large numbers for organised online pranks, like website raids or phony phone calls. This behaviour attests to the internet's power as a self-organised hive, which many describe as 'cool' at the surface, yet bears a dangerous underbelly. These pranks ranged from light-hearted trolling to racism and harassment.



Anonymous 4chan users take over the online community Habbo Hotel, forming swastikas. Screenshot from "The Great Habbo Raid of '06", posted by @HabboRaid_POOL on Twitter

Trolling is chaotic, in message and in execution, and hard to assign to traditional 'good' or 'bad' morals. Journalist Sean Michaels describes 4chan's community as "lunatic, juvenile (...) brilliant, ridiculous and alarming" in a 2008 article for the Guardian. Hacking and scamming seems to happen often for the following reason: "the lols" (Knappenberger, 2012). The podcast Reply All, self-described as "a podcast about the internet" often manages to find and interview people behind these schemes. They tend to be self-taught young men who develop their hobbies around the internet. Tricking people into schemes seems to be a way to test their skills and compare them against their peers, and for some a way to make easy money.

The hacker group LulzSec was responsible for many high-profile hacks in 2011. They did not hack for financial profit, but rather claimed they had fun in causing mayhem. In fact, they released a manifesto explaining their actions. To consolidate the point about trolling ethics being extremely convoluted, here is a statement directly from the hackers:

"This is the Internet, where we screw each other over for a jolt of satisfaction. There are (...) trolls and victims. There's losers that post shit they think matters, and other losers telling them their shit does not matter."

Anonymous member of LulzSec, 17 June 2011

Activists

As imageboards grew popular and their pranks got more elaborate, 'Anonymous' became known as a decentralised collective of unnamed individuals from all over the world, which gave it its power. Anonymous was first associated with hacktivism in 2008 when they took on the Church of Scientology, explained in detail in the documentary *We Are Legion* (Knappenberger, 2012). Their conflict started by a series of online pranks, however in February 2008 the fight was brought forth into mainstream media by a series of nonviolent protests around the world. For the first time, the might of the internet was tangible. People who were used to communicating quietly and anonymously through imageboards were now physically present and had a noticeable spotlight on their backs. They were the internet's first army.

Photo by user anonymous612 of whyweprotest.net, 2010

As people learned that their online activities could be turned into real-world actions, the internet has been a major force in large-scale movements such as Occupy Wallstreet, School Strikes for Climate and Black Lives Matter. The ability to record and instantly upload video online is a powerful tool for social justice, as broadly documented in the events leading to the Arab Spring in 2011-12. Nonetheless, the violence with which these protests were crushed and their ultimate failure in achieving their democractic aims attests to the power of real-world governments and institutions, with their monopoly of violence, versus the actions emanating from internet activity. In any case, anything shocking enough is bound to make the rounds on social media and everyone else can voice their opinion on it. The use of hashtags to support causes

can lead to increased awareness, engagement and ultimately change. The #GambiaHasDecided hashtag, for example, became a lot more than a word on a screen. It grew into a self-organised movement that gave a voice to the Gambians and helped restore Gambia's democracy (Taal, 2019) – although this exceptional achievement needed the support of the majority of the population, both internet users and non-users.

Liars

The abundance of information available online exposes us to contradicting narratives and conflicting worldviews, making way for conspiracy theories, fake news and misinformation. As Bridle (2017) explains, the value we have placed on knowledge is destroyed by its abundance. Which begs the question - what can we still call 'knowledge'? Information gets decontextualized as records of provenance get lost. The objective truth too gets lost in the process. Once a snippet of a text or interview is taken out of context, it can be rearranged to tell a completely different story. Furthermore, if a piece of information cannot be traced back to its original source, circular reporting can occur, as two different sources cite each other with no triangulation of the information reported. This is often done intentionally to reinforce belief in false information (Tavlin, 2015). In earlier designs of the internet, information accessed online could be traced back to its origin, as Lanier (2018) explains in a critique of the World Wide Web. Hyperlinks worked both ways. In the WWW framework that is now the norm, however, hyperlinks are one-directional. No one can tell if the information has been copied, context is lost and scammers can hide (Lanier, 2018).

Via user purcaholic on tumblr. Photographer unknown

In the audioseries *Rabbit Hole*, New York Times columnist Kevin Roose speaks to believers of the QAnon conspiracy theory, which has been associated with serious incidents such as murders, kidnappings and the riots at the US capitol. Their conversations make it clear that most people were attracted to the compelling narrative not by randomly stumbling across the story, but by gradually getting pulled into progressively more obscure and opinionated corners of the internet. These dark corners are often backed by supportive communities, which give people a sense of belonging. They are also perpetuated by the algorithms that run the biggest social media platforms. The same algorithm that suggests another cat video after watching a few will also suggest another, slightly crazier conspiracy theory. Once one becomes involved in these communities, for example through a Facebook group, Facebook's algorithms are designed to encourage this type of interaction, because they perceive it as an instance of social value (which it often is). This is all discussed extensively in the *Rabbit Hole* series.

Data

The rise of the internet gave rise to new markets. Businesses can now connect to clients all across the world and advertisements can be put up online. As people spend more time online, their behaviour becomes recordable and parameterised.
In other words, the internet inadvertently became the perfect tool to study and register human behaviour. Our actions in the browser, from what we click on to how long we spend on it, are valuable pieces of data that power the algorithms that determine what we want to buy, see or read next. The aptitude of these algorithms as well as the myriad of ways in which they affect people is described in detail in Cathy O'Neil's book *Weapons of Math Destruction* (2017). As online businesses grow, they rely on algorithms to optimise their business models. This means that an extensive amount of research and resources is spent acquiring data and developing the most efficient programs, creating what is referred to as the Big Data Economy.

The cloud holds vast amounts of data, which unlike the idea of a cloud suggests, is not floating in ethereal space. It is earthbound and earth-consuming. The real internet is stored in windowless data-centres and transmitted by underwater cables that span across entire oceans. These infrastructures require large amounts of electricity to operate, making surfing the internet a more energy consuming activity that a lot of people give it credit for.

Trevor Paglen, *NSA-Tapped Undersea Cables*, North Pacific Ocean, 2016

This literature review serves as a reminder of the complexity of the debate about the ambitions of a fully self-governed internet. The destructive impacts of unregulated online activity are clear and broadly documented. However, an emancipatory project which rewards autonomy but reduces the incentive for a destructive employment of internet freedom is highly desirable, as the discussion about the concerns of young internet users in the next section shows.

2. THE INTERNET GENERATIONS

People who were brought up in the 1990s and 2000s had the weird privilege of growing up with the internet. All we have ever known is connectedness. We have been inexorably shaped by it, however we rarely question what exactly it is doing to us. Throughout this section I will ask that question to myself and my peers. We will see how people feel about the web and how they fight to remain autonomous from it.

Personal Experience

My earliest memory of the internet was starting a “cool pictures” folder and scanning Google Images to create my own ‘private’ collection, quickly moving to a blog of clumsy design experiments. I played games online and the virtual space became a positive outlet for me, making me feel accepted and teaching me social skills that I could use in real life. At some points, I ventured out into darker corners of the internet, but luckily I had a good enough relationship with the reality around me to know when to back off. I shared my early design exploits with gaming communities and other players would often ask me to design banners and logos for them. My internet story

was overall a positive one. It gave me the support I needed without alienating me too much from reality, it improved my social skills and it fueled my interest in the art and design world.

Other People

My experience alone is purely anecdotal though. I am interested in what concerns others in my generation and what they are doing about it. To that end, I conducted a survey of about 50 people between March and April 2021, which revealed some interesting results (see the appendix for more details):

The majority of interviewees are young people between the ages of 18 and 30 who live in Europe. The most common concern among them is data privacy (91%), closely followed by computer viruses (86%). Around half the participants are concerned with false information (55%), wasting time on the internet (50%) and suggested advertisement content that seems too accurate (50%).

Most (68%) employ technological solutions to address these issues and 55% employ non-technological solutions. Most technological solutions tackle safety concerns, such as limiting data collection and defending against viruses. Blocking advertisements is also very popular. A third category encompasses a time-keeping aspect, where people use software to limit their time on the web or minimise distractions. The non-technological solutions listed the most are also focused on limiting people's time behind the screen or mindless browsing. Some people program time away from electronic devices, others disable notifications. A small number of people referred to yet another category: physical solutions to address the monotony and idleness associated with being on the computer. Some examples are standing desks, routinely changing rooms and positions and taking the time to stretch, move or perform active tasks (such as cooking and cleaning) while browsing more passively (for example watching a video or participating in a video call). Lastly, two participants referred to learning about the internet and its underlying technologies, in order to make informed choices.

Further on, 67% claim the internet has an impact on their overall (mental and/or physical) health, the effects ranging from positive to negative evenly. The positive impacts listed were inclusivity and a sense of belonging, in other words making friends, mostly during teenage years, and its positive impact as a tool for information, empowering people to know more about self-care, motivation, physical exercise and nutrition, as well as finding new interests. On the negative side, people listed being prone to get sucked into toxic discussions and ideological bubbles, desentization from being exposed to disturbing content (graphic sexual and violent content for example) and lack of sleep or other symptoms from excessive screen time.

The conclusions of this short survey show that people are indeed aware of the problems of internet use regarding privacy, autonomy, safety and health, but the most interesting finding is that they employ creative solutions to reduce the negative effects of their daily use. These local and individual 'personal hacks', intertwined with the broader cultural collective history of the internet, inspire a reimagination of the Autonomous Web, which will be discussed in the next section.

3. REIMAGINATIONS

Studying the internet history and those whose lives have been intertwined with it allows a better understanding of how ambiguous the idea of autonomy can be. What for some is the perfect form of democracy can be to others an opaque system where power is exerted over the individual. Seeing how other life-long internet users address this duality prompted me to reimagine this system as one that is more distributed, adaptive and collectively-produced, therefore doing a better job at working *with* life instead of controlling it - in the terms of systems theory and environmental studies, a *sympoietic* system. What follows is a speculative reimagination of an Autonomous Web. I start by discussing the editorial approach to create the vehicle spreading my ideas, and then provide an overview of the ideas themselves.

3.1 Editorial Approach

Collage of two images from my graduation project, illustrating the contrast between both narratives

I indulged in this speculative way of thinking and applied it in a hybrid publication that makes up my graduation project, where I re-imagine the internet as two extreme versions of itself - one dystopic and one utopic. An oppressive, alienating world where users became enslaved by the web, and its polar opposite, a realm where biological life and the autonomous internet coexist in cybernetic harmony.

Spread from the negative narrative within my graduation project

The negative story takes the form of a comic novel, examining the myriad ways in which the internet cunningly takes away our freedom, informed from my research into internet culture and history. In this world, which could be us in a not so distant future, people live in a zombie-like state. Constantly connected to their digital devices, that shun them from reality, they live and die as data generators for the Cloud. It uses the visual language of science-fiction, mixed with elements of digital culture such as old geocities webpages, memes and ads. It does so in an attempt to tell a story which is explicitly exaggerated, yet clearly interwoven with the issues of our own reality.

Image from the positive narrative within my graduation project

The positive story is a catalogue of experiments, thoughts and behaviours focused on autonomy and the internet. Inspired by Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog*, it documents and expands on the thought experiments I made in the final part of my research, addressing the nasty aspects of the web as told in the pessimistic story. In doing so, I imagine what I call the *Autonomous Web*, an internet which is decentralised, where people have control over their own data and actions and browsing is an embodied and often multi-user experience. The visual compositions in this part of the publication are a mix of semi-realistic 3D renders, photography and documentation of the experiments I made. These compositions create a sense of realism around the speculative ideas they illustrate, reinforcing the idea that the internet is and will likely stay deeply knitted with physical reality.

I decided to use storytelling as a method to deliver my message as what I'm most passionately arguing for is not my personal vision of a better internet, but an imaginative attitude towards developing a collective approach to it. I find that the freedom of creating fictitious worlds is a powerful tool for critical (re)thinking about our own world. My choice of hybrid publishing is related to my target audience. The web version of my publication has the advantage of reach, taking advantage of the very structure it critiques. With this publication I aim to provoke thought in young users of the internet who might feel alienated by it, but are not part of existing initiatives for a better internet. My physical publication takes the form of a zine, which is more condensed and available to download and print from its online counterpart. Unlike a more 'serious' book which can be less accessible, a zine's cheap cost and short nature makes it more fitting to play a part in broader dialogues and workshops about the subject. It is a message to the 'converted', meaning the existing communities that strive for collective internet freedom, such as Varia, Waag and Bits of Freedom, which can be used as an asset in collective making/thinking, talks and events. If this project were to be extended or I have the chance to work further in this topic in the post-covid future, I would like to make a series of physical interactive pieces representing the various metaphors in my stories, embedding the internet further into the physical realm. This could open-up the dialogue to a new crowd of museum-going, avant-garde artists and thinkers.

3.2 Reimagining the Web: Key Strategies

Keeping Records to Fight Fake News

Enabling people to communicate across the globe strengthens communities and gives us access to incredible amounts of information. This empowers us to organise collective efforts, to study and research. However such an abundance of information gives way to conflicting claims over what is true. The people interviewed in *Rabbit Hole*, as discussed above, show us how easily one can get sucked into extreme political ideologies, toxic communities and far-fetched conspiracy theories.

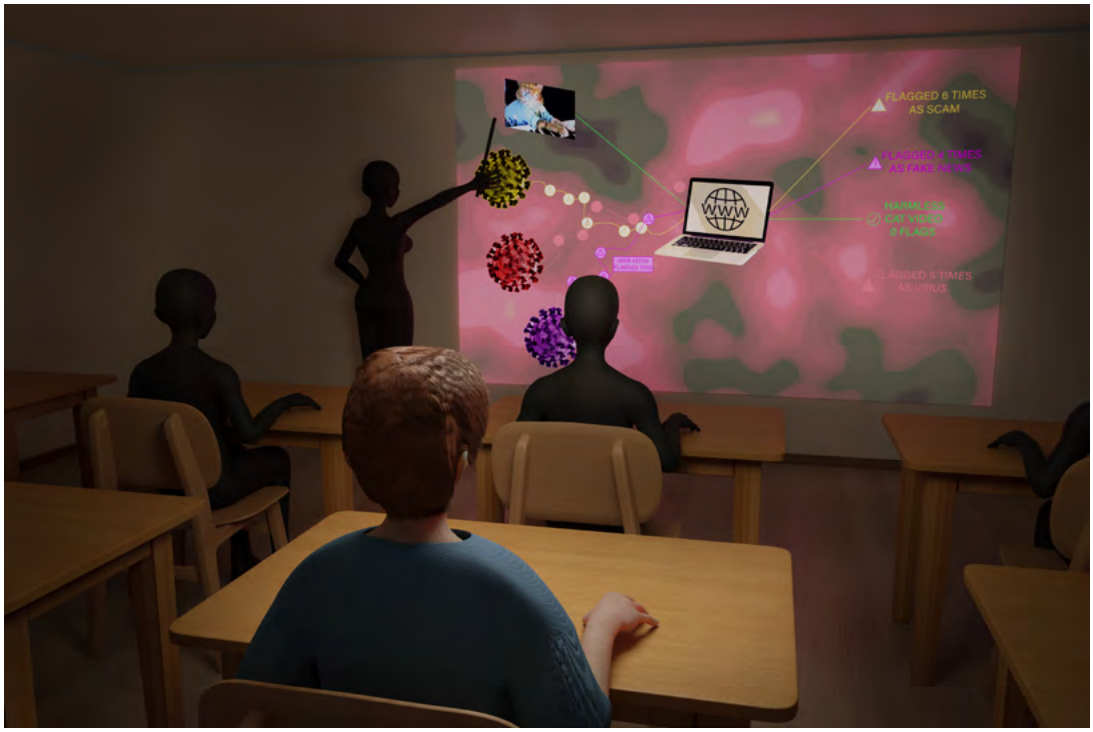


Image from my graduation project, illustrating the use of bidirectional links to contextualise information

Hyperlinks work both ways in the Autonomous Web. This means that everyone on the internet can see the whole path of a link, from its original source to the receiving end, allowing better fact-checking and avoiding circular reporting. Even though people themselves are anonymous, malicious sources are actively flagged by the community, which is accustomed to spot links travelling odd paths. Sources that spread viruses and false information are therefore easily identifiable and usually short-lived. Bidirectional links have been around in the internet as well as broader communications systems, however they were never fully implemented as doing so would pose complex design challenges. Examples of its implementation include Vannevar Bush's proposed Memex machine and Ted Nelson's Project Xanadu. Recently, the Digital Gardening movement has shown interest in bidirectional links as a tool for better learning, social awareness and contextualisation of information.

Embodied Browsing and the Decentralised Net

The underlying mechanisms of the internet are unwilling accomplices in the spreading of misinformation. These mechanisms commodify human interaction, creating a shallow sense of belonging in communities fueled by instant gratification, as seen in Jeff Orlowski's documentary *The Social Dilemma* (2020). The companies that design these mechanisms are the same who collect copious amounts of data to build models that predict our actions, in the name of engagement and growth. These models, essentially very advanced persuasion technologies, make online connection an integral part of younger generations' lives. Furthermore, the back-end activities required to run and maintain large networks, such as Youtube and Instagram, consume vast resources (Bridle, 2017). For a lot of us, it is alienating to break away from technology, yet participating in it can become detrimental as well. Some of the participants in my

survey have experienced and are aware of this duality. They are mostly the same who employ non-technological, behavioural solutions to limit their internet usage and maintain a healthy relationship with reality.

In the speculative Autonomous Web, each household has an autonomous server space, usually in a room embedded with various plants, ponds and water tanks for shade and a cool temperature. The server harvests electrical energy from plant microbial fuel cells, as well as sunlight. This creates a self-contained cybernetic ecosystem, allowing each household to control their own data, which is then shared with other servers but never uploaded there, enabling the owner to pull-out or change data at will. Harvesting people's data becomes infinitely more complex, discouraging the big data economy and the persuasion technology it employs. Moreover, it reduces the overall cost of the network.

The idea is based on the peer-to-peer (P2P) networking architecture, in which interconnected nodes share resources amongst each other without relying on a centralised administrative system. An example of its real-life implementation is Fediverse, a collection of federated servers that are independently hosted, yet can communicate with each other. In order to connect content and method, I created a small-scaled P2P system with my personal data, which I programmed to go back and forth between two computers via a local server. I later adapted this program to deploy my survey independently from Google or other proprietary survey platforms.

Additionally, content in the Autonomous Web must have a maximum threshold associated with the electricity it consumes. I reimagine this need in my speculative world with a metaphor of real heavy lifting. As a piece of content is seen more in the Autonomous Web, it grows physically heavier, and its network cost grows too. Eventually it grows too heavy for a single person to lift it. This encourages embodied, multi-user browsing. It also encourages people to become stronger and more mobile, in order to be able to access more content. Mechanical devices are usually illegal and considered 'hacking', yet they are available within limited power for people with various disabilities. Some content has gone truly viral and achieved mythical status, in which case people organise events where they attempt to lift it in large numbers, pushing records.

I estimate that a five minute video (50Mb) consumes around 18,75Wh to travel from the Youtube servers to my device (see appendix). I used this value to implement the idea in my daily internet activity. At 1 Kg per 100,000 views, for a week I had to limit my Youtube videos to the ones I could lift above my head, making my absolute limit a very painful and exhausting 4 million views.

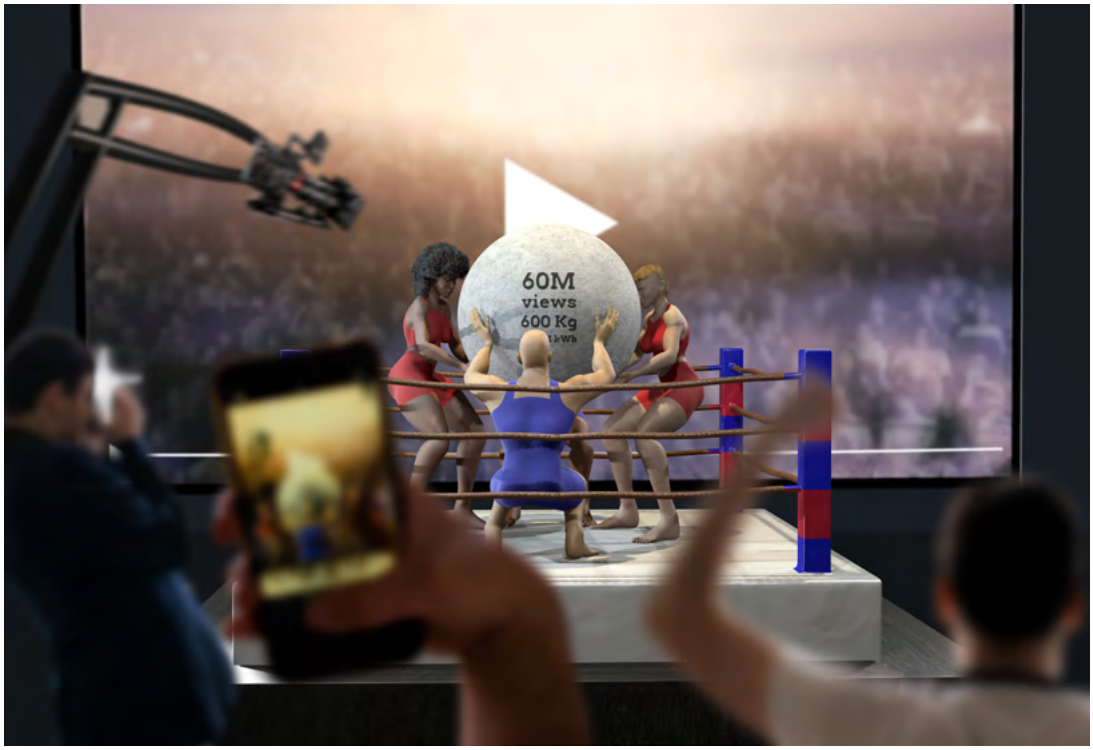


Image from my graduation project, illustrating multi-user physical browsing

Anonymity and Freedom of Identity

Cyberspace does give people autonomy and agency, as positive stories such as #FridaysForClimate and #GambiaHasDecided tell us. However, the effects of a hive mentality can be dangerous and disruptive, as victims of LulzSec's hacks in 2011 or the various online scams discussed in Reply All have experienced first-hand. The anonymity and safety of sitting behind a screen gives some the much-needed freedom to speak their minds and confidence to socialise. In contrast, others abuse it, creating a destructive culture of trolling and cyberbullying. Any system that encompasses billions of human lives is naturally chaotic and contradictory. The right attitude, I think, is not to attempt to suck people in and control them as most internet megastructures like to do. Instead, I propose a mutual commitment, where online platforms stop trying to make us dependent at all costs and we, the people, use the opportunity to reattach ourselves to our reality and learn how to navigate in complex and chaotic virtual space.

As sources in the speculative Autonomous Web are openly available to everyone and data servers decentralised, cyber-attacks are uncommon and the big-data economy fell. Allowing people to be anonymous encourages self-expression and alternative forms of culture to flourish. It empowers citizens of repressive governments to self-organise and minorities to protest without fear. This anonymous internet fosters communities. Of course, it can also lead to abuse, making communitarian social values very important. Deciding to include it in the Autonomous Web came down to a philosophical belief in the goodness of human nature. Before making the decision, I spent a few days lurking around anonymous message boards such as Reddit and

4chan, and whereas this is purely anecdotal, most of what I saw were positive interactions and a strong sense of community.

Conclusion

An autonomous internet is a double-edged sword. Human beings have very distinct moral and ethical beliefs and a place where everyone can speak their mind is bound to be conflictive. Blind equality is perhaps not a fair solution – in a completely unregulated network, the ones who are more tech-savvy are in power. Contrary to some of the internet trolls, I do not believe people are to blame if they choose not to or cannot invest their time in computer skills. 'Survival of the fittest' should not be the rule in modern, non-tribalistic space.

Internet autonomy should be seen as an intricate system of dependencies and influences, that works on many different scales. The case of cryptocurrency illustrates this well. At its core, the crypto market is an attempt at creating a decentralised economy, free from the tight grip of the hierarchical financial system. A P2P trading system associated with autonomy and self-regulation. Critics of the system, however, point out its climate impact and the opaqueness of the origins and trajectories of financial transactions. Cryptocurrency brings us back to the individualistic early dot-com neoliberal mindset which enabled and quickly terminated so many 'revolutionary' ideas. Adopting a systematic view of the internet allows us to break away from a binary view on freedom versus control, and start seeing relationships and collective commitment instead of isolated objects, understanding that seemingly innocent mechanisms may cause destructive feedback loops when inserted in a bigger system.

Dempster (1998: p.4) suggests the term sympoiesis for "collectively-producing systems that do not have self-defined spatial or temporal boundaries. Information and control are distributed among components. The systems are evolutionary and have the potential for surprising change." In *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway (2016) argues for a sympoietic view of the world in order to rethink and reimagine our relation to the Earth, an urgent task in the context of the complex social and ecological challenges we face today. This definition can be extended to the internet. The web is the collective product of the roughly 3,7 billion who populate it. It is scattered all over the world and never rests. It is wild, unpredictable and constantly changing. While the architecture of the internet has always been like that, its power structures are not. I argue that a sympoietic unwebbing of the internet is a necessary step towards reimagining it and finding autonomy in and from it.

I once thought the answer to my research question – how can one self-govern their browsing experience – was to be found in an exciting new technology or a fancy design method. However, I have come to think that what makes the internet are the people that compose it, not its underlying technologies or the scary algorithms.

My project certainly has its limitations: it preaches those who are either somewhat aware or fully converted, and disseminating this cause to those not interested in the topic is a challenge; it neglects the technical complexity of the necessary redesign of the systems; it does not fully tackle the problems of scaling up the networks and mechanisms beyond small, self-governing communities; and it is optimistic about the incentive of big corporations to let go of control. However, it strongly argues that the path to an Autonomous Web should come from all of us. It is an attitude that we must take upon ourselves to cultivate. It involves systems thinking, a pinch of techno-literacy and lots of speculative fabulation. It borrows from ecologies, cybernetics and self-organised communities, as the internet itself is an ecosystem that we must learn how to navigate and take care of.

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Appendix:

The extended analysis of my survey can be found here.

The questions of the survey can be seen at https://rodri-go.net/AW-form.html.

The extended documentation of my Embodied Browsing experiment can be read here.