



Title: The internet mistake

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Mercedes Bunz

The internet mistake

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It is true that governments are losing their manners when it comes to the internet. As they felt unwatched they behaved like a naive non-digital native, not understanding the digital's basic trick: everything that is on the internet leaves traces, everything digital can be copied fast, and can be published in next to no time – even the traces of governments intruding our privacy. As much as I think that to this feist intruder called government, an activist approach is important and we really need to do something on a political level: I think our problem is more fundamental.

We haven't come to terms with technology yet.

I believe we can only answer Bruce's question, if we get a better understanding of this thing that is living now in our midst. The beeping, silvery shining, gloomy, indifferent, stubborn, prying, know-it-all, ever changing, well networked thing we invited to find its place among us, and which we use to organize our societies: technology – now misbehaving. Yes, our relationship is disturbed, we need a bit of therapy.

It is obvious that we are disappointed. The interesting thing is that we don't turn away, at least most of us. We don't get up and leave the internet. Even more: most of us still make use of the services known to have passed on our privacy: Google, Skype, Microsoft or Apple.

We want to be on the internet. However, we don't want to be on THIS internet. Only why is it so hard for us to get it right, why is this relationship so problematic?

Let's go to therapy

If we think the internet was a disappointment, don't blame the internet, blame your own expectations: they have been way too high, and the wrong ones. On the one hand, we accepted it to be addressed and milked as a thing of the new economy. Political or social approaches were kept out: we were happy to sit back and take things easy, while the internet gets all the messy social stuff out of the way: Funky automatism. Automatic democracy or automatic anarchy. Yay. Regulations No.

Technology, however, is partly a social product. And society needs regulations - we humans often misbehave. If we get a chance to use a technology in the wrong way, believe me, we will. And this is why we need to regulate technology.

Re-gu-la-tion.

An odd word. Makes one immediately nervous. As if someone takes choice away. It feels patronizing, I can't help it. We are coming from a time, where calling for order was a gesture of the conservatives. Progressive, left leaning people, were against order, and for creativity. But now we are living in a time, where creativity is something tremendously useful for neoliberalism. So maybe it shouldn't surprise us that we find ourselves calling for some order. Still it feels weird. But can we regulate the internet at all? I am going to come back to this.

Let's look at our relationship to technology first: We don't have a healthy relationship towards technology, to be fair, technology isn't easy to understand. The way we reacted to Edward Snowden's leaks is quite revealing, so let us have a look at us.

There were three big fractions: The first one was blaming Snowden for giving away state secrets. The second and third one, however, didn't oppose this. The second one told us, we should have known the internet was a problem. While the third knew it all before: it claimed that they had always mistrusted the state anyway, and of course the state would made use of a technology like the internet, which leads everyone to expose oneself in banal selfies for the state to get a grip.

In short: Pro-Snowdens had a hero, but no argument. They were blamed to be naïve by trusting the state or the technology, and of the technology one had to think the worst, of course. Thus, Pro-Snowdens had problems to get upset, even though they had all the right to be so.

Our wrongdoing was to expect technology to solve our problems, and it didn't. Some of us wrote texts that the internet is a disappointment. Well, what can I say. The thing was man made. Here is why we have a troubled relationship with the internet:

When it comes to technology, we expect the best or the worst.

Looking at how we handle the internet, it seems that we are stuck in a relationship where we only deal in extremes. It's a bit like this problems we once had with women when we addressed them whether as whores or as mothers. (Of course, we don't do this anymore.) When we look at how we treat technology, it is along the mistake of extreme dialectics. Apart from one field, which I will introduce now. There is indeed one field in which we were actually able to establish a bit of a more mature relationship.

It is in sports.

In sports, we don't treat technology as the best or the worst. We look at the impact of a new technology, and then decide if it is good for the gameplay, or dangerous for the humans, or the spectators, and then we come up with a solution. Okay, while coming up with the solution, we quarrel a lot. About swim suits, new balls and the quality of lawns, or bicycle frames. Regulating technology, quarrelling about it, we argue, but we don't deal in extremes: we expect technology to make something faster or slower, but we don't think it makes the game or ruins it. We have fun with it, we play around with it, we study it – and if things start to go wrong, we change it.

Let's turn from sports back to technology. For there is another question. Can we regulate the technology at all? Can we keep it under control? The answer to the first question is: yes. The answer to the second question is: no. And this is a good thing, because it means regulation isn't domination. It should be

thought of more like in sports:

as a dialogue between humans and technology.

But why can't we keep technology under control?

Technology has its own logic. This you can clearly see when you look at us predicting it: we have problems to pin down what will become the next big thing. It's not more than a bet. Is Bitcoin the next big thing after Facebook? We are not so sure yet. But of course, we expect the best or the worst from it.

So technology has its own logic, but it is also man made. It can be influenced by us humans, through its development and usage. The humans working for the governments used technology to spy on us, and only when they started spying on each other, the whole scheme fell apart. Technology is a hybrid, or a cyborg: a social product that has its own logic. Lucky us, its logic can be influenced. Lucky us, it has its own logic.

(I think this is important to understand: Technology's logic can be influenced but it has its own logic. Think of it as a five year old child, maybe this helps.) So how can we, us who don't want to live on THIS internet, make use of this strange hybrid? Here is why I think that we haven't lost technology to the government, and there is no reason for disappointment, but need for a bit more mature relationship – we need to stop dealing in extremes, we need to stop addressing it in those polarised dialectics.

There is something going on in technology, which is of interest to us. Walter Benjamin was among the first to notice in his famous essay "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction" that there this interesting thing in the midst of technology: it's own logic, which can be used and influenced, but stays on its own. Regarding the conceptual setting of society and technology, this means something interesting: society and technology are related to each other but they don't determine each other. They are disparate, and will never be congruent – technology will always get to the point, where it eludes the human teleological logic. So between society and technology we find a gap.

We need to make more use of this gap between technology and society.

I am really interested in this gap. I even draw a picture of it, once. I think there is still enough anarchy on the internet to hang on to it, and I think this is one of its centres. I think this is the reason why we can think regulation differently, like in sports: there can be no domination of technology, but there can and there needs to be a dialogue. We need to want something from it, instead of thinking we get it automatically. And this also means: we need to make people responsible. We need to invent new internets. We need to insist on darkness. Discuss transparency bages like fair trade buttons. We need to organize us in groups and develop technology that makes a difference.

So please don't turn away from it. Instead, don't let go, instead start analyzing it with lower expactions, nothing is automatic, working with it, push it, built alliances, analyse and organize. Get active. We need to start using the internet in a different way, not only as an individual but as societies. It's time we start thinking what a society could want from the internet apart from "a new economy", and what wouldn't be so good to get. Like mass surveillance.

"Why do people want to be "on the Internet?" A century back, Bruce Sterling had an answer which I still believe is true because technology has its own logic, it is still an anarchic thing at ist heart.

"One of the main reasons is simple freedom. The Internet is a rare example of a true, modern, functional anarchy. There is no "Internet Inc." There are no official censors, no bosses, no board of directors, no stockholders. In principle, any node can speak as a peer to any other node, as long as it obeys the rules of the TCP/IP protocols, which are strictly technical, not social or political."

I still think there is a truth in the first half of the sentence. There is functional anarchy when it comes to the internet, only we hoped to get it all automatically. Anarchy, doesn't come as a funky automatism. It's time we start the next phase.