

Chapter 8

Algorithms vs. Hive Minds: Preserving Democracy's Future in the Age of AI

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ABSTRACT

From the time of its emergence onto the public scene, the internet has been understood in light of both its dystopian potential for total surveillance and control and its utopian possibilities to enable enhanced forms of freedom. The reality has proven far more complicated with the internet having both helped to weaken institutions and strengthened new forms of authoritarian populism. This chapter argues that these two potentials are deeply interconnected and that the long-term sustainability of democracy requires that we understand and address the connections between our fears and hopes regarding the internet's future.

INTRODUCTION

In 1997 just as the Internet was roaring into public consciousness the inventor of the VRML code, Mark Pesce, attempted to project forward the ultimate destiny of this new “realm” he had helped create. Holding that the telecommunications revolution would likely end in one of two radically different ways, Pesce wrote in his essay *Ignition*:

The power over this realm has been given to you. You are weaving the fabric of perception in information perceptualized. You could – if you choose – turn our world into a final panopticon – a prison where all can be seen and heard and judged by a single jailer. Or you could aim for its inverse, an asylum run by the inmates. The esoteric promise of cyberspace is of a rule where you do as you will; this ontology – already present in the complex system known as the Internet – stands a good chance of being passed along to its organ of perception. (Pesce, 1997)

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Certainly Pesce was onto something. As the Internet and its successor mobile technologies unfolded in the two decades following his essay it proved both the ultimate panopticon and a vector for the undermining of traditional centers of power. It gave us both the NSA and what political theorists characterized variously as “the end of power” (Naím, 2014) or “monitory democracy”. (Keane, 2009)

Yet the effect, so far, of this erosion of power has not been to empower democratic citizens and civil discourse but to enable new forms of popular- authoritarian politics and political sectarianism even in some of the most long-lived democracies in the West. (Mounk, 2016)

My task here is to bridge these utopian and dystopian aspects by providing a rough outline of the emergence of Pesce’s feared “prison” with a “single jailer” and his hoped for “asylum run by the inmates” in the hope that better understanding our situation will provide a more secure ethical orientation towards the communications technologies which are radically changing the nature of democratic politics.

The following essay is divided into three sections and a brief conclusion. The first section will look at various manifestations of Pesce’s panopticon, the economic model that underpins it, along with its manifestation in authoritarian states.

The second section will look at the inverse of this panopticon, the way in which the Internet has enabled lateral, almost leaderless movements to burst onto the scene in the second decade of the 21 century. I characterize these movements and protests as “hive-minds”, and in this section, I will explore how these movements both were enabled and suppressed by leveraging features unique to current communications technologies.

The third section will explore how in 2016 the hive-mind was mobilized in the interest of the political right and the way in which this has resulted in calls for greater algorithmic control by Internet platforms. Here I attempt to lay out how, rather than being mutually exclusive predictions regarding the Internet’s future, algorithms and hive-minds are instead two manifestations of the same process both of which threaten the future of democracy if not brought under public control.

The final and concluding section will look at some proposals for asserting political control over algorithms and hive-minds and urge us to break free of the founding mythology of the Internet in order to recover our status as democratic citizens.

Mass Surveillance and the Rise of Algorithms

Not all that long ago, people talked of the Internet as if it were a new and distinct domain- *cyberspace*- something separate from the real world with which we had long been acquainted. That is no longer the case, for what has happened over the last generation is that cyberspace has consumed the real world, it has become the overlay through which our reactions with reality are mediated. (Wertheim, 1999)

A peculiar model of how this mediation should work is now found across multiple domains. It is found in the way security services operate, along with much of finance and commerce; it is the basis for new ways of responding to crime, and is deeply influencing the way we organize the cities of our increasingly urbanized planet. It is ultimately a model of *power* that has been made possible by the shrinking size of computer components and the spread of ubiquitous connectivity. It is a model that bears a chilling resemblance to Pesce’s feared panopticon.

Only with the 2013 revelations by Edward Snowden was the extent to which US and British security services had leveraged the Internet’s architecture for mass surveillance become truly known. (Franceschi-Bicchierai, 2014) Yet a little over a year before Snowden’s discoveries were made public, James Bamford laid out how the NSA had built a massive data center in the desert of Utah where:

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