

A tolerable internet

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Dear friends,

We're living in a strange world of technological "innovation" on the world wide web. After Web 2.0, the utter garbage fire that is Web 3.0 [1], and successive failed attempts to capitalise on "content creation" we have found ourselves in a race to the bottom with tracking, ads, and "dark patterns" [2]. The latter of these, a dark pattern, is an interface design choice that benefits the company at the expense of the user's experience. Not a surprise, but just another layer in the process of seeking to extract value from internet resources.

A fundamental tenet of capitalism is a necessity for the "line to go up" - be this nett profit, stock price, human suffering, it matters not - the reportable metric drives the mode of production in contemporary capital, and the cost to humanity is never more than a brief afterthought. For this one rule to rule them all, "endless profit", the 99% suffer. This ranges from the minutiae of daily life - small interactions conditioned by a deeper ontic capitalist frame, through to industrial relations, politics and so on. So infectious is the virus of capitalism that even the values of the anglosphere, and much of the rest of the world, are derived from its panoply of distorted anti-nature cancers. But let's dial it back for a second.

The internet in 2024 is already a surveillance engine. Between global megacorps whose interest is tracking you from brief glimpse of advertisement through to sale and government actors who track online activities to "predict" "crime", the infrastructure of an open, free internet, hard won from the net's early days as a military project, are now used in full scale as a tool primarily for surveillance, secondarily for lock-in, and tertiary as a provider of entertainment (or, as Marx might have suggested - opioids). While information from human sources still exists on the internet, and, indeed, the proliferation of access to information has never been richer, there is also mass disinformation, propaganda, and, aforementioned, dark patterns.

Engagement is the name of the game - and engagement demands surveillance and clever tracking of users. Some people argue that they have nothing to hide [3] but as discussed previously, we are living with the biggest growth of fascist overthrow of -democracy- since the 1930s. Alleged democracy free of war with fascism is not even a centenarian, and yet the very nations interested in fighting authoritarianism have become the fascists themselves. A dark turn, and this is mirrored in microcosm across the "productions" of humanity. If we accept that the role of education, media, and hegemony [4] is to assert capitalism as an ontological mode of production (i.e., deeper than just "what we do", but actually "how we are, how we relate, and who we value") then the values required under capitalism require some examination.

We've talked about profit, we've discussed exploitation and expropriation, particularly at the intersections, in the colony and on the "fringe" - so let us assume we have one umbrella value: we make profit for the 1%. The rest falls under this umbrella, and the inevitability of fascist turns under capital become obvious - if profit is the motive, not human sanity (not to mention human happiness), if vainglorious benefit for the 1% is the motive, not the continued survival of our planet and all the ecosystems that make it, we see that capitalism is fundamentally anti-human. Its only interest is the accumulation of profit, this comes at cost, as we have explored elsewhere. So one way in to this, methodologically speaking, is to examine the outputs and products of capitalism to identify the manifestation of these values.

Okay, that was one heck of a digression.

My argument boils down to this: capitalism demands outsized profit at mass expense to human life, the planet, and your flourishing. And if you're flourishing, then you're a capitalist, benefiting from someone else's expropriated labour.

We can see this manifest in the movement from a relatively free and open internet, which valued information sharing, and still harboured dark cesspits of criminal and morally vile behaviour, to a contemporary reality where the good, the former, is replaced with an oligopoly of tech-dictators, Zuckerberg, Bezos, Musk (though, he is at least undoing himself), Cook, Nadella, and so on. The interest is in tracking, targeting, profiling and personally identifying as much as possible about each user. The content is secondary to this – anything that yields “engagement” and keeps people on the platform drives the line up. This ranges from social media, to computer operating systems.

The user experience of the modern internet is one of being followed. From the mundane search for a dog collar, through to the invasive slightly-too-slow-swipe-away from an IBS treatment advertisement, your internet is coloured by ghosts of previous interests –accidental or otherwise. Some of these tracking patterns we notice, others we don't. The more nefarious are usually part of the latter. The fingerprinting and tracking of users, even through consumer level privacy protections (VPNs, custom DNS, Tor, and so on), is so sophisticated and constantly evolving that it is impossible to understand the differential scope of the technologies on any given day.

More troubling still is that corporate technology providers are championing these fingerprinting, tracking, and dark pattern approaches to ensure they keep their users. In an almost fiefdom-model of marketplaces [c.f. 5] these companies seek ever more ingenious (evil, but ingenious nonetheless) methods for identifying and following users. We are practically in an era of having a personal tracker following our every move, with more steps each day to ensure deeper and more significant surveillance of our lives. Governments are not far behind, and rogue agencies acting, allegedly, on behalf of nation-states actively participate in the process of furthering surveillance of citizens. After all, what good is an anti-terrorist agency if it can't track your shopping habits.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to shake tails –to prevent tracking – to get rid of personalised suggestions. It is next to impossible to shake more serious tailing, and you likely wouldn't know if you were being tailed unless you were a Keanu level Matrix hacker. If you're looking to escape the tracking –even at the most basic level –then you are amongst a very small minority, and fortunately, for most of the benign tracking methods installing a few Firefox extensions is all you need. I've been using a combination of container tabs and cookie auto delete for many moons now, and on my “personal computer” the number of dog collar adverts I see has significantly reduced. Though I'm still not sure why Instagram thinks I have IBS, take the hint Instagram?

Unfortunately the answer is not to install a few extensions and hope for the best. As mentioned these tracking technologies are increasingly complex and ingenious, and complacency because you installed a cookie-blocker is not a go. Moreover, if more people start protecting themselves, more effort is put into persistent tracking beyond cookies. We need a fairer, better way of sharing knowledge and content –of trading and building “economies” and a -collective- way to create a better way together. Being aware is a good step, protecting yourself as much as possible is a great start, but we need a systemic change before we fall off the cliff into the ocean of 1984 – and we're already teetering.

Food for thought, I guess. Your comrade,

Aidan.

1. <https://www.web3isgoinggreat.com/>
2. <https://techcrunch.com/2024/07/10/ftc-study-finds-dark-patterns-used-by-a-majority-of-subscription-apps-and-websites/>
3. <https://aidan.cornelius-bell.com/idea/6/>
4. <https://aidan.cornelius-bell.com/idea/7/>