

Tech Titans Gone Astray
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Technology has been a multi-edged sword for me, and for all of us, I think. On the one hand, I recall sitting in the library at college, handwriting a request for a research paper through the Interlibrary system. I would hand my request over to the librarian, who would enter the info into her clunky computer. I'd wait a week or two for the book to be delivered to my library so I could proceed with my research. I had a flash of prescience, realizing that one day we would all have immediate access to information, in our homes and at our fingertips. I longed for the day. I wanted to be a writer but couldn't bear the constant mess of typos littering the pages - there was no clean or timely way to correct such a mess, one error and it was back to the drawing board. That was enough to put me off my chosen career and push me toward social services instead.

Then, a few years later, we got our first home computer, called a Trash80. Suddenly my natural career was in sight. I could create perfect error-less copy in the corner of my living room, and reach out across the globe for information in an instant. A miracle was in the making for me.

Forward another ten or fifteen years and I'd established that career as a journalist. I traveled to the nation's capital to attend a conference of writers, publishers and eco-tour pioneers, where an enterprising young man presented cutting-edge info on the benefits of the new technologies he was working on... "You'll be able to have ever-changing ads on every page, you can set them so they'll pop up whenever readers scroll through your site, opening up whole new opportunities for revenue." I stood up and pointed out, "You're going to ruin this wonderful new tool we have!" Everyone in the large, packed room turned to look at me - blankly staring - then turned back to the speaker. None even acknowledged the truth I'd pointed out. I wonder if I'm the only one who remembers that now?

The internet wiped out the carefully vetted news communication system once in place, making it impossible for traditional news outlets to maintain their staffs and positions in the hierarchy, casting more than 40,000 seasoned journalists out on the streets when they couldn't keep up with costs via advertising. Suddenly

marketers paid by product pushers surfaced to fill the void by providing copy for free to web publishers eager for copy but without editors or fact checkers on staff.

Our magical tool, the internet, quickly became a veritable cesspool, full of wholly unregulated misinformation guiding apparently ignorant people to do stupid and sometimes dangerous things, swaying our politics out of reason and toward the idiocracy predicted by a funny movie released just a year or two before the crash of traditional media. Our capacity for attentiveness has been fragmented and overstuffed to the point where we can barely stay on track to get our work done - mental breakdowns due to overloads of Too Much Information are becoming common.

A few days after that fateful conference, just before returning home from the seat of power, I attended a speech by Al Gore, deposed would-be-president, warning about a new initiative of his presidential rival's administration, The Patriot Act, championed by VP Dick Cheney, which would allow surveillance technology to legally track citizens and record not only their constant location, but also their conversations, emails, social media and search records, storing vast quantities of information in desert warehouses shared by cellular companies and the government. We've all already got these phones in our pockets, and they double as mini-computers.

I wrote about it at the time: "We hike past the White House and find the DAR - Daughters of the American Revolution headquarters - surrounded by a quiet, peaceful line of patrons patiently waiting for entry. We're all here to see Al Gore speak. But soon it's time to catch our plane and I must dash from the DAR to Reagan International Airport, time to fly home.

"I'm able to tune into the press conference using my cellphone, and continue to listen to this gentle voice of reason as our taxi drops us at the wrong gate, as the bags are collected and then I'm instructed to send the cellphone through the x-ray machine. I don't want to turn it off for fear of losing the connection, so I leave it on and drop it on the conveyor belt. Al Gore's voice booms out his litany at the security machine as we walk through. Perhaps it's no coincidence we're fingered for a search, and have to spread our wings for the electronic wand, de-shoed, bags inspected. All the while the phone is humming along with Al Gore

in the basket of keys and jewelry, warning of the dangers of too much surveillance in the new Patriot ACT...”

Ten years later an earnest young man became a fugitive when he passed files off to journalists detailing the invasiveness of the government’s surveillance activities. He’s still in exile in Russia today.

Catapult ten more years ahead, and we can’t imagine living without our tech tools. Our lives have been computerized, our finances, too. Tech companies keep an ongoing stream of new and “better” coming at us in true capitalistic fashion. They’re constantly hoovering information about us, selling it to advertisers who want to find more ways to suck our money out of us. They’ve worked hard to hypnotize the public to eagerly buy the latest phone every few years for its new data tracking abilities, its better camera, handily making them rich.

Our banking, files and photos are all residing in our computers and online databases, all subject to invasion by hackers. We have to constantly update the files, moving our favorite photos and videos from 8-tracks to cassette tapes to floppy discs to VHS tapes to compact discs to DVDs... and soon none of those are readable! Digital files are lost or only accessible in archaic formats no longer viable... I was horrified when I discovered that my life’s work, I thought carefully stored on external hard drives, was simply lost, the storage drives unreadable. What’s going to happen to all of our history?

Yet the kings of tech are riding high, the richest men (mostly white, too) in the world, zipping off to Mars ‘cause, why not?

While I and the rest of us are left to Party Like There’s No Tomorrow.

Because technology has invaded our lives, stolen our attention, enabled graft and theft and slipping past rules and norms to steal and poison us while we toil as slaves. So here we are.

I’m hoping that Vice President Harris, daughter of Silicon Valley, will rein these bad boys in and reinstall protections to our privacy as well as our finances.

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