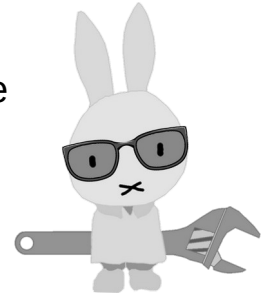# 'On the Internet, nobody knows you're a drone'

YouTube has become a warped subliminal marketplace; a confidence trick of misdirection. Digitally disembodied people pretend to be your best friend, while the platform they use fleeces your computer of as much information as possible in order to commodify your soul.

Paul Mobbs, *The 'Meta-Blog'*, issue no.15, 12th August 2021

I must rebuild the (ageing) computer I use to create and encode videos – necessitating a reorganisation of all my machines. Almost four decades from when I first built 'a computer', it sets me thinking about the reasons for doing this; an (ageing) codger cogitating the cost-benefit calculus of participating in this increasingly skewed system, bearing little connection to the system that drew me into 'the digital domain' in the 1980s.

"On the Internet nobody knows you're a dog".

Oh!, the naiveté of that old maxim, and the chasm of change that separates it from the electronic networks of today. Then again, applying the *Turning Test*, could you tell if I were a 'drone'?

As I set-up for an overdue session to disembowel and service all my machines, the nature of that system, and how it applies in particular to YouTube, occupies my mind. Do I really want to 'be that'?

Influencers trading vacuous content for likes, shares, and total aggregated seconds viewed. Channelled to them by the platform's own form of digital drug – 'the algorithm' – that services people's demand for analgesic distraction. But which, like a drug pusher, in reality preys on that dependency to drive the corporate need to generate psychological profiles for marketing advantage.

The algorithm is there to addict you to watch more; not to inform, educate, or entertain. Social media platforms drive users into isolating echo chambers, or down ideological rabbit holes, to exploit their psychological vulnerabilities for profit.

I refuse to play that game: My views are not Patronised; this space is not tainted by SquareHeadz; The only Skill I have to Share is *'DIY'*; in short, within the YouTube ecology, it's gonna' be Inaudible.

As I plan the videos I want to make once I have this machine working, I'm reminded of that banal stock photo, turned into a viral meme by social media; *The boyfriend distracted by the girl I the red dress*. In that constructed myth: I'm the girlfriend, standing open mouthed in my disbelief; looking on at YouTube's default audience, who can't see me because of the algorithm; their heads turned towards the red dress, representing every kind of popular YouTube content that I refuse to make.

I don't need to be popular; I have no need for the approval of or to emulate others; I want to communicate my own personal perspective as I experience it. If I make videos it's because I have something to say, and video is the easiest way I have to say it.

Problem is, the nature of my content, and its expression of radical viewpoints, will inevitably be confined to the slums of the YouTube metropolis. The algorithm isn't likely promote me as this month's viral talking head – and then most likely burn me a short time later when a tweak of its parameters changes its arbitrary patronage.

The economic ecology of YouTube is far more intricate than the algorithms that underpin its operation; or the snake oil pushers telling you how to beat the algorithm to generate more traffic. The imperative to whack the algorithm in fact services the platform's demand for how creators should format their work, to suit their greater business plan.

The power of the algorithm isn't the access it creates to an audience. Its true power is the Pavlovian manner in which social media warps people's creativity to serve the platform's corporate priorities.

Personally, I raise the digit to that entire scam. Right now, though, I'm not making any videos. My only machine with enough power to speedily encode video broke a few weeks ago. Fixing it requires an overdue, difficult, more general overhaul of all the technology in my life. That's taken a while to plan; *to decide exactly how I want the machine to work for me, not the other way around*.

The process of designing a new machine to do that, with the components to hand, has got me

thinking though: Of the algorithm; its invisible hold over the people subject to its subliminal influence; and of my participation in that digital 'masquerade'.

Virtual environments sever humanity's last links to what is truly 'natural'

If I had to give a metaphor for my vision of social media platforms and society, it would be giving a live grenade to pre-school children in the hope it would broaden their experience. It's not certain that a disaster would arise, but from the observable evidence it is highly foreseeable that it might.

This metaphor simplifies reality: The children are given a device which they do not understand conceptually, or have even a basic understanding of its workings. Are the far more complex, algorithmic underpinnings of of social media, and especially the hidden scripted processes of data collection it enables behind the scenes, any different for adults?

In the modern context of digital environments, Oscar Wilde was so wrong when he said, *"Man is least himself when he walks in his own person. Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth."*

Social media has become *"a masquerade ball where attendees obscure, to a lesser or greater degree, their true identities by wearing a mask or costume."* Social interaction, isolated and/or anonymous, liberates the participant(s) from the presentation and maintenance of a single, true identity. This debate over 'anonymity' on social media is a commonly discussed dilemma, but that's not the issue that concerns me here.

No, my concern is far nearer to that expressed by Wilde's contemporary, John Ruskin: *"You must either make a tool of the creature, or a man of him. You cannot make both"* (see box for full quote).

The issue is the delegation of people's perception of reality, and hence capacity to judge value, that social media platforms enable – and the fact that this transaction is skewed squarely to the needs of the platform operator, not their willing 'drones'.

Akin to what Ruskin says, the issue is the conflict between 'machine learning' and 'human creativity':

"Algorithms are able to function as a result of the translation of items, actions and processes into calculable and malleable units or data points. Rendering all in some senses as equivalent regardless of the actual content or context. In turn these renderings are attributed value, meaning and relationships through the very design and operation of the algorithm itself and its interaction with its broader environment. In some ways, this rendering process is indiscriminate and without judgement. On that basis alone, questions can be posed as to the broader philosophical issues raised... when the everyday is increasingly algorithmically articulated. Or more simply, to ask how this might affect how people see and understand their environment and their relations when all is reducible to malleable discrete but combinable units."

John Ruskin: *'The Stones of Venice'* (1852)
(volume 2, chapter 2, section XII, pages 161-162)

XII. And observe, you are put to stern choice in this matter. You must either made a tool of the creature, or a man of him. You cannot make both. Men were not intended to work with the accuracy of tools, to be precise and perfect in all their actions. If you will have that precision out of them, and make their fingers measure degrees like cog-wheels, and their arms strike curves like compasses, you must dehumanise them. All the energy of their spirits must be given to make cogs and compasses of themselves. All their attention and strength must go to the accomplishment of the mean act. The eye of the soul must be bent upon the finger-point, and the soul's force must fill all the invisible nerves that guide it, ten hours a day, that it may not err from its steely precision, and so soul and sight be worn away, and the whole human being be lost at last – a heap of sawdust, so far as its intellectual work in this world is concerned; saved only by its Heart, which cannot go into the form of cogs and compasses, but expands, after the ten hours are over, into fireside humanity. On the other hand, if you will make a man of the working creature, you cannot make a tool. Let him but begin to imagine, to think, to try to do anything worth doing; and the engine-turned precision is lost at once. Out come all his roughness, all his dullness, all his incapability; shame upon shame, failure upon failure, pause after pause: but out comes the whole majesty of him also; and we know the height of it only, when we see the clouds settling upon him. And, whether the clouds be bright or dark, there will be transfiguration behind and within them.

The issue is not so much the design of digital platforms; albeit social disconnection, the amplification of fringe issues, and susceptibility to automated micro-targeting of content, are important. It is that the purposes for which people use the platform – for communication – and the purposes of the platform's owners – for digital market control and profiting from data collection – are antagonistic.

Neoliberal and digital libertarian pundits promote the 'Net and social media as a new environment for creativity; when in fact Internet platforms are demonstrably a new arena for economic exploitation, political manipulation, and social control. Just as Ruskin outlined, turning people into 'tools' does not make them more creative; it just makes them better tools for those wanting to exploit them as unwitting 'drones' within their economic enterprise.

With social media, though, turning people loose in an environment without an evolved social framework to control it guarantees their *'roughness, dullness, and incapability'* is released too. But with social media, releasing and amplifying those traits to maximise the time spent on-line *is the objective;* as strong emotional and instinctive reactions are what defines our unique susceptibility to micro-targeted messages and on-line manipulation.

Problem is, the Internet 'doesn't forget'. Data bought or scraped from social media is warehoused by companies marketing on-line personality profiles. This permits numerous points of data to be used to map a profile, to support marketing or political micro-targeting, whenever it is required in the future.

...and to return to the metaphor of the live grenade, how many adults participating in social media platforms truly understand these processes? – and how to moderate their activity to elude, confuse, or misdirect those systems?

Therein, platforms like YouTube represent an environment even more confining than Ruskin's vision; as even when people think they are free to express as individuals, they provide more content for the system to more easily assimilate them.

'The Algorithm' and the delegation of control

Almost at the same time that Ruskin wrote his perspective on industrial control, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon wrote (see full quote below):

"To be governed is to be watched, inspected, spied upon, directed, law-driven, numbered, regulated, enrolled, indoctrinated, preached at, controlled, checked, estimated, valued, censured, commanded, by creatures who have neither the right nor the wisdom nor the virtue to do so."

Seriously, is there any statement which more aptly sums up today's technologically moderated social media environment? Such control was never truly possible in Proudhon's time, nor even within later totalitarian industrial states such as the German Democratic Republic. Within the networked, always-connected world, however, the required levels of monitoring, and individualised feedback for the purposes of control, are practically feasible.

More recently, shortly before his death at around the same time the *'world wide web'* was about the take-off, Gilles Deleuze wrote:

We are in a generalized crisis in relation to all the environments of enclosure: Prison, hospital, factory,

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Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: Epilogue, *'The General Idea of the Revolution in the 19th Century'* (1851)

You call yourself holy and sacred, but you are only the prostitute, the unwearied and unpaid prostitute, of your servants, of your monks, and of your soldiers. You know it, and you permit it. To be governed is to be watched, inspected, spied upon, directed, law-driven, numbered, regulated, enrolled, indoctrinated, preached at, controlled, checked, estimated, valued, censured, commanded, by creatures who have neither the right nor the wisdom nor the virtue to do so. To be governed is to be at every operation, at every transaction noted, registered, counted, taxed, stamped, measured, numbered, assessed, licensed, authorized, admonished, prevented, forbidden, reformed, corrected, punished. It is, under pretext of public utility, and in the name of the general interest, to be placed under contribution, drilled, fleeced, exploited, monopolized, extorted from, squeezed, hoaxed, robbed; then, at the slightest resistance, the first word of complaint, to be repressed, fined, vilified, harassed, hunted down, abused, clubbed, disarmed, bound, choked, imprisoned, judged, condemned, shot, deported, sacrificed, sold, betrayed; and to crown all, mocked, ridiculed, derided, outraged, dishonoured. That is government; that is its justice; that is its morality.

school, family... The administrations in charge never cease announcing supposedly necessary reforms: To reform schools, to reform industries, hospitals, the armed forces, prisons. But everyone knows that these institutions are finished, whatever the length of their expiration periods. It's only a matter of administering their last rites and of keeping people employed until the installation of the new forces knocking at the door. These are the societies of control, which are in the process of replacing the disciplinary societies.

Sound familiar? From saving the planet to saving the NHS, governments are increasingly turning over control to private technocrats, implementing systems that are mediated through data collection and mass monitoring. *That is not without purpose*.

In the post-colonial era, the neoliberal agenda has cannibalised the institutions of the of Western states to perpetuate the wealth and influence of an affluent minority. As time passes, and the economic inequalities accrue, that process becomes harder to manage or justify. The imperative to pre-empt perceptions that the state is failing, and to perpetuate that agenda at more extreme levels, generates a greater need for centralised control.

Updating Deleuze's vision for the world of big data and predictive analytics, James Brusseau argues that while broadly right, his 1990 vision was not pessimistic enough. This lends greater credibility to the work of Deleuze's less examined contemporaries, such as Jacques Ellul or Herbert Marcuse.

Today this is not solely a 'Western' issue. In this transition the state capitalist administration in China may be ahead, but it is not unique in the drive to enact greater technological controls over the public.

As Adam Smith foresaw over two centuries ago, as we reach the Earth's ecological limits, *"both the wages of labour and the profits of stock would probably be very low"*. **In general, then, this trend represents a crisis of industrial society as a whole, globally, not simply politics or economics.**

Increasingly, 'governance by algorithm', whether on-line or in the public sphere, is popularly seen as an impartial, democratising force – yet arguably it *"tends to increase individualization, commercialization, inequalities… and to decrease transparency, controllability, and predictability."* From its innate racism, to the uncertain assumptions or limitations over its application, algorithmic governance instead enacts a continuation of the historic trends identified by both Ruskin, Proudhon, and Deleuze.

The moment that you submit to the conditioning demanded by the algorithm – the moment you 'play the mystical game' of chasing traffic or popularity on digital platforms – you are part of that system of control: Compliance engenders the activity and conduct demanded by the algorithm, reinforcing the agenda coded into its digital infrastructure; you amplify the system's false promise of free expression, but that reinforces their neoliberal model of freedom – which enacts anything but this, especially where that amplifies manufactured on-line controversies.

The alternative? In a system that profits from your fear and self doubt, trusting yourself is a rebellious act; *'Fuck the algorithm!'* Do exactly what you will, using the means available, to express your personal perspective gained through that trust of your value in the world; without giving-in to the imposed standards expected. If that results in technological restrictions, then technologically circumvent them. If that results in official censure, then stand for those principles.

Research shows us that this hybrid public/private technological state is both dumb and perverse in its judgements. Challenging that semi-privatised, neo-feudal digital state is no different to challenging any other historically imposed form of authority.