

Chapter 3

A New Golden Age of Enlightenment?



For a long time during the 1990s and 2000s, positive stories about the Internet prevailed. A growing number of people with online access, first in the Western world, then gradually across the globe, would start a new era of Enlightenment with freedom of information and freedom of expression in a new radical sense. An unprecedented number of individuals would gain easy access to the large amounts of information uploaded by many different players, from individuals to media outlets, to organizations and government authorities. As a growing number of free search engines came about, it became easier to seek out information. There is no doubt that much of the elementary optimism was actually correct: the world has become a significantly more enlightened place thanks to the Internet, in the basic sense of “enlightenment” as the increased dissemination of information and knowledge—but also in the sense of Enlightenment as empowerment of the individual.

However, it was almost as if the Internet called upon people’s science fiction fantasies, both dystopian ones of a dark future characterized by over-technification, surveillance and control, and utopian ones seeing the network as a solution to almost all key human problems. In 1997, Danish science journalist Tor Nørretranders prophesized about “the radical information democracy”¹—editors, publishers,

¹Nørretranders (1997) p.141.

broadcasters of all kinds became the emblem of evil, whom he accused of doing nothing more than manipulate, streamline and even suppress the flow of information. Now, with the internet, they could be phased out and made redundant, as online individuals would be able to put together their own newspaper, journal, book or TV show based on information searched for, found and combined by—themselves. The fact that there might still be need for organizations to sift, fact-check and synthesize the steadily growing amount of online information did not seem to worry promoters of such radical optimism, who saw a whole new, utopian, collaborative and responsive community emerge on the Internet. It would even replace the cumbersome electoral procedures of representative democracy, because ongoing, maybe even daily, online referenda would represent a more sensitive mapping of the people's will. In this view, there was no room for doubt that the will of the people would always be democratic and could never turn into terrifying spontaneous decisions. Today, supporters of “disruption” argue that, since the Internet can very accurately map the actual preferences of voters based on their “likes” and other search behavior, one could just draft policy according to such knowledge: “What if ... local authorities did not need the opinions of citizens but instead measured their behavior and got to know their preferences that way?” Then this could be supplied by online polls as “a good way to wrap up something which sometimes becomes endless debate”, to quote the anti-parliamentary choice of words laid out in “Five Technological Themes”, a report from Danish consultant DareDisrupt.² Others—for instance American

²DareDisrupt: “Fem teknologiske temaer” (Five Technological Themes), p. 70 and 135, 2018. The report was made on behalf of Local Government Denmark in 2018 and can be found on www.kl.dk (Danish version only). Most recent visit 08-04-18: http://www.kl.dk/ImageVaultFiles/id_85157/cf_202/Kommunernes_Teknologiske_Fremtid_fuld_version-.PDF. It is indeed unsettling to realize that an association such as Local Government Denmark is considering bypassing local elections. However, DareDisrupt and Local Government Denmark miss the fact that people do not vote based on preferences only but also based on ideals and ideologies.

innovation consultant Lewis Perelman—thought that schools would become superfluous once everyone had a computer in their home to search and get the information they needed. If everyone were connected in one and the same open and transparent network, eternal problems of humanity such as ignorance, conflict, crime and war would simply disappear.

Other hopeful voices spoke about how the Internet would foster people's generous drive towards collaboration, that is, they saw the Internet as a gift economy in the sense of Marcel Mauss and other anthropologists. CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, has applauded this idea of giving your information and services away for free and in return receiving equally free information and services from others.³ It seems that the gift economists of the online world did not study Mauss' ideas in full, namely the part where exchanging gifts becomes a competition, obliging people to give a gift in return, in an attempt not to lose face. The reciprocal gift overbidding of the Kwakiutl indigenous tribes could result in aggressive "destruction feasts"; the so-called "potlatch." In extreme cases, a chief could publicly destroy all of his property, including his food supplies, weapons, holy copper objects, canoes, even slaves, in order to ultimately put his opponent in a checkmate position, by giving him a gift that was impossible to reciprocate—and if the other could not reciprocate, that chief and his tribe would be enslaved to the opponent.

Other early Internet enthusiasts imagined that the growing collaboration among users within the network might form a whole new shared global brain where the many users connected via the Internet would become the brain cells of a whole new higher-order consciousness at a planetary level that would surpass human consciousness when it comes to both intelligence and sensitivity. Few people discussed whether such a sensitive superintelligence would be morally good or politically open in any known sense, let alone adopt a kind stance toward the people who constituted it—or if it

³Kirkpatrick (2010) p. 287.

might pursue completely other goals, goals incomprehensible and not necessarily pleasant to us as individuals.

In the 2000s, when social media such as MySpace, Friendster, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram and others emerged and grew, they were regarded as “power tools to the people” with radical social benefits. They would inaugurate not only a democratic redistribution of knowledge, but also new and intensified connections between people who would soon share most or all of their data with a growing circle of contacts and “friends”; ultimately with anybody. The big tech companies seem to have started as playful experiments, imagining themselves as charitable initiatives to make the world a better place, rather than actual firms. In any case, it is safe to say that they became able to spread highly optimistic, generous and beneficial tales about themselves, about how they would supply the world with information under the motto “Don’t be evil” (Google), or about how the real goal was to make the world a more open and transparent place by connecting as many people as possible under the motto “Don’t be lame” (Facebook)—rather than monetizing these services, which was almost regarded as a slightly annoying side effect to take into consideration.⁴ Even during the April 2018 hearings before Congress, Mark Zuckerberg displayed that attitude. This is as believable as if big oil companies tried to convince us that their primary task is really to help people transport themselves comfortably to visit their friends and make the world a more connected place—and that any profits derived from that were merely a secondary detail. However, the fact that Zuckerberg has also hailed the motto “Move fast and break things” is indicative of tolls and downsides to the fast growth of users and free services. After ten years of growth and becoming the world’s biggest corporations, the big tech companies now find themselves in need of taking not one but two basic considerations into account: One, they have

⁴At least according to Kirkpatrick’s (2010) biography on Zuckerberg. Martínez’ (2016) critical insider account of Facebook supports the claim that the company’s ads department had low priority and low prestige within the organization all the way up until the 2010s.

to consider their users, of course, who need an enjoyable and useful free service to compensate for the time, attention, uploaded data and digital traces they put at the companies' disposal, all free of charge; two, they must increasingly serve shareholders and the tech giants' clients, that is, the advertising companies who pay for the whole party by buying an ever-increasing amount of banner advertisements of ever-increasing types and kinds.

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