

Excerpts from Future Histories by Lizzie O'Shea

History and the future

“The purpose of a usable past is not simply to be a record of history. Rather, by building a shared appreciation of moments and traditions in collective history, a usable past is a method for creating the world we want to see. It is about “cutting the cloth” of history, as [Van Wyck] Brooks put it, to suit a particular agenda. It is an argument for what the future could look like, based on what kinds of traditions are worth valuing and which moments are worth remembering.” 25

“History has a role in telling us about the present but not if we use a frame that valorizes those who currently hold positions of power. We need to reclaim the present as a cause of a different future, using history as our guide.

By stitching historical ideas and moments together and applying them to contemporary problems, it is possible to create a usable past, an agenda for an alternative digital future. In times gone by, early adopters, tinkerers and utopians may have wished for—even expected—a brighter and bolder future than where we find ourselves today, and I am keen to reclaim this possibility.” 28

“It is also widely accepted that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism—an assumption that persists even during the most transformative moments in technological development.

Digital technology is treated as a force of nature, without an agenda, inevitable and unstoppable. The past that has survived in the minds of the current generation is one that reflects what has happened rather than what is possible. Society is often treated as an object, which digital technology does things to, rather than a community of people with agency and a collective desire to shape the future.” 26

“If we are to explore the possibilities of digital technology, we need greater engagement between historians and futurists, technologists and theorists, activists and creatives. Synthesizing thinking across these fields gives us the best chance of a future that is fair. This is an ambitious project, especially at a time when the powers of capital and state are ranged against it. But as Vincent van Gogh reminded himself: “What would life be if we hadn’t courage to attempt anything?”

Public space

“The fragmentation of our online public spaces and the way in which our entire sense of self has become highly porous to influence may have corrosive effects, but that does not mean it is an unpleasant process. Quite the contrary: it is designed to be enjoyable, structured to optimize, at times, a sense of fulfillment. Surveillance capitalism uses our desire for convenience and connection as bait to draw us into using its platforms. It then uses our consent to justify transferring responsibility for its invasive practices onto us.” 61

“The ways in which we build our spaces, both physically and digitally, will influence our capacity to manage our desires and navigate the compromises we must make. They should balance convenience with engagement, and cultivate connection, rather than atomize and segregate. These are exactly the motivations that drove Jane Jacobs to lead a campaign to save Washington Square Park in New York City from a plan by urban designers to build a freeway through it in the late 1950s.” 69

“What had been dismissed by senior urban planners as a movement of “a bunch of mothers” had actually saved a part of the city that remains deeply important to its inhabitants. 70

“the [Parisian] Communards were a living example of how “any conditions which arise in historical time are capable of disappearing in historical time.” They showed that it was possible for ordinary people to seize control of their own destiny, without the need for technocratic, religious or wealthy elites presiding over social affairs...

“The Paris Commune showed how cities and communities can be rebuilt in radical new ways, not by “innovating” their way out of social problems, but by empowering people to make decisions collectively.” 196

“Utopianism erases our understanding of the present in a vision of the future that is supposedly detached from, yet ends up hopelessly bound to, the problems of the present. It is for this reason that some of the people lauded as the most visionary in our society end up having some of the most mundane ideas. Technology capitalists love to talk up the sparkling possibilities of technology—of unleashing potential in an interconnected society. But often what is revealed in these manifestos is little more than an unambitious extension of the status quo.” 200

Digital technology and consumerism

There is much still to be won and lost in the battle for our online autonomy in the future. As the next generation of web technology improves the integration of all our digital activities, allowing machines to organize even more of our lives, others will continue to learn more about us than we even know ourselves. In this context, focusing on our power over this process as consumers is a mistake: the power being exercised over us is precisely based on our being socialized as consumers. ” 70

“Digital technology, at least as much as any innovation over the last two centuries, offers us the opportunity to create a society that can meet the needs of every human being and allow them to explore their potential. But at present, too much power over the development of technology rests in the hands of technology capitalists and political elites who do their bidding. These people are good at what they do and also at convincing us that they are the best people to do it.” 190

“Software design in closed environments acts as a brake on human potential in order to sustain the subjugation of technology to commodified form. It keeps users of software benighted, actively denying them the opportunity to self-educate, out of fear as to how this might affect their profitability. It is an enormous squandering of possibility that takes place due to the subordination of software development to shareholder value.

This is not just a shame from a moral perspective. It also represents a power dynamic at play that governs the integrity of our digital systems. Only certain kinds of people think they should get to decide the direction of development of key software programs, including programs that people are dependent on in many aspects of their lives. ” 249

The Commons

“A commons, like its name suggests, is a commonly held resource. It can be something physical or natural like a park or wild environment; or something abstract, like human knowledge about the laws of mathematics, for example. When we talk about the commons, we mean a set of goods or something of value that is not owned by any individual person, though how a common resource is owned and governed may differ. A commons is something that is collectively shared, and its use and protection affect the entire community.

It is almost impossible to talk about the commons without talking about tragedy. In his widely cited essay, *The Tragedy of the Commons* (1968), the ecologist Garrett Hardin explained the problem with cows. If everyone were allowed to let their cows loose on common land, there would be no incentive to stop more and more cows being sent out to graze. Each individual is motivated to reap the greatest possible benefit from this common resource—but the resource is finite. Demand gradually overwhelms supply, as the benefit of adding extra cows flows to the individual cowherd, while the collective cost to the commons does not factor into the calculation. Each “commons is something that is collectively shared, and its use and protection affect the entire community.

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“The idea of a commons and its tragedy has largely been associated with natural or physical resources, owned collectively. But the idea of an information commons has existed for almost as long as Boston Common. Since the early seventeenth century, intellectual property rights have been issued over abstract ideas, most commonly over inventions by skilled technicians. Boyle talks about how in its earlier days, intellectual property law actively sought to protect the commons of human knowledge, by granting only limited individual rights over intellectual property, usually for a period of fourteen years. The law understood the importance of a store of common materials for all creators and thinkers to draw from. Intellectual property rights over ideas and knowledge were the exception, not the rule.

But over time, particularly during the twentieth century, there has been a transformation of more of human knowledge into property. Information has become more central to generating value under capitalism in the digital age than it was in the past. We can see this in the contours of various technology platforms and the data mining that happens there. But perhaps more significantly, information has also become a much more valuable commodity in industrial settings.” 404

“If privately held information is not to become the norm rather than the exception, we need to consider how we can continue to both generate and guard the commons. We are entering an age when information in various forms, but especially digital forms, amounts to a kind of capital—something that can be directed to the purpose of generating profit, something that affects both what we can learn and how we can produce things. For various reasons, legal, political and moral, the public has a claim over these goods. The extent to which any of this information can or should be in the commons is a question we have not properly begun to grapple with.” 407