

The survival of democracy depends on the ability of large numbers of people to make realistic choices in the light of adequate information.

– Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World Revisited*, 1958.

To Each Time its Means

Summary

The problem with free speech is that, when you lose it, you can't talk about that any more. In the brief pre-Trump phase from November 8, 2016 to January 20, 2017, preparations for the Trump era are urgent. Some actions that are possible in this phase, may be impossible later. The most direct action is to form diverse communities with strong capacities to carry on civil discourses in the face of political spectacle.

You'll Never Know What Hit You

Like #brexit, the outcome of the 2016 US presidential election shocked many. Shock is the result of poor attention paired with real danger.

The poor attention arose because the coastal media-driven elite of the United States arrogantly dismissed the voices of a majority of the United States population, who felt left out by the tech boom, and who voted for Trump in spite. What were people looking for in Pennsylvania? What were people looking for in rural counties? They held real needs and sought real solutions. Out with the old. Why did the nation never hold conversations about these needs? Many voters reside in information silos, or a scope of view which is too narrow. All parties must widen their perspectives to see the real issues and concerns of the other parties, and to overcome their bias.

The real danger resulting from this failure of perception is that the United States elected a spectacle-driven presidency. This presidency thrives on attention. Bored with the affairs of state the day after the inauguration, this presidency will turn its efforts to more attention-commanding spectacles. After an election that absorbed \$6.8 billion (or about 23 bucks per U.S. resident), the only spectacles to trump the election spectacle are public works and wars. Refurbishing the U.S. infrastructure would absorb about 3.6 trillion. Once that plays out, the spectacle-seeking presidency might go to war. By some estimates, World War II cost \$21.6 trillion, not considering the human toll and the impact on the environment. The next president of the United States speaks of such spectacles. If he asks the American people to go to war, will they say yes? Will Americans have that civil discourse then?



Fig. 1: "All of Germany hears the Führer with the People's Receiver", Poster, Germany, 1936. The Wolfsonian-Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida, The Mitchell Wolfson, Jr. Collection, and iPhone screen.

Radio

On January 30, 1933, after the National Socialist Party held on to a narrow majority of parliament seats in the German Republic, Hitler was appointed to become the Chancellor of the Republic. In that role, he called for a general election in March of 1933. This election was preceded by the spectacular Reichstag Fire, in which the seat of the German Parliament burned down. From there on, radio was the medium that pushed Germany from spectacle to spectacle until the end of World War II. What media fuel spectacles now? What media fuel conversations?

Analogies between Germany in 1933 and the United States in 2017 are misleading. The political state of the world in 2017 is more fragile, the United States Armed Forces are more powerful. Governments, corporations and other organizations have much more information about each resident of the United States than ever before, and media are much faster. twitter, not radio, pushed the election spectacle. What spectacle is next? Which 140 characters will galvanize the masses? Who can keep the spectacle in check?

Media Acceleration

Average shot lengths in movies in the 1940's hovered around 10 seconds, and in the 2010's hovered around 1 second. That's a 10-fold increase in the frequency of scenes. Twitter messages are limited to 140 characters, but their frequency is unlimited. Did twitter and shorter average shot lengths make the American public pay less attention to more and more spectacular images and ideas, or did the public's desire force media producers to accelerate their messages? Both are true: Cultural norms and technical methods co-constitute each other. The cost of media acceleration is the audience has no time to reflect. To retrieve a civil public discourse, people need to slow down. They need time to expand their scope and their depth. People in the United States need a way to see what's at the very edge of their perception, to see what's behind the facades of bias. They need a browser that shows more than they asked for, which requires more time to sort out. They need to see what's annoying, and not click away. They also need to feel safe to explore information. Anyone should feel free to read any content without fearing that it will perturb their carefully curated online identity. Anonymous but specific authors need to be able to post information through a secure and decentralized platform without a gatekeeper.

How could such a medium encourage a broader view? Should a search engine present the most relevant matches and the most relevant mismatches? Do users

feel safe looking at things that don't match their self-imposed, carefully curated self-image? Many, it seems, enter the surveillance arena of the internet with a modified self that they consider to be safe. Are they still free in public? Is there a way to be both relevant, honest and private in online media?

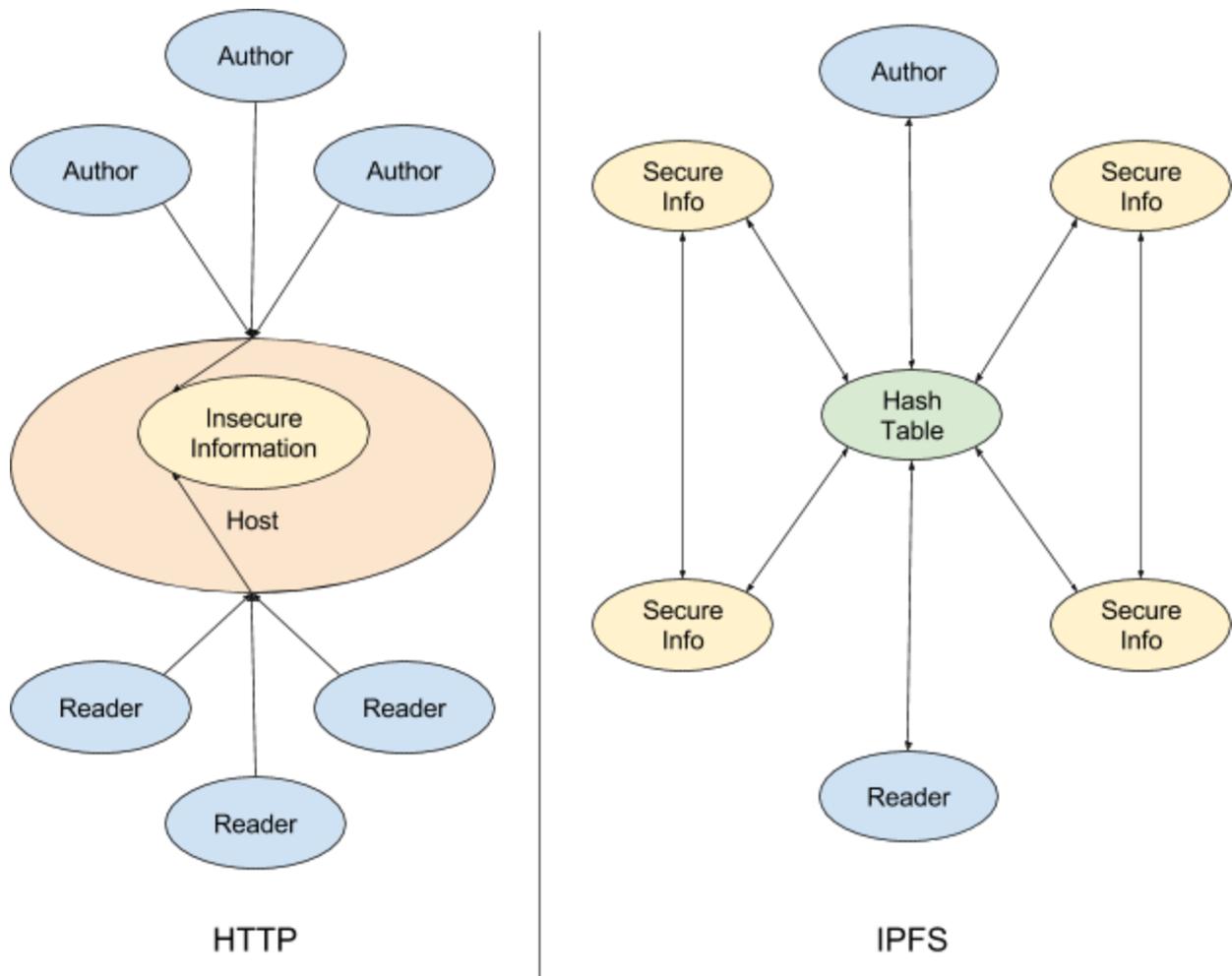
The people of the United States need a new, inclusive, patient and attentive attitude in order to step out of information silos, hear and address each other's actual needs, and maintain a balance of powers. Discourse is an antidote to the excess of spectacle.

Privacy and Accountability

With this new attitude comes the need for a new kind of reflexive medium which has three main features: Privacy, accountability, and permanence of information: These are the basic building blocks for civil, decentralized peer to peer information exchange and discourse.

The key incentive for authors and readers alike to use such a medium is to prevent spectacle, to prevent surprises and present issues in their full complexity, including a wide range of facts and perspectives. The incentive is to have real conversations based on mutual respect, admiration and honesty.

Wikipedia's editing system represents some of these values. Many articles present a concept and also discuss its critical reception. Still, people only get what they search for, and still, Wikipedia is written only by people with plenty of free time. It is not the voice of the people.



IPFS, the Inter Planetary File System supports some of these goals from the ground up by redefining a file system where content is not organized by its location, but rather by a fingerprint of its content. This fingerprint is the hash, an abstract description of a specific piece of information of any size. It replaces an internet or file system address with a string of characters like such:

QmX9C7c9aDiRBh7gUBo2iRbnkQQJEA4cbUJq3TJFbiGzBj

This string of characters is a digital summary of the piece of information, rather than the location of that piece of information. The description is created by a Merkle tree. It is hard to remember, but storable and searchable, and can be retrieved from many locations. A simple, but encrypted table can associate a

natural language descriptor with the hash on the client side, and this table replaces the DNS log which keeping track of who looked at what from where.

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coolstar.gif = QmX9C7c9aDiRBh7gUBo2iRbnkQQJEA4cbUJq3TJFbiGzBj
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In principle, an author's name or a reader's name can also be identified by a hash, specific and unique, but private. Truly encrypted, platform-free, peer-to-peer chat is possible, and IPFS is working on just that.

Privacy, accountability, and permanence of information: These are the basic technical building blocks for a decentralized peer to peer information sharing platform.

But more is required: Can a platform deliver what users want to hear but also what they don't want to hear? How can users build trust in each other to make a broad range of experiences possible? What design, style, frequency and culture can sustain open channels both technically, emotionally and socially? Of course, the problem is in the chair, not in the computer. But the solution is in both. To each times, their means of communication.