

It's not Cyberspace anymore (by danah boyd, Feb 2016)

It's been 20 years — 20 years!?! — since John Perry Barlow wrote “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace” — a rant in response to the government and corporate leaders who descend on a certain snowy resort town each year as part of the World Economic Forum (WEF). Picture that pamphleteering with me for a moment...

Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone.

I first read Barlow's declaration when I was 18 years old. I was in high school and in love with the Internet. His manifesto spoke to me. It was a proclamation of freedom, a critique of the status quo, a love letter to the Internet that we all wanted to exist. I didn't know why he was in Davos, Switzerland, nor did I understand the political conversation he was engaging in. All I knew is that he was on my side.

Twenty years after Barlow declared cyberspace independent, I myself was in Davos for the WEF annual meeting. The Fourth Industrial Revolution was the theme this year, and a big part of me was giddy to go, curious about how such powerful people would grapple with questions introduced by technology.

What I heard left me conflicted and confused. In fact, I have never been made to feel more nervous and uncomfortable by the tech sector than I did at Davos this year.

Walking down the promenade through the center of Davos, it was hard not to notice the role of Silicon Valley in shaping the conversation of the powerful and elite. Not only was everyone attached to their iPhones and Androids, but companies like Salesforce and Palantir and Facebook took over storefronts and invited attendees in for coffee and discussions about Syrian migrants, while camouflaged snipers protected the scene from the roofs of nearby hotels. As new tech held fabulous parties in the newest venues, financial institutions, long the stalwarts of Davos, took over the same staid venues that they always have.

A Big Dose of AI-induced Hype and Fear

Yet, what I struggled with the most wasn't the sheer excess of Silicon Valley in showcasing its value but the narrative that underpinned it all. I'm quite used to

entrepreneurs talking hype in tech venues, but what happened at Davos was beyond the typical hype, in part because most of the non-tech people couldn't do a reality check. They could only respond with fear. As a result, unrealistic conversations about artificial intelligence led many non-technical attendees to believe that the biggest threat to national security is humanoid killer robots, or that AI that can do everything humans can is just around the corner, threatening all but the most elite technical jobs. In other words, as I talked to attendees, I kept bumping into a 1970s science fiction narrative.

At first I thought I had just encountered the normal hype/fear dichotomy that I'm faced with on a daily basis. But as I listened to attendees talk, a nervous creeping feeling started to churn my stomach. Watching startups raise downrounds and watching valuation conversations moving from bubblicious to nervousness, I started to sense that what the tech sector was doing at Davos was putting on the happy smiling blinky story that they've been telling for so long, exuding a narrative of progress: everything that is happening, everything that is coming, is good for society, at least in the long run.

Shifting from "big data," because it's become code for "big brother," tech deployed the language of "artificial intelligence" to mean all things tech, knowing full well that decades of Hollywood hype would prompt critics to ask about killer robots. So, weirdly enough, it was usually the tech actors who brought up killer robots, if only to encourage attendees not to think about them. Don't think of an elephant. Even as the demo robots at the venue revealed the limitations of humanoid robots, the conversation became frothy with concern, enabling many in tech to avoid talking about the complex and messy social dynamics that are underway, except to say that "ethics is important." What about equality and fairness?

We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth.

Barlow's dreams echoed in my head as I listened to the tech elite try to convince the other elites that they were their solution. We all imagined that the Internet would be the great equalizer, but it hasn't panned out that way. Only days before the Annual Meeting began, news media reported that the World Bank found that the Internet has had a role in rising inequality.

Welcome to Babel

Conversations around tech were strangely juxtaposed with the broader social and fiscal concerns that rattled through the halls. Faced with a humanitarian crises and widespread anxieties about inequality, much of civil society responded to tech enthusiasm by asking if technology will destabilize labor and economic well-being. A fair question. The only problem is that no one knows, and the models of potential impact are so variable as to be useless. Not surprisingly, these conversations then devolved into sharply split battles, as people lost track of whether all jobs would be automated or whether automation would trigger a lot more jobs.

Not only did any nuance get lost in this conversation, but so did the messy reality of doing tech. It's hard to explain to political actors why, just because tech can (poorly) target advertising, this doesn't mean that it can find someone who is trying to recruit for ISIS. Just because advances in AI-driven computer vision are enabling new image detection capabilities, this doesn't mean that precision medicine is around the corner. And no one seemed to realize that artificial intelligence in this context is just another word for "big data." Ah, the hype cycle.

It's going to be a complicated year geopolitically and economically. Somewhere deep down, everyone seemed to realize that. But somehow, it was easier to engage around the magnificent dreams of science fiction. And I was disappointed to watch as tech folks fueled that fire with narratives of tech that drive enthusiasm for it but are so disconnected from reality as to be a distraction on a global stage.

The Internet Is Us. Which Us?

When Barlow penned his declaration, he was speaking on behalf of cyberspace, as though we were all part of one homogeneous community. And, in some sense, we were. We were geeks and freaks and queers. But over the last twenty years, tech has become the underpinning of so many sectors, of so much interaction. Those of us who wanted cyberspace to be universal couldn't imagine a world in which our dreams got devoured by Silicon Valley.

Tech is truly mainstream — and politically powerful — and yet many in tech still want to see themselves as outsiders. Some of Barlow's proclamations feel a lot weirder in this contemporary light:

You claim there are problems among us that you need to solve. You use this claim as an excuse to invade our precincts. Many of these problems don't exist. Where there are real conflicts, where there are wrongs, we will identify them and address them by our means. We are forming our own Social Contract.

There is a power shift underway and much of the tech sector is ill-equipped to understand its own actions and practices as part of the elite, the powerful. Worse, a collection of unicorns who see themselves as underdogs in a world where instability and inequality are rampant fail to realize that they have a moral responsibility.

They fight as though they are insurgents while they operate as though they are kings.

What makes me the most uncomfortable is the realization that most of tech seems to have forgotten the final statement that Barlow made:

May it be more humane and fair than the world your governments have made before.

We built the Internet hoping that the world would come. The world did, but the dream that drove so many of us in the early days isn't the dream of those who are shaping the Internet today. Now what?