

If you were limited to 8 apps on your phone, what would you choose? Today we live in a world that has given into Algorithmic Authority.

This is the decision to regard an unmanaged process of extracting value from diverse, untrustworthy sources, without any human standing beside the result saying “Trust this because you trust me” as authoritative.

We trust Google to find what we’re looking for when we search. It’s just an algorithm, sorting out possible websites to return to you. How do we know that it’s trustworthy?

We don’t. Our friend Geert Lovink says that instead of gaining power, this act of outsourcing authority only weakens the subject. If that’s true, it explains to some degree why we have such low levels of trust in our society. The more authority we give to machines, the less we trust human authorities.

Who do you trust?

The government? The media? Celebrities? Influencers? Your family? Your friends?

Who do they trust?

How do we determine significance outside of the celebrity/media social network paradigm and instead use intelligence to identify what’s at stake?

Lovink calls for an awareness of the existence and the architecture of filters that surround us. Our cultural bias is something to be aware of, not run from.

Has the internet become a background process?

Do we think of the internet the same way we think about a microwave? We use it, but we don’t talk about it, and we definitely don’t talk about the protocols and how it works that often.

How do we design in favor of attentive thought?

Can we learn from older technologies to allow for more critical thinking?

The bulletin boards that I called as a teenager are one form of slow technology. A person would dial in, read messages, and respond. It was exceedingly rare to talk to someone in real time. A forum on a website can be accessed by millions of people at the same time. You could be writing a response as someone else steering the conversation elsewhere. The only way this could happen on a BBS would be if that particular system had multiple phone lines to call into. Even then, the likelihood of two users trying to talk over each other on a forum would be exceedingly rare.

Usenet is a worldwide distributed discussion system. The key difference between Usenet and BBSes is the absence of a central server. Users read and post messages on what are called newsgroups, basically a categorization system. Instead of dialing in and posting to a specific computer, a server would run a daily routine to check in at another server and exchange messages.

When a user posts an article, it is initially available on only that user's usenet server. Each usenet server talks to one or more other servers and exchanges articles with them. As they are copied from server to server, they eventually reach every server in the network.

Usenet is a precursor to internet forums on the World Wide Web. It was developed in 1979 at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill and Duke University. It was connected to ARPANET, the precursor to the Internet, in 1980. As a communication platform, Usenet is no longer king. Forums like Reddit and 4chan, social networks like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, as well as mailing lists have become the standard for open group discussions.

What technology platforms do you use to engage in deep conversations? Is that platform designed in a way to allow for deep conversations?

When the consumer internet was in its infancy during the 1990s, most people getting online used a walled garden service. A walled garden is a closed platform or software system where the provider has control over applications, content and media. In the 1990s, AOL was much more than a connection to the internet. They provided their own forums, games and services through a custom piece of software. As a value add, you were given access to the larger internet and an email address. This was novel at the time.

For these walled gardens, you paid a fee. CompuServe cost \$12 an hour. Prodigy had a flat monthly fee of \$10. That was one revenue stream, but there were others. AOL would offer sponsored content to users when possible. CBS paid to provide sports content. ABC paid to provide news. 1800 Flowers paid to be the default florist. It was highly profitable to AOL at the time. My family had switched from Prodigy to AOL at some point. I think we used one of the various trials they had offered and it seemed like a better walled garden.

At some point, I found myself using the world wide web more than anything AOL offered. The biggest reason to have an AOL account was to chat with people in real time. Then AOL Instant Messenger, AIM for short, was released as a stand-alone download. You didn't need an AOL account to talk to people with an AOL account. AIM used a proprietary OSCAR instant messaging protocol and was licensed to other services such as iChat and Google Chat to provide interoperability.

People who decided to stop paying for AOL service could still use AIM. Competed with products like MSN Messenger. Various products popped up to try and pull different services into one application such as Pidgin.

Looking back now, this was probably the moment that the business model of amassing users, regardless of revenue, was realized.

The various protocols that have been developed for instant messaging show how fractured a type of communication can become. No one wants to install 10 different instant messenger apps just to talk to all of their friends and family.

These companies all compete based on user experience, design and market share. This is not the same when you think about the web. Edge, Internet Explorer, Safari, Chrome and Firefox can all view webpages. Sometimes they look a little different but access is not restricted.

How profitable was licensing a protocol?

It's definitely not a main revenue stream for AOL today.

We realized the potential of using the internet to talk in real time and made it as cheap as possible. But for profit companies require profit to operate.

If using the service is free, how do you make money?

Instant messengers were great for talking directly to someone, but hanging out as a group? That was what IRC, or Internet Relay Chat, promised. It was created by Jarkko Oikarinen in August 1988. With IRC, a server has a software installed that allows client computers to connect to it. Servers connect to other servers to create an IRC network. By 1989 there were some 40 IRC servers worldwide.

IRC is a fairly resilient chat system. At times, a server would lose its connection, causing what's known as a split. If you were sitting in a channel when this happened, half of the people would magically leave the channel.

Of course, when the server reconnected, the people would reappear, yet the channel operators, those people that had the ability to kick and ban people from a channel, could change.

If you use Reddit, you might be familiar with the term Op. I'm pretty sure this comes from IRC, it's short for Operator. Channel Operator.

Like all kinds of power, people desire it. In the scene I was part of, there was a ruling class in the channel that maintained Channel Operator status. In order to do this, they left their computer connected to IRC all day long. They created bots that would stay in the channel with operator status and have a list of people that would be given “ops” upon entry into the channel.

When a split occurred, it was possible to take over a channel. Members that craved op status would get a bit drunk with power, kicking out the old regime and trying to hold the channel for as long as possible. If you weren’t the one taking over, it was mainly an annoyance.

IRC servers are still active today. It’s fairly anonymous. It’s easy to maintain privacy as well by not advertising the channel name. IRC has been used for political activism. During a Soviet Coup d’etat and the Gulf War at the start of the 1990s, countries had media blackouts, yet IRC wasn’t blocked.

It’s a bit different today. For example, many countries in the middle east have a small number of servers that connect to the internet. During the Arab Spring, it was fairly easy for some authoritarian regimes to shut the internet off for their country.

Blocking the internet is an interesting political tool. In an authoritarian state, going completely offline may be extreme, but in the larger context for a small amount of time, it can be very effective at crushing dissent.

If the US government shut down the internet, how would people react?

What if it was only one application?

China has developed a method of internet censorship that would allow the US government to cripple dissent without as much backlash as turning the entire thing off. Known to some as the great firewall, it’s basically a system of dynamic and static filters that gets applied to every server in China, trickling down to users who find some services inaccessible while others are wide open.

In China, everyone uses WeChat. It is a great app. It’s also blessed by the state. The apps we love in the West are only allowed to be used in China if the Chinese government approves their use. That means allowing the state to access the data those apps create. This allows the government to dictate what’s allowed to be seen and more importantly, what should not be seen.

The US government, specifically law enforcement, has lobbied for ways to disable security features and encryption protocols for a long time. They argue that they need a shortcut. They need the data. Crimes will be committed. People will die.

Do you believe them?

Do you trust them?

Companies have commercialized basic internet protocols and turned it into their own thing. If you're familiar with the software Slack, it originally used IRC as a backend. It now has its own servers. I wouldn't disagree if an executive at Slack told me that the reason they moved away from IRC was to provide a more consistent and reliable experience for users.

Consolidating users to specific platforms gives those companies a tremendous amount of data as well as a single connection to exploit, whether it's a malicious hacker or a government.

For users, the trade off companies sell to us is that a superior user experience is worth the potential loss of privacy.

That assumption is based on how those companies chose to monetize their business. They decided that it's in their best financial interest to monetize the user, making money from revenue received from advertising.

This trade off makes us the product.

I'll end with this quote from Edward Tufte:

"There are only two industries that call their customers 'users': illegal drugs and software."