

Property is a curious invention that forms the basis of Western civilisation. 'To have' and 'to be' are the most used verbs in any Western language and they are tightly intertwined. To have something, you need to be someone. To be someone, you need to have something. Property rights create our identity. On top of this notion of identity, we built individual rights.

However, something strange is going on on the internet. We have virtually no property on the internet. As a result, we can't have an identity and accompanying rights on the internet. The internet is a space without enforceable rights. Did you get locked out of your Gmail account and lost access to your entire email history? Good luck. There isn't much you can do. This is not an acceptable situation. I didn't care much about this problem when I didn't use the internet as much, but today it would be an absolute disaster for me to lose access to my Google or Facebook account. I want to own this content. The [Bitcoin whitepaper](#) and the work of the crypto community has created a path towards easily enforceable property rights on the internet. No internet service would be able to lock you out of your data. Yet the work is far from done. An incredible effort is still required to make digital property rights accessible to all. It's hard for me to imagine a more urgent project to work on. Let me explain why.

Property rights form the basis of all rights.

Without property, rights simply won't work. I'd encourage anyone to try reading the US Bill of Rights or the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen from the French Revolution without a notion of property. You'll soon find out that these systems of rights cannot work without property.

Let's look at some examples. Take habeas corpus. If you don't own your body, but someone else does, habeas corpus no longer works. Anyone can now indefinitely detain you against your will - not great.. Individual freedoms such as freedom of thought and speech also don't work without a notion of property. If what you think or say is not yours but property of the community, it becomes impossible to think and speak freely. Religious persecution in feudal Europe hinged on the idea that the community was ultimately responsible for the thoughts of the unfaithful. As a result, the unfaithful had no freedom of thought and were persecuted. There wasn't much of an alternative to persecution because in feudal Europe there was no legal infrastructure for individuals to own anything at all. If you don't own your thoughts, you can't have freedom of thought.

There are no property rights on the internet.

We practically live in the digital feudal age. Unlike the physical world, the internet has no technical infrastructure built in to own anything enforceably. When I have an apple in the physical world, and I give it to someone else, only one of us has an apple. Now, when I have a pdf, and send that pdf to someone else, we both have the pdf. The original owner of the pdf still has property rights over the pdf, as mandated by the [1886 Berne Convention](#). But the speed at which information travels across the Internet breaks almost every enforcement mechanism of digital property. Actors like the music industry have been able to defend their property online somewhat successfully, but you'll need extremely deep pockets and the stamina for 10+ years of litigation to follow their example. It goes without saying that these

means aren't available for independent creators. As a result, we have virtually no property rights on the internet. This lack of a technical infrastructure to own digital property also means we have no digital identity. To be someone, you need to have something. You might have a Facebook or Google account, but the account lives in the database of Google or Facebook and you simply have access to it. The connection between your account and your identity is extremely fragile. It is practically impossible to get Google or Facebook to help you if you've lost access to your account. Because of this lack of a digital identity, there are no rights on the internet:

Habeas corpus doesn't work on the internet. Your digital identity is not your property. Your social profiles are owned by social media companies. For this reason your social media account can be 'detained' indefinitely. Just look at what happened to Donald Trump. His Twitter and Facebook accounts are detained indefinitely. He got banned from one moment to the next and needs to litigate to get access to any of his posts or tweets. Trump is guilty until proven innocent. Even the President of the United States is just a digital serf held at bay by his digital overlords.

Individual freedoms of thought and speech also don't work on the internet. You don't own what you say on a social media platform. Twitter owns your tweets, Facebook owns your posts. You merely have access to the posts. This access might be governed by law, but it's practically unenforceable. Social media platforms put their community guidelines first. If you say something that is (or seems to be) in violation of these community guidelines, you will get censored to ensure the health of the community.

The internet is a space without rights. Just like in feudal Europe you can only escape from this state of slavery by running away from the techno-feudal overlords and retreating into the digital wilderness. You have to live as a digital hunter-gatherer without access to services like Google and Facebook, making the internet almost unusable. This is not an acceptable state. Especially because we're using the internet more every day.

Crypto holds the promise of bringing us property rights on the Internet.

In the pre-crypto internet, we're lacking a technical infrastructure to own anything online enforceably. You cannot have enforceable property rights to a pdf if sending it to someone else means that you now both have the pdf. Simply put, the [Bitcoin whitepaper](#) uses cryptography to solve the pdf problem through a public ledger. Bitcoin would not work if sending one Bitcoin to someone else means that you now both have that one Bitcoin. By introducing digital property natively to the internet, the Bitcoin whitepaper also introduces digital identity. You own your Bitcoin on a Bitcoin address to which only you have access through your private key. This is a huge upgrade from the pre-crypto internet, where we have no built in user identification model - we only have a means to identify networks/devices (IP address) and services (DNS). As a placeholder for a lack of a user identification model, pre-crypto internet services created accounts with usernames and passwords. But internet services (like Facebook) need to store a copy of your password somewhere to check if it matches. As a result, the username and password paradigm is vulnerable to hacks and other exploits. Bitcoin private keys aren't stored in any database. You're in full control of your

keys, making you in full control of your digital property - and thus of your digital identity. This technical breakthrough doesn't just work for owning digital currency but extends to all forms of property: we can now own digital art, digital certificates, digital speech (your writing), digital voting rights - the possibilities are limitless. By using this technological breakthrough, we can end techno-feudalism and bring property rights to the Internet.

Crypto gives us Habeas corpus on the internet. If you don't own your body, you can be detained indefinitely. If you don't own your internet account, your account and your content can be detained indefinitely. In a Habeas corpus world, you can at least challenge your detention. With a true digital identity everything associated with your private key is yours. Your private key cannot be detained by anyone from transacting freely on the internet. A crypto social media service might block posts coming from your address to be displayed on the network, but you can take your posts and move it on a service that doesn't block you. If Twitter and Facebook would run on crypto rails, President Trump might get removed from the network but he is free to take his posts elsewhere. No one can be detained indefinitely.

Similarly, crypto also brings freedom of speech and thought to the internet. If you can own your writing through your private keys, your speech cannot be taken away. A crypto community might ban your content, but you can always take it to a network that doesn't. Worse comes to worse, you can host your own writing and speech somewhere on the internet yourself.

So why do we still use Google and Facebook if the crypto internet is here? The technology is still in its infancy and very expensive to use. A crypto social network on the Ethereum blockchain would need to charge \$20 per post at the time of writing. The smartest computer scientists in the world are working on bringing this cost closer to zero. However, there will always be some cost to using these decentralised services. Just like with feudalism, a society of slaves is cheaper to run in the short-term than one with individual rights. Building the infrastructure of ownership records, courts, and parliaments is expensive. Yet, in the long run the payoff of freedom is enormous. The introduction of property rights in Medieval times lead to parabolic growth from the poor feudal agrarian economy to the riches of modernity. On the internet we can continue this journey of human progress, but only with property rights.

Property is the origin of our rights. As we're moving into the internet age at an ever accelerating pace, it becomes clear that we need property rights to make the future something to look forward to. In this light, it's easy to understand why the Chinese Communist Party is against crypto. Crypto holds the promise to exit the techno-feudal world of command and control. It holds the promise of turning digital serfs into digital citizens. Yet progress isn't automatic and technology doesn't develop itself. It's up to us to build the future we want.

*All views are strong but weakly held

Some more reading:

<https://billofrights institute.org/primary-sources/bill-of-rights>

<https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/le-bloc-de-constitutionnalite/declaration-des-droits-de-l-homme-et-du-citoyen-de-1789>

<https://bitcoin.org/bitcoin.pdf>

<https://medium.com/bitcoin-simple/the-bitcoin-whitepaper-explained-and-commented-section-1-introduction-55f23e96a110>

<https://newsletter.banklesshq.com/p/sign-in-with-ethereum>

<https://twitter.com/balajis/status/1401906212426469379>