

Digital Grab: Corporate Power Has Seized the Internet

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Theme: [Global Economy](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

If your daily routine took you from one homegrown organic garden to another, bypassing vast fields choked with pesticides, you might feel pretty good about the current state of agriculture.

If your daily routine takes you from one noncommercial progressive website to another, you might feel pretty good about the current state of the Internet.

But while mass media have supplied endless raptures about a digital revolution, corporate power has seized the Internet — and the anti-democratic grip is tightening every day.

“Most assessments of the Internet fail to ground it in political economy; they fail to understand the importance of capitalism in shaping and, for lack of a better term, domesticating the Internet,” says Robert W. McChesney in his illuminating new book, *Digital Disconnect*.

Plenty of commentators loudly celebrate the Internet. Some are vocal skeptics. “Both camps, with a few exceptions, have a single, deep, and often fatal flaw that severely compromises the value of their work,” McChesney writes. “That flaw, simply put, is ignorance about really existing capitalism and an under-appreciation of how capitalism dominates social life. . . . Both camps miss the way capitalism defines our times and sets the terms for understanding not only the Internet, but most everything else of a social nature, including politics, in our society.”

And he adds: “The profit motive, commercialism, public relations, marketing, and advertising — all defining features of contemporary corporate capitalism — are foundational to any assessment of how the Internet has developed and is likely to develop.”

Concerns about the online world often fixate on cutting-edge digital tech. But, as McChesney points out, “the criticism of out-of-control technology is in large part a critique of out-of-control commercialism. The loneliness, alienation, and unhappiness sometimes ascribed to the Internet are also associated with a marketplace gone wild.”

Discourse about the Internet often proceeds as if digital technology has some kind of mind or will of its own. It does not.

For the most part, what has gone terribly wrong in digital realms is not about the technology. I often think of what Herbert Marcuse wrote in his 1964 book *One-Dimensional Man*: “The traditional notion of the ‘neutrality’ of technology can no longer be maintained. Technology as such cannot be isolated from the use to which it is put; the technological society is a system of domination which operates already in the concept and construction of

techniques.”

Marcuse saw the technological as fully enmeshed with the political in advanced industrial society, “the latest stage in the realization of a specific historical project — namely, the experience, transformation, and organization of nature as the mere stuff of domination.” He warned that the system’s productivity and growth potential contained “technical progress within the framework of domination.”

Fifty years later, McChesney’s book points out: “The Internet and the broader digital revolution are not inexorably determined by technology; they are shaped by how society elects to develop them. . . . In really existing capitalism, the kind Americans actually experience, wealthy individuals and large corporations have immense political power that undermines the principles of democracy. Nowhere is this truer than in communication policy making.”

Huge corporations are now running roughshod over the Internet. At the illusion-shattering core of Digital Disconnect are a pair of chapters on what corporate power has already done to the Internet — the relentless commercialism that stalks every human online, gathering massive amounts of information to target people with ads; the decimation of privacy; the data mining and surveillance; the direct cooperation of Internet service providers, search engine companies, telecomm firms and other money-driven behemoths with the U.S. military and “national security” state; the ruthless insatiable drive, led by Apple, Google, Microsoft and other digital giants, to maximize profits.

In his new book, McChesney cogently lays out grim Internet realities. (Full disclosure: he’s on the board of directors of an organization I founded, the Institute for Public Accuracy.) Compared to Digital Disconnect, the standard media critiques of the Internet are fairy tales.

Blowing away the corporate-fueled smoke, McChesney breaks through with insights like these:

* “The corporate media sector has spent much of the past 15 years doing everything in its immense power to limit the openness and egalitarianism of the Internet. Its survival and prosperity hinge upon making the system as closed and proprietary as possible, encouraging corporate and state surreptitious monitoring of Internet users and opening the floodgates of commercialism.”

* “It is supremely ironic that the Internet, the much-ballyhooed champion of increased consumer power and cutthroat competition, has become one of the greatest generators of monopoly in economic history. Digital market concentration has proceeded far more furiously than in the traditional pattern found in other areas. . . . As ‘killer applications’ have emerged, new digital industries have gone from competitive to oligopolistic to monopolistic at breakneck speeds.”

* “Today, the Internet as a social medium and information system is the domain of a handful of colossal firms.”

* “It is true that with the advent of the Internet many of the successful giants — Apple and Google come to mind — were begun by idealists who may have been uncertain whether they really wanted to be old-fashioned capitalists. The system in short order has whipped them into shape. Any qualms about privacy, commercialism, avoiding

taxes, or paying low wages to Third World factory workers were quickly forgotten. It is not that the managers are particularly bad and greedy people — indeed their individual moral makeup is mostly irrelevant — but rather that the system sharply rewards some types of behavior and penalizes other types of behavior so that people either get with the program and internalize the necessary values or they fail.”

* “The tremendous promise of the digital revolution has been compromised by capitalist appropriation and development of the Internet. In the great conflict between openness and a closed system of corporate profitability, the forces of capital have triumphed whenever an issue mattered to them. The Internet has been subjected to the capital-accumulation process, which has a clear logic of its own, inimical to much of the democratic potential of digital communication.”

* “What seemed to be an increasingly open public sphere, removed from the world of commodity exchange, seems to be morphing into a private sphere of increasingly closed, proprietary, even monopolistic markets. The extent of this capitalist colonization of the Internet has not been as obtrusive as it might have been, because the vast reaches of cyberspace have continued to permit noncommercial utilization, although increasingly on the margins.”

* “If the Internet is worth its salt, if it is to achieve the promise of its most euphoric celebrants and assuage the concerns of its most troubled skeptics, it has to be a force for raising the tide of democracy. That means it must help arrest the forces that promote inequality, monopoly, hypercommercialism, corruption, depoliticization, and stagnation.”

* “Digital technologies may bring to a head, once and for all, the discrepancy between what a society could produce and what it actually does produce under capitalism. The Internet is the ultimate public good and is ideally suited for broad social development. It obliterates scarcity and is profoundly disposed toward democracy. And it is more than that. The new technologies are in the process of truly revolutionizing manufacturing, for example, making far less expensive, more efficient, environmentally sound, decentralized production possible. Under really existing capitalism, however, few of the prospective benefits may be developed — not to mention spread widely. The corporate system will try to limit the technology to what best serves its purposes.”

The huge imbalance of digital power now afflicting the Internet is a crucial subset of what afflicts the entirety of economic relations and political power in the United States. We have a profound, far-reaching fight on our hands, at a crossroads leading toward democracy or corporate monopoly. The future of humanity is at stake.

Norman Solomon is co-founder of RootsAction.org and founding director of the Institute for Public Accuracy. His books include *“War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death.”* He writes the *Political Culture 2013* column.

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