

Philosophy of Technology

Feenberg on Internet Tech



Emancipation, Conformism, and Post-Truth



What does Feenberg want?

- Feenberg aims to “affirm” the democratic potential of the Internet which has been challenged by contemporary critical theorists, who’ve now firmly rejected the hype.
- That said, Feenberg acknowledges that “it is an ambiguous phenomenon unlikely to fulfill the promise of democratic transformation foisted on it in the early years.”
- Still, Feenberg accuses critics of cherrypicking problematic aspects and suggests that it is more useful to analyze the Internet as a technology in its formative stage

Despite my reservations the critiques do bring important aspects of the Internet to light. We have had enough experience with it by now to realize that it is an ambiguous phenomenon unlikely to fulfil the promise of democratic transformation foisted on it in the early years. The critics have hit on some of the reasons for its limited and contradictory impacts. However, I will argue that their evaluation of the Internet is one-sided. They focus exclusively on its most problematic aspects and underestimate equally important accomplishments. An analysis of the Internet as a technology in its formative stage, before it has achieved a standard configuration, offers a more comprehensive view. I will show that the political and social contradictions of the Internet are reflected in its technological features that do not resolve into a coherent whole.

II

The Internet is Messy

Critiquing the critiques

- Feenberg goes on to respond to two “articulate champions of counter-hype,” Jodi Dean and Christian Fuchs, “who skilfully deflate the myth of the Internet as a revolutionary technology.”
- With these responses, Feenberg hopes to address critiques from two different standpoints: political economy (via Fuchs) and cultural theory (via Dean).

Fuchs on the Internet

- In advanced capitalism, knowledge becomes a major source of profit. Building on Marxist thought, Fuchs claims that this system privatizes and commodifies knowledge, against its essence, much like the commons.
- Users on social media platforms produce content for free, which the platforms monetize via ads and data brokerages. This results in unpaid immaterial labor, which leads to a virtually infinite rate of exploitation.
- Building on the audience commodity theory, Fuchs argues that platforms exploit users' creativity, turning them into both consumers and creators. He hopes that a resistance can emerge by trying to unite new struggles in advanced capitalism around the colonisation of these new commons.

But would it be fair to call it labour?

But the putting of labour-power into action – i.e., the work – is the active expression of the labourer's own life. And this life activity he sells to another person in order to secure the necessary means of life. His life-activity, therefore, is but a means of securing his own existence. He works that he may keep alive. He does not count the labour itself as a part of his life; it is rather a sacrifice of his life. It is a commodity that he has auctioned off to another. The product of his activity, therefore, is not the aim of his activity. What he produces for himself is not the silk that he weaves, not the gold that he draws up the mining shaft, not the palace that he builds. What he produces for himself is wages; and the silk, the gold, and the palace are resolved for him into a certain quantity of necessities of life, perhaps into a cotton jacket, into copper coins, and into a basement dwelling. And the labourer who for 12 hours long, weaves, spins, bores, turns, builds, shovels, breaks stone, carries hods, and so on – is this 12 hours' weaving, spinning, boring, turning, building, shovelling, stone-breaking, regarded by him as a manifestation of life, as life? Quite the contrary. **Life for him begins where this activity ceases**, at the table, at the tavern, in bed. The 12 hours' work, on the other hand, has no meaning for him as weaving, spinning, boring, and so on, but only as earnings, which enable him to sit down at a table, to take his seat in the tavern, and to lie down in a bed. If the silk-worm's object in spinning were to prolong its existence as caterpillar, it would be a perfect example of a wage-worker.

Karl Marx
Wage Labour and Capital

What are Wages?
How are they Determined?

Virtually Infinite Exploitation?

$$\begin{aligned}\text{rate of exploitation} &= \frac{\text{Surplus}}{\text{Worker's utility}} \\ \text{rate of exploitation} &= \frac{\text{INR 89.42}}{\text{INR 125}} \\ &= 71\%\end{aligned}$$

For reference, a welder in the U.S. faces a 200% rate of exploitation on average

YT Surplus= Ad revenue per month per active user

Feenberg takes on Fuchs

- Feenberg argues that Fuchs reduces all internet activity to capitalist exploitation, ignoring that user-generated content often has independent social or cultural value beyond its commodification.
- He goes on to critique Fuchs for applying Marxist thought too loosely to diminish the Internet's essence; comparing casual online activity to the factory floor misses key differences in control, purpose, and structure.
- Unlike TV, which evolved into a closed system, the Internet is still open and evolving. Feenberg believes Fuchs's framework prematurely limits its democratic potential by treating it as already fully subsumed by capitalism.

Dean and Depoliticisation

- Dean argues that the Internet's initial revolutionary potential for bottom-up, democratic communication has become a system for endless communication without action that strengthens capitalist control.
- According to Dean, the Internet blurs the line between fantasy and reality, symbol and fact, leading to a loss of meaning and belief. Users become caught in a loop of self-expression without commitment that paralyzes meaningful political action.
- Rather than creating real political power, online participation produces the illusion of engagement. This misleads people into thinking they are contributing to change, while in fact they are fueling the machinery of communicative capitalism.

Feenberg v Dean

- Feenberg argues that Dean reduces internet activity to trivial and hollow communication, not taking into account serious political forums like Slashdot.
- Feenberg suggests that signing online petitions or liking dissenting posts isn't supposed to replace real action, but to augment it by lowering their sense of isolation, and Feenberg claims that people know that.
- Feenberg notes that most people remain influenced by traditional structures, suggesting that the Internet hasn't replaced core societal needs. Adding that, the real concern should be how excessive criticism may distract from more serious threats.

Feenberg's Layers

- Feenberg identifies five Internet layers:– non-hierarchical structure, anonymity, broadcasting, data storage, & many to many communication. each enabling varied uses, from commerce to activism, and being shaped by competing actors.
- The layers show the Internet's multistability, supporting conflicting functions. The struggle over its technical code decides if consumption or community uses take the upper hand.
- Each layer is contested by businesses, communities, and governments, influencing the Internet's design. Outcomes hinge on whether these struggles lead to compromise or control, defining the Internet's future.

My Take on this disagreement



Despite the exorbitant influence of a small number of popular web sites, there is still a great deal of variety and room for non-conformity. Even the passive expression of dissenting opinion is an advance over the near universal consensus in which those my age grew up. Debord's hope that an alternative to the mass media would make a difference is not wholly disappointed. We live in a far more contentious social world than the happy days of yore. It is true, to be sure, that there is little effective political resistance, but I see no evidence that the Internet is responsible for that. It cannot simply be dismissed because it has not solved the difficult conundrum of getting Americans to join radical political organizations. The cultural incapacity of Americans to create a durable Left requires a better explanation than the supposed depoliticizing effects of MoveOn.

In sum, I do not agree with Dean that the Internet as a whole is usefully characterized by the type of interaction taking place in sites such as Facebook, nor that it is responsible for the weakness of Left activism today. Which brings me back to my starting point. What explains the vehemence with which the Internet is criticized by so many intellectuals today?

I believe critics like Fuchs and Dean are caught up in an internecine struggle within the contemporary intelligentsia that distracts them from important aspects of the Internet. The Internet was hailed at first in such expansive terms that a critical reaction was inevitable. It has not had the revolutionary impact that was promised, but the expectation that it would was always unrealistic. A critique based on disappointment with such an unrealistic expectation is distorted by its dependence on its object.

Feenberg

Bottom-up possibilities

Play, plurality, protest

Grassroots hope

Internet = partial freedom

Dean/Fuchs

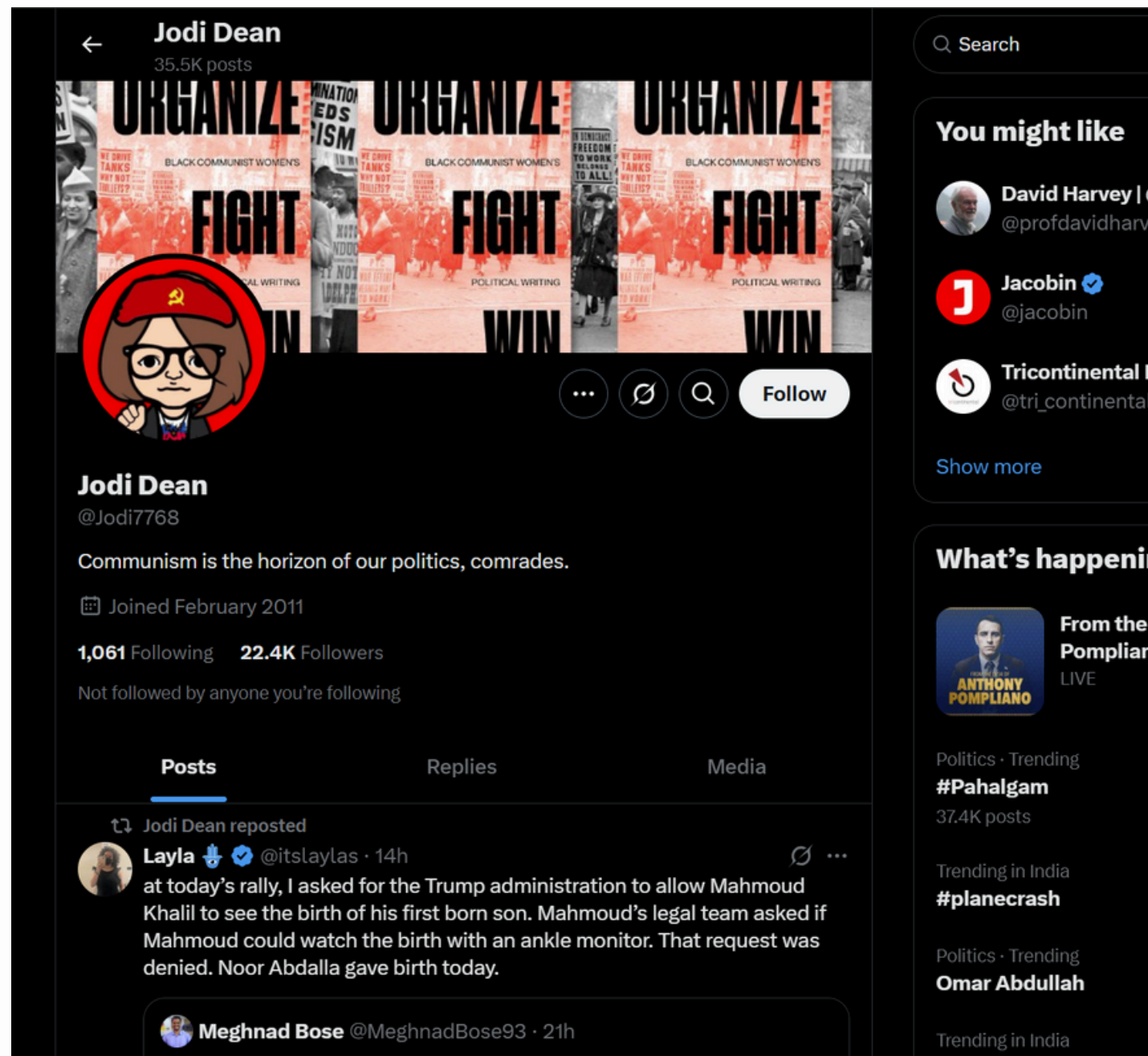
No real escape

Commodification, control, compliance

Cynicism

Internet = tool of the system

Internet Tech is not the problem



a. they don't practise what they preach

**b. they are not as passionate about
getting rid of capitalism**

c. they couldn't see themselves falling for it

d. their claims were dumb

a. they don't practise what they preach

**b. they are not as passionate about
getting rid of capitalism**

c. they couldn't see themselves falling for it

d. their claims were dumb

It wasn't the internet that failed to spark revolution, but Dean, Fuchs and their comrades that failed to kindle the flame.

**Do you think the internet still
holds emancipatory possibilities or does
it lead to conformism and 'post-truth'?**

Yes, Yes & Yes.

Neither of these outcomes is mutually exclusive..

The internet offers emancipation, enabling activism but fosters conformism via echo chambers and post-truth through misinformation. These coexist: Twitter amplified protests (emancipation), reinforced divides (conformism), and helped spread unverified claims (post-truth).

**where we go from here
is a choice i leave to you**

A Presentation By

Arnav Singh

2021019