

Raw Thought: The Weblog of Aaron Swartz
aaronsw.com/weblog

What's Going On Here?

May 15, 2005

[Original link](#)

I'm adding this post not through blogging software, like I normally do, but by hand, right into the webpage. It feels odd. I'm doing this because a week or so ago my web server started making funny error messages and not working so well. The web server is in Chicago and I am in California so it took a day or two to get someone to check on it. The conclusion was the hard drive had been fried.

When the weekend ended, we sent the disk to a disk repair place. They took a look at it and a couple days later said that they couldn't do anything. The heads that normally read and write data on a hard drive by floating over the magnetized platter had crashed right into it. While the computer was giving us error messages it was also scratching away a hole in the platter. It got so thin that you could see through it.

This was just in one spot on the disk, though, so we tried calling the famed Drive Savers to see if they could recover the rest. They seemed to think they wouldn't have any better luck. (Please, please, please, [tell me](#) if you know someplace to try.)

I hadn't backed the disk up for at least a year (in fairness, I was literally going to back it up when I found it giving off error messages) and the thought of the loss of all that data was crushing. I broke down crying and couldn't function.

I've since been trying to piece things together from the old backup and the Google cache and so on, but it's a painful and time-consuming process, and even without this on my hands I am extremely lacking time. I'll try my best, though.

Thanks to everyone for their kind words and support. If you have some files you think I might be missing, [let me know](#). If you have some disposable income and want to help fund the purchase of a new server and perhaps the recovery of the old disk, [you can make a donation](#).

Sorry for screwing up.

Getting Back On Track

June 1, 2005

[Original link](#)

Just how crazy am I? Well, tonight I wrote my own weblogging system. One of the silver linings of [losing a server](#) is that you get to rebuild things just the way you like.

Anyway, this might mean I'll start posting more. Or maybe not.

Either way, this site is now proudly powered by good old **make**.

(For those who are interested [the code is now up](#) but it's probably not easily usable by most.)

The God Who Wasn't There (And The One Who Was)

June 1, 2005

[Original link](#)

“I was doing some research into the idea that Jesus never existed. When I first looked into it, I thought it was just a crackpot theory and I was curious why anyone would believe this,” explains Brian Flemming. “To my surprise I found the evidence kept stacking up. The more I looked into it, the more that the facts aligned with those who said Jesus was just a legendary character. The shaky evidence and the poor reasoning were actually on the side of those who said that Jesus did exist.”

And so Flemming (*Bat Boy: The Musical, Nothing So Strange, Fair & Balanced*, and all-around digital rights supporter) decided to make a movie. The result, which is currently being screened across the country in theaters and at atheist organizations and will be released on DVD soon, is a shockingly good film.

Flemming begins at the beginning: the popular story of Jesus. In a hilarious montage of old footage taken from the Prelinger archives underneath deadpan narration, he tells the story in six minutes. And then it's on to debunking it. Through interviews with various experts, illustrated with entertaining graphics, he tries to reconstruct the historical evidence for the story...only to find there isn't much and a lot doesn't add up.

Convinced the story is wrong, Flemming takes aim at the right-wing Christian fundamentalists who act based on it, the wishy-washy Christian moderates who enable them, and the rest of the system. He concludes by heading back home to the fundamentalist Christian school he attended as a child to confront the principal about what he's teaching children.

Flemming's previous film, *Nothing So Strange* ([which I also reviewed](#)) was interesting but, in fairness, rather amateurish. No such criticism can be made of this film, which has some of the best graphics I've seen in a documentary and a brilliant score composed from the Creative Commons-licensed Wired CD by the hertofore-unknown DJ Madson (a nom-de-plume of Flemming, I'm beginning to suspect) by remixing popular artists. The whole thing, from the interviews down to the promotional posters, hangs together so well that it's hard to believe Flemming is doing this all himself, but apparently he is, with no liberal atheist conspiracy to back him.

(Although, in full disclosure, Larry Lessig and former Creative Commons executive director Glenn Otis Brown receive special thanks in the credits. And in a remote Q&A via iChat after the screening here at Stanford, Flemming was

wearing a Creative Commons shirt. So if you want to investigate a conspiracy, that's where I'd look.)

On the other hand, Flemming has always had what Bill O'Reilly might call a "parasitic" sense of self-promotion. His film *Nothing So Strange* received press largely because it included scenes of Bill Gates being assassinated. And during the California Recall, Flemming jumped into the fray on the platform "If elected, I will resign." (Thus making Lt. Governor Bustamante governor, since at the time he was refusing to run, thinking he'd draw support away from the actual governor.) When FOX sued Al Franken for using the phrase "Fair and Balanced", Flemming wrote a play with the name. When Arnold Schwarzenegger sued the makers of a bobblehead version of him, Flemming posted a photo of Arnold's penis.

Both times, he insisted the works were a form of political protest, but he still charged money for the products. He did the same when he released portions of *Nothing So Strange* under a Creative Commons license. It's one thing to support free speech; it's another to try to make money off of other people's support for it. What's unsettling about this film is not how Flemming is using various atheist groups to screen and promote it — that's perfectly reasonable, especially since he's giving the DVDs to the groups at outrageously low prices.

No, what's unsettling is a hidden feature on Flemming's site called the Grassroots Promotion Team or GPT. In general these things are nothing new — just personally, I remember volunteering for Apple when the iMac came out and joining a "Street Team" website to promote a Buffy DVD. The idea behind such sites is that your particular group of obsessive lonely fans will spend their free time promoting your products on various forums and websites in exchange for a chance to win some lame prizes.

It's sad when big corporations do this, but when independent political folks like Flemming do it, it becomes a little creepy. It's also problematic. Take the movie's soundtrack, which is sold on Amazon. Normally such obscure CDs have hardly any reviews. But this one not only had 11, but they were all amazingly glowing. "Wow, this CD must be really good," I thought. But when I saw Flemming was awarding 100 "points" for each Amazon review, it suddenly made sense. If everyone plays this game, Amazon reviews will quickly become meaningless, which is why I don't think it's a very good idea to start.

The film is valuable and grassroots promotion of it is certainly a good thing. I just wish it felt a little less like using well-meaning people to make money for Flemming and a little more like a cooperative community with the aim of spreading the Real News.

Brian Flemming responds:

Thanks for the kind words about the movie. I agree with some of your criticism of the street team, but I think your aim is off the mark with much of it.

1. AMAZON REVIEWS. There's an old phrase in publicity, "I don't care if the review is positive or negative, just put the title in the headline." As an indie filmmaker always struggling to get the word out against competing messages backed by tens of millions of dollars, I definitely subscribe to this philosophy. It was never the design of the movie's street team to load up Amazon with praise (frankly, a mix of angry one-star reviews and passionate five-star reviews would be better). It's no secret that authors and their publishers and friends stack the Amazon book reviews (as has been documented), but I don't wish to add to that clutter. I've never asked anyone to post nice things on Amazon about the soundtrack CD for *The God Who Wasn't There*, or to withhold negative statements (and I have not posted a review myself). Street team members are given a free (digital) copy of the soundtrack and encouraged to go to Amazon and post a review of the music—that's it. About 5% of them do. There's no incentive to make the review positive or negative. However, while I think the street team members' reviews of the soundtrack CD on Amazon are sincere, and no harm has been done, this particular sample does naturally skew positive—if you're on the street team, you probably like the film/soundtrack you've decided to back with your time. But then again, reviews are inherently biased—and fans tend to be more motivated than others in posting. Most reviews on Amazon for most media products are positive for that reason. I'll freely admit to sending people to Amazon—but my goal is battling obscurity, not battling negative opinion. And I certainly can't stop anyone from posting a negative review.
2. THE STREET TEAM ITSELF. A "street team" is a group of volunteer supporters who distribute flyers and stickers and otherwise spread the word about a band or film online and offline. You say, "It's sad when big corporations do this, but when independent political folks like Flemming do it, it becomes a little creepy." Here's where I think your aim is considerably off the mark. To be opposed to a street team is nearly tantamount to being opposed to the very idea of promoting indie artists. I believe promotion should be honest and ethical, but promotion itself is not an evil. And organizing promotion is not an evil. To eliminate street teams would be largely to give up and turn over the marketplace to those who have the money to promote via advertising and other expensive means. It would strengthen messages backed by money and weaken messages backed by passion. I think the street team for *The God Who Wasn't There* is a great example of passion being organized into action, and I'm proud of it. I give theatrical rights away for free—and then a group like SF Atheists holds a screening and earns upwards of \$1000 to help their extremely important efforts. Volunteers go to a website where grassroots action is made easier—and conversations all over the web get started over whether

Jesus really did exist, a very legitimate question that is nonetheless the third rail of mainstream-media conversations about Christianity. Street teams aren't "creepy," and this one in particular is doing some very real, verifiable good.

3. MONEY. You write that when I attacked Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bill O'Reilly via Fair Use Press, I "insisted the works were a form of political protest, but [Flemming] still charged money for the products. He did the same when he released portions of *Nothing So Strange* under a Creative Commons license. It's one thing to support free speech; it's another to try to make money off of other people's support for it." Really, I'm just shaking my head in wonder at this accusation. I have never made any profit whatsoever from any of my Fair Use Press e-books. The Schwarzenegger attack was given away, with a high-res "premium" edition sold at first for \$1 (both editions are free now and have been for about a year). I added a \$1 price to that specifically to demonstrate fair use—that I wasn't taking a "noncommercial" copout, so Schwarzenegger and his attorney couldn't claim that's why they didn't sue. That's what my activism through Fair Use Press is about—demonstrating the limits of fair use. I want people to look at what I do, see that I got away with it, and then do more of the same. The commercial marketplace—where messages like Bill O'Reilly's already live—is an important battlefield in this fight. Just because I fight in that space doesn't mean I'm making a profit from Fair Use Press. I don't, and it certainly isn't part of the plan (I spend far more on promotion and advertising than I take in). And my best-case scenario for *The God Who Wasn't There* is to break even on marketing expenses (production costs are already written off, gladly, as a loss). All of my indie-film work and free-culture activism operates in the red, subsidized by the Hollywood work-for-hire assignments I take that also pay my rent. I'm not, as you say, "using well-meaning people to make money." I'm putting in my own money and time to the same purpose as the people I'm working side-by-side with. The fact that we earn revenue to try to keep the project somewhat self-sustaining cannot reasonably be termed exploitation.

Criticism is a good thing, Aaron, and we free-culture activists of course do need to criticize each other where criticism is justified. And I certainly should be held publicly accountable for anything I publicly do. But in this case I really think you've gone overboard and made accusations that have little merit.

Aaron replies:

Thanks for responding. I can't say I'm *glad* to hear you don't expect to turn a profit on any of this, but it certainly allays any fears of exploitation.

But I feel like you missed my main point about the street team — the one I ended the article with: “I just wish it felt ... a little more like a cooperative community with the aim of spreading the Real News.” There’s nothing wrong with telling people about music or movies you like, or even putting up posters to promote them. Where it gets creepy is when this natural enthusiasm is co-opted and channeled into a structured, top-down sort of system. Now I’m not just expressing my opinions, I’m following orders so I can get goodies. That fundamentally changes things.

Maybe an analogy will help. My mom likes telling people about interesting things I’ve done. There’s nothing wrong with this — the people she talks to like knowing this stuff. But you have to admit it would be creepy if I started providing my mom with a list of my achievements and awarding her points every time she found a way to mention them. Mom begins to feel used, her friends begin to feel duped, and I look like a narcissist.

There’s no need to get rid of the promotion system, just scale it back a little. Provide a list of suggested actions, a forum where people can talk about what they’re doing, and then offer to mail a t-shirt or something to people who work hard.

You see, contrary to popular opinion — even in the free culture community, oddly enough — rewards are incredibly destructive. Study after study shows they actually *demotivate* people, encourage people to cheat and lie, and cause them to make stupid decisions about trade-offs. For an excellent book on the subject, see *Alfie Kohn’s Punished By Rewards*.

- [Official site](#)
- [Flemming’s post on independent distribution](#)

Stanford: Season Finale

June 4, 2005

[Original link](#)

June 3

Nobody likes being called to the principal's office. Even in high school when the principal was "cool" — I'd tell him school was harmful and should be abolished, he'd agree, and we'd talk about it — it still felt wrong. And it always felt worse when, as surprisingly often was the case, the powerful man in the big chair talked about how powerful you, the puny little pushed-around student, were.

I remember the time in 7th grade that the teacher told me to leave the room and fill out one of his "dispute resolution forms" — his method of classroom discipline. I resisted by filling out the form in an absurd manner, because the whole thing was just so degrading. Then the teacher complained that *I* was being condescending! (A few years later, after the 7th grade teacher had moved out to a cabin in the Pacific Northwest with my 6th grade teacher, he came back to school and seemed much cooler, so I don't think it was really his fault.)

*You sure weren't rich, didn't live in the city
Didn't whisper sweet nothings, never told me I'm pretty*

All this by way of saying I received a rather discomfiting feeling when [unnamed authority figure] sent me a cryptic note saying she wanted me to come see her. I asked her about what but she never replied. (She later explained that she meant to but it just got behind.)

Worried, I asked a few people about what [unnamed authority figure] did. "Have you committed any crimes recently?" asked one. "Not that I know of," I said. "Maybe I kill people in my sleep?" But how do I dispose of the bodies? The lake's already run dry! Another, always optimistic, insisted it must be a good thing. "They wouldn't have her deliver bad news. It can only be good." I wasn't buying it.

As I walked to the meeting, there was a different disposition. I heard a girl screaming her lungs out and then slapping her boyfriend, who had apparently cheated on her. The boyfriend was desperately penitent, insisting it was just an accident, not a pattern, and that he loved her.

*You cheated at cards, and lied when you hung out
in bars making time with those girls you called old pals*

None of this eased my discomfort, nor did the fact that I had a major assignment due in a couple hours. 90% of my grade in one class depended on what work I turned in today by 5pm and I hadn't really started on it. I tried to do it

last night but I couldn't bring myself to do it until I was too tired to make any progress. I wasn't sure I'd have any better luck this morning.

When I finally saw [unnamed authority figure] she was so happy that I couldn't stop myself from smiling. Maybe she was right — maybe it was good news. Then we sat down. "I wanted to talk to you about some of your behavior," she began. Oh, this wasn't going to be good.

*I cried when you left me,
now I'm wondering when you'll make it all up to me?*

She said she'd been tipped off by my IHUM TF, which was odd, since we'd just had a long talk a week ago or so and I thought we'd worked everything out. Not that there really was a whole lot to work out. Actually, that talk probably just made it worse.

But then she'd done her own research and begun telling me what she'd uncovered:

- She'd pulled my admissions applications and saw that I was really self-schooled, meaning I was probably "a bit more isolated or sheltered from your peers than might be typical."
- She checked with the Residence Dean at my dorm and found [I was too shy to ask someone for help moving a filing cabinet](#).
- She also heard (amazingly) that I'd [written some hurtful things](#) about a "young woman I was dating".
- The TF had said that I once blurted something out in class, which I don't really remember specifically but certainly seems plausible.
- The TF also claimed that once I had jumped out at her and said boo.
- The TF also said that I'd once said she went to a lower-class school and suggested I was trying to call her authority into question.

"It paints an interesting picture for me," she said. I laughed to myself. "Heh, it's just like one of those television season finales, you know, where the main characters get called before an authority figure who then proceeds to list everything they've done over the season, only it's all a little off and a little out-of-context." Like that *Seinfeld* finale, where everyone they'd ever met started to testify against them. (See how I self-consciously point out the clichés I'm in? Let it never be said that this blog is not post-modern!)

It certainly was an interesting picture. I was beginning to sound sort of autistic or something. "I feel like I've made a couple mistakes," I said, "but doesn't everyone? The difference is that mine are just a little more public and mine are the ones being scrutinized." If reality TV has taught us anything, it's that you can find something in anything, if you look hard enough.

*Don't I have the right to be over you yet?
I've tried pretending. I tried to forget.*

We kept talking — for a half-hour altogether — but every time I tried to tell her about myself it just kept sounding worse. The facts were all able to fit the frame.

“Well, what suggestions do you have?” I finally asked. “One strange thing about me is that I love hearing negative things about myself.” “You do?” she replied. “Yeah, I guess most people, when they receive nasty letters, they feel bad or something. But I love them — the nastier the better. the ones that are all obscentities just make my day.”

“Why?” she asked. “I don’t know,” I said and thought about it. “There’s this theory,” I said, “that’s very popular in our society that people have certain specific attributes, like personality traits. So some people are smart and other people are funny and that’s just how it is.”

“I don’t believe that. I think people are malleable. I think I’m malleable. So whe I hear something negative, I don’t think ‘oh no, I’m a bad person’, I think ‘well, that’s something I can work on.’” She didn’t seem convinced.

Well, she didn’t want to punish me or anything, she said, and she didn’t know me well enough to give any specific advice, but she suggested I talk to my friends (I tried to persuade her that I had some) and ask them about my “outbursts” and “empathy”.

*Though it's past three AM, I would still let you in
'cause I can't go on dreaming alone.*

I couldn’t find anything to take to lunch to read, which is generally a sign I’ll find someone to talk to. And sure enough I found one of those friends and sat down. “Do you think I have problems with empathy?” I asked him. “Uhhh, I don’t know,” he said. “Why?” I told him the story. “Heh, that’s pretty funny,” he said. “You got called to the principal’s office for hurting someone’s feelings.”

Afterwards, when my friend has left and I’m all alone, a hand grabs my shoulder. I spin around but I don’t recognize its owner. “Hey, Schwartz, I’m really sorry you didn’t win evil dictator last night,” he says. “Uh-huh,” I mumble. “I voted for you,” he says. “Oh. Thank you,” I say and walk away. After a few seconds I realize what he’s referring to — the dorm passed out surveys for things like “funniest guy” and so on and announced the results in a *Family Feud*-style gameshow last night. Maybe I have more friends than I think.

Sneak Peek

June 6, 2005

[Original link](#)

VOICEOVER: *Aaron Swartz: The Stanford Diaries* will return in September. Here's a sneak preview of what to expect next season.

KIEFER SUTHERLAND appears in a completely black room.

KIEFER: Hi, I'm Kiefer Sutherland. You might know me better as Aaron Swartz in *Aaron Swartz: The Stanford Diaries*. (beat) It's been an exciting year, culminating in a jam-packed season finale. But that's not all there is to the story. Next year, I again play Aaron Swartz in *Aaron Swartz: The Stanford Diaries*, but this time there's a whole lot more to the story.

AARON SWARTZ and UNSEEN TEACHER meet in a parking garage. Teacher stays in the shadows, face never revealed, although he or she is clearly wearing a trenchcoat.

AARON: Oh, hey. I just wanted to tell you I read that book you recommended.

TEACHER: Oh, good!

AARON: Well, I guess I'll see you next year.

As Aaron turns to head away the teacher GRABS him by the arm.

TEACHER: Wait, there's something I need to tell you.

AARON: Oh?

TEACHER: I read your last paper, Aaron. That wasn't appropriate.

AARON: What do you mean?

TEACHER: I think you know what I mean.

AARON: The assignment was to write about sex, the body, or reproduction. I wrote about sex.

TEACHER: Well, in the context of what you said to me, I had to take it to the sexual harrassment center. We just had a consult about it and it's going in your file, but they're not opening an investigation on you or anything. I'm sure you didn't mean it as harrassment but I had to take it to them just to be safe.

AARON: Oh. OK.

TEACHER: I didn't really have a choice, Aaron, given what you said. Don't worry, you're not in trouble or anything.

AARON: I said OK. Is there anything more you can tell me?

TEACHER: Well, it's confidential.

AARON: But it's about me! I waive my confidentiality rights.

KIEFER: Was the sexual harrassment claim responsible for the meeting with [unnamed authority figure]? Will this "file" open on Aaron cause later misunderstandings to be seen in a negative light, causing Aaron to be suspended or even expelled for the things he said, forcing him to turn around and hire the right-wing Foundation for Individual Rights in Education to sue Stanford University under California's Leonard Law which extends First Amendment protection to private universities? Who knows? I just read the scripts they give me.

The actual AARON SWARTZ marches out in front of Kiefer.

AARON: OK, that's enough. Hi, I'm Aaron Swartz, author of *Aaron Swartz: The Stanford Diaries*. Despite the 24 season finale and Deep Throat references I've chosen to use in this post, I'd just like to let folks out there know that this meeting actually did happen, although not in a parking garage.

KIEFER: Are we done here because, uh, I've got some people in my trunk I need to take care of.

AARON: Yeah, let me give you a hand with that.

Kiefer and Aaron walk off into the SUNSET that has just appeared in their solid black room.

SFP: Home, Sweet, Home

June 9, 2005

[Original link](#)

I started looking for an apartment [as soon as we headed out to Cambridge for an interview](#) but few things had been made available yet. Then [the server died](#) and I was distraught for a while. By the time I started looking again, few things were available and in the past few weeks things have gotten increasingly desperate.

We went through craigslist and made up a list of options, but each one seemed to fall apart upon investigation. Occasionally, especially as deadlines moved closer, I would stumble across an amazing deal and throw all of my hope into it, convincing myself that we'd get it and all would work out fine. These deals repeatedly collapsed, eventually leaving me where I was this morning: at Stanford, without an apartment or a plane ticket, and getting kicked out the next morning.

My dad, thankfully, was at MIT this week and he took some time to go down to the housing office and investigate their options. He discovered that it was possible to get an MIT dorm room and pay by the night and suggested I stay there while I figured out a more long-term place to stay.

I was not looking forward to move out of one dorm room just to move into another, but then he found that MIT's [beautiful Simmons Hall](#) (aka the bubble wrap building — Sean insists “it looks like a Tetris reject”) was available to stay in. I'd always admired photos of Simmons Hall, thought of trying to find an excuse to visit, even considered going to MIT because of it (until I realized that there was little chance I'd get to stay there). And now I was getting to stay there — apparently we might even be able to stay there for the whole summer.

So I signed up for a few nights — got an amazingly low room rate — and bought a plane ticket for tomorrow morning — also surprisingly cheap and perfect (I thought I'd have to leave out of some obscure airport and stop in some obscure hub, but it's direct from SF!). Procrastination really worked out this time, it seems. Too bad I didn't get this kind of peace of mind earlier; then I could have spent the week on the town! (Although I did have some fun [Segwaying with Seth](#) and going to dinner with some of Apple's Safari team...)

Now I just need to finish packing.

Stanford/SFP: Leaving on a Jet Plane

June 11, 2005

[Original link](#)

It's always odd how extraordinary things are just like their ordinary counterparts. Stanford is just like a school, only wealthier. Leaving home is just like going on vacation, only longer. And packing your dorm is just like packing up your hotel room, only bigger.

Tonight the campus is so desolate: people missing, cars missing. Even the room is beginning to seem empty, although the hallways are filled with crud. I'm the last one left in our room of four people. With all my schoolwork done, it's surprisingly lonely. I wander down to talk to other people packing.

Goodbye Caroline (set of 3)

[image links broken]

As I wait outside with my bags the next morning, kids slowly filter out and sit on the top of the picnic table, just like the cool kids do in television shows to indicate coolness. I sit away in the shade on the chair. Eventually my ride shows up and the group of kids waves goodbye. I wonder how many of them I'll see again.

Bags are heavy. It's a good thing I didn't take public transportation — there's no way I would have made it. Not to mention the fact that when I get here a voice over the speakers says that public transportation is currently out. I wait in line for a long time at the curb until I get to the front and they tell me they can't check my bags anymore. Then I spend a while running around looking for a cart machine that will take my money, then I take the cart over to another long line and pay a lot of money to take my bags on the plane. Good thing I'm early. I still have two heavy bags to carry all the way to the terminal, unfortunately. Somehow I survive without any major damage.

On the plane I read a long book which inspires me to write a long memoir.

I then carry the heavy bags down to the baggage claim, buy another cart, grab the bags off the conveyor belt, take them to the cab stand and ask the cab driver to go to MIT. He doesn't know where Simmons Hall is so he tells me to stop him when we get close. I scan the windows, seeing nothing but empty fields and

abandoned warehouses when BOOM! this huge building pops up, much larger than it seems in pictures. “That’s it!” I say and the cabdriver backs up. He places my stuff on the curb as I pay him and speeds off.

Inside an alienated student mans the desk, her lowered eyes not-so-subtly implying that she really doesn’t want to talk to me. I tell her I’m checking in. ‘Oh,’ she says in a dry monotone, ‘you’re that guy. I thought you’d be older.’ She gives me a key and asks me to fill out a confusing form, continually finding spots I haven’t filled out. ‘No, fill out everything — you left the box that says “# of children” blank.’ While I’m doing this some police come in and ask how to get to tower B, she points them to the elevator at the end of the hall.

Finally I finish filling out the form and ask her how to get to my room. She looks it up and concludes it’s in tower B, take the elevator at the end of the hall. I decide to go on an exploratory mission with just one bag to find my room before carrying everything down. It’s a good thing I did since the elevator is surrounded by three cops. In front of them, the elevator door is open revealing a whole group of kids in an elevator stuck halfway between floors. The kids seem resigned to their situation and are now sitting on the floor playing games. ‘I don’t trust these f—ing elevators,’ says one cop. ‘No way, me neither,’ answers another. I decide to back away to give them some space.

After a short rest I decide to try the other elevator and it turns out it’s much closer, so I laboriously drag my bags up and thru using it. On the way to my room there is a picture window onto a deck with some sort of yin-yang sculpture. The kids have filled it up with water and place rubber duckies into it. Unfortunately, getting onto the deck requires a keycard, which I don’t have.

Simmons Hall is indeed pretty, if a little warm. (Apparently the computer lab is the only air conditioned room.) Meeting rooms of various sorts are scattered throughout the place, each fitted with a whiteboard and prints from Josef Albers’s *Interaction of Color*.

Oddly, each print is also accompanied by a note with a number to call with “questions and concerns” about the artwork. (I imagine the MIT student who calls and says “I have a concern about print #49. Albers clearly intended to use a 3,4,5 sequence but on the last square here it’s printed as 3,4,6. Do you think you could send someone to take care of this?”)

There are also a series of kitchens and TV rooms, each differently shaped and furnished. Each TV room has a DVD player, VCR, and stairs up to the next floor where, in a different location, there is another room with a different shape and furnishings.

The floor plans of the building are printed by the elevator (for use in case of fire, I guess) and they’re rather entertaining. They look just like normal floor plans — squares and boxes with symbolic codes — except it’s apparently been hit by

a meteor, since there's a big squiggly-shaped hole right in the middle where the TV room is.

In one of the meeting rooms I found a [large box](#) someone had built out of wood, the inside covered in foam padding. Inside was a strange-looking device, a switch, and a bunch of wires. Outside was a light (currently off) that said "DIRECT FROM THE FUTURE". I tried figuring out what the box was, with little success. The whole thing felt like a puzzle out of *Myst* or something.

The one thing I couldn't find, however, was a bathroom on my floor. I found a whole series of locked rooms with interesting labels — Counseling, Student Government, Mail, Music, and my personal favorite (if only because it was the one with no lock) Meditation — but no bathroom. Finally I tried to open the unmarked door next to my room and aha! a bathroom. Nice location, too. The only problem is it doesn't have lock.

The next day as I walk outside I'm hit in the face by Cambridge's dreadful weather. Unbearably snowy in the winter, it's unbearably hot and muggy in the summer. I guess it wasn't just because I was carrying bags yesterday that I was sweating. I walk the superblock to the student center where I get some food and buy a fan for my room. It makes things a little better but it's still pretty terrible.

Anyone in Cambridge got an air conditioner I could borrow? Maybe I should find someplace to buy one. **UPDATE:** The good folks at Y Combinator brought me over an air conditioner which we jammed into one of the windows and now it's awesome. *Thanks!*

Finally, if anyone nearby wants to visit, just drop me an email.

SFP: First Contact

June 15, 2005

[Original link](#)

Most of what a startup — or at least this startup — is about is solving various technical problems, fixing bugs, getting stuff done. At its worst, this stuff is boring to do. And even at its best it's hard to describe and not much fun to hear. On the plane here I wrote a memoir about my time with the W3C and what was striking was not just that I omitted all the technical stuff from the story but that I don't even remember the technical stuff. People stuff, on the other hand...

So I've been holed up by myself in this elegant MIT dorm room. ([more photos](#) ([my favorite](#))) Jessica (formerly 4 of 4 from Y Combinator, the group that's

funding the startup I'm working on) stopped by to drop off a lifesaving air conditioner and we chatted for a bit. I get out once or twice a day to go get food at someplace nearby. And at nights I sleep. But most of the time I just work.

Y Combinator has weekly meetings where all the startups go over to their offices for dinner. I missed last week's because I didn't have a dorm and so when I get there I don't recognize anyone. I sort of wander around alone trying not to look too stupid, which is what I normally do at parties anyway.

At some point we sit down at a long table with benches that they've placed in the room, which looks even nicer than before, with elegantly placed lights and abstract art on the walls. During some pre-dinner conversation someone makes a pun. "You know, I read somewhere that bad puns are highly correlated with IQ," Paul says. "I find that hard to believe," responds a founder, "I know some people who make lots of puns and, well..." "Correlations aren't perfect," responds another. "And IQ isn't necessarily correlated with intelligence," comments Paul. I was really glad to see he'd [backed off this claim](#). (I was thinking about chiming in but I was at the very edge of the table and planning to save my disagreements until after the money is in the bank.)

They plan to get a guest speaker each dinner; this week it was a patent attorney, who admitted that patents were expensive and not very useful to a startup he suggested (and cited a study that argued) they would be useful later on. He gave us all packets and branded cell phone holders but I forgot to take mine home.

Afterwards there was more talking. One group of founders described their history. "Well, we haven't really done any legitimate businesses before," they said. "What illegitimate businesses have you done?" I asked. "Oh, adult entertainment, student term papers — nothing illegal but not the sort of things you want to show to VCs!"

I got to talk to rtm which was really wonderful and at some point I found myself in a conversation with Paul and a couple other people. Paul asked me if I could send him a copy of [the infamous paper](#) and another person chimed in 'oh you're definitely sending me a copy.' "Wait, you know about this?" asked Paul. "You don't?" replied the third person. It turned out everyone there had read my blog. "Oh," said Paul, "I only started reading it when it started mentioning *me*!"

Not long afterward a group of people behind me pulled me away and introduced themselves. "And who are you?" they asked. Paul, from behind me, said "this is *Aaron Swartz*; you don't know who *Aaron Swartz* is? He co-authored RSS!" "Oh," said the kid, "well then you made me quite a bit of money!"

At some point Jessica pulled me aside to go over the legal paperwork of which there is quite a bit.

A group of Russian kids offered to drive me home in their van. "We're actually agents from the KGB," they explained, laughing, in their thick Russian accents,

‘we were sent here to spy on you. We bought a van because we were told all Americans drive vans. We try to blend in.’ They certainly made the most of it, swerving back and forth across the street and making crazy turns. Amazingly, though, we managed to find my place and they dropped me off.

SFP: Dinner with Dan

June 16, 2005

[Original link](#)

One of the many nice things about living at MIT is that Stuff Happens Here. Just down the street, for example, is the Frank Gehry-designed Stata Center ([photos](#) ([my favorite](#))) which hosts, among many other things, the MIT Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory (LCS+AI Lab=CSAIL), the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), Noam Chomsky, and so on.

The W3C happens to be hosting their [Technical Architecture Group](#) meeting, where the Web's biggest minds come together to argue about such pressing issues as whether a URL can be said to refer to a physical object, like a truck. Dan Connolly, who might be considered the #2 guy at the W3C (after Tim Berners-Lee, the Web's inventor, of course), saw that I was in Cambridge and invited me to come over this evening.

When I got there he introduced me to fellow TAG members Norm Walsh (who some readers may know as the DocBook guy) and Henry Thompson (author of xsv) and we all headed to a pool hall. Tired from a long day arguing about such weighty subjects, they tried to avoid talking about them, which ended up meaning that they mostly talked about pool. I'd never played pool before but in two games I was able to make one or two half-way decent shots. I need to work on doing all the various things at once.

Dan Connolly is very dismissive of my swearing off of competitive games. "Oh, pool isn't pool a competitive game?" he sneered to me in email. (To be honest, playing was sort of a breach.) And when I described the application process he grumbled about it sounding competitive. (It wasn't a game, though!) I assume it's because Dan's a social conservative. While we were walking there someone suggested a union picket line might just be an attempt to extort money and on the way back there were grumbles about people who didn't know well enough to pay off credit card debts. (Why isn't this taught in school? they wondered.)

After pool, we headed over to a restaurant just next door and ordered food. Sitting in the little booth, as we talked about friends and food, I realized how absurdly detailed TAG problems really are. Did Ma Bell have a department that sat and thought about the meaning of a phone number? A team to come up with recommendations about the uses of a phone? Surely this is the only technology in history to have such philosophical problems.

As we walked into town, Dan told us excitedly about the weekly CSAIL hockey game, which I'd never heard of before. Then we parted ways and I headed home and called my mom.

SFP: Fire Alarm

June 16, 2005

[Original link](#)

One of the hazards of dorm life is that fire alarms are always going off. At Stanford, here's how it went the three or four times it happened last year: an alarm would go off, I wouldn't hear it because I was in my room with my headphones on or asleep, eventually I'd notice or get woken up, I'd throw on my pants and walk downstairs and outside, where a group of kids would accumulate. After what seemed like an interminable wait in the shivering cold, a fire truck would show up, the firemen would walk inside and, after a couple minutes, walk out again. Then everybody would go back into the building even though nothing was actually explained.

As it turns out, it worked much the same way here at MIT, except they have a new high tech talking fire alarm in every room to recite a paragraph of instructions — twice — before telling you to leave the building. When I got outside, there were much fewer people (it is summer after all) but and the fire trucks showed up much more quickly. And there were two of them! And after that, some policemen in their blue uniforms. And then, inexplicably, a gray MIT-logo van pulled up and a bunch of fat guys in suspenders (but no uniform) got out and went inside.

But still, no explanation.

The Immorality of Freakonomics

June 17, 2005

[Original link](#)

As the hype around the book *Freakonomics* reaches absurd proportions (now an “international bestseller”, the authors have been signed for a monthly column in the *New York Times Magazine*), I think it’s time to discuss some of the downsides that I mostly left out of my main review. The most important of which is that economist Stephen Levitt simply does not appear to care — or even notice — if his work involves doing evil things.

The 1960s, as is well-known, had a major civilizing effect on all areas of American life. Less well-known, however, was the immediate pushback from the powerful centers of society. The process involved a great number of things, notably the network of right-wing think tanks I’ve written about elsewhere, but in the field of education it led to a crackdown on “those institutions which have played the major role in the indoctrination of the young”, as a contemporary report (*The Crisis of Democracy*) put it.

The indoctrination centers (notably schools) weren’t doing their job properly and so a back-to-basics approach with more rote memorization of meaningless facts and less critical thinking and intellectual development was needed. This was mainly done under the guise of “accountability”, for both students and teachers. Standardized tests, you see, would see how well students had memorized certain pointless facts and students would not be allowed to deviate from their assigned numbers. Teachers too would have their jobs depend on the test scores their students got. Teachers who decided to buck the system and actually have their students learn something worthwhile would get demoted or even fired.

Not surprisingly, as always happens when you make people’s lives depend on an artificial test, teachers begun cheating. And it is here that Professor Levitt enters the story. He excitedly signed up with the Chicago Public School system to try to build a system that would catch cheating teachers. Levitt and his co-author write excitedly about this system and the clever patterns it discovers in the data, but mostly ignore the question of whether helping to get these teachers fired is a good idea. Apparently even rogue economists jump when the government asks them to.

Levitt has a few arguments — teachers were setting students up to fail in the higher grade they would be advanced to — but these are tacked on as afterthoughts. Levitt never stops to ask whether contributing to the indoctrination of the young or getting teachers fired might not be an acceptable area of work, despite being an economist, he never weighs any benefits or even considers the costs.

Levitt, by all appearances, was not, like some of his colleagues, a self-conscious participant in this regressive game. He was just a rube who got taken in. But surely preventing others from the same fate would be a more valuable contribution.

The Intentionality of Evil

June 23, 2005

[Original link](#)

[[English](#) | [Deutsch](#)]

As children we're fed a steady diet of comic books (and now, movies based off of them) in which brave heroes save the planet from evil people. It's become practically conventional wisdom that such stories wrongly make the line between good and evil too clear — the world is more nuanced than that, we're told — but this isn't actually the problem with these stories. The problem is that the villains *know* they're evil.

And people really grow up thinking things work this way: evil people intentionally do evil things. But this just doesn't happen. Nobody thinks they're doing evil — maybe because it's just impossible to be intentionally evil, maybe because it's easier and more effective to convince yourself you're good — but every major villain had some justification to explain why what they were doing was good. *Everybody* thinks they're good.

And if that's the case, then intentionality doesn't really matter. It's no defense to say (to take a recently famous example) that New York bankers were just doing their jobs, convinced that they were helping the poor or something, because everybody thinks they're just doing their jobs; Eichmann thought he was just doing his job.

Eichmann, of course, is the right example because it was Hannah Arendt's book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* that is famously cited for this thesis. Eichmann, like almost all terrorists and killers, was by our standards a perfectly normal and healthy guy doing what he thought were perfectly reasonable things.

And if that normal guy could do it, so could we. And while we could argue who's worse — them or us — it's a pointless game since it's *our* actions that we're responsible for. And looking around, there's no shortage of monstrous crimes that we've committed.

So the next time you mention one to someone and they reply “yes, but we did with a good intent” explain to them that's no defense; the only people who don't are characters in comic books.

Of Washington And Worcester

July 3, 2005

[Original link](#)

Stanford, California

It's June 19. I'm still in school, in fact, I'm just dashing out of class into the cab waiting outside. The Ford Foundation is paying for a trip to Washington, DC for a meeting about Free Culture. I was initially hesitant about going to the meeting and in fact getting there has been quite a bit of a hassle — here I am at the airport and they claim they don't have my tickets — but I eventually manage to dash onto the plane just in time to get to DC late that night, where I take a shuttle to my hotel.

The next day I head out to get lunch and visit my friend Derek Willis who has very kindly offered to give me a tour of his employer, the *Washington Post*. But as I head out the door I hear a voice call from behind me. "Aaron?" it asks. I spin around and there on the couch, gleaming like a diamond among the hotel's tacky chandeliers and mirrors, sit three young kids — two guys and a girl — wearing stylish-yet-indie clothes and holding skateboards. 'Hey,' says the voice, 'it's Holmes. From Downhill Battle. These are my partners, Nick and Tiffiniy.'

Cambridge, Massachusetts — Present Day

"so, are you coming here? i really hope you will," writes Tiffiniy. "ok, i'll come — let me check the trains," I write back. Downhill Battle is headquartered in nearby Worcester, an hour away on the train. I agree to come by the next day, when I wake up early and pack a book and an umbrella and head west to Worcester.

I arrive at the elegant train station and head downstairs and through a ballroom being set up with tables. Outside I look around through the sea of cabs and cars and once again hear a voice call my name. This time it's Nick and I dodge across the street to meet him. 'Hey!' he says, embracing me in a hug. 'Welcome to Worcester.'

Washington, D.C.

The three of them, as it turns out, are just checking in. Having the keys made is taking forever, for some reason. I wait with them and follow them up to

their room where they invite me to lunch. We look for places to eat, eventually deciding on a Chinese place down the street. Outside, it's raining slightly and none of us have umbrellas. "Let's hoof it!" shouts Holmes as he takes off running. We all follow in close pursuit: four young kids, running like maniacs in the rain.

Worcester, Massachusetts

'So this is Worcester,' Nick says, as we drive past a large abandoned outlet mall on one side and a big gray convention center on the other. Nick drives me over to Tiffiniy's place, which she shares with Holmes's girlfriend, who let us in. We chat quietly until all of the sudden a noise comes running up the stairs, screaming into the room — Tiffiniy, wide-eyed, coming in and hugging me. 'You're here! You're here!' she shouts.

Tired, I smile a little weakly.

Washington, D.C.

We chat about technology and globalization — while they assure me they agree with my politics, they can't help but wonder whether there are benefits to globalization. (My new strategy for discussing globalization, which I haven't actually gotten a chance to employ, is to just repeat back whatever people tell me except replace globalization with colonialism.)

I then head uptown to the *Washington Post*. Derek comes down to meet me and sign me in. I notice that on the guestbook the last person to sign someone in was political reporter Dana Milbank. Derek takes me up to the *Post* newsroom, which looks just like it did in *All The President's Men* (not surprisingly because, Derek comments, the movie was filmed here): a vast sea of gray cubicles with men in suits walking from one place to another, surrounded by reams of paper (and now, of course, computer terminals).

Derek, formerly a Congressional reporter, now works as the *Post*'s research database editor, a job which has always struck a political geek like me as a rather sexy position. As we walk to his area of the newsroom, he points out the various other parts ('oh, there's Howard Kurtz,' he says, 'that guy is always working!'). He introduces me to his co-workers, one of whom tells me the most amazing story about facing down a powerful politician with a pile of data he'd found by crunching the numbers in his database. He points to a picture man being frog-marched which sits above his computer. 'End result was, this guy went to jail,' he explains. I can't help myself from smiling widely — it almost gets rid of by cynicism about journalism.

[image not found] Holmes (L) and Nick of Downhill Battle
photo: William Huber/Mother Jones

Holmes and Nick first met going to high school in Worcester. They soon moved to a Massachusetts math and science magnet school at a local university, where they met Tiffiniy Cheng and others. The group split up to go to college but ever since then they've slowly been reassembling, living cheaply in Worcester and spending their time fighting the abuse of copyright law.

Their organization, Downhill Battle, first appeared on the Internet scene with [iTunes iSbogus](#), a vicious parody of the website for Apple's newly-launched iTunes Music Store. At a time when most copyright activists were painstakingly careful to insist they opposed downloading copyrighted music and arguing that the music industry should find a way to make downloading music legal, the website's opposition to one of the first moves in this direction and its full-throated support of file sharing software was nothing less than shocking. Here was someone not just saying what all the kids were thinking, they were actually providing a pretty careful intellectual justification for it. "iTunes is just a shiny new facade for the ugly, exploitative system that has managed music for the past 50 years," they wrote.

Downhill Battle continued to grow, launching sites like [What A Crappy Present.com](#) (humorously warning parents not to buy CDs), [Coal for Christmas](#), and [Grey Tuesday](#). And with the help of another high school friend, programmer Nick Nassar, they begun developing software-based websites like [Blog Torrent](#), designed to make sharing files through BitTorrent as easy as posting to a blog.

With little more than a computer in the attic of Nick's parents' house, they became a major force in the Internet copyright debate. Cory Doctorow lavished praise on their youthful humor and energy ("one of the best, most effective group of copyfighters on the net, fast turning into a MoveOn for the P2P wars," [he once called them](#), "my favorite gang of take-no-prisoners copyfighters") and Larry Lessig begun denouncing their "extremism" (the anti-copyright analog, he argued, of those who think everything should be copyrighted forever) in speeches, positioning himself as a centrist between such extremists.

And Downhill Battle continued to grow, launching two more non-profits — the Participatory Politics Foundation, which develops the kind of political technology hacks in a way I once dreamed of doing myself (current projects include [a Slashdot-style news site for politics](#) and [a website for tracking current congressional legislation](#)), and the Participatory Culture Foundation, which is [developing a Internet TV platform](#) which will let anyone start their own television network (delivered over BitTorrent) which can be easily downloaded from a GUI player (Al Gore's cable channel and the SEIU, among others, have already signed on to provide content).

With the non-profits came actual funding — up to then, the thing was funded by meager merchandise sales, savings, and living cheaply (including living out of their parents' houses and buying clothes from the Salvation Army) — and stuff that seemed more like actual work: giving presentations to funders, calling people to invite them to provide content for the TV platform, and so on. No more dashing off web pages attacking major media corporations, now it's a long slog toward shipping, all under the guise of professionalism. But it's not like they've started wearing suits or anything...

(And now they want *you* to [join them](#)! What a sweet job that would be...)

Worcester, Massachusetts

Tiffiniy's friend is also visiting from Vermont this weekend and the Tiffiniy decides to take us all on a little tour of Worcester. Worcester is an odd city. It's an hour away from Boston, yet it looks just like part of the city, not a suburb. But despite looking like a city — blocks and blocks of retail and business and things — the streets are completely empty. And while it contains several colleges, it doesn't feel at all like a college town. And — and maybe this last part is just the Downhill Battle guys — but everything looks like it's from the 70s.

Tiffiniy's apartment, for example, has old draped couches and tables, sinks and stoves — even [the new books](#) have retro covers. And the first place Tiffiniy took us was an old shopping mall where they considered buying office space (they needed a place to invite bands, they claim) and the whole thing looks run-down and wooden. Then we head to a hot El Salvadoran restaurant that similarly seems like a throwback. And, of course, all of them dress in retro clothes.

At the restaurant, Holmes shows up on his skateboard (also giving me a hug) and getting really into the soccer match playing on the TV. Holmes's girlfriend mentions she's getting a tattoo of a Jimmy Corrigan bird on her arm (Holmes's sister, I noticed, has the Tristero logo) and Holmes asks me if I've read Jimmy Corrigan. 'No,' I reply. 'Oh, you have to,' he insists. I say I want to, that I've read some of Chris Ware's other stuff and I really enjoyed it — in fact, I saw him do the most amazing thing with Ira Glass. The whole table groans (with the except of Tiffiniy's friend, the other visitor). 'Ira Glass is a such a jerk!' they insist and I get into a long argument about Ira Glass, who I actually really like, but they argue saps all political meaning out of life.

'The whole point of Ira Glass,' Holmes explains, 'is so that some yuppie sitting in their car can listen to some sappy story about a girl who lost their dog and think that now they've experienced what it really means to live in America. The show makes no distinction between whatsoever between whatever little yuppie bullshit their average listener has to put up with and the real societal problems that face America. Whether they're talking about silly kid or about gun control, it's the same stupid background music, the same smarmy tone.'

Washington, D.C.

American University is hosting the Free Culture conference (they're the ones with the Ford Foundation funding) and they're ferrying us all from the hotel to the campus in a series of cabs. Inside an innocuous-looking building at the center of the AU campus, they've taken out a whole room and done it all up with fancy lighting and real caterers.

I try to get around and chat. Colin Mutchler, an artist and activist who is hosting the discussion, made waves the past year with his [Free Culture Tour](#) in which he traveled the country performing on the subject of copyright law and things like Creative Commons. He repeats the presentation for us (it includes, I was later told, a photo of me wearing a CC shirt to represent Creative Commons — I noticed the CC logo but somehow missed the fact that it was me wearing it!) and it's amazing. For some reason, I find spoken word incredibly powerful in a real, visceral way.

Afterwards, the apparently famed [DJ Rekha](#) took over and the Downhill Battle people cleared out some space and started dancing away, eventually drawing others in to join them. I tried to but couldn't shake my self-consciousness.

Worcester, Massachusetts

Back at Tiffiniy's apartment, Holmes is carrying his girlfriend, who is not feeling well, inside. Tiffiniy is hanging out with her visiting friend and so I head with Nick to a place he calls "the collective", which sounds interesting enough for me to get in the car without asking further questions. The collective's full name, as it turns out, is "Collective á Go-Go" and Nick explains that while his friend Jake is on tour with his band, he's staying in Jake's room there.

As we drive Worcester becomes increasingly less city-like, its tall blocks fading into strip malls and then disappearing altogether, leaving houses surrounded by trees. Eventually we pull into the drive way of one especially large house and cut the engine. As I step out, the first thing that hits me is the overwhelming silence. The place is beautiful, tucked into luscious green woods.

The house tries to be mostly self-sufficient. Water is taken from a nearby reservoir but is heated by hand over a stove powered by firewood which they cut to size themselves (the wood itself comes from a tree removal service). In lieu of bathrooms, they run their own composting process. They have a garden where they grow some food, the rest is bought from local organic farms. Chores (of which there are a lot, Nick says) are shared equally.

In fact, we're here now to help chop firewood. Nick tries to show me how to chop the wood down to size by hand with a thing that looks like an axe (but

blunter, Nick says). As you might expect, I'm terrible at it. We eventually pull out the heavy duty wood-cutting machine, in which a hydraulic piston pushes the wood through the axe blade. Even this is something of a challenge, since the wood has a tendency to try to jump up and get stuck and other such things.

Washington, D.C.

It's surprising how few people I know at this party. People keep having to explain other people to me.

Worcester, Massachusetts

After chopping wood, Nick shows me around the collective. The garage houses a full silk screening system, which is where they make the Downhill Battle tees. Jake used to be in charge and then Holmes's girlfriend, who used to live here, begun helping out. Jake calls on the phone and Nick talks to him for a bit, asking how the tour is going.

Inside, Nick introduces me to some of the other collective members and they talk a bit more about Jake. And then, a thought hits me. 'This isn't Jake Berendes, is it?' I say. Nick looks taken aback. 'You know Jake Berendes?' 'Well, I know of him.' 'How?' 'My friend Leonard Richardson is always making jo—" 'Oh, you know Leonard! Wow, that's incredible.' The fact that I knew of Jake Berendes quickly became the most interesting thing about me and Nick eagerly told everyone.

'Indeed,' I said, 'sometimes Leonard needs to [assure people that Jake is a real person!](#)' 'Jake doesn't sound like a real person?' laughs a collective member with an air that suggests sometimes Jake can be all-too-real. 'Not the way Leonard tells it,' I reply.

[Aside: To discuss Jake Berendes would not only be going far beyond my area of knowledge but also to delve into a strange world of [magical realism](#), [amateur music](#), [nested in-jokes](#), [Repetitive Electronic Music](#), and [giant squid](#). Not that that's a bad thing.]

Nick takes me up to Jake's room. "Jake is the most creative person I know," Nick says. Every day he writes [a weblog entry](#) and [makes a stuffed animal](#), he writes numerous songs, draws, makes posters, puts together zines, and on and on. It is truly incredible. Nick gives me a CD to take home.

Washington, D.C.

The university kicks us out at what seems like an unreasonably early hour and we head outside to wait in the cold for the cabs that are supposed to take us back to our hotel. Nobody shows up for what seems like forever until a stationwagon finally arrives. Desperate, we decide to all pile in; the Downhill Battle people and me all lying together in the trunk. Someone snaps a photo. “No rich metadata!” Holmes cries. ‘You can post it but I don’t want it to be found by searching for my name.’

We realize, piled into the trunk of a cabbie’s stationwagon, that the night is still young. We decide to ask the cabbie to drop us uptown near some bars. I ask Holmes if they’re sure they want me along, but Holmes is nothing if not accommodating and thinks we’ll be able to make it work out. When the cabbie drops us off, Holmes stops someone on the street and asks him if he can recommend any bars I might be able to sneak into. ‘Not a chance!’ says the guy.

Undeterred, we head to the first bar we spot. One of the Battlers has a recently-expired ID whose photo looks a decent amount like me and I give it to the bouncer. He looks at it for a second and then lets me in. The actual battler holds back for a while and enters with the real ID soon after.

It’s my first time in a bar and, like most such firsts, it is inevitably disappointing. It looks much like any other restaurant. It’s quite stylish, with globe lights and fake branches as plants. The waitress takes some orders and the music pounds. We sit in a booth and chat with our neighbors.

I first met Holmes at [a party hosted by Zack Rosen](#) months ago. Zack, who looked so at home when he was at a party...well, at home, now looks sort of out-of-place, like I often feel at parties. Unfortunately he’s too far to talk to.

Worcester, Massachusetts

Back at Tiffiniy’s apartment, they’re inflating a new raft. We all take turns getting lightheaded on hyperventilating over plastic fumes. We throw the raft on top of the car, each grabbing a side, and drive to the top of a hill overseeing a lake. Nick throws the raft onto the hill and we take turns sliding it down (it’s not a very steep hill). We throw the raft into the mud surrounding the lake. For a moment it looks like I’m going to go with Tiffiniy’s friend, but this mistake is quickly rectified and I hang back with Tiffiniy until its our turn.

The sun is setting and the lake and trees are all drawn in pale blues and greens. The lake is like a shimmering mirror, the yellow raft hanging in the middle. When its our turn Tiffiniy goes in first and I go in after but end up slipping in the mud, falling on top of her, getting water in the boat, and getting myself all swampy. We embark anyway, using brooms brought from the apartment as paddles. The mood is slightly ruined, as are my clothes.

Washington, D.C.

The law school graduate fighting medicine patents is rather obviously hitting on Nick. ‘*Tell me your dreams*’, she says lusciously. ‘Well, uh,’ Nick replies, stiff and nervous, ‘our group tries to fight, uh, the expansion of, uh, copyright law by—’. ‘No’, she interrupts. ‘*Not the group’s dreams — your dreams*.’ ‘Oh. Well, uh.’

We’ve left the bar and are now walking the streets in search of dancing, although we can’t quite seem to remember the name of the place we’re heading for. Captain something, perhaps? Oh, there it is. We try to pull off the ID trick again, but we’re foiled by the \$5 cover charge. “Five dollars!” someone exclaims. We head back to regroup. Law school girl heads in to see if she can pull out a friend.

Her friend is a shortish snobbish fellow, with a manner that was the subject of much derision but which is rather hard to describe. ‘Oh, boy, there’s sure a lot of you. Well, uh, I could probably get you and you in — who wants to actually get in? — yeah, you and you.’ He looks at me. ‘Sorry buddy, but there’s no way I’m gettin’ you in.’ Holmes decides that maybe he doesn’t want in and we head home, joking about what a jerk he was. ‘Please, you could get in,’ he assures me.

Worcester, Massachusetts

Back at Tiffiniy’s apartment, they’re cooking up some dinner. I’ve taken off some of my more swampy clothes, borrowing some of Tiffiniy’s pants. Afterwards, we make plans to head over to a swimsuit-themed party. They call up their friend programmer, who I will call Sam, and invite him to come over. When Sam arrives, Nick suggests we discuss RSS, a prospect which Sam is not particularly enthusiastic about (and, to be honest, neither am I).

We apparently get to the swimsuit party a little too early, since nobody has really arrived yet. We stand in a circle and talk for a bit with the lights on and then mill about for a little while. Topics for conversation are not particularly forthcoming. Sam tries to spark a new one: ‘I spent the day rereading *Ender’s Game*,’ he suggests. This sounds rather awkwardly geeky, but I can’t help but chime in: ‘Oh, I did that once too! Just sat started looking at it and before I knew it I’d reread the whole thing.’ ‘What’s *Ender’s Game*?’ asks one of the girls. We’re apparently the only two who know.

Sam is clearly socially awkward so it doesn’t surprise me too much when a little later he announces that he’s heading home. But it does surprise the Downhill Battle folks. Word spreads that apparently Sam was asked to leave, which

strikes me as a little much. I mean, he obviously wasn't a party person, but to throw him out?

It turns out that things are much stranger than that. In fact, Sam's ex-girlfriend who broke up with Sam after cheating on him, is coming over soon and apparently they don't think he should be around for it. Holmes thinks this is monumentally unfair and, he later tells us, he seeks out the girl who asked Sam to leave and gets in her face. 'Maybe next time you could tell me in advance who I can and can't bring to your parties,' he tells her.

'I've been watching the OC a lot,' he later explains, 'and on that show if someone has a beef with someone else they just go right there and tell them. The Worcester scene's too small for people to be having beefs like this; it's noxious. We just need to get this all out into the open. We could have a Worcester beef wiki. You know, you've got to write up everybody you've got a beef with.'

So at the party, he just kept staying on the girl, asking her why Sam couldn't stay and what the problem is and she repeatedly declined to comment. 'They're never going to invite you back,' someone comments. 'Oh, I knew that,' Holmes says. 'I don't care. I don't want to go back if that's how they're going to be.'

Washington, D.C.

The Ford Foundation, foolishly, did not bring us all out here simply to hang out and party. Instead, they've provided what I assume is the standard summit garb: a long white U-shaped conference table with a projector at one end along which we can type on our laptops while sharing insights. Such sessions are certainly popular, but I'm not sure how effective they (as opposed to the discussions outside them) really are.

The last major one I went to was a alternative [music] compensation system (ACS) meeting hosted by Harvard Law's Terry Fisher. I took copious notes of the discussion, which Terry suggested I not post on my blog, but those don't seem to have been worth anything and instead what I remember is being snowed into the Sheraton Commander with Ed Felten and Ernest Miller and friends.

One problem is that such events have rather unclear goals, like "fostering discussion". One can certainly have a conversation — two, maybe even three or four, people talking to each other — and one can have many such conversations. But one cannot have conversations involving groups of twenty or thirty people, especially when the topic is boring and the people are prone to speeches. It's just doesn't work. The only useful part, as the participants will readily attest, is the conversations in the hallways.

Still, you obviously want to go to such summits, if only for the prestige and fun of hanging out with such cool people. And something about such meetings seems to compress people, making them into more concentrated coolness than

normally. Hanging out with the amazing Ed Felten at the ACS meeting led me to go home and apply to Princeton (where he teaches) and, as we will see later in this story, hanging out with the Downhill Battle people had a similar effect.

And so, I'm in something of a bind, since I want to get invited to such meetings but I don't really like them. So I can't really talk about them much on my blog. Nor can I tell the organizer what I really think about them, although they always ask. And worst of all, I sort of tune out during the actual meeting-part conversations which makes me shy about speaking up lest I betray this fact, which in turn makes the organizer regret inviting me. 'I invited this Aaron kid because I thought he was a genius,' they say to themselves, 'but he didn't say a word!' (As a last ditch attempt to justify flying me out they try to pressure me into saying something but I'm not very cooperative.) It's all so sad.

Winnetka, Illinois — Ninth Grade

But perhaps not as sad as me at a party. In junior high and high school we would routinely have what the school insisted on calling "socials" — basically dance parties. I was practically alone in almost never showing up and my classmates, who showed the same surprising social generosity I see in the Downhill Battle Kids, went so far as to start bribing me to come.

Even when I did come I mostly stood in the corner, perhaps twitching occasionally, maybe talking to some people. During a slow dance a girl finally grabbed me from the corner (perhaps even ditching her date) and pulled me out to the floor, putting her hands on my shoulders, as was the custom. I reacted, naturally, by putting my hands on her shoulders but a within a few seconds noticed this was quite wrong and that all the other men had their hands on either side of their partner's waist, so I quickly corrected myself. I still had no idea what to do with my feet, but to my recollection I didn't do anything incredibly stupid with them, but I can't say the moment was particularly enjoyable, seeing as how I was gripped with fear the whole time.

Further bribes led me to try to participate in the bizarre actions that seem to make up modern "dance", which make my twitching look tame by comparison. Dance has never really made a whole lot of sense to me, but its modern version is surely especially odd, consisting as it does mostly of people huddling close together and sort of writhing and shaking various appendages in some vague relation to the music.

The worst thing about it, however, is that stupid as it is you can do it poorly and look even stupider. And, as you might expect, falling from such an already low level could leave one's self-esteem at rather perilous lows. So in dancing, one tries to keep a sense of just how stupid one looks at this moment, in order to determine whether to cease such activity. Unfortunately for one, however,

it is precisely this self-conscious monitoring that is the primary cause of poor dancing.

Worcester, Massachusetts — Present Day

Taking all this into account, I am sitting alone at a table in the kitchen with a neckache while dancing grows in the other room and people start smoking pot on the porch. Holmes, frustrated with the stereo system, has commandeered it and attached it to an iBook and is now downloading songs to play off a peer-to-peer network. Once he feels he has sufficient songs queued up he comes over and sits down with me.

‘Are you OK with just sitting here?’ he asks. ‘Because I want to know if I should pressure you to come join us and I know there are some people who are just totally OK with who they are.’ I’m rather surprised at the question and not really sure about how to articulate my feelings. ‘Well, um,’ I say. ‘No, then. If you have any question about it, then the answer is no.’ ‘Well,’ I finally say. ‘Right now, this person I am right now, has no desire to go dancing. But I’m beginning to wonder if I should be a different sort of person.’

This too apparently means no and Holmes drags me into the other room and I slowly begin twitching again, expanding until I reach a range which might be considered moderate dancing, which I still am not doing very well at. Holmes and friends decide to liven up the party but running into a mattress that’s laid up against the wall at high speeds, causing them to bounce off of it and into the crowd. I decide to join in and it’s the first fun thing I’ve done all night.

Washington, D.C.

One of the cooler groups here are the folks from Third World Majority (website cultureisaweapon.org, who manage to combine some of the most radical rants with support for the power of technology. The tech industry, as Thomas Frank superbly documents (notably in *One Market Under God*), consists mostly of radical politics as sham — letting 20-year-old kids run companies is supposed to replace economic democracy — but TWM has radical politics as extreme as anything I’ve seen.

Worcester, Massachusetts

A dark-skinned youth in what I guess are called hip hop clothes enters the party. He wasn’t invited, he admits readily, but he saw the noise and decided to come by. Back in Illinois, I’d have to say, they’d probably be trying to kick the kid out right about now, but these Worcester kids just toss him a beer. Conversation with him is perhaps a little strained, but there’s no overt tension.

He invites a few of his friends over (which is probably exactly what the Illinois kids were afraid of) and while for the most part they associate among themselves, nobody seems to mind them.

Washington, D.C.

Aside from the Downhill Battle folks, the coolest person here is Hannah Sasser-man of the [Prometheus Radio Project](#). Prometheus, [profiled in *The Nation's* radio issue](#), started as a collective that started illegal “pirate” radio stations. The group has lately gone legit, lobbying for the legalization of Low-Power FM (LPFM) stations and building community radio stations instead of pirate ones. Hannah is intelligent and articulate and passionate and good at balancing the legal and illegal sides of her job. “She’s definitely one to watch,” I wrote a friend afterwards.

A professor asks if some students can practice by filming us and Hannah comments by saying something about them filming her ass. ‘It’s not supposed to be X-rated,’ the professor explains. ‘Oh, don’t worry,’ Hannah replies. ‘My ass is not X-rated.’

Worcester, Massachusetts

Back at the Tiffiniy’s apartment, my neck still hurts, the pain crawling up towards my head as it usually does. As the party went on people begin taking off their clothes, revealing the swimsuits underneath (it was a swimsuit party, after all). Even Holmes strips down to some tight-fitting swimming trunks. Some of the girls even started swapping swimsuits. I think I finally understand what Aimee Mann meant when she sang “trading clothes and ringing Pavlov’s Bell”.

We left probably around probably 4am. (I remember I once was at a rather geekier party and I was introduced to Miguel de Icaza. Miguel and I really didn’t have all that much to talk about, so he started flipping his sexy cell phone open and closed and telling me about the dance parties he went to. Where he was from, he told me, the music didn’t even *start* until 4am!)

I ask if there’s any aspirin for my head and they tell me that the solution to headaches is to drink some water and eat stuff. I try this but tell them that I don’t think it’s going to work and when I don’t take aspirin in response to a neckache I generally end up waking in the middle of the night with a searing pain tearing apart my skull. After repeating this story several times in a rather subdued tone, they kindly get some aspirin from the local 24-hour pharmacy.

Holmes arrives later and debriefs us about the night, giving the above riff about the OC, which leads to a discussion about how things are much better on television. ‘You know what else is good about the OC? The kids just totally ignore the parents. You want to go visit someone? You drive over there and next thing you know you’re in their bedroom.’ I suggest that another good thing about the OC is that you get places instantly, but Holmes assures me that the show’s realism includes actual driving.

Eventually we go to sleep — I’m allowed to use the bed out on the glass-enclosed second-floor back porch.

Washington, D.C.

After the day’s long meeting we’re taken on a bus to a crowded fancy restaurant. We’re stored in three tables up in the top floor’s corner. At one point I have to go down to the bathroom and I swear it looks just like the choreographed office number from *Brazil*: people in colorful clothing go up and down the stairs, a waiter with a tray cuts in front of me, a scenic view from the second floor over a crowded restaurant, people pass pieces of paper back and forth in front of me, all while a perfectly steady camera shot takes it all in.

Back at the table, I sit next to Tiffiniy. She says she’s not feeling very well so she sort of slouches down in her chair quite a bit and to keep talking to her I slouch down and do face the same way. While we’re oblivious, someone snaps [a photo](#) and laughs and shows it to us. It looks like we’re swooningly in love.

Worcester, Massachusetts

I wake up to the sun streaming through the glass ceiling. I get up and spend an hour just sort of staring at my hands. Later I head in and we go out to breakfast.

Washington, D.C.

After dinner a fellow from the Consumers Union (nonprofit publisher of *Consumer Reports*, although they’re actually much more political than that would suggest) invites us over to his house, which looks a little like the kind of old abandoned places that people throw wild parties at in movies. He hasn’t been letting the place go to waste though — he installed a large stripper pole in the middle of the living room.

Some loud music is put on and I head out to the back porch to escape it. Holmes decides to take a seat and as water starts squirting out from under him, he realizes he's sat in a puddle. He takes off his pants and throws them on the nearby barbecue, where they proceed to start steaming. It looks like smoke, of course, and one wonders what the neighbors think when they come out on their porch and observe us.

The Downhill Battle kids have brought their skateboards and we take turns trying them, the more adventurous racing down the hill. Just the driveway's tilt is too much for me — things go too fast and I arch my back and scrape my wrist and knee.

I hang out with Tiffiniy on the front steps for a bit and then she grabs my hand and drags me across the street and over a fence, up some stairs into this amazing urban meadow between two houses that's been allowed to run wild, grass growing tall and crawling up a defunct fountain in the middle. 'Isn't this beautiful?' she asks and indeed it is. After some time we head back and some time after that she heads off with some people to a bar. 'Do you want to come?' she asks and I do but I also don't want to cause trouble again so I stay behind and head back to the hotel, looking at myself in the hotel's many mirrors, checking out how I look in the tight-fitting Downhill Battle tee they gave me.

Worcester, Massachusetts

We pile into a place that looks like your typical breakfast diner, ordering one and two dollar meals which Holmes pays for entirely in the quarters he has in his pockets. Holmes asks me what sort of political software I want to work on and I tell him that as I've radicalized I've had trouble thinking of software radical enough to keep up with my politics. 'But projects don't have to be explicitly political to have political effects,' he says. 'Look at Wikipedia.'

'Yes, look at Wikipedia,' I say. 'Wikipedia was founded by an Objectivist and its policies are explicitly anti-truth.' 'Anti-truth? Wikipedia's policy is truth through process.' 'The Wikipedia [npov policy page](#) explicitly says that it doesn't matter whether something is true or not — it can only be put on a Wikipedia page if it's popular. And that makes some sense from a certain perspective, but it's certainly not political. In a messed-up society like ours, neutral policies don't have neutral effects. The process will just reinforce the status quo.'

'Does this really happen?' 'Sure, I tried an experiment. I picked one page — the article on *From Time Immemorial*, a book that claimed there were really no Palestinians — and tried to tell the full story, which involved such shocking facts as that a journal article exposing the book as a fraud couldn't get published anywhere. My well-cited additions kept getting deleted and when I asked why someone explained on the talk page that what I was saying was silly — nobody

rejects journal articles that are accurate. Well this was precisely the point I was trying to argue against!’

‘So what’s the solution? Does a wiki have to have an explicit political point of view?’ ‘Well, that’s one possibility — one that I’m sort of trying. But a simpler answer is to just say that instead of only including things people believe, only include things you can provide citations for. Require people to provide evidence for their claims. That’s a much better way of getting truth and it’s much more useful too, since people can get the cites to learn more.’

Washington, D.C.

The second day of the Free Culture meeting is much shorter and emptier. Under pressure, I give a short talk on my radical wikipedia and, shockingly, one of the people from Third World Majority comes up to me afterwards to note that she’s actually used the site (which I haven’t even told anyone about). And then I say my goodbyes (Tiffiniy says it feels like the last day of summer camp) and drive to the airport with Zack Rosen, get onto my plane, and fly back to California.

Worcester, Massachusetts

After breakfast, the gang takes me on a small car tour around Worcester and then back to the train station. ‘This didn’t really work out the way I expected,’ Tiffiniy says. ‘We’re not usually this social. I thought we were just going to hold hands and walk around the city. You’ll have to come back. Think of Worcester as your home.’ I thank them for their food and beds and tight-fitting pants and party invitations and so on and then head into the grandly architected Worcester station and onto the train and back to Boston.

SFP: The Spirit Inside

July 5, 2005

[Original link](#)

The sun has set leaving the street lights to cast everything in an eerie yellow glow. People from all over the city leave their houses, joining the growing mass that has taken over the streets carless streets. As the group passes darkened empty buildings, old men stand by the side of the road selling colored luminences. An orchestral soundtrack begins to fade up.

As the group nears the river, the actual size of the proceedings becomes apparent. The entire riverside and its attached street has become inhabited, people

bustling back and forth, setting up shop on various patches of grass, laughing and talking. The orchestral score grows louder, coming from a hulking monolith in the sky.

The tune becomes recognizable as the 1812 Overture, reaching its finale. People begin to gasp and point to the other side of the river. ‘What’s going on?’ asks Simon. Before I can reply light begins to shoot out from the ground up to the sky, exploding in a luminous pattern that leaves shards of fire and smoke lingering in the sky.

The music stops.

‘And that was the world-famous Boston Pops playing their signature piece, the 1812 Overture,’ reports a perky female voice from the loudspeaker. ‘And a little taste of the fireworks that are yet to come,’ adds the male. ‘In just a moment we’ll be joined by the national audience, so stay tuned to the Boston Pops 4th of July Fireworks Spectacular on CBS!’

Simon and I find a spot on the grass to sit down as the loudspeaker encourages us to support our corporate and governmental masters. Members of the military are praised for their service. (Even as popular support for the war continues to dwindle, it’s comforting to see that at least the major television networks will support our babykillers.¹) ‘And tonight’s fireworks display is presented commercial free for the first time through the generosity of Liberty Mutual. Why don’t you all show how much you appreciate Liberty Mutual?’ asks the loudspeaker. The crowd, who I didn’t even think was listening, loudly thanks Liberty Mutual.

The orchestra prepares us for the show with a medley of American songs, ranging from “Yankee Doodle Dandy” to “YMCA” (which we all do the hand motions for, except Simon). Then, for the TV audience, they present [an incredibly awful](#) combination of combination of country music, hollowed rhetoric, and false patriotism.

But soon enough the fireworks begin and they are indeed spectacular. I can’t say I’m up on my fireworks but the show is much better-choreographed and impressive than everything I’d seen at home. The show lasted nearly half an hour with numerous tunes played, the best being U2’s “Vertigo”, during which large cubes appeared in the sky precisely as they counted off. I also saw smiley faces, supernovae, and an odd sort of color package. Technology!

And then, our eardrums battered, the whole thing exploded in a finale that lit up the entire sky. And then we all walked home. It’s nice living just a block away from the most spectacular fireworks display in the galaxy.

1. I have no problem with the troops as people — I’m sure there as good as anyone — but it wasn’t the people that the media was supporting. They were suggesting the job itself was praiseworthy; it’s not.

Help Wanted: Programmers for Startup

July 14, 2005

[Original link](#)

Are you a good programmer? Willing to join a small startup? Think you can get along with me?

We're looking people to join out startup if it gets funded, possibly as a co-founder. We're building a web-based application.

Email me: startup@aaronsw.com.

Change of Course

July 16, 2005

[Original link](#)

Here on the Interblog, anyone can write whatever they feel like. Unconstrained by standards and practices, bloggers feel free to write anything that's fair and accurate. For the past ten years, I've played this sorry game — telling you when I thought my friends books sucked, noting exactly which major media figures offered Schedule III Controlled Substances to teenagers, and speaking frankly about sex. I have finally seen the error of my ways. I plan to become [an online magazine](#).

No more will I defend saying something simply because it is “the truth”. No, from now on, I am adopting the rigorous standards of professional journalists. I've been convinced that telling people the truth will just hurt them and, frankly, I'm a little tired of being mocked and shunned for my honesty, which goes completely unappreciated by you people.

So, here's the new regime.

1. [Like all major newspapers](#), there will be no factchecking.
2. [Like Newsweek](#), I will run any possibly unflattering stories by my subjects before publishing them.¹
3. [Like Bob Woodward](#), I will totally adopt the point of view of my sources in a piece, even if this means contradicting a previous piece.
4. [Like Judith Miller](#), I will go to jail in order to protect a source who committed a crime.
5. [Like Judith Miller](#), I will continue to insist my stories are true even when they obviously aren't.
6. [Like Ceci Connolly of the Washington Post](#) and [Chris Vlasto of ABC News](#), I will fabricate quotes and doctor audiotapes if it will help my political cause.
7. [Like Elizabeth Bumiller of the New York Times](#), I will write complete puff pieces about people in power.
8. Like practically everyone famous, I will provide glowing blurbs for books I've never read.
9. [Like most news outlets](#), I will no longer try to provide facts about things and instead focus on personality.

10. [Like Robert Novak](#), I will promote products from my friends and family without disclosing my association.

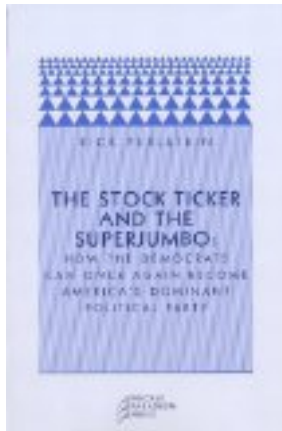
The fun starts tomorrow, with a glowing profile of Seth Finkelstein (assuming he approves it, of course). But the first thing I plan to do as a journalist is convene a panel on blogger ethics. Somebody really needs to stop those guys before things get out of hand.

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1. I remember seeing a more detailed piece about this that included quotes from major media figures saying that Newsweek did the right thing in this case. I can't seem to find it but if anybody else can, please let me know.

Our Next Superjumbo

July 20, 2005

[Original link](#)



The question seems rather less important now, but for a while I was working on a book about politics, especially how the Democrats could win elections. For those out there interested in the question, Rick Perlstein (author of *Before the Storm*, the highly-praised history of the rise of the Republican right) has written what is pretty much the definitive piece on the subject, now in paperback as *The Stock Ticker and the Superjumbo*.

In short: Perlstein recounts the strong evidence that there is very broad support for the economic platform of the Democrats. Nonvoters, independents, and even Republicans, he notes, support core Democratic principles. They just don't consider themselves Democrats, a party they think of as not standing for anything in particular. This is, of course, because Democrats have been busy chasing after the mirage of swing voters, running further and further to the right, following the ball Republicans are gleefully pulling in front of them.

He argues that instead, the Democrats must build a strong and long-term political identity, building a new political landscape instead of trying to win on the old one, just as the right-wing Republicans did. Doing so requires an openness to the possibility of losing, at least initially, but in the end it is the only way to win.

This artless summary doesn't convey the depth of Perlstein's piece, so if you're interested you can:

- [Read it online](#) at the *Boston Review*, where it was originally published
- [Buy the book](#)

- [*Buy Before the Storm*](#)

More thoughts:

- Boston Review: [Various responses and Perlstein's rebuttal](#)
- Crooked Timber: [Market Making versus Market Taking in Politics](#) (feat. comments by Perlstein)

A final note: Why is all this uninteresting? Because the Democrats aren't paid to win elections. They're paid to win policy for their corporate donors. Policy that hurts those companies, however popular with the public, simply will not be funded.

Serious Social Science

July 21, 2005

[Original link](#)

I once attended a psychology lecture in which the speaker argued that Freud was really a brilliant psychologist, but the field had passed him by because of its “physics envy”. His specific example is perhaps easy to mock, but it has resonance because the problem is a real one. [As Paul Graham shows](#), in general physicists are smarter than social scientists. But (to use a Grahamism), like kids trying to act adult, the social scientists end up emulating the form of these fields but not the content. In other words, instead of getting smarter, they play make-believe.

The first thing that comes is the numbers. Real science papers are filled with tables and graphs and regressions on piles of data, so the social scientists decide to do all that. In economics, they even go so far as to start coming up with equations and proving theorems. Then comes the technical language. Physics papers discuss the “gravitational wave perturbations about a brane cosmology embedded in a five-dimensional anti-de Sitter bulk” so the cult studs decide they should be just as incomprehensible.

And then, in the headiness of this newfound power of *science*, grand claims are made. As J. K. Galbraith writes (*Annals of an Abiding Liberal*, p. 4): “It is the great desire of nearly all economists to see their subject as a science too. Accordingly, and without much thought, they hold that its matter is also fixed. The business firm, the market, the behavior of the consumer, like the oxygen molecule or the geologist’s granite, are given.”

This is not to say that there is anything intrinsically wrong with using math or jargon or making grand claims. But to adopt these habits reflexively is to put the means before the ends. Scientists do not use math because it is complicated but because, for what they are doing, it is effective. Their grand pronouncements become accepted because (sometimes, at least) they are true.

Such complaints, among a certain sector, are truisms. But the conclusion typically drawn with them is pure pessimism. Social behavior, they argue, is simply too complex for us to ever make real progress in the field. The topic is studied by idiots and charlatans because the intelligent and honest can immediately see its impossibility. I do not agree with such a view. In fact, I think it is only possible to maintain it thru abject ignorance of what science really knows.

The vulgar postmodern critique of science argued that scientists had become our modern priesthood: deified as “experts” they would make claims about how the world worked, claims with just as much authority as those made by religion in earlier times. And while such comparisons were wrong, they did betray a

truth: society has, for largely selfish reasons, inflated the accomplishments of science beyond their actual existence. (See R. C. Lewontin's fabulous *Biology as Ideology* for evidence of this theme, from a respected scientist.)

Scientists — even the hardest of scientists — fabricate data, fabricate studies, fall prey to fads, and otherwise get things wrong. But more relevantly, they just don't know that much. We have very little idea of how the body works; the pills we take are made through the bluntest of means. We don't know how to calculate very simple things, like the dispersion of milk in a cup of coffee. The illusion that social science is ineffective can only be sustained by ignorance of such ineffectiveness of hard science. The upside of all this is that there is hope for social science.

So what is to be done? For reasons beyond the scope of this article, it's unlikely that the existing disciplines can be reformed. Instead what is needed is a culture of serious social science built outside the existing systems of academia. Its work should be primarily outwardly-facing, because that's the important audience. This means clear writing (unlike this article, perhaps) for public consumption. And it means compilations of broad scope, instead of obscure monographs.

We can already see the beginnings of such a thing in the work by people like Doug Henwood and Christian Parenti. But there is certainly much more to do, including building structures to do the work in.

So that's the other thing I'm thinking about.

Faces of Fame

July 22, 2005

[Original link](#)

In his book *Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine American Democracy* (a relatively moderate book, despite the title) James Fallows asks (p. 94):

Why do [journalists] want to appear [on TV], when so many reporters make fun of the shows? ... The most immediate payoff is the simple thrill of being noticed and known. Political-journalistic Washington functions much like a big high school, with cliques of the popular kids, the nerds, the rebels, the left-outs, and so on. To be on Tv is to become very quickly a cool kid. Friends call to say they've seen you. People recognize you in stores. Whether people agree or disagree with what you said (or whether they even remember), they treat you as "realer" and bigger than you were before.

I learned this weekend that I narrowly missed being on TV (CBS left me on the cutting room floor — I knew wearing that *Democracy Now!* shirt was pushing it) but I realized that as a prominent online journalist and a new (media) online magazine I should try to capitalize on my existing media power. So I've posted a photo on the sidebar, so that if any of my many millions of readers happen to notice me on the street or in the shop, they can behave as Fallows suggests:

[One] hears from friends and relatives for weeks afterward, "I saw you on TV!" [Regular commentators] have that extra, sizzling experience of seeing strangers' heads flip back, for a second look ("Is it really him?") as they walk into restaurants or through airport corridors.

Of course, TV does have one big difference:

In each case the recognition is almost entirely judgment-free ... Print forces the reader's attention past your personality to whatever your article is trying to say. TV's effect is mainly to make you bigger than life. For each hundred acquaintances who will say, "I saw you on the show," only one will say, "I agree [or disagree] with what you said."

So, uh, if you happen to see me in a movie theater, or on an airplane, or in the bathroom, or in your dorm room, don't hesitate to shout, 'HEY! It's Aaron Swartz! I saw you on the weblog.' Here, I'll help you out with another picture:

[image link broken]

Heh, I almost put a picture of Blake Ross there. You would have fallen for that wouldn't you!

iCommons Summit

July 26, 2005

[Original link](#)

Saturday, June 25 — Harvard Law School Campus

After wandering around stupidly for about an hour, I see a crowd of people outside the one door I didn't bother trying to open (all the others were locked). Yep, they're definitely Creative Commons people. There's Hal Abelson, who seems not to recognize me. And there's Mike who says hi but then gets pulled away. I push inside and get a bottle of water. And there's Larry Lessig! 'Wow, you look like you've lost a million pounds,' Larry says. 'Is that true?' 'No, I don't think I've lost a *million* pounds,' I reply.

I didn't think that the way I looked would change much. I would always be the little kid in the corner, the guy who definitely stands out. But then I was looking at some old photos of me receiving the ArsDigita prize and I realize I really do look rather different. Then I was ugly, short, fat, awkward, and poorly-dressed. Now I'm taller and definitely much thinner (although that seems to change), I wear better-looking clothes, and my face has become rather handsome-looking, especially on the occasions when I shave it. Now when I meet people they don't recognize me — they wait until I introduce myself or sort of stare at me blankly before they realize who I am — that never used to happen before.

Anyway, I'm here to check out the iCommons summit. Creative Commons has grown from a couple former students of Larry's to a large international "movement" (as all the speakers insist on calling it), the most prominent members of which have been flown out to Harvard from around the world thanks to Soros's foundation. Charlie Nesson gives the day's closing keynote, describing his vision of an indestructible world library.

We then retire to Charlie Nesson's house, which is the typical sort of cocktail party-type affair. When I'm not looking, Lessig gets pushed into Nesson's pool. 'I believe this is the only area where it is appropriate to say this,' says one legally-trained guest, 'but he was asking for it.'

When I tell him that I'm out here to start a company, a descendent of Robert Boyle (of Boyle's law) offers to invest. 'But we don't have anything,' I insist. 'That's OK,' he says, 'I'm sure you'll succeed at some point.'

I spend most of the night talking to Mike Linksvayer, who I end up walking back with, and we end up talking for hours outside the subway stop, long into

the night, long after the subway has stopped running, so I buy a box of Cheerios and a bottle of water from a 7-11 and walk the way back to my dorm room, listening to radical radio shows podcast onto my iPod.

June 26

The phone rings. It's my father. 'Hi, I'm here,' he says. 'Oh. I forgot you were coming. I was just going to see Lessig give a closing keynote.' I agree to meet him on the way there and halfway between my dorm and his hotel, there he is, smiling widely. My dad and I have not really spoken in person since almost a year ago, when he used force and trickery to prevent me from going to FOO Camp in a stupid show of power. He's much nicer now. I think he misses me.

As we walk and talk a kid in front of us keeps looking behind at me. At first I think it's something I've said, but he keeps doing it. Finally he stops and says, 'Hey, you're that weblogger guy, right?' 'Yeah,' I say. 'Aaron something. Yeah, I read your site.' 'Wow,' I say. 'Yeah, I'm here for the Linguistics summer school. Maybe I'll see you around some time.' 'Maybe,' I say hopefully.

I ask if my Dad wants to come with to Lessig's keynote and he agrees.

I get to chat a bit with Ben Adida who, having been left with my legacy of using RDF for Creative Commons found himself chair of the RDF-in-HTML task force (quite possibly the worst job in the W3C — I should ask him how he did it sometime) and, now discovering that overnight a major competitor (Microformats, pushed by Technorati) has arisen, is trying to get them to convert. I've been friends with the Technorati guys and I take their position, telling Ben that it's a hopeless endeavor. Ben is a little shocked at this — I was the one who got him on the RDF train after all — and pushes back. And eventually he manages to convince me that it wouldn't require hardly any additional work from the Microformats guys to be RDF/A-compatible.

Joi Ito waves from behind Ben.

After Lessig's speech, we head off and find dinner.

Simon Arrives

July 26, 2005

[Original link](#)

Wednesday, June 22

I originally made a short-term reservation at Simmons Hall, both because I had to get authorization for a longer-term stay and because I wasn't sure if I'd like it. I've already extended it once, but it expires tomorrow, when my partner arrives (he also needs a room). I email the house manager about staying. He says I should stop by. I go to his office. He's not there. I try back later, he's talking to someone. And so it goes throughout the day until he leaves. Uh oh.

I email him. He gives me a firm appointment in the morning. He can extend my room through the end of the summer. 'Thanks,' I say. 'Alright then?' 'Actually, I have a friend and I was sort of wondering if he could stay here too...' 'Oh, hmm, well, I need to keep a certain number of rooms reserved just in case anything goes wrong, you know. I think we're pretty much out.' 'But what about that room next door to me? Nobody seems to be living there.' 'That's a double, not a single.' 'Oh.'

'Actually, how about this?' he says. 'I'll let you move into that room and you can split it with your friend. How does that sound?' This Solomonic compromise is better than sleeping on the street or something, so I agree. He marks me down in his book and gets me the key from the desk. I move all my stuff over to the new room, which is like three times as big as my old room, and nicely laid out too. I return the key to the old room (stupidly, I guess) but I keep the door propped open so we can use it if we need some alone-time. (Which indeed I do until my partner gets us all locked out from it forever the first time he uses it. Afterwards, I switch to using the time machine.)

At around 7:30pm there comes a knock at the door — my first here. I open it and there's a strange man I don't recognize with a suitcase. 'You must be Aaron,' he says. 'Hi,' I say. 'I've got some good news and some bad news. The good news is I cut our housing costs in half.' 'Wow, how'd you do that?' he asks. 'Well, the bad news is it's because we're sharing one room,' I say and open the door onto our double. 'Oh,' he says, a little scared.

Despite this humor routine, I'm a little scared too. Watching this strange person move into my room is more than a little odd. I've always been afraid of sharing space with other people. I almost thought of dropping out of college if I had to share a room. At least this is only for the summer. But it still seems odd. What was I thinking when I chose to spend the summer with a random person based on little more than an email and a flicker of name recognition. I didn't even

check references, despite knowing one of the references. Why was I so stupid? I make a note to check with that reference (which I never do).

Despite all this, it works amazingly well. Simon likes asking questions and I like explaining things. We both enjoy our privacy and end up on roughly similar schedules. Simon is a good, if not great programmer and very open to being convinced he's doing things wrong. In fact, Simon is very open to anything. So open, in fact, that his openness is practically the only frustrating bit about him. I can say the meanest things to his face and he'll just laugh and agree.

Our first big debate is about planning. Simon wonders why we aren't doing more planning. Shouldn't we do use cases and draw up screenshots and make a list of features and pick milestones and build a mockup first? 'Nah,' I say. 'Let's just build it.' This goes against what Simon has been taught. 'Planning,' I say, 'makes sense when you're solving a predefined problem or working for somebody who is defining the problem for you. But it doesn't make sense when you're hacking. When you're hacking, as Paul Graham likes to note, you're actually figuring out what the problem is, exploring the problem space. It's through writing the code that you figure out what the code should do. You can't plan that.' Simon eventually comes to agree, although it takes him a while to get rid of his instincts.

Even afterwards, he is still tempted to overbuild things. We needed a permissions system, for example, and Simon build a super-advanced, completely generalized database model for one so complicated that it took up several pages of code. I spent a week trying to fix it up and implement it before finally giving up, saying it was just too complicated for me to wrap my head around. But he's working on it.

I, meanwhile, have been struggling with my own demons — mainly procrastination. Programming is an odd task in that it requires so much mental discipline that your mind is often afraid of doing it. Worse still is the fact that it happens at a computer, usually one with an Internet connection, so there's hardly any visible difference between actually doing your work and running off to check your email or read the news. It's incredibly frustrating to snap out of a bit of newsreading and realize you just wasted a couple of hours.

To combat this problem, I brought back an old application I wrote: *minuteminder*. *minuteminder* unobtrusively pops up in the corner of your screen every five minutes. When you get a second you can click on it and tell it what you're doing and it'll log that with the current time and go back and hide. The idea is that the combination of telling the computer you're really surfing the Web and seeing that you've been doing so for the past 20 minutes will jolt you into waking up and heading back to something more productive. It's not a perfect solution, but I think it definitely helps a lot. (A *todo* outline has been another productivity lifesaver.)

Just having another person around is really nice, though.

Eat and Code

August 2, 2005

[Original link](#)

Dear Diary: Sorry I haven't written so long. Running a startup is *hard*! That and finally having people to talk to sort of takes some of the time and desire out of writing. I'm thinking maybe instead of a full blow-by-blow account of what happened, I'll write posts about different topics, that will recap the story so far. My first attempt follows. -ASw

Life seems so incredibly overworked and overcomplicated that you pare it down to the bare essentials: eat and code. Surely you should be able to handle this without distraction. Unfortunately, it's not so easy.

Let's take eating.

To be honest, I've always had a problematic relationship with food. I always liked plain things — the year before college I lived mostly off of eating plain, microwaved bagels. At oriental restaurants I would always just order steamed white rice. Wes Felter, noting I would apparently only eat white food joked, referencing a Science Fiction novel, that I would eat light bulbs, but “only the white ones”. This reached its extremes at a World Wide Web conference where all the food was white, even the plate it was on. Tim Berners-Lee later pulled my mother aside to share his concerns about this diet.

Finally, one day at an oriental restaurant by Stanford (years before I went to school there), we had the typical discussion except this time Cory Doctorow spoke up: ‘are you sure you're not a supertaster?’ he asked. I had heard the They Might Be Giants song but never considered the possibility. I thought about it as the conversation continued and it seemed to make sense to me. [At this point I imagine a crane shot lifting up and up over the conversation at the restaurant. Fade to:] I did some research on the Internet and did the test (which formally consists of putting blue food coloring on your tongue, taking a piece of paper with a three-hole punch, placing it over the tongue and counting the number of taste buds in it) and indeed, I am a supertaster. This hasn't eliminated the discussions about my eating habits, but it does shift the blame.

In any event, I'm not one for the fine arts of cooking. So it's always seemed attractive to me to have a simple food that tastes decent that I can just pull out and eat whenever I want. And, lo, it appeared that I had found it: Cheerios. Cheerios claimed on the box to be healthy, they had little in the way of taste, I could eat them whenever I want, they had big boxes of them at the corner

grocery store — everything seemed great. Cheerio boxes piled up in the corner. (Photo to follow.)

There were some problems, though. I didn't eat them with water or milk, which meant that a fine Cheerio dust went everywhere. This dust was so fine that it got into invisible cracks in my laptop's surface and apparently bonded with the metal and had to be scraped out each time I ate. And then I began to discover that the Cheerio dust was also into my system, possibly even my lungs and giving me some Cheerio form of silicosis; they made it difficult to breathe deeply. 'Wouldn't it be ironic if I died of pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis?' I asked Simon. (I chose pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis as a spelling word in 6th grade.)

At the same time, I was suffering from bouts of acid reflux which continued to grow in frequency and severity. First just some acid. Then, one night walking back from a Noam Chomsky lecture, I began to cough of what felt like my stomach lining. I gave up the Cheerios but it didn't help. Last night I threw up my entire dinner.

And then what do I eat instead? We go for regular meals at 12 and 6 but I'm only sporadically hungry and the food is getting boring. In Science Fiction stories, we imagine small packets of food that are healthy but taste like whatever we enjoy. Forget that, I'd be happy with just packets of food that are healthy. I'm sick of having to worry about food.

And then there's programming. When I'm feeling good, I'll have bouts of just amazing productivity, doing everything that needs to be done in hours. The only problem is that these good days are followed by a week of bad ones, where I feel tired or depressed or scared and can't quite force myself to sit and face the code.

I used to think this was just cowardice, that I just needed to sit down and program and I'd get the same level of productivity again. But what if this is some serious limit in my brain? What if programming takes so much out of me that it takes days to recharge? I've never seriously considered this possibility before, but it's not just fatalism — it has real implications for how I should structure my days.

The last time I was fighting procrastination I was watching a bunch of good television shows. And as part of this, I would read Tim Goodman, the Roger Ebert of television critics. I was struck to learn one day that even Tim Goodman, whose job was to literally sit down and watch TV, could not bring himself to accomplish this task. I mean, I knew all about [Structured Procrastination](#) but surely it had its limits. How could someone procrastinate sitting down and watching TV? And yet, here it was before my eyes — my favorite television critic, a hardworking and thoughtful man who had even spent a column answering a question I sent him, even though I lived in Chicago at the time.

The lesson I drew from this is that the human mind is such that whatever you do, it will try to avoid it. So you might as well aim high. Now the question is: what do you do with the rest of time?

Behind the Rant: Maciej Ceglowski

August 8, 2005

[Original link](#)

As a noted Internet pundit, I have spent years suggesting that the future would be so bright if everyone worked on my pet project. In particular, I have argued that the Internet needs serious, well-written, critical investigations into societal phenomena. Now Maciej Ceglowski has shown just how right I am. Ceglowski, who in addition to being a brilliant ranter can also [paint](#), [program](#), and [act as some sort of unspecified nonprofit functionary](#). In a brilliant and detailed piece entitled [A Rocket to Nowhere](#) Ceglowski takes apart the manned space program with an elegance and completeness not seen since Christian Parenti wrote for *The Baffler*. How did this feat come about? I sat down with Ceglowski over email to discuss it.

Aaron Swartz: The Weblog: You're a ranter (in the best sense of the word) more known for your pieces about technologies and technologists, like your [audioblogging manifesto](#), than for social criticism. What led you to a piece about manned space flight?

Maciej Ceglowski: I don't think a rant about space flight qualifies as social criticism. There are rockets involved, after all.

What provoked me in this case was the hype about the "Return to Flight", along with a series of NASA statements suggesting that the Shuttle was safer than ever. And there is something fascinating about the completely reflexive nature of this mission. Trash collection aside, the only point of the flight is to see whether things that break on the way up can be fixed in time to come down.

ASTW: Did you have any previous background in the subject?

MC: No. I wrote a small shuttle rant two years ago after the Columbia investigation, and I was a space geek growing up like everyone else.

ASTW: Your article shows a withering level of understanding of the program in all its many facets. What was your process of research?

MC: here is an enormous amount of space-related material online, a lot of it highly technical. Many space geeks are web geeks and take the time to scan strange old articles, transcribe stuff, and create obsessive websites. NASA also puts up a lot of interesting documents. This makes it particularly easy to find good information on the space program, including far more incisive critiques than the one I cooked up.

ASTW: How long did the whole thing take? Did it interfere with your [busy schedule of unemployment](#)?

MC: I collected links for a month and then pooped out a rant. Most of my limited active time is spent [painting](#), but the oppressive heat provided a good excuse to stay home and read Shuttle links instead.

ASTW: In the article you write that, “Future archaeologists trying to understand what the Shuttle was for are going to have a mess on their hands.” What do you think future archaeologists will think when they search the text of this era for comments about the problems of future archaeologists? Do you think they’ll find such results genuinely helpful or more of a rhetorical concern?

MC: I think future archaeologists will be digging through 30 meters of ice with a sharpened stick, looking for canned goods.

ASTW: Already your article seems rather popular. Do you see yourself doing more such work in the future?

MC: I’m sure I’ll continue emitting sporadic essays, I like to write and I enjoy getting attention.

ASTW: What do you see as the larger place for such writing? In an era of generally superficial science reporting, largely uncritical magazines, and endless technical jargon, wouldn’t you endorse my hobbyhorse?

MC: People need to stop wasting their time surfing the web and get back to work. That means you too, startup boy - coffee break is over!

ASTW: Often while reading someone or about something, you feel like there’s something wrong but you can’t quite put your finger on it. As one of the Internet’s most noted ranters, you don’t just put your finger on it, you put your finger all the way through it and twirl it around for good measure. By clearly articulating a problem, one would think you might have more effect than people who vaguely complain about it, but does that effect ever reach nonzero?

MC: Well, twirling the finger is just good manners. As for nonzero effect, I don’t think the NASA administrator is going to read my weblog and scrap the International Space Station any more than I thought Paul Graham would stop writing online essays after [Dabblers and Blowhards](#). The point of the exercise is to offer a little mental release to people who get as annoyed as I do, but lack the time or energy to spell out why.

ASTW: Have you thought about writing for some more formal publication or submitting your stuff to something like *Harper’s* or *The Baffler*?

MC: Writing popular online essays is like being the prettiest girl in Scotland - satisfying on its own terms, but you can’t let it go to your head.

If you look at a publication like the New Yorker, there’s a dearth of articles written by guys who sit around reading web links in their underwear, and a profusion of articles by people reporting from remote places, or speaking to anonymous sources they’ve cultivated over a lifetime of careful journalism, or deploying vast reserves of wit and erudition against a topic they’ve studied carefully. It all just sounds like work.

ASTW: Thanks for sitting down with us.

MC: Thanks for emailing me this template.

FOO Camp

August 25, 2005

[Original link](#)

I was recently excited to be invited to FOO camp, where all the leading figures of the modern technology industry shared their deep thoughts with me. Having already started a successful startup, I decided this year it was time to give back to the community, so I did some one-on-one consulting with future entrepreneurs.

Here's a photo of me listening to a pitch from up-and-comer Ada Norton about the layer architecture of her new Fish-on-Puppies web application framework. Definitely one to watch — I've recommended that Y Combinator invest immediately.



[\(more photos\)](#)

I generously gave [Ada](#) a 20% discount off my normal consulting fees, in exchange for 10% of the company. I hope that other entrepreneurs will follow my lead in generously giving back to the community.

Reflections on Cultural Fragments

August 26, 2005

[Original link](#)

Six Feet Under's final episode: After the second-to-last episode of *Six Feet Under* aired, I was having lunch with my partner Simon. 'I wonder what they'll do for the last episode,' I said. 'Obviously they'll have to kill everyone off, but how? Ooh! Maybe they'll make the house collapse. Then they could have these cool shots of everyone being crushed as everything is shaking and falling down.' I thought about that for a second.

'No, that's not really their style,' I concluded. 'Instead they'll probably have flash-forwards showing how everybody died. And they'll sneak them in as flashes cut with present-day stuff. They'll probably shoot the episode from the point of view of some new character who will walk around and whenever he meets someone, they'll have a flash-forward and show how that person will die. Oh, and get this: the new guy? He's played by Alan Ball.'

Well, I was pretty close.

Everyone else seemed to like the final episode of *Six Feet Under*. I found it merely disappointing. It was just like the boring parts of any other episode, only longer. Where was the heightened drama? The pathos? The raw emotions? Whenever Alan Ball previously did an episode, it was something special, much better than usual. Has the rest of the team gotten so good that when Alan Ball takes over now, he ends up with something worse?

I believe it was Jason Kottke who said that this was the first series finale that made him cry and left him missing the characters for days. Someone needs to buy him a copy of *My So-Called Life*.

Michael Penn's latest album: Michael Penn is married to Aimee Mann. Their musical styles are practically the same, except for their genders. And this year, they are both releasing concept albums telling stories about characters in the past. ~~So it was disappointing to discover that Michael Penn's music is so much worse. The work on his latest album, *Mr. Hollywood Jr., 1947*, sounds about as immature as the songs on Mann's debut, *Whatever*.~~ Penn's first track, [Walter Reed](#), ~~is the only song that approaches Mann's modern skill~~ definitely the best.* Fans who want a male Aimee Mann are better off with her old boyfriend, Jon Brion.

Mann's latest album is *The Forgotten Arm* and I finally figured out today what in the story that title refers to. Reviewers have apparently criticized the album for not having any stand-out tracks, but that seems like a bizarre criticism because practically every track on the album is a stand-out. I recall the same bizarre

criticism being leveled at the Jon Brion version of Fiona Apple's *Extraordinary Machine*, which remains a work of genius even if Fiona doesn't think so.

* I was far too harsh on Penn. After listening to the album a couple times more, it's a very interesting work and deserves to be judged on its own merits.

Narcissism Notice

September 16, 2005

[Original link](#)

Wired News: [Stars Rise at Startup Summer Camp](#)

Though he's only finished a single year at Stanford as a sociology major, Swartz said it is "looking likely" he will take some angel funding and not go back to school this fall.

Hartford Courant: [Keeping It Really Simple: RSS News Feeds Via E-mail: A Technology That Actually Delivers](#)

Aaron Swartz, co-author of an early version of the RSS computer language and author of the rss2email technology that delivers news-feeds via e-mail, says RSS has offered a sense of empowerment absent from the Net surfer's previous hunt for distinctive voices and viewpoints.

Paul Graham is Wrong

September 21, 2005

[Original link](#)

I really enjoyed that essay by Paul Graham. Paul Graham is an excellent writer and a very nice fellow. But when he said that thing that made me look bad, I just had to draw the line. For years, I've been doing something and telling people I'm doing it and then all of a sudden Paul Graham comes along and tells me it's a bad idea. I think it's time to question his assumptions.

In his essay, Graham writes:

Most people in this situation typically do this thing. But what if they did this other thing instead? This idea typically doesn't occur to them for that reason. But if they did what I suggest, they'd be like a metaphor instead of a simile.

Here's where Graham really goes off the rails. What if we don't want to do what he suggests? Graham never considers that possibility. He just assumes that he's right.

Once, in an interview, Graham was asked what he thought about this subject:

Q: What do you think of people doing that thing?

Well, you know, historically people really haven't done a lot of this thing and going forwards I see a lot more of this thing happening because the things that have stopped people from doing those things no longer exist. This could really change things.

But this is absurd! Just because people *can* do that thing now doesn't mean they're going to.

For too long, Paul Graham has gotten a free ride by saying things that disagree with people's prejudices in an informative and entertaining manner. That was fine when all we had to do was link to his article and read it. But this time he's gone too far: he's said something that might actually make me change how I behave. And that's unacceptable.

[gernika](#) writes:

A satire worthy of Swift :)

Sencer explains:

Paul Graham has always written the way he has written. That (among real reasoning) includes making assertions and peddling his own views as a kind of fact. The same people that are applauding Graham for “brilliant reasoning” when he makes assertions that fit their world-view, criticize him for the absurdity of even making assertions, when they don’t fit their world-view. Not that they shouldn’t, but the inconsistency is just funny in an ironic kind of way. :)

In support:

I’m so glad that someone stood up to him finally. Some of what he says at such as about Amateurs is a bunch of bull crap. [...] Paul Graham is not “god” and some of what he says really ought to not be left unchecked and thank you Aaron for having the guts to stand up to him.

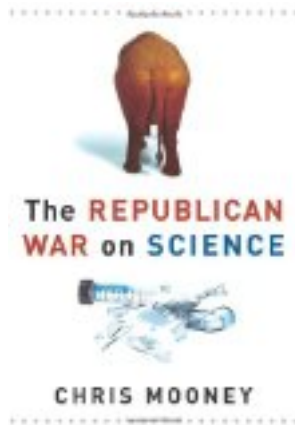
In opposition:

err what is the point of this? You establishing a reputation and personality off the back of Paul Graham? Man, you’re pretty shameless and petty. You think you’ve stumbled onto a gold landfill by realizing you don’t agree with Graham? How many millions of people have read a paul graham essay? [...] Graham backs up his word with some good thought and informed opinions. YOU??? what do you base it on? the need to get noticed?

The Republican War on Science

September 24, 2005

[Original link](#)



Science, we imagine, is the realm of objective disinterested geniuses reporting back the findings from their expensive equipment, telling us truths about the world. Politics, on the other hand, is seen as the place for sleazy and corrupt jerks who lie to us in everything they do and try to make everything fit their existing worldviews. So is it any surprise that when the two things meet we're in for a show?

Journalist Chris Mooney has made a name for himself by writing magazine articles that make this intersection, especially under the Bush administration, entertaining. He's recently released his first book, *The Republican War on Science*, which tries to combine the various individual stories into a damning case of science politicization. The book tackles a variety of subjects, including:

- global warming
- nutrition guidelines
- fishing regulations
- evolution
- embryonic stem cells
- safe sex

Each one gets a chapter written in the style of a magazine article (indeed, many have been published as magazine articles), opening with an interesting person or event and expanding to show how a group of Bush backers (drawn from major industry and the religious right) have concocted their own pseudoscience in an attempt to spread confusion about the truth, with a particular focus on its effects in Washington, where Mooney is based. Mooney bookends these stories with some more general thoughts about the relations of conservatives and science.

The book has been something of a surprise success, recently making it onto the *New York Times* bestseller list, and Mooney has been busy doing a book tour for it. I went to see him when he spoke just down the street at Porter Square Books and talked to him a bit afterwards as he signed my copy. The audience was interested and engaged. I suspect a lot of it was typical anger at the Bush administration (or “the neocon radicals up in Washington and the media” as the angry sort who call in to radio shows and so on always seem to put it), but I think this particular issue strikes at the heart of people’s dislike for the administration: the administration refuses to go along with reality, even in its most pure form.

The book itself is a respectable and highly readable (I went through it in a day’s free time) piece of work, although I could not help but feel a little disappointed. In an apparent attempt to gain respectability, Mooney adopts a detached journalistic — almost legalistic — style. While Mooney doesn’t pull any punches factually — he will call a lie a lie and refuses to be pulled into the trap of equating conservative science abuses with liberal ones — such a style lacks the verve of Mooney’s more strident online writing, such as when he wrote about Michael Crichton’s global warming denialist novel *State of Fear*:

Let’s face it: Such writing is pure porn for global warming deniers, in much the same way that fictional accounts of UFO abduction skeptics converting into true believers titillate UFO fans. [...] By the book’s end, one can only ask: What planet is Michael Crichton living on? Because this one is clearly getting warmer. (cite)

By comparison, Mooney’s book-long exposé of numerous incidents of Bush administration distortion and dishonesty concludes more like this:

these considerations all suggest science politicization has reached a nadir with the Bush administration [...] Considered this way, Bush administration abuses and distortions of science come to look more and more like a large-scale political strategy. (241f)

And despite Mooney’s attempts at moderation and fairness, he hasn’t won any favors from the press. *Publishers Weekly*, in a favorable review, called it “very readable, and understandably partisan” while the *Washington Post* attacked it

as “surprisingly unconvincing”, “polemic[al]”, and “a kind of conspiracy theory”. Since the mainstream was apparently ready to consider the book partisan no matter the style, Mooney probably would have been better off writing a little more strongly.

But what about conservative readers? At the book signing, someone asked Mooney if he thought the book would reach them. Mooney doubted that any of the relevant politicians would actually read it. ‘But, you know, maybe someone will say to them, “Things have gotten so bad that there’s now a book claiming we’re at war with science!”’ he said. ‘Maybe that will have some effect.’

Serenity

September 24, 2005

[Original link](#)



So *Buffy* ran its course, *Angel* got canceled, and *Firefly* saw its untimely demise. But all is not over for Joss Whedon — *Firefly* is back, this time in the form of the feature film *Serenity*. Along with the rest of the diehard Joss Whedon fans, I'm on the edge of my seat. By all accounts the film is going to be amazing.

In this time of increasing polarization between left and right blogospheres, of [endless politically-tinged cultural criticism](#), it's more important to see some pop culture we can unite behind. That's why it's nice to see that [the leading blogs of the right](#) and [those of the left](#) can get behind this film, with impressive marketing finesse. Here's how the film is described:

Joss Whedon, the Oscar — and Emmy — nominated writer/director responsible for the worldwide television phenomena of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, and *Firefly*, now applies his trademark compassion and wit to a small band of galactic outcasts 500 years in the future in his feature film directorial debut, *Serenity*. The film centers around Captain Malcolm Reynolds, a hardened veteran (on the losing side) of a galactic civil war, who now ekes out a living pulling off small crimes and transport-for-hire aboard his ship, *Serenity*. He

leads a small, eclectic crew who are the closest thing he has left to family — squabbling, insubordinate and undyingly loyal.

I can't tell you how thrilled I am to have managed to nab two tickets to a preview screening here in Boston! The place is practically alive with buzz over this thing — family, friends, random folks at parties are all talking about it. I'll be sure to tell you all about how great it was after I see it.

For more information, including the trailer, check out [the *Serenity* website](#).

Serenity: A Review

September 29, 2005

[Original link](#)

Joss Whedon's film *Serenity* comes out tomorrow, the first new episode of his series *Firefly* in years. Go see it; you won't be disappointed. It's almost certainly Joss's best work yet — mixing storyline tricks with biting humor with amazing battles and beautiful surroundings. The cinematography, special effects, and music are all grand. But most importantly, it's just really, really fun.

I received a “press pass” as part of the “Serenity Blogger Bonanza” — they invited bloggers to come see a free preview if they promised to write about it. (My companion thought this seemed rather risky — what if a bunch of opinionated bloggers all give it bad reviews?) They also invited blog readers, but then they claimed that all the screenings were full — I actually received a rejection letter — yet when we went to the theater they were handing free tickets to people walking by on the street and the theater wasn't anywhere near full.

Still, it was a good turnout and full of fans. The person to my left said she'd already seen the film twice (they previously did previews without finished music and so on for hardcore fans) and planned to go to the real premiere (her fourth screening) dressed as one of the characters. But while the movie fits in perfectly with the story of the TV series (I was surprised; I would have thought the studio would demand changes (actually, I can't recall if the space battles were silent like they were in the TV show (sound can't travel in space, of course))), one need not have seen the TV series to understand or enjoy the film. In fact, while the trailers mention Buffy and Angel, they don't mention Firefly at all.

It seemed like everyone there loved the film. As we left, my companion commented, still in awe, “I can see why they let the bloggers into see it.”

David Lynch and Vedic “Science”

October 5, 2005

[Original link](#)

I was recently offered a free ticket to see David Lynch give a talk at Emerson College. The talk was titled “Consciousness, Creativity, and the Brain”. I didn’t know why a movie director would have any particular insights on these subjects but I decided that at the least it would be amusing.

The talk was held in a huge and beautiful theater in downtown Boston, ornate with two large balconies and, from where I was sitting at least, largely full. We were all handed free DVDs on the way in as well as “more information” forms with beautiful typography. The form were headed “The David Lynch Educational Foundation For Consciousness-Raising Education And World Peace”. (The “And World Peace” seems like it should be a joke.) The dean of the college introduced the event by droning on about how great Emerson College was. I tuned out but the people I went with told me he gave the standard distancing-himself-from-the-event speech, something about how they provided a range of voices to encourage the students (profound voice:) “to quest, and to question”.

Then the president of the David Lynch Foundation came up and introduced David Lynch, who apparently didn’t have a talk prepared and just took some questions from the audience. I suspect some of the questions were plants, because they sounded so suspiciously knowledgeable about meditation, but maybe all the local meditators were attracted to the event.

In photographs, Lynch looks like an old British dude who would have a deep and thoughtful voice. Instead, his voice is high and squeaky and sort of gimmicky-sounding, which also made it hard to take him seriously. He finished up and the Foundation president came back to introduce Dr. John Haeglin, who he presented as one of the leading physicists of our day. And where does this great mind work? The Maharishi University of Management, although the announcer cleverly pronounced this so it sounded like “Murshy University”, which is more plausible as an actual school. The Maharishi University of Management (MUM), however, is a phony organization set up the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who claims that he can fly. (The Maharishi, you may recall, also seduced The Beatles. Their later disappointment was the source of the song “Sexy Sadie”, which was originally titled “Maharishi”).

Haeglin is the Maharishi’s main man in the US, running for president on the Maharishi’s political party (the Natural Law Party), which almost received federal funds from Perot’s Reform Party, although it narrowly lost to Pat Buchanan. (I had my Sidekick with me, so I looked all this up on the Web while I was listening.) Haeglin had a tricky job ahead of him. He had to explain to the audience that practicing the Maharishi’s Transcendental Meditation (TM) would

send out a magical field that would make everybody nearby happy and peaceful. But he also had to do so in such a way that this audience of college kids, didn't just break out laughing. The answer: science.

Haeglin gave some reasonably-accurate descriptions of recent innovations in Physics, noting that reductionism had caused us to realize that the superficial diversity asked an underlying uniformity of, he claimed, vibrating strings (string theory) that connect all of us together. Now Haeglin thinks that TM will cause happy feelings to be transmitted through the strings into nearby people. But even this seems too absurd, so he changes tacks and tries to explain it in a common sense way. 'If everybody is fearful and scared,' he says, 'you can sort of feel it in the air and you start to be scared. But if everyone is happy, then it's just the opposite. TM works in the same way — it puts happiness in the air.' He never directly connected this to his comments about string theory and I didn't really see it until I reflected on it later.

Haeglin has done several "scientific" tests, claiming that a group of meditators can lower the crime rate, although when actual scientists checked some of his numbers, they found he had fabricated the crime rate statistics. And David Lynch explained that the goal of his foundation is to raise \$7 billion so they can provide Transcendental Meditation in every school. (The David Lynch Foundation's website claims that TM can cure classroom stress, clinical depression, learning disorders, high blood pressure, and academic underachievement — oh, right, and cause world peace.

Then he introduced a Dr. Fred Travis, also from MUM, who proceeded to do an EEG of some kid's brain right on stage. He showed some diagrams of the brain, insisting it had a "CEO" which told the rest of it what to do. Normally, he said, the brain's pieces all scurry about doing whatever they feel like. But Transcendental Meditation strengthens your CEO so he can get all the pieces of the brain working together, doing whatever the CEO wants them to do. He demonstrated this by showing the boy's brainwaves normally: all over the place, doing different things. Then he asked the boy to meditate and zoomed in on two brain waves, which started moving in tandem. What this has to do with anything remains a mystery to me.

Then Lynch came out and took some more questions. Nobody called him on this nonsense (I was tempted to, but didn't). But *you* can — Lynch is going on [a 20 city tour of universities to spread this nonsense](#). The entire event was taped so it could be [webcast from his website](#).

The New McCarthy: Bill O'Reilly

October 12, 2005

[Original link](#)



I was reading [an old transcript of a piece about Joe McCarthy](#)'s anti-communist witchhunt hearings and I was surprised to find that some of his comments sounded awfully familiar. I did a little googling, and I think I figured out why:

MCCARTHY: A few days ago I read that President Eisenhower expressed the hope that by election time in 1954 the subject of Communism would be a dead and forgotten issue. The raw, harsh unpleasant fact is that Communism is an issue and will be an issue in 1954.

TONY SNOW (sitting in for O'Reilly): This morning, the president pounced on a quote in Sunday's New York Times Magazine where Senator Kerry called terrorists a nuisance. ([October 10, 2004](#))

MCCARTHY: You know the [American] Civil Liberties Union has been listed as "a front for, and doing the work of," the Communist Party?

OREILLY: [T]here is no question the ACLU and the judges who side with them are terror allies. ([July 25, 2005](#))

MCCARTHY: Now, you wrote a book in 1932. I'm going to ask you again: at the time you wrote this book, did you feel that professors should be given the right to teach sophomores that marriage — and I quote — "should be cast out of our civilization as antiquated and stupid religious phenomena?" Was that your feeling at that time?

OREILLY: You can understand how people like me and maybe a lot of people watching think you are a loony lefty when your book, *Fanatics & Fools* [...] is endorsed by the following: Molly Ivins; Bill Maher, Bill Moyers; and Larry

David. Why don't you get Che Guevara on that, oh, he's dead. How about Fidel Castro? Come on, they are the far left fringe. That's who you're hanging with ... ([April 20, 2004](#))

MCCARTHY: If a stupid, arrogant or witless man in a position of power appears before our Committee and is found aiding the Communist Party, he will be exposed. The fact that he might be a General places him in no special class as far as I am concerned.

OREILLY: The only thing we can do is hold people who raise and give money to the ACLU accountable. In the weeks to come, The Factor will tell you who these people and organizations are, so you can decide whether or not you want to do business with them. ([August 5, 2005](#))

MCCARTHY: When the shouting and the tumult dies, the American people and the President will realize that this unprecedented mud slinging against the Committee by the extreme left wing elements of press and radio was caused solely because another Fifth Amendment Communist was finally dug out of the dark recesses and exposed to the public view.

O'REILLY: Enter Hillary Clinton, who wants to sit in the White House. In her Newsweek column this week, liberal Anna Quindlen gushes over Mrs. Clinton, describing her as a moderate. ... That's what I mean about the left-wing media. To them, social issues like unfettered abortion, pro-gay instruction in public schools ... [are] tak[en] for granted. ([May 10, 2005](#))

Founders Unite for Startup School

October 16, 2005

[Original link](#)

[The following article was originally intended for Wired News, but was rejected for not being about any of its advertisers.]

Experts agree that it smells like a new startup age is beginning to boom. This time, however, it's being led by geeks themselves instead of business guys. At the center of this democratizing force is the new funding firm Y Combinator, led by Internet entrepreneur and essayist Paul Graham.

Y Combinator burst onto the scene by offering small grants to promising graduates (average age: 23) to pursue their ambitions in startup form over the summer. And this past weekend, the people behind Y Combinator, in association with the Harvard Computer Society, took their show to the masses, inviting 500 of the most promising startup founders to Harvard University for an intense one-day lecture series on all aspects of starting a company.

The weekend was kicked off with a smaller reception at Y Combinator's offices the night before. The room pulsed with networking between the various would-be founders, as well as some interesting meeting with some of the guests of honor.

"Last night was the first time I met my lawyer," said Steve Huffman, Lord Ruler and Supreme Leader* of Reddit, one of the companies Y Combinator has funded. "The first thing I said was 'Am I getting charged for this?' 'No,' she told me. 'There are rules preventing us from charging for parties.'"

Meanwhile, clusters of people formed around the night's VIPs, including blogger Joel Spolsky, scientist Stephen Wolfram, and, of course, the Reddit developers themselves, who found themselves deluged by excited fans.

The startup school itself was a similarly star-studded event, with Apple Computer co-founder Steve Wozniak telling the story of how his company got started. Michael Mandel, chief economist for *BusinessWeek* touted the virtues of America's entrepreneurial culture to the assembled crowd. "People starting companies and risking failure are what makes America so great. The people in this room are doing God's work," he said to applause.

Senior officials from Google and Yahoo both espoused the virtues of their respective companies. Lawyers from top-tier law firms provided advice on protecting a company's intellectual property and navigating some of the complex legal waters of the modern business world. Founders Langley Steinert, Marc Hedlund, and Olin Shivers tried to share some of their assembled experience.

Because space was limited, people who wanted to attend simply needed to fill out a simple questionnaire about their background, but the event was entirely free of charge. It might seem unusual for a company interested in helping hackers start companies to try to give some of that value away but Paul Graham had an explanation. “There’s a concept in venture capital known as ‘deal flow,’” he said in an interview. “The deal flow is all the interesting startups to fund flowing by. And venture capitalists just try to grab the best ones for themselves. Well, we think the real solution to this is to increase the total deal flow for everyone.”

Paul Graham himself gave a very well-received talk on how to come up with ideas for startups. The thing that trips people up, he suggested, was mistakenly thinking that a good startup idea needed to be a million-dollar idea. Instead, he proposed prospective founders simply look around for things that are broken with the world and try to fix them.

Video of the talks will be available on the startup school website shortly.

Jessica Livingston contributed to this report. Sigh and Wrinkle contributed additional style tips from California.

* An earlier version of this article incorrectly referred to Steve Huffman as CEO of Reddit. Aaron Swartz: The Weblog regrets the error. [Return to the article.](#)

The Startup News

October 26, 2005

[Original link](#)

New from me: [The Startup News](#), featuring the latest news about Google, Yahoo, various new startups, acquisitions, funding, and all that jazzz, in a concise easy-to-read format.

Plus: [MP3s, slides, and podcasts from the Y Combinator Startup School](#).

Trials of Testing

October 28, 2005

[Original link](#)

Since many readers complained about [the previous piece](#) we have pulled it and provided this replacement. The things we do for you people!

It takes little courage to denounce men [who believe](#) they can harness the power of their minds to fly and use a space of universal consciousness to create world peace. And, in the long run, it is of little consequence. No one can recall the obscure psuedoscientific claims of yesteryear.

But take the idea that underneath the skull lie a series of organs for human traits like acquisitiveness and amorousness which bulge and change the shape of the head with dominance. The idea seems equally preposterous but it held real sway in its era — the Massachusetts Medical Association and the president of Harvard threw their weight behind it (Paul, 7) and phrenology continues to be remembered today.

Such absurd ideas are not remnants of a bygone past — just replace “organs” with “genes” and you’ll have the new “science” of evolutionary psychology (formerly sociobiology), an absurdity which Harvard University’s own president has thrown the institution’s weight behind. And yet one rarely sees “pro-science skeptics” challenging its claims. Indeed, scientific magazines write them up with only minor questioning, saving their ire for those who dare criticize the ideas.

But at least such fields have critics (and I count myself among them). There are related claims, however, that exercise much more power over our lives and (perhaps as a result) are far less challenged. One of their creators explained that they would “promote personal development”, “manage conflict”, and “increase human understanding worldwide.” (Paul, 121) But instead of Vedic science, she was talking about here creation: the Myers-Briggs personality test.

I have written before about the failures of experiments to provide evidence in favor of our concepts of [personality](#) or [intelligence](#) and how despite this many continue to believe in them. One can discuss how even studies by proponents find that IQ lacks validity and that 47% of people have a different Myers-Briggs personality type on a second administration of a test. But this somehow seems not to convince. So let us try another tack: let us look at how these tests are made.

The history of the IQ test — along with a number of other supposed ways of measuring “intelligence” — is detailed in Stephen Jay Gould’s classic *The Mismeasure of Man*. It was originally created by Alfred Binet to find children in

French schools who might need special tutoring. Binet thought that by locating and helping these students, one could make sure that everyone learned all the material. Binet composed the test by throwing together whatever questions came to mind: things about shapes and numbers and words. He just wanted to see if some kids were having trouble, he made no attempt to make sure the result was a balanced measure of “intelligence”.

Lewis Terman, a professor at Stanford University, imported the Binet test to America, added some more random things and mixed it all up a little, and called the result the Stanford-Binet intelligence test (a name which is still used today).¹ One of the test’s first applications was American Psychological Association president Robert Yerkes’s attempt to classify the people recruited for the Army. Among the questions:

Crisco is a: patent medicine, disinfectant, toothpaste, food product
The number of a Kaffir’s legs is: 2, 4, 6, 8
Christy Mathewson is famous as a: writer, artist, baseball player, comedian

Recent immigrants, whose command of English might be understandably weak, were allowed to take a pictorial version: drawing “a rivet in a pocket knife, a filament in a light bulb, a horn on a phonograph, a net on a tennis court, and a ball in a bowler’s hand (marked wrong, Yerkes explained, if an examinee drew the ball in the alley, for you can tell from the bowler’s posture that he has not yet released the ball).” (Gould, 230)

Terman, meanwhile, conducted a longitudinal study of the people his IQ test marked as “gifted”. Joel Shurkin, based on exclusive access to the records, documented the full story in his book *Terman’s Kids*. Among the study’s participants was a man named Jess Oppenheimer. “Gave the impression of being very pushy and forward although he did not show these characteristics during the interview,” wrote one of Terman’s assistants. “I could detect no signs of a sense of a humor.” (Shurkin, 54) Oppenheimer went on to create and write the shows *I Love Lucy* and *Get Smart*.

The story of personality tests is little better. In her book *The Cult of Personality* (recently republished as *The Cult of Personality Testing*), Annie Murphy Paul (a former senior editor for mass bi-monthly *Psychology Today*) describes the history of all the major personality tests. Take the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), which was created in a similar way to the IQ test.

The test was created by psychologist Starke Hathaway and neuropsychiatrist J. Charnley McKinley by simply coming up with a bunch of true-or-false statements that they thought might indicate whether the respondent had a mental illness. Among them:

I have never had any black, tarry-looking bowel movements.
I have had no difficulty starting or holding my urine.
I have never indulged in any unusual sexual practices.
There is something wrong with my sex organs.
I believe there is a Devil and a Hell in the afterlife.
Everything is turning out as the Bible said it would.
I think I would like to belong to a motorcycle club.
Often I feel as if there were a tight band around my head.
I loved my father.
I like to flirt.
I believe my sins are unpardonable.
I have a good appetite.
I think Lincoln was greater than Washington.
Women should not be allowed to drink in cocktail bars.
A large number of people are guilty of bad sexual conduct.
If the money were right, I would like to work for a circus or carnival.
(Paul, 53)

The resulting test was administered to the patients at the University of Minnesota mental hospital as well as the (presumably sane) staff there (all white, Protestant, Minnesotans who came to be known as the “Minnesota Normals”). Statistical analysis was then done to determine which questions more accurately predicted whether the user had a mental illness and more specifically, what kind.²

This was quickly generalized: people who scored above-average on the scales for Hysteria or Depression (but not high enough to actually have a mental illness) could be said to have hysterical or depressive *personalities*, even though there was absolutely no evidence to support this leap (not that it was on particularly sturdy ground to begin with).

The resulting test was used to analyze people in business, the army, court, high school, and at the doctor’s. It was “used to screen job applicants, offer vocational advice, settle custody disputes, and determine legal status.” (Paul, 58f) And while the test engendered some backlash, it continues to be used frequently today, often as the a requirement for getting or keeping a job. Paul notes “the MMPI (in an updated version) is employed by 86% of clinical psychologists and administered, by one estimate, to 15 million Americans each year.” (63) For example, it is used by 60% of police departments to evaluate prospective officers. Meanwhile, studies show that such tests can reject as high as 60% of healthy applicants.

This is but one example — and one chapter in Paul’s book — but all the others all have similar stories. An absurd test, concocted through absurd means, completely untested, ends up becoming a powerful societal force. All the more reason for us to speak out about them.

1. Incidentally, although Terman did not put his name on the test, his family continues to have a presence at Stanford. His son Frederick Emmons Terman was a professor of engineering (and later provost); the Terman Engineering Center, which was across the street from my dorm, is named in his honor. And down the hall from me in my dorm lived his daughter, who, in full disclosure, I ate meals with a couple times.
2. Not that this methodology is necessarily flawed, although it leads to some interesting conclusions. Paul writes that in one experiment, the question “that yielded some of the most useful information” about whether someone had a fascist personality was: “Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn.” (Paul, 147)

Birthday Thoughts

November 8, 2005

[Original link](#)

It's my birthday today, although it doesn't feel like it. But better than [any material presents I would want](#) is making [my on-screen debut](#). I sound so profound with a soundtrack!

Understanding Economic Jargon

November 25, 2005

[Original link](#)

These days it seems like economists are everywhere — the newspaper, the television, the school system, the bookstore — speaking in their own special brand of jargon, a language I call “economese”. Understanding what they mean is often difficult without formal training, so I’ve put together this helpful guide on the subject.

Economese

What Americans need most is a ~~good economic education~~. All too often in politics and on the news you hear
What Americans fail to understand is that the necessities of life — the food they eat, the cars they drive, the
Indeed, ~~markets~~ are such wondrous things that we must bring them into all spheres of life. Our great govern
Many people refuse to believe in ~~the market~~ and try to shelter themselves from ~~market forces~~. College profes
The average person cannot afford such a luxury. They know they are born ~~poor~~ and must work hard and for
It is only by obeying the ~~principles of economics~~ — ~~free markets, free trade, free capital flows~~ — that we will

Inspiration: [Let There Be Markets: The evangelical roots of economics, A Person Paper on Purity in Language](#)

Rewriting Reddit

December 6, 2005

[Original link](#)

Translations: [Srpsko-Hrvatski](#)

2012 note: This article was first published in 2005. After it was published, Django launched a [RemovingTheMagic](#) project to address some of my criticisms (though personally I still find it unusable), [web.py](#) inspired FriendFeed's [tor-nado.web](#) and Google's [gae.webapp](#) and others (though I still prefer [web.py](#)), and this article led to a permanent surge in Reddit traffic that still hasn't really stopped growing.



Over at [reddit.com](#), we rewrote the site from Lisp to Python in the past week. It was pretty much done in one weekend. (Disclosure: We used my [web.py](#) library.) The others knew Lisp (they wrote their whole site in it) and they knew Python (they rewrote their whole site in it) and yet they decided liked Python better for this project. The Python version had less code that ran faster and was far easier to read and maintain.

The idea that there is something better than Lisp is apparently inconceivable to some, judging from comments [on the reddit blog](#). The Lispers instead quickly set about trying to find the *real* reason behind the switch.

One assumed it must have been divine intervention, since “there seems to be no other reason for switching to an inferior language.” Another figured something else must be going on: “Could this be...a lie? To throw off competition? It’s not as though Paul Graham hasn’t hinted at this tactic in his essays...” Another chimed in: “I decided it was a prank.” Another suggested the authors simply wanted more “cut corners, hacks, and faked artisanship.”

These were, of course, extreme cases. Others assumed there must have been outside pressure. “Either libraries or hiring new programmers I guess.” Another concluded: “some vc suit wants a maintainable-by-joe-programmer product. I hope he pays you millions.”

The Lisp newsgroup, `comp.lang.lisp`, was upset about the switch that they’re currently [planning to write a competitor to reddit in Lisp](#), to show how right they are or something.

The more sane argued along the lines of saying Lisp’s value lies in being able to create [new linguistic constructs](#) and that for something like a simple web app,

this isn't necessary, since the constructs have been already built. But even this isn't true. [web.py](#) was built pretty much from scratch and uses all sorts of “new linguistic constructs” and — even better — these constructs have syntax that goes along with them and makes them reasonably readable. Sure, Python isn't Perl 6, so you can't add arbitrary syntax, but you can often find a clever way to get the job done.

Python, on the other hand, has problems of its own. The biggest is that it has dozens of web application frameworks, but none of them are any good. Pythonists are well aware of the first part but apparently not of the second, since when I tell them that I'm using my own library, the universal response is “I don't think Python needs another web application framework”. Yes, Python needs fewer web application frameworks. But it also needs one that doesn't suck.

The framework that seems most promising is [Django](#) and indeed we initially attempted to rewrite Reddit in it. As the most experienced Python programmer, I tried my best to help the others out.

Django seemed great from the outside: a nice-looking website, intelligent and talented developers, and a seeming surplus of nice features. The developers and community are extremely helpful and responsive to patches and suggestions. And all the right goals are espoused in their philosophy documents and FAQs. Unfortunately, however, they seem completely incapable of living up to them.

While Django claims that it's “loosely coupled”, using it pretty much requires fitting your code into Django's worldview. Django insists on executing your code itself, either through its command-line utility or a specialized server handler called with the appropriate environment variables and Python path. When you start a project, by default Django creates folders nested four levels deep for your code and while you can move around some files, I had trouble figuring out which ones and how.

Django's philosophy says “Explicit is better than implicit”, but Django has all sorts of magic. Database models you create in one file magically appear someplace else deep inside the Django module with a different name. When your model function is called, new things have been added to its variable-space and old ones removed. (I'm told they're currently working on fixing both of these, though.)

Another Django goal is “less code”, at least for you. But Django is simply full of code. Inside the django module are 10 different folders and inside each of those are a few more. By the time you actually build a site in the Django tutorial, you've imported `django.core.meta`, `django.models.polls`, `django.conf.urls.defaults.*`, `django.utils.httpwrappers.HttpResponse`, and `django.core.extensions.render_to_response`. It's not clear how anyone is supposed to remember all that, especially since there appear to be no

guiding principles for what goes where or how it's named. Three of these are inserted automatically by the start scripts, but you still need to memorize such names for every other function you want to use.

But Django's most important problem is that its developers seem incapable of designing a decent API. They're clearly capable Python programmers — their code uses all sorts of bizarre tricks. And they're clearly able to write code that works — they have all sorts of interesting features. But they can't seem to shape this code into something that other people can use.

Their APIs are ugly and regularly missing key features: the database API figures out queries by counting underscores but has no special syntax for JOINS, the template system requires four curly braces around every variable and can't do any sort of computation, the form API requires 15 lines to process a form and can't automatically generate the template.

I tried my best to fix things — and the Django community was extremely supportive — but the task simply dwarfed me. I just couldn't do it mentally, let alone with the time constraints of having to actually build my own application for my own startup.

And so, Lisp and Django found wanting, we're left with [web.py](#). I'd like to say that web.py learned from these mistakes and was designed to avoid them, but the truth is that web.py was written long before all this and managed to avoid them anyway.

The way I wrote web.py was simple: I imagined how things should work and then I made that happen. Sometimes making things just work takes a lot of code. Sometimes it only takes a little. But either way, that fact is hidden from the user — they just get the ideal API.

So how should things work? The first principle is that code should be clear and simple. If you want to output some text, you call `web.output`. If you want to get form input, you call `web.input`. There's nothing particularly hard to remember.

The second principle is that web.py should fit your code, not the other way around. Every function in web.py is completely independent, you can use whichever ones you want. You can put your files wherever you like, and web.py will happily follow along. If you want a piece of code to be run as a web app, you call `web.run`, you don't put your code in the magical place so that web.py can run you.

The third principle is that web.py should, by default, do the right thing by the Web. This means distinguishing between GET and POST properly. It means simple, canonical URLs which synonyms redirect to. It means readable HTML with the proper HTTP headers.

And that, as far as I'm concerned, are pretty much all the principles you need. They seem pretty simple and obvious to me and I'm even willing to fudge on some of them, but no other Python web app framework seems to even come close. (If you know of one, tell me and I'll happily recant. I don't want to be in this business.) Until then, it looks like I'm forced to do that horrible thing I'd rather not do: release one more Python web application framework into the world.

A Brief History of Ajax

December 22, 2005

[Original link](#)

New technology quickly becomes so pervasive that it's sometimes hard to remember what things were like before it. The latest example of this in miniature is the technique known as Ajax, which has become so widespread that it's often thought that the technique has been around practically forever.

In some ways it has. During the first big stretch of browser innovation, Netscape added a feature known as LiveScript, which allowed people to put small scripts in web pages so that they could continue to do things after you'd downloaded them. One early example was the Netscape form system, which would tell you if you'd entered an invalid value for a field as soon as you entered it, instead of after you tried to submit the form to the server.

LiveScript became JavaScript and grew more powerful, leading to a technique known as Dynamic HTML, which was typically used to make things fly around the screen and change around in response to user input. Doing anything serious with Dynamic HTML was painful, however, because all the major browsers implemented its pieces slightly differently.

Shortly before web development died out, in early versions of Mozilla, Netscape showed a new kind of technique. I don't think it ever had a name, but we could call it Dynamic XML. The most vivid example I remember seeing was a mockup of an Amazon.com search result. The webpage looked just like a typical Amazon.com search result page, but instead of being written in HTML it was a piece of XML data which was then rendered for the user by a piece of JavaScript. The cool part was that this meant the rendering could be changed on the fly — there were a bunch of buttons that would allow you to sort the books in different ways and have them display using different schemes.

Shortly thereafter the bubble burst and web development crashed. Not, however, before Microsoft added a little-known function call named XMLHttpRequest to IE5. Mozilla quickly followed suit and, while nobody I know used it, the function stayed there, just waiting to be taken advantage of.

XMLHttpRequest allowed the JavaScript inside web pages to do something they could never really do before: get more data.¹ Before, all the data either had to be sent with the web page. If you wanted more data or new data, you had to grab another web page. The JavaScript inside web pages couldn't talk to the outside world. XMLHttpRequest changed that, allowing web pages to get more data from the server whenever they pleased.

Google was apparently the first to realize what a sea change this was. With Gmail and Google Maps, they built applications that took advantage of this

to provide a user interface that was much more like a web application. (The startup Oddpost, bought by Yahoo, actually predated this but their software was for-pay and so they didn't receive as much attention.)

With Gmail, for example, the application is continually asking the server if there's new email. If there is, then it live updates the page, it doesn't make you download a new one. And Google Maps lets you drag a map around and, as you do so, automatically downloads the parts of it you want to look at inline, without making you wait for a whole new page to download.

Jesse James Garrett of Adaptive Path described this new tactic as Ajax (Asynchronous Javascript And XML) [in an essay](#) and the term immediately took off. Everyone began using the technique in their own software and JavaScript toolkits sprung up to make doing so even easier.

And the rest is future history.

Both systems were relatively ill-supported by browsers in my experience. They were, after all, hacks. So while they both seemed extremely cool (KnowNow, in particular, had an awesome demo that allowed for a WYSIWYG SubEthaEdit-style live collaboration session in a browser), they never really took off.

Now apparently there is another technique, which I was unaware of, that [involved changing the URL of an iframe](#) to load new JavaScript. I'm not sure why this technique didn't quite take off. While Google Maps apparently used it (and Oddpost probably did as well), I don't know of any other major users.

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1. As my commenters point out — and as I well knew, but momentarily forgotten — this isn't really true. Before XMLHttpRequest, people used a trick of not closing the connection to the server. The server would keep adding more and more to the page, never saying it had finished downloading. Ka-Ping Yee used this technique to make a [real-time chat system](#) based on an animated GIF. And the ill-fated startup KnowNow used a similar technique with JavaScript to allow for live-updating pages.

HOWTO: Be more productive

December 28, 2005

[Original link](#)

Translations:

“With all the time you spend watching TV,” he tells me, “you could have written a novel by now.” It’s hard to disagree with the sentiment — writing a novel is undoubtedly a better use of time than watching TV — but what about the hidden assumption? Such comments imply that time is “fungible” — that time spent watching TV can just as easily be spent writing a novel. And sadly, that’s just not the case.

Time has various levels of quality. If I’m walking to the subway station and I’ve forgotten my notebook, then it’s pretty hard for me to write more than a couple paragraphs. And it’s tough to focus when you keep getting interrupted. There’s also a mental component: sometimes I feel happy and motivated and ready to work on something, but other times I feel so sad and tired I can only watch TV.

If you want to be more productive then, you have to recognize this fact and deal with it. First, you have to make the best of each kind of time. And second, you have to try to make your time higher-quality.

Spend time efficiently

Choose good problems

Life is short (or so I’m told) so why waste it doing something dumb? It’s easy to start working on something because it’s convenient, but you should always be questioning yourself about it. Is there something more important you can work on? Why don’t you do that instead? Such questions are hard to face up to (eventually, if you follow this rule, you’ll have to ask yourself why you’re not working on the most important problem in the world) but each little step makes you more productive.

This isn’t to say that all your time should be spent on the most important problem in the world. Mine certainly isn’t (after all, I’m writing this essay). But it’s definitely the standard against which I measure my life.

Have a bunch of them

Another common myth is that you’ll get more done if you pick one problem and focus on it exclusively. I find this is hardly ever true. Just this moment

for example, I'm trying to fix my posture, exercise some muscles, drink some fluids, clean off my desk, IM with my brother, and write this essay. Over the course the day, I've worked on this essay, read a book, had some food, answered some email, chatted with friends, done some shopping, worked on a couple other essays, backed up my hard drive, and organized my book list. In the past week I've worked on several different software projects, read several different books, studied a couple different programming languages, moved some of my stuff, and so on.

Having a lot of different projects gives you work for different qualities of time. Plus, you'll have other things to work on if you get stuck or bored (and that can give your mind time to unstick yourself).

It also makes you more creative. Creativity comes from applying things you learn in other fields to the field you work in. If you have a bunch of different projects going in different fields, then you have many more ideas you can apply.

Make a list

Coming up with a bunch of different things to work on shouldn't be hard — most people have tons of stuff they want to get done. But if you try to keep it all in your head it quickly gets overwhelming. The psychic pressure of having to remember all of it can make you crazy. The solution is again simple: write it down.

Once you have a list of all the things you want to do, you can organize it by kind. For example, my list is programming, writing, thinking, errands, reading, listening, and watching (in that order).

Most major projects involve a bunch of these different tasks. Writing this, for example, involves reading about other procrastination systems, thinking up new sections of the article, cleaning up sentences, emailing people with questions, and so on, all in addition to the actual work of writing the text. Each task can go under the appropriate section, so that you can do it when you have the right kind of time.

Integrate the list with your life Once you have this list, the problem becomes remembering to look at it. And the best way to remember to look at it is to make looking at it what you would do anyway. For example, I keep a stack of books on my desk, with the ones I'm currently reading on top. When I need a book to read, I just grab the top one off the stack.

I do the same thing with TV/movies. Whenever I hear about a movie I should watch, I put it in a special folder on my computer. Now whenever I feel like watching TV, I just open up that folder.

I've also thought about some more intrusive ways of doing this. For example, a web page that pops up with a list of articles in my "to read" folder whenever I

try to check some weblogs. Or maybe even a window that pops up with work suggestions occasionally for me to see when I'm goofing off.

Make your time higher quality

Making the best use of the time you have can only get you so far. The much more important problem is making more higher quality time for yourself. Most people's time is eaten up by things like school and work. Obviously if you attend one of these, you should stop. But what else can you do?

Ease physical constraints

Carry pen and paper Pretty much everyone interesting I know has some sort of pocket notebook they carry at all times. Pen and paper is immediately useful in all kinds of circumstances — if you need to write something down for somebody, take notes on something, scratch down an idea, and so on. I've even written whole articles in the subway.¹

(I used to do this, but now I just carry my computerphone everywhere. It doesn't let me give people information physically, but it makes up for it by giving me something to read all the time (email) and pushing my notes straight into my email inbox, where I'm forced to deal with them right away.)

Avoid being interrupted For tasks that require serious focus, you should avoid getting interrupted. One simple way is to go somewhere interrupters can't find you. Another is to set up an agreement with the people around you: "don't bother me when the door is closed" or "IM me if I have headphones on" (and then you can ignore the IMs until you're free).

You don't want to overdo it. Sometimes if you're really wasting time you *should* be distracted. It's a much better use of time to help someone else with their problem than it is to sit and read the news. That's why setting up specific agreements is a good idea: you *can* be interrupted when you're not really focusing.

Ease mental constraints

Eat, sleep, exercise Time when you're hungry or tired or twitchy is low-quality time. Improving it is simple: eat, sleep, and exercise. Yet I somehow manage to screw up even this. I don't like going to get food, so I'll often work right through being hungry and end up so tired out that I can't bring myself to go get food.²

It's tempting to say to yourself, "I know I'm tired but I can't take a nap — I have work to do". In fact, you'll be much more productive if you do take that

nap, since you'll improve the quality of the day's remaining time and you were going to have to sleep sometime anyway.

I don't really exercise much so I'm probably not the best person to give advice on that bit, but I do try to work it in where I can. While I'm lying down reading, I do situps. And when I need to go somewhere on foot, I run.

Talk to cheerful people Easing mental constraints is much harder. One thing that helps is having friends who are cheerful. For example, I always find myself much more inclined to work after talking to Paul Graham or Dan Connolly — they just radiate energy. It's tempting to think that you need to get away from people and shut yourself off in your room to do any real work, but this can be so demoralizing that it's actually less efficient.

Share the load Even if your friends aren't cheerful, just working on a hard problem with someone else makes it *much* easier. For one thing, the mental weight gets spread across both people. For another, having someone else there forces you to work instead of getting distracted.

Procrastination and the mental force field But all of this is sort of dodging the issue. The real productivity problem people have is procrastination. It's something of a dirty little secret, but *everyone* procrastinates — severely. It's not just you. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't try to stop it.

What is procrastination? To the outside observer, it looks like you're just doing something "fun" (like playing a game or reading the news) instead of doing your actual work. (This usually causes the outside observer to think you're lazy and bad.) But the real question is: what's going on inside your head?

I've spent a bunch of time trying to explore this and the best way I can describe it is that your brain puts up a sort of mental force field around a task. Ever play with two magnets? If you orient the magnets properly and try to push them towards each other, they'll repel fiercely. As you move them around, you can sort of feel out the edges of the magnetic field. And as you try to bring the magnets together, the field will push you back or off in another direction.

The mental block seems to work in the same way. It's not particularly solid or visible, but you can sort of feel it around the edges. And the more you try to go towards it the more it pushes you away. And so, not surprisingly, you end up going in another direction.³

And just as you can't get two repelling magnets to sit together just by pushing real hard — they'll fling back as soon as you stop pushing — I've never been able to overcome this mental force field through sheer willpower. Instead, you have to be sneaky about it — you have to rotate a magnet.

So what causes the mental force field? There appear to be two major factors: whether the task is hard and whether it's assigned.

Hard problems Break it down

The first kind of hard problem is the problem that's too big. Say you want to build a recipe organizing program. Nobody can really just sit down and build a recipe organizer. That's a goal, not a task. A task is a specific concrete step you can take towards your goal. A good first task might be something like "draw a mockup of the screen that displays a recipe". Now that's something you can do.⁴

And when you do that, the next steps become clearer. You have to decide what a recipe consists of, what kind of search features are needed, how to structure the recipe database, and so on. You build up a momentum, each task leading to the next. And as your brain gets crunching on the subject, it becomes easier to solve that subject's problems.

For each of my big projects, I think of all the tasks I can do next for them and add them to my categorized todo list (see above). And when I stop working on something, I add its next possible tasks to the todo list.

Simplify it

Another kind of hard problem is the one that's too complicated or audacious. Writing a book seems daunting, so start by doing an essay. If an essay is too much, start by writing a paragraph summary. The important thing is to have something done right away.

Once you have something, you can judge it more accurately and understand the problem better. It's also much easier to improve something that already exists than to work at a blank page. If your paragraph goes well, then maybe it can grow into an essay and then into a book, little by little, a perfectly reasonable piece of writing all the way through..

Think about it

Often the key to solving a hard problem will be getting some piece of inspiration. If you don't know much about the field, you should obviously start by researching it — see how other people did things, get a sense of the terrain. Sit and try and understand the field fully. Do some smaller problems to see if you have a handle on it.

Assigned problems Assigned problems are problems you're told to work on. Numerous psychology experiments have found that when you try to "incentivize" people to do something, they're less likely to do it and do a worse job. External incentives, like rewards and punishments, kills what psychologists call your "intrinsic motivation" — your natural interest in the problem. (This is one of the most thoroughly replicated findings of social psychology — over 70 studies have found that rewards undermine interest in the task.)⁵ People's heads seem to have a deep avoidance of being told what to do.⁶

The weird thing is that this phenomenon isn't just limited to other people — it even happens when you try to tell *yourself* what to do! If you say to yourself, “I should really work on X, that’s the most important thing to do right now” then all of the sudden X becomes the toughest thing in the world to make yourself work on. But as soon as Y becomes the most important thing, the exact same X becomes much easier.

Create a false assignment

This presents a rather obvious solution: if you want to work on X, tell yourself to do Y. Unfortunately, it’s sort of difficult to trick yourself intentionally, because you know you’re doing it.⁷ So you’ve got to be sneaky about it.

One way is to get someone else to assign something to you. The most famous instance of this is grad students who are required to write a dissertation, a monumentally difficult task that they need to do to graduate. And so, to avoid doing this, grad students end up doing all sorts of other hard stuff.

The task has to both seem important (you have to do this to graduate!) and big (hundreds of pages of your best work!) but not actually be so important that putting it off is going to be a disaster.

Don’t assign problems to yourself

It’s very tempting to say “alright, I need to put all this aside, hunker down and finish this essay”. Even worse is to try to bribe yourself into doing something, like saying “alright, if I just finish this essay then I’ll go and eat some candy”. But the absolute worst of all is to get someone else to try to force you to do something.

All of these are very tempting — I’ve done them all myself — but they’re completely counterproductive. In all three cases, you’ve basically assigned yourself a task. Now your brain is going to do everything it can to escape it.

Make things fun

Hard work isn’t supposed to be pleasant, we’re told. But in fact it’s probably the most enjoyable thing I do. Not only does a tough problem completely absorb you while you’re trying to solve it, but afterwards you feel wonderful having accomplished something so serious.

So the secret to getting yourself to do something is not to convince yourself you have to do it, but to convince yourself that it’s fun. And if it isn’t, then you need to make it fun.

I first got serious about this when I had to write essays for college. Writing essays isn’t a particularly hard task, but it sure is assigned. Who would voluntarily write a couple pages connecting the observations of two random books? So I started making the essays into my own little jokes. For one, I decided to write each paragraph in its own little style, trying my best to imitate various forms of speech. (This had the added benefit of padding things out.)⁸

Another way to make things more fun is to solve the meta-problem. Instead of building a web application, try building a web application framework with this as the example app. Not only will the task be more enjoyable, but the result will probably be more useful.

Conclusion

There are a lot of myths about productivity — that time is fungible, that focusing is good, that bribing yourself is effective, that hard work is unpleasant, that procrastinating is unnatural — but they all have a common theme: a conception of real work as something that goes against your natural inclinations.

And for most people, in most jobs, this may be the case. There's no reason you should be inclined to write boring essays or file pointless memos. And if society is going to force you to do so anyway, then you need to learn to shut out the voices in your head telling you to stop.

But if you're trying to do something worthwhile and creative, then shutting down your brain is entirely the wrong way to go. The real secret to productivity is the reverse: to listen to your body. To eat when you're hungry, to sleep when you're tired, to take a break when you're bored, to work on projects that seem fun and interesting.

It seems all too simple. It doesn't involve any fancy acronyms or self-determination or personal testimonials from successful businessmen. It almost seems like common sense. But society's conception of work has pushed us in the opposite direction. If we want to be more productive, all we need to do is turn around.

Further reading

If you want to learn more about the psychology of motivation, there is nothing better than [Alfie Kohn](#). He's written [many articles on the subject](#) and an entire book, [Punished by Rewards](#), which I highly recommend.

I hope to address how to quit school in a future essay, but you should really just go out and pick up [The Teenage Liberation Handbook](#). If you're a computer person, one way to quit your job is by applying for funding from [Y Combinator](#). Meanwhile, Mickey Z's book [The Murdering of My Years](#) features artists and activists describing how they manage to make ends meet while still doing what they want.

Notes

1. Believe it or not, I actually have written in subways. It's easy to come up with excuses as to why you're not actually working — you don't have enough time before your next appointment, people are making noise downstairs, etc. — but I find that when the inspiration strikes me, I can actually write stuff down on a subway car, where it's absurdly loud and I only have a couple minutes before I have to get out and start walking.
2. The same problem exists for sleep. There's nothing worse than being too tired to go to bed — you just feel like a zombie.
3. Now it turns out I experience this same phenomenon in another area: shyness. I often don't want to call a stranger up on the phone or go talk to someone at a party and I have the exact same mental field pushing me off in some other direction. I suspect this might be because shyness is also a trait that results from a problematic childhood. (See "Assigned problems".) Of course, this is all very speculative.
4. While the terminology I use here ("next concrete step") is derived from David Allen's *Getting Things Done*, a lot of the principles here are (perhaps even unconsciously) applied in Extreme Programming (XP). Extreme Programming is presented as this system for keeping programs organized, but I find that a lot of it is actually good advice for avoid procrastination. For example, pair programming automatically spreads the mental weight of the task across two people as well as giving people something useful to do during lower-quality time. Breaking a project down into concrete steps is another key part of XP, as is getting something that works done right away and improving on it ("Simplify it" *infra*). And these are just the things that aren't programming-specific.
5. For a fantastic overview of the literature, see Alfie Kohn, *Punished By Rewards*. This specific claim is drawn from his article [Challenging Behaviorist Dogma: Myths About Money and Motivation](#).
6. I originally simply assumed this was somehow biological, but Paul Graham pointed out it's more likely learned. When you're little, your parents try their best to manipulate you. They say do your homework and your mind tries to wriggle free and think about something else. Soon enough the wriggling becomes habit. Either way, it's going to be a tough problem to fix. I've given up trying to change this; now I try to work around it.
7. Richard Feynman tells a story about how he was trying to explore his own dreams, much the way I've tried to explore my own procrastination. Each night, he'd try to observe what happened to himself as he fell asleep:

I'm dreaming one night as usual, making observations, ... and then I realize I've been sleeping with the back of my head against a brass rod. I put my hand behind my head and I feel that the back of my head is *soft*. I think, "Aha! That's why I've been

able to make all these observations in my dreams: the brass rod has disturbed my visual cortex. All I have to do is sleep with a brass rod under my head and I can make these observations any time I want. So I think I'll stop making observations on this one and go into deeper sleep."

When I woke up later, there was no brass rod, nor was the back of my head soft. Somehow ... my brain had invented false reasons as to why I shouldn't [observe my dreams] any more. (*Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman!*, 50)

Your brain is a lot more powerful than you are.

8. So, for example, instead of writing "By contrast, Riis doesn't quote many people.", I wrote: "Riis, however, whether because of a personal deficit in the skill-based capacity required for collecting aurally-transmitted person-centered contemporaneous ethnographies into published paper-based informative accounts or simply a lack of preference for the reportage of community-located informational correspondents, demonstrates a total failure in producing a comparable result."

The professor, apparently seriously desensitized to bad writing, never seemed to realize I was joking (despite going over the paper with me one-on-one!).

Colombia is Bleeding

January 4, 2006

[Original link](#)

Nellie McKay is having trouble getting her new album, Pretty Little Head, released, apparently due to the content of artistic differences with the record label. The best song on the album, and one that is particularly mentioned in this regard, is “Columbia is Bleeding”, her vicious portrayal of college life while students are oblivious to [the animal torture going on around them](#).

However, it seems like the song might really be more appropriate for [a different Colombia](#). Here, then, are those lyrics...

another day begins
you check the news
ah-sass-ih-nay-she-uns
here come the footstep of the man who'll end your life
the rifle's is fitted in
and there you are
the shot is targeted
then a scream

hold your placard up / cold and coffee cup
after go to a bar
hand your flier out / must admire
how dedicated you are
i don't wanna know if biz is boomin'
or the goods you make are on sale
i don't wanna know 'bout your [“saintly glow”](#) or your [“noble” show](#)
or if you think you ought to bail

Chris Hogan / she had to run
last night'd been a lot of fun
but now it's french / a little tense
she hadn't done the reading
there she sat / hoped to pass
didn't think to face the fact
that oh by gosh o lack o lass
colombia is bleeding
walkin' down / off the bus
Vicky Lucas crossed campus was
thinkin' how she's made it now
that successful feeling
walked by fast / hoped to pass no clue 'bout the shirt she has

and while she's sittin' in lit class
colombia is bleeding

the union is in town
and there they are
the forces come on down
then a scream

everybody knows protesters are those
schmoes who don't have a life
see these businessmen seeking profit and
have to suffer such strife
i don't wanna know if the world is flat
or you can't check your email
i don't wanna know [if your cell won't work or that guy's a jerk](#)
or if you think you ought to bail

generalize, proselytize, verbs were spillin' out their sides
as Charles Eise buys his supplies gets ready for a meeting
tried for track / hit the mat
didn't think to face the fact
that while he's thinkin' "man, that's wack!"
colombia is bleeding
quite a snob he didn't tip
nice guy Rob watched the eclipse
and looked around / "i've made it now
i'm just so glad to be here"
made a pass / got hand slapped
didn't think to face the fact
that while he's mackin' on that ass
colombia is bleeding

the catholic religion
[decides to help the poor](#)
while we rename the school in
[which we train the men](#) and
then a scream

they're just criminals / make good worker cells
[pushing drugs and disease](#)
empire's pretty fun / we got power, son
[we can do as we please](#)
i don't wanna know 'bout your drug war claims
or how it's gonna fail
i don't wanna know if you need to show you're a real madman
or you think you're gonna bail
hail!

Tee-Tee Green / pressed mezzanine

ended up beside the team
and gave a cheer / got some beers
with friends who started drinkin'
back with Zach said "i look fat"
didn't think to face the fact
that while she's under self-attack
colombia is bleeding
Rodney J. began to pray
his momma lost her life that day
had been a year / it wasn't clear
if he was safe or screamin'
as he jabbed the bible flap
he didn't think to face the beast
of profiteering that killed the priest
colombia is bleeding
this is america

Some Announcements

January 5, 2006

[Original link](#)

My new Python web application library, [web.py](#), is out.

[An essay of mine about productivity](#) has made the rounds. I'm not sure it's finished, but lots of people have already read it and loved it, so I thought I might as well tell you about it.

On a similar note, over the winter break I wrote a program called [arcget](#) to download web sites from the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine. There are still a few more changes I'd like to make, but I'm unlikely to get to them anytime soon.

The reason I built [arcget](#) was so I could put up the [Lingua Franca archive](#). *Lingua Franca* was a fantastic magazine about academic life that ran for several years before going bust in the recession. Their website, with many of their fantastic articles, sadly disappeared with it (and thus from Google).

Now you can read such classics as [Oh My Darwin!](#), [A Most Dangerous Method](#), and [Who Owns The Sixties?](#).

Of course, these and many others are collected into the wonderful collection [Quick Studies](#) which, along, with [Boob Jubilee](#) is some of the most enjoyable and edifying material out there — combining both dazzlingly intriguing writing with meaty subjects.

Anyway, that should keep you busy for a while.

Say Goodbye to Embarrassment

January 8, 2006

[Original link](#)

I've decided to stop being embarrassed. I'm saying goodbye to the whole thing: that growing suspicion as the moment approaches, that sense of realization when it comes, that rush of blood reddening your cheeks, that brief but powerful desire to jump out of your own skin, and then finally that attempt big fake smile trying to cover it all. Sure, it was fun for a while, but I think it's outlived its usefulness. It's time for embarrassment to go.

Turning off an emotion is always a tough decision. I remember how a couple years ago I decided to say goodbye to anger. Sure, anger has its bright moments — you haven't really lived until you've known that special joy of hurling a chair across the room — but it's also quite time-consuming. Every time someone comes up and hits you, you have to run around chasing after them. And once you start getting angry it's hard to stop — an angry person doesn't really want to calm down, it sort of *enjoys* being angry. So I finally decided to get rid of the whole thing. And you know what? I haven't regretted the decision one bit.

Regret — that's another interesting emotion. I mean, what purpose does it really serve? "There's no use crying over spilled milk," my mom once told me when I started sobbing after I got milk all over the floor while trying to make cereal. "I suppose that's true," I replied between sobs. "Although maybe my tears will dilute the milk and make it stick to the floor less." But I was wrong — the milk stayed just as sticky. So maybe regret should be the next one to go.

But actually, I think it's going to be frustration. It's not discussed much, but frustration is really quite distracting. You're trying to solve some difficult problem but it's just not working. Instead of taking a moment to try and think of the solution, you just keep getting more and more frustrated until you start jumping up and down and smashing various things. So not only do you waste time jumping, but you also have to pay to replace the stuff you smashed. It's really a net loss.

But that's a decision for another time. Today it's time for embarrassment to join anger in the wastebasket of deactivated emotions. It might take some getting used to at first — when friends try to tease me about something I'll probably start to react before realizing there's just no need for it anymore — but before long I'm sure it will seem normal. Even if I'm a less normal person for it.

In His Own Words 2

January 17, 2006

[Original link](#)

I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season."

(Martin Luther King, Jr., [Letter from Birmingham Jail](#))

One year ago: [In His Own Words](#).

More MLKJ Day

January 27, 2006

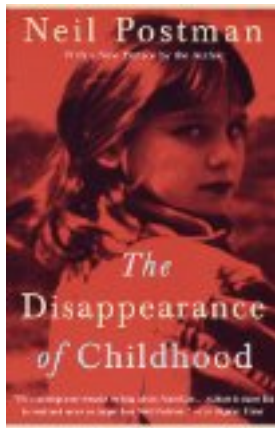
[Original link](#)

This episode of *The Boondocks* about Martin Luther King, Jr. is amazing. Humorous, thoughtful, deeply touching. It provides a glimpse of what truly emancipatory television might look like.

The Disappearance of Thought

January 28, 2006

[Original link](#)



Neil Postman is generally considered a thoughtful liberal critic of technology and its deleterious effect on our culture. My friends praise his attacks on television and rethinking of education. But it's hard for me to take him seriously after reading his *The Disappearance of Childhood*, in which he argues (p. 87) that television is bad because it teaches children homosexuality is normal and praises the Moral Majority as being the only group to realize this important truth. And true, he admits it's an exaggeration to say "such a situation necessarily and categorically signifies cultural degeneration", he does insist it clearly "poses dangers".

Postman's argument is that childhood is the creation of the printing press, which led to a culture in which learning to read was necessary to become an adult, and thus children became a separate group. In the same way, he argues, the emergence of television, which requires no special training to view, is destroying the distinction between children and adults and bringing us back to that pre-literate age.

Not once does Postman ever explain why this should be considered a bad thing. Instead, his book simply assumes it's obvious that we need to pretend to keep kids from naughty words (even though they know them anyway), that we need to make it hard for kids to learn about sex, that we need to pretend for them that political leaders are infallible, etc.

One is almost tempted to believe the book is tounge-in-cheek, an impression assisted by the preface to the second edition — the only place where actual children are ever considered — which quotes letters Postman has received from

students who have read portions of the book and disagree completely with his argument that childhood is disappearing. They don't, however, criticize childhood itself, so Postman assumes they are in favor of it and praises them as "a force in preserving childhood", a sort of "moral majority".

And this, in miniature, is the problem with the whole book. Postman investigates the history of childhood and modern thought, finding it a creation of the printing press, and thus a social and not a biological entity. But instead of investigating whether the result was good or bad, he simply ignores his own work and proceeds directly to assuming it must be good. What we are witnessing here is not the disappearance of childhood, but the disappearance of thought.

Wassup?

March 27, 2006

[Original link](#)

Wow, it's been a long time since we last talked. In fairness, I've been hard at work. As you probably know, for a long time I've been working on a startup called [infogami](#). If you're interested in the full story, [I've written a long blog post about it](#) but in short, last November I joined the amazing team behind [reddit](#), merging our two companies.

Then, about a month ago, I quietly released the first version of [infogami](#) to the public. It was a very early version with hardly any features and I didn't tell anyone about it, but we still got several thousand sites created using the software.

Since then, I've kept my promise of releasing a new feature every day, steadily improving the site bit by bit. There are a couple things I'm particularly proud of, including our advanced permissions system which gives detailed control over exactly who can do what with your site and [the blame feature](#) that was put together by my friends Zack Coburn and Sean B. Palmer which shows exactly who wrote what in a document. And of course there's much more to come.

Of course, working on just one project all the time is a little much, so I've been taking little breaks to work on new hacks. This weekend I built a little site called (for now, at least) [Simple Amazon](#). I was annoyed with how slow it was to search Amazon — first you have to load their complicated front page, type in your search in the tiny hidden box, then click the link to filter it just for books and so on. With Simple Amazon, you just go to a URL like:

<http://books.theinfo.org/lisp>

and you get a listing of lisp books superfast with covers and links to price checks. You can also use links like:

<http://books.theinfo.org/go/0262011530>

to provide shorter links to Amazon.

Anyway, I guess that's about it for now. If you're interested in following my more day-to-day work, I'm publishing company-related stuff over on the [infogami blog](#). Currently it's mostly just reports about our new features, but I hope to write more about the startup life and things like that.

All the best!

What It Means To Be An Intellectual

April 17, 2006

[Original link](#)

A friend sent me an email this morning and at the end of it, almost as an afterthought, he responded to a quote I'd sent him from an author praising books. "He would say that," my friend replied, "he's a writer."

I want to quibble with this statement — how is it that we can dismiss someone's argument simply because of their job? — but doing so would seem bizarre. There's a social norm that how much we discuss something should be roughly proportional to its importance. Mountains of print may be spilled on the issues of international relations but spending a couple emails [discussing punctuation](#) would seem dreadfully bizarre.

There's just one problem: I *enjoy* deep discussions of punctuation and other trivialities. I could try to justify this taste — some argument that we should think about everything we do so that we don't do everything we think about — but why bother? Do I have to justify enjoying certain television shows as well? At some point, isn't pure enjoyment just enough? After all, [time isn't fungible](#).

But of course, the same drive that leads me to question punctuation leads me to question the drive itself, and thus this essay.

What is "this drive"? It's the tendency to not simply accept things as they are but to want to think about them, to understand them. To not be content to simply feel sad but [to ask what sadness means](#). To not just get a bus pass but [to think about the economic reasons getting a bus pass makes sense](#). I call this tendency the intellectual.

The word "intellectual" has a bit of a bad rap. When I think of the word I hear a man with a southern accent sneering at it. But this stain seems appropriate — *the idea* has a bad rap.

And why is that? One reason is that many people simply don't like to think about things. Perhaps it reminds them of school, which they didn't enjoy, and they don't want to go back there. Another is that they're busy people — men of action — and they don't have time to sit and think about every little detail. But mostly it's just because they think it's a waste of time. What's the point? What difference does it make what you think about punctuation? It's not going to affect anything.

This is the argument that's often used when demonizing intellectuals. As Thomas Frank summarizes the argument:

The same bunch of sneaking intellectuals are responsible for the content of Hollywood movies and for the income tax, by which they steal from the rest of us. They do no useful work, producing nothing but movies and newspaper columns while they freeload on the labor of others. (116)

When I think of intellectuals, though, I don't really think of Hollywood producers or politicians or even newspaper columnists. But the people I do think of seem to have something else in common. They don't just love thinking, they love language. They love its tricks and intricacies, its games, the way it gets written down, the books it gets written into, the libraries those books are in, and the typography those books use.

Upon reflection this makes perfect sense. Language is the medium of thought and so it's no surprise that someone who spends a lot of time thinking spends a lot of time thinking about how to communicate their thoughts as well. And indeed, all the intellectuals that come to mind write, not because they have to or get paid to, but simply for its own sake. What good is thinking if you can't share?

This contrasts with how intellectuals are commonly thought of — namely as pretentious elitist snobs. But real intellectuals, at least in the sense I'm using the term, are anything but. They love nothing more than explaining their ideas so that anyone who's interested can understand them. They only seem pretentious because discussing such things is so bizarre.

This stereotype actually seems more like the caricature of the academic than the intellectual. (It's perhaps worth noting that most of the intellectuals I can think of *aren't* academics or at least have left the academy.) Far from being intellectuals, academics are encouraged to be almost the opposite. Instead of trying to explain things simply, they're rewarded for making them seem more complicated. Instead of trying to learn about everything, they're forced to focus in on their little subdiscipline. Instead of loving books, they have to love gabbing — up in front of class or at office hour with students or at professional conferences or faculty meetings.

Not that there's anything wrong with that. At the beginning I declined to justify my being an intellectual on any grounds other than pure personal enjoyment. And here, at the end, I can't think of any better justification. Certainly people should think deeply about their actions and the world's problems and other important topics. But the other ones? That's little more than personal preference.

Do Faces Cause Depression?: Self-Experimentation in Science

April 23, 2006

[Original link](#)

It all started, Seth Roberts says, when he wanted more practice doing experiments. The closest thing at hand was himself. He was trying to treat his acne and, although convinced that the pills were effective and the cream was not, he decided to chart their effectiveness anyway for practice. The results were the exact opposite of what he expected — the cream helped and the pills did not. His acne went away and Roberts went looking for bigger problems to solve.

It's obvious that sleep follows some sort of circular rhythm, an inner biological clock that makes us tired at the end of the day and refreshed at the beginning. This is the clock that gets thrown off when we travel and thus causes jet lag, for example. But what if other things mess with the clock than simply when we go to sleep?

It wasn't simply academic for Roberts, who frustrated from a serious bout of "early awakening", in which he'd wake up around 4am feeling tired but unable to get back to sleep for another couple of hours. Roberts searched for a way to cure his problem but none of the standard methods seemed appropriate. So he decided to research the subject.

A 1979 study of people in caves suggested that contact with other people affected when we fell asleep and a 1985 survey of daily activities in 12 countries led to another clue: Americans were much more often awake around midnight than people in any other country and the only distinguishing factor seemed to be late-night television. Perhaps, Roberts thought, watching television could influence sleeping rhythm?

The most popular late-night television show at the time the study was done was the *The Tonight Show*, with its person-heavy monologue. So one morning Roberts decided to watch Jay Leno and David Letterman's monologues. It seemed to have no impact; an otherwise normal day. But the *next* morning he woke up feeling great.

It was hard to believe that the television show could be responsible, so Roberts decided to formalize the study. Every hour he'd write down three numbers between 0 and 100 to measure how unhappy/happy, irritable/serene, and reluctant/eager he was. And then he tried turning the TV watching on and off again to see if it impacted his mood. It did — he always felt better the next day.

So he tried adjusting the show and television set, finding that, despite his love for *The Simpsons*, life-size human faces at about a meter away for 30 minutes worked best.

I have to concede, at this point, that the results sound fairly absurd and unbelievable. But reading [Roberts's papers on the subject](#), what's striking is how careful he is about the subject. An actual psychologist, publishing in psychology journals, he's taken into account every objection. The results *cannot* be, as one would first expect, simply self-induced by his own wishes. For one, Roberts took quantitative notes, so his memory couldn't be playing tricks on him. For another, the size of the difference was too large to be explained through normal explanations. If Roberts could simply *will* himself into waking up happy, why hadn't he done it before? Nor could such an explanation explain the numbers's careful sensitivity to how similar the TV watching was to human face contact, especially since Roberts was originally hoping to be able to watch his favorite shows, not face-heavy ones like *Charlie Rose*.

He also began noticing something he wasn't expecting — his mood wasn't just raised the next morning, it was lowered that night. This graph shows the pattern:

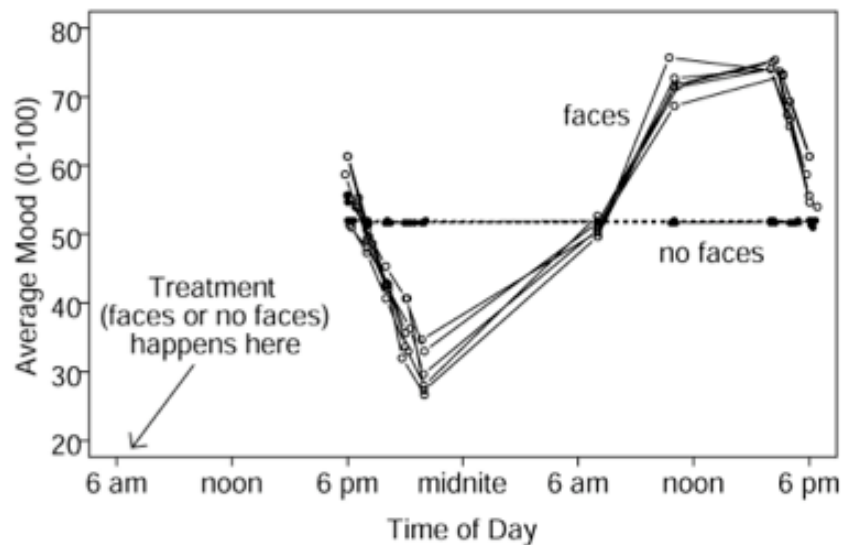


Figure 1: Graph of mood over the course of 48 hours based on whether faces were seen or not.

Mood spikes up from 6am to noon, stays high during the day, and then takes a dive around 6pm. (When not seeing faces, mood stays flat.)

And what about all those people who watched TV at night? Roberts found that watching TV after 6pm also reduced mood, with the effect more pronounced

the later it was watched.

So what's going on? If you look at faces in the morning, you feel worse 12 hours later but better 24 hours later. But the effect is muted if you see faces in the evening. Roberts theorizes that your body is using the faces to set its inner mood clock, which works similarly to its inner tiredness clock. You want to be happy during the day (as opposed to the night), but how do you tell when the day starts? The body assumes that you gab with people when you wake up, so it uses seeing other faces as a way to synchronize the clock. Of course, you want to make sure you've got the timing right on the nighttime side as well, so if you see faces late in the evening it tries to tweak the clock then as well.

This is consistent with what we know from other sources about depression. Depression is highly correlated with insomnia as well as social isolation and is often treated by disturbing sleep. The Amish, who eat breakfast communally and go to bed very early, have 1/100th the rate of depression as other Americans. And depression rates increased by 10 times in the 1900s, around the same time radio/TV, electric lighting, and other such things became common.

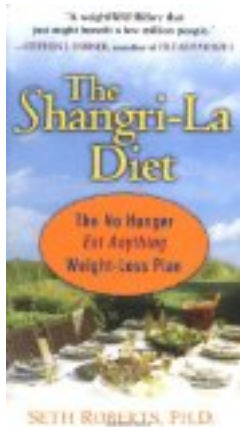
I'm hoping to get a chance to test this myself, but it sure appears that one easy way to improve mood is to look at faces in the morning.

Of course, even more than mood (which is generally considered difficult to tweak) people want to improve their look. And Roberts has done research on this as well, concluding that the body uses a similar internal system to measure the ideal weight. The result is his Shangri-La Diet which uses similar techniques to trick the body's internal system to cut down on appetite. His book on the subject, *The Shangri-La Diet*, comes out this week. It's been hailed as a diet book unlike any other. More on that next time.

The Miracle Diet

April 26, 2006

[Original link](#)



You eat food that has calories. And you do things that burn calories. The calories left over get stored as fat. And thus, the typical advice for losing weight: eat less, exercise more. Fewer calories are eaten and more are burned and so the result is less fat. There's just one problem: that's really hard. To burn enough calories to lose a lot of weight, you really have to put an awful lot of time into it. And if you try to eat less, your body just feels hungry all the time, because it wants more.

So what if instead of forcing your body to eat less, you teach your body to *want* less. After all, it's clear that it's obesity, not lack of fat, that's the health problem. So getting your body to want less food would be a good thing. And it would make dieting incredibly easy too — instead of fighting to count calories or avoid eating certain foods, you do nothing at all; you're just not interested in eating.

It sounds like a pipe dream, but Seth Roberts argues that it's possible. Drawing on the results of a number of studies with rats, his own experiments on himself, and the best research on nutrition and weight loss, he's developed a theory of how the body decides what it feels like eating.

Our body's weight, he says, is regulated by a “set point”, like the setting on a thermostat. If our weight is lower than our internal set point, we feel hungry; higher, we feel full. So if you want to weigh less, all you need to do is lower your body's set point. Your body will stop being hungry, you'll burn the fat you already have, and your weight will go down.

But how would you do that? Roberts argues that a person's set point isn't fixed, instead it goes up and down based on what they eat. After all, the whole reason the body stores up calories when food is abundant is so it can use them in "lean years", when food is scarce. So it would make sense for a person's set point to go up when food is abundant (allowing them to build up fat) and down when it's scarce (so they don't feel hungry all the time).

The problem, of course, is that food is never scarce anymore. You can always just go to McDonald's. The body is storing up for an eventuality that will never come. So how do you get it to stop? Maybe you could trick it into thinking food was scarce.

This is where Roberts's big insight comes — he argues that we use a Pavlovian sort of flavor-conditioning system to see whether food is scarce. If we eat foods frequently, we grow to like their taste, and thus our brain realizes we're eating them out of choice and raises the set point. On the other hand, if we eat new foods or foods with little taste, our brain assumes we're eating them because there's nothing else around and the set point is lowered.

And thus, the way to lower your set point: eat foods with no taste. Of course, they have to have calories as well, so Roberts's preferred suggestion is extra-light olive oil (ELOO), which is basically just oil with absolutely no taste. Your body gets the calories but it doesn't get the taste, so the set point goes lower every time you eat it.

It all seems crazy, but Roberts is sort of a crazy guy, so he decided to test it. He started taking a couple hundred tasteless calories every day. Almost immediately, he began feeling less hungry. He started eating one meal every other day, even while still exercising, and felt great. He lost a pound of weight a week with no effort. He lost so much weight that his friends started telling him that he looked too thin, so he started taking less tasteless calories and put some weight back on. It was amazing; a diet plan unlike any other.

He told friends about it and it worked for them too. It was written up in *The New York Times* and readers wrote in with letters saying it was working for them. Blogs started to keep track of people's stories — almost all successful. And now he has a new book yesterday, *The Shangri-La Diet*, which explains how you can do it to.

The book is odd, in that it looks pretty much like any other silly diet book, but the contents are rather different. Although clearly rushed, the book has an appendix of scientific studies using rats to back up its arguments about theory and happily features the stories of people who tried the diet and found it didn't work along with those who tried the diet and found it did.

Obviously, such anecdotal evidence isn't enough to prove the system works, but it does make it intriguing enough to try. I've started taking a couple tablespoons of extra light olive oil and already I found myself skipping a meal, something I've never been able to do before. We'll see how it goes.

- [Buy the book from Amazon](#)

A Future Without Fat

April 28, 2006

[Original link](#)

I've been on [the Shangri-La diet](#) long enough to convince myself that there's definitely something to it. Yesterday, for example, I spent all morning moving furniture (we're moving to a new apartment) and around lunch time I got invited to lunch at a favorite pizza place with a friend and I jogged all the way there. Normally, at this point, I'd be famished and devour half a pizza. This time, I wasn't hungry at all (but I had a slice out of politeness).

Of course, there's no reason my particular anecdotes should be more convincing than any others, but they are convincing to me, so I'd like to move from discussing the diet to discussing its implications. Weight and trying to lose it is a huge part of American culture and a system that makes doing it trivially easy will have far-reaching effects.

The most basic, it would seem, is more thin people. There's clearly an enormous number of people who want to lose weight. A lot are so desperate that they will try any number of painful and crazy tactics, from Slim-Fast shakes to Atkins meals, that are touted as helping. Obviously these people will try the diet.

But also a large number of people (like myself) who see themselves as too skeptical to fall for a fad diet or too lazy to jump through its hoops will try this diet, since it's both scientifically proven (or will be, after further clinical trials) and super-easy. And unlike Atkins, there are few concerns about nutritional dangers — the diet doesn't require you to change the balance of foods you eat, just the quantity — so a bunch more reasons not to do it disappear.

As it takes off, commercial products will soon follow — branded pocket-sized flasks of ELOO, for example. The media will do stories on this latest craze and the ideas behind it. Clinical trials will demonstrate its effectiveness and suggest areas for further research, which will lead to it being refined. And popular culture will likely try to deal with the results.

Among those results: lots of people you know getting thin. It's difficult to imagine what this is going to be like. The fat guy at the office won't be fat anymore. That cute-but-slightly-overweight girl you've had your eye on won't be slightly overweight anymore. Social dynamics will be seriously disrupted in a way that, to my knowledge, has no analog. People have gotten taller, and thinner, and prettier over time, to be sure, but never quite this fast.

The flip side of the drive to be thinner is the discrimination against those who are fat. American culture is simply vicious towards the less fortunate. You're poor because you're lazy, it says, and you're fat for the same reason. If only

you got some exercise or ate better, you'd look fine. It's your own damn fault and there's nothing wrong with me looking down on you for it.

If the theory behind the diet is correct, however, this just isn't so. Fat people are that way simply because their body's set point is too high. That's not really anything you can blame them for and it's also something that, before the diet, was really hard to fix. They live with a burden of wanting to eat that thin people, with their lower set point, never have to deal with. And the entire time they've been struggling, they've been told it's simply their own damn fault. (As I noted, their situation mirrors that of the poor.)

Of course, it's unlikely our culture will ever notice the horrors its committed against fat people. Instead, the diet is likely to make it even more vicious. Now that there's a simple easy way to get thin, anyone who refuses to use it will be turned against with serious scorn. Being fat may become as much of a social rudity as being a smoker, with strangers feeling that they can lecture you about your unhealthy lifestyle in public. It'll be pure torture.

But, I have no doubt, it'll work. Sipping ELOO is much easier than quitting smoking and tons of people are doing the latter. And so the last few overweight people will be pushed to join the pack. While it's unlikely that obesity will be entirely eradicated, it's hard to imagine the last few hangers-on (perhaps those for whom the diet doesn't work or who can't do it for some reason) making up a significant sect of the population.

The diet book itself saves most of its vision for future generations who, it suggests, will never have to think about obesity at all because the new science behind the diet will allow us to build it right into our foods, so that we will simply never get fat in the first place. Certainly, at a minimum, children's set points will be regulated from a very early age (what parent wouldn't want to spare their child from fat-kid teasing?) and they'll likely never even consider another possibility.

To our children, obesity will probably seem like just another relatively-rare disease, like a learning disability or a speech impediment. They'll look back at movies from our time and think— well, actually, they won't notice anything because we've already removed the fat people from them.

Book Reviews

May 7, 2006

[Original link](#)

Don't know if anyone's interested, but I've just written [a bunch of reviews for Amazon](#).

Fat Backlash

May 7, 2006

[Original link](#)

*They told me exercise and diet
If I would try it, would cure my ills
But though I'm already past my quota
I want another load o' those magic pills*
— They Might Be Giants, “[Renew My Subscription](#)”

The response to [my suggestion that there might be a simple and painless way to lose weight](#) brought some interesting responses. Many people who wrote in were excited about it or were actually trying it. But some of the rest were downright hostile.

tuomov wrote:

No pain, no loss. Forget all these bullshit weight-loss manuals. Those four words above summarise all that you need to know. The rest is just pain management and scheduling. If you don't feel hungry occasionally, you're not losing weight.

And Martijn commented:

But how is this healthy? This diet sounds like a trick to fool your body. [...] Why not just eat well? [...] Somehow people want to lose weight the easy way, pff.. just proves how lazy this 'McDonalds' generation has become.

Such comments strike me as slightly odd. “Eat better” has been the diet advice for as long as I can remember and undoubtedly everyone overweight has heard it by now. And yet, as these writers clearly know, obesity is, as I understand it, an epidemic in this country. So this supposed solution clearly isn't working. Yes, it might work in the sense that if everyone followed it they'd be fine (although even that is somewhat unclear), but plainly it's too hard to follow. If our goal is to actually stop obesity, then we're failing.

But I suspect for some people, that isn't the goal. And Martijn's last sentence hints at this. In [my last piece](#) I drew an analogy between being poor and being fat. And I think this rage at an easy way to lose weight parallels the rage we see at “government handouts” that provide an “easy way out” of being poor.

(To be clear, I'm talking about people who are opposed to easy ways to lose weight in general; not the people who were skeptical about this diet in particular or sick of fad diets altogether. Such reactions are perfectly right and reasonable.)

This is one thing I didn't really predict in my last piece on the subject, but undoubtedly such far-reaching changes will also have their backlash. People who have spent their whole lives putting themselves through the pain of starvation and strenuous exercise to maintain their physique are undoubtedly going to be a little upset to figure out it was all unnecessary. It would be bad enough if it was some new invention that made fat disappear — after all, it hadn't been invented yet when they'd gone through all that so there was no way they could take advantage of it. But olive oil and sugar water? That's been around forever! How could they have missed it?

Ronald Reagan got elected campaigning against imaginary “welfare queens” in supposed-Cadillacs. Will right-wing politicians of the future rail against those who take the easy way out of being fat?

One major difference is that economics is at least thought to be a zero-sum game. Those welfare queens are taking “*your money*”, in the form of taxes. But you lose nothing if more people get thin. By the same token, there's not a whole lot the government can do about this problem. The welfare payments were theirs, so they could cut them (as Clinton savagely did) but what's the government going to do about the diet? Ban olive oil?

Perhaps instead we'll see social pressure. The major visible difference between someone on the diet and someone who isn't (considering that the olive oil can be taken in private) is that someone who's on the diet simply doesn't eat much. But eating is a major social function, around which much business and friendship is conducted. Perhaps backlash members will heap scorn on those who skip lunch or eat little, perhaps even ostracizing them until they start eating like normal (and thus weakening the effects of the diet).

I've seen a little bit of this myself — as a supertaster, my tastes are sufficiently strange that when eating with new people I'm often asked about my choice of food and then queried and lightly mocked for my explanation. It's not so bad and I'm sure people mean perfectly well by it, but it is a cost and if people are actually angry about the diet, it may get worse.

So while actually being fat may go away easily, the stigma might be a little harder to erase.

Public Service Announcement

May 10, 2006

[Original link](#)

These are sad days for American democracy. Ohio congressman [Bob Ney](#) took bribes of tens of thousands of dollars in contributions and gifts. California congressman [Duke Cunningham](#) is in jail after forfeiting \$1.8 million in bribes. And Louisiana congressman [William Jefferson](#) is giving up \$1 million in bribes after [an FBI raid on his house found \\$90,000 in a freezer](#).

In these days of widespread corruption and bribery, it is important to remember that no, this is not how our great democracy is supposed to work. The bribery is supposed to be [much more subtle](#) — not to mention legal.

The Book That Changed My Life

May 15, 2006

[Original link](#)

Two years ago this summer I read a book that changed the entire way I see the world. I had been researching various topics — law, politics, the media — and become more and more convinced that something was seriously wrong. Politicians, I was shocked to discover, weren't actually doing what the people wanted. And the media, my research found, didn't really care much about that, preferring to focus on such things as posters and polls.

As I thought about this more, its implications struck me as larger and larger. But I still had no bigger picture to fit them in. The media was simply doing a bad job, leading people to be confused. We just had to pressure them to do better and democracy would be restored.

Then, one night, I watched the film *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media* (I think it had come up in my Netflix queue). First off, it's simply an amazingly-good film. I've watched it several times now and each time I'm utterly entranced. It's undoubtedly the best documentary I've seen, weaving together all sorts of clever tricks to enlighten and entertain.

Second, it makes shocking points. I didn't understand all of what it was saying at the time, but I understood enough to realize that something was severely amiss. The core of the film is a case study of Indonesia's brutal invasion of the country of East Timor. The US personally gave the green light to the invasion and provided the weapons, which allowed Indonesia to massacre the population in an occupation that, per capita, ranks with the Holocaust. And the US media ignores it and when they do cover it, inevitably distorts it.

Shocked and puzzled by the film, I was eager to learn more. Noam Chomsky has dozens of books but I was fortunate to choose to read *Understanding Power*, a thick paperback I picked up at the library. Edited by Peter Mitchell and John Schoeffel, two public defenders in New York, the book is a collection of transcripts of group discussions with Chomsky.

Chomsky lays out the facts in a conversational style, telling stories and explaining things in response to questions from the groups, covering an incredibly wide range of topics. And on every single one, what he tells you is completely shocking, at odds with everything you know, turning the way you see things upside-down. Mitchell and Schoeffel know you're unlikely to believe these things, so they've carefully footnoted and documented every claim, providing blockquote excerpts from the original sources to establish them.

Each story, individually, can be dismissed as some weird oddity, like what I'd learned about the media focusing more on posters than on policy. But seeing

them all together, you can't help but begin to tease out the larger picture, to ask yourself what's behind all these disparate things, and what that means for the way we see the world.

Reading the book, I felt as if my mind was rocked by explosions. At times the ideas were too much that I literally had to lie down. (I'm not the only one to feel this way — Norman Finkelstein noted that when he went through a similar experience, “It was a totally crushing experience for me. ... My world literally caved in. And there were quite a number of weeks where ... I just was in bed, totally devastated.”) I remember vividly clutching at the door to my room, trying to hold on to something while the world spun around.

For weeks afterwards, everything I saw was in a different light. Every time I saw a newspaper or magazine or person on TV, I questioned what I thought knew about them, wondered how they fit into this new picture. Questions that had puzzled me for years suddenly began making sense in this new world. I reconsidered everyone I knew, everything I thought I'd learned. And I found I didn't have much company.

It's taken me two years to write about this experience, not without reason. One terrifying side effect of learning the world isn't the way you think is that it leaves you all alone. And when you try to describe your new worldview to people, it either comes out sounding unsurprising (“yeah, sure, everyone knows the media's got problems”) or like pure lunacy and people slowly back away.

Ever since then, I've realized that I need to spend my life working to fix the shocking brokenness I'd discovered. And the best way to do that, I concluded, was to try to share what I'd discovered with others. I couldn't just tell them it straight out, I knew, so I had to provide the hard evidence. So I started working on a book to do just that. (I'm looking for people to help, if you're interested.)

It's been two years now and my mind has settled down some. I've learned a bunch more but, despite my best efforts, haven't found any problems with this frightening new world view. After all this time, I'm finally ready to talk about what happened with some distance and I hope I'm now able to begin work on my book in earnest.

It was a major change, but I wouldn't give it up for anything.

- [*Understanding Power* on Amazon](#)
- [*The Understanding Power* web site](#)
- [*Manufacturing Consent* DVD on Amazon](#)
- [*Manufacturing Consent* torrent](#)
- [companion book](#)

The Conservative Nanny State

May 22, 2006

[Original link](#)



For years, progressives have watched as both Democratic and Republican administrations have taken away what little remained of economic liberalism in this country. Bill Clinton, for example, took away what meager assistance the government paid to poor single mothers, signed NAFTA, and begun attempting [to chip away at Social Security](#).

But even worse than these policy defeats are the conceptual defeats that underly them. As cognitive scientist [George Lakoff has argued](#) people think about politics through conceptual moral frames, and the conservatives have been masterful at creating frames for their policies. If the left wants to fight back, they're going to have to create frames of their own.

Enter Dean Baker, co-director of the Center for Economic and Policy Research and one of the people instrumental in fighting back against the most recent attempt to privatize social security (as author *Social Security: The Phony Crisis* he had plenty of facts to demonstrate that the crisis was, in fact, phony). He has a new book out, *The Conservative Nanny State: How the Wealthy Use the Government to Stay Rich and Get Richer*, which takes decades of conservative frames and stands them on their head. (Disclosure: I liked the book so much I converted it to HTML for them and was sent a free paperback copy in return.)

His most fundamental point is that conservatives are *not* generally in favor of market outcomes. For far too long, he argues, the left has been content with the notion that conservatives want the market to do what it pleases while liberals want some government intervention to protect people from its excesses.

No way!, says Baker. Conservatives *love* big government — only they use it to give money to the rich instead of the poor. Thus the conservative nanny state of the title, always looking out for crybaby moneybags to help.

Take, for example, trade policy. The conservative nanny state is more than happy to sign free trade agreements that let manufacturing jobs in the United States flee offshore. And they're happy to let immigrant workers come into the country to replace dishwashers and day laborers. But when it comes to the professional class, like doctors, lawyers, economists, journalists, and other professionals, *oh no!*, the conservative nanny state does everything it can (through licensing and immigration policy) to keep foreign workers out.

This doesn't just help the doctors, it hurts all of us because it means we have to pay more for health care. NAFTA boosters estimate that the entire agreement saved us \$8 billion dollars a year. Using competition to bring only doctor's salaries down the levels seen in Europe would save us *eighty* billion dollars — nearly \$700 per family per year, just from improved prices for doctor's. You'd see similar amounts from other major professions.

Baker's book is also one of the few to reveal the shocking secret behind the Federal Reserve Board you always hear messing with interest rates on the news. This unaccountable technocracy, most of whose members are appointed by banks, uses its power over interest rates to drive the economy into a recession so that wages won't get too high. That's right, the government tries to slow down the economy so that you get paid less. (Full details are in the book.)

Baker's book is also chock-full of fascinating new policy ideas. He points out, for example, that corporations aren't part of the free market, but instead a gift offered by the government. (A very popular one too, since companies voluntarily pay \$278B each year for it.) And because of this, there's absolutely no reason the government can't tweak its terms to make us all better off. For example, Baker points out that currently, corporate rules count shareholders who don't vote at all as voting in favor of whatever the director's of the corporation prefer. Baker suggests requiring that all CEO pay packages get approved by a majority of those actually voting, instead of letting major CEOs pick how much to pay themselves as they do now.

Or what about copyright and patents? Again, this isn't a law of nature, but a big government gift. People who really care about shrinking government would want to try to get rid of or shrink the laws that say the government gets to make rules about what songs and movies we can have on our personal computers.

Americans spend \$220 billion on prescription drugs, largely because of government-granted patents. Instead of handing that money to big drug companies, the government could spend far less (only a couple hundred million)

funding researchers itself and making the resulting drug discoveries free to the public. College students spend \$12 billion. Again, the government could make free textbooks for one-thousandth that. And we spend \$37 billion on music and movies. Why not create an “artistic freedom voucher” (vouchers — a conservative favorite!) that can only be spent on artists who place their work in the public domain?

None of these would require outlawing the existing system — they could work side-by-side, simply forcing the existing drug, textbook, and movie companies to compete with this alternate idea. If their version works better, then fine, they’ll get the money. But if not, there’ll be no conservative nanny state to protect them.

Similarly, the government could expand the social security program, allowing every to buy additional personal accounts from a system with amazingly low overhead (.5% versus the 20% of private funds) and a 70-year track record of success. Or it could try to improve our pitifully-bad health care system by letting people buy into the government’s Medicare program, which again has amazingly low administrative costs (did you know that, on a per person basis, we spend 80% of what Britain spends on health care altogether simply on administration?) and serious bargaining power to push down prices. Again, why not let the private companies try their best to compete?

The book itself also discusses bankruptcy laws, torts and takings, small businesses, and taxes. And it goes in to far more detail on each of these subjects. And it’s all available for free on the Internet, so there’s no excuse for not reading it. It’s an fun read, the kind of book that turns the way you think about the economy upside-down.

- [Official website](#)
- [PDF version](#)
- [HTML version](#)
- [Paperback version](#)

Introducing feeds.reddit

May 24, 2006

[Original link](#)

Over the past few weeks, I've been working on another new project. I think it's finally time to tell people about it and what better place to start then here? So here's the site:

feeds.reddit.com

The idea is that it's a more social web feed (RSS) reader. First, it's got a great interface for reading feeds over the Internet — it has key commands ([see the faq](#)) that let you easily breeze through stories while keeping track of what you've read and haven't read. Then there's a simple URL you can go to any time, anywhere (I visit it from my phone) to see stories you haven't read yet.

Second, just like on reddit, you can vote on items you like a lot. This will go towards creating a list of the most popular items but it will also train a recommendations system to try to find other items and other feeds that you'll probably like as well.

The problem is that building this stuff up requires users. So I hope you'll [try it out](#). It's got one-click import from Bloglines and imports OPML files from any other feed reader, so there's no harm in trying it out.

[Let me know what you think.](#)

A Non-Programmer's Apology

May 27, 2006

[Original link](#)

In his classic *A Mathematicians Apology*, published 65 years ago, the great mathematician G. H. Hardy wrote that “A man who sets out to justify his existence and his activities” has only one real defense, namely that “I do what I do because it is the one and only thing that I can do at all well.” “I am not suggesting,” he added,

that this is a defence which can be made by most people, since most people can do nothing at all well. But it is impregnable when it can be made without absurdity ... If a man has any genuine talent he should be ready to make almost any sacrifice in order to cultivate it to the full.

Reading such comments one cannot help but apply them to oneself, and so I did. Let us eschew humility for the sake of argument and suppose that I am a great programmer. By Hardy's suggestion, the responsible thing for me to do would be to cultivate and use my talents in that field, to spend my life being a great programmer. And that, I have to say, is a prospect I look upon with no small amount of dread.

It was not always quite this way. For quite a while programming was basically my life. And then, somehow, I drifted away. At first it was small steps — discussing programming instead of doing it, then discussing things *for* programmers, and then discussing other topics altogether. By the time I reached the end of my first year in college, when people were asking me to program for them over the summer, I hadn't programmed in so long that I wasn't even sure I really could. I certainly did not think of myself as a particularly good programmer.

Ironically, considering Hardy writes that

Good work is not done by 'humble' men. It is one of the first duties of a professor, for example, in any subject, to exaggerate a little both the importance of his subject and his own importance in it. A man who is always asking 'Is what I do worthwhile?' and 'Am I the right person to do it?' will always be ineffective himself and a

discouragement to others. He must shut his eyes a little and think a little more of his subject and himself than they deserve. This is not too difficult: it is harder not to make his subject and himself ridiculous by shutting his eyes too tightly.

Perhaps, after spending so much time not programming, the blinders had worn off. Or perhaps it was the reverse: that I had to convince myself that I was good at what I was doing now, and, since that thing was not programming, by extension, that I was not very good at programming.

Whatever the reason, I looked upon the task of actually having to program for three months with uncertainty and trepidation. For days, if I recall correctly, I dithered. Thinking myself incapable of serious programming, I thought to wait until my partner arrived and instead spend my time assisting him. But days passed and I realized it would be weeks before he would appear, and I finally decided to try to program something in the meantime.

To my shock, it went amazingly well and I have since become convinced that I'm a pretty good programmer, if lacking in most other areas. But now I find myself faced with this dilemma: it is those other areas I would much prefer to work in.

The summer before college I learned something that struck me as incredibly important and yet known by very few. It seemed clear to me that the only responsible way to live my life would be to do something that would only be done by someone who knew this thing — after all, there were few who did and many who didn't, so it seemed logical to leave most other tasks to the majority.

I concluded that the best thing to do would be to attempt to explain this thing I'd learned to others. Any specific task I could do with the knowledge would be far outweighed by the tasks done by those I'd explained the knowledge to.¹ It was only after I'd decided on this course of action (and perhaps this is the blinders once again) that it struck me that explaining complicated ideas was actually something I'd always loved doing and was really pretty good at.

That aside, having spent the morning reading David Foster Wallace², it is plain that I am no great writer. And so, reading Hardy, I am left wondering whether my decision is somehow irresponsible.

I am saved, I think, because it appears that Hardy's logic to some extent parallels mine. Why is it important for the man who "can bat unusually well" to become "a professional cricketer"? It is, presumably, because those who can bat unusually well are in short supply and so the few who are gifted with that talent should do us all the favor of making use of it. If those whose "judgment of the markets is quick and sound" become cricketers, while the good batters

become stockbrokers, we will end up with mediocre cricketers and mediocre stockbrokers. Better for all of us if the reverse is the case.

But this, of course, is awfully similar to the logic I myself employed. It is important for me to spend my life explaining what I'd learned because people who had learned it are in short supply — much shorter supply, in fact (or so it appears), than people who can bat well.

However, there is also an assumption hidden in that statement. It only makes sense to decide what to become based on what you can presently do if you believe that abilities are somehow granted innately and can merely be cultivated, not created in themselves. This is a fairly common view, although rarely consciously articulated (as indeed Hardy takes it for granted), but not one that I subscribe to.

Instead, it seems plausible that talent is made through practice, that those who are good batters are that way after spending enormous quantities of time batting as a kid.³ Mozart, for example, was the son of “one of Europe’s leading musical teachers”⁴ and said teacher began music instruction at age three. While I am plainly no Mozart, several similarities do seem apparent. My father had a computer programming company and he began showing me how to use the computer as far back as I can remember.

The extreme conclusion from the theory that there is no innate talent is that there is no difference between people and thus, as much as possible, we should get people to do the most important tasks (writing, as opposed to cricket, let’s say). But in fact this does not follow.

Learning is like compound interest. A little bit of knowledge makes it easier to pick up more. Knowing what addition is and how to do it, you can then read a wide variety of things that use addition, thus knowing even more and being able to use that knowledge in a similar manner.⁵ And so, the growth in knowledge accelerates.⁶ This is why children who get started on something at a young age, as Mozart did, grow up to have such an advantage.

And even if (highly implausibly) we were able to control the circumstances in which all children grew up so as to maximize their ability to perform the most important tasks, that still would not be enough, since in addition to aptitude there is also interest.

Imagine the three sons of a famous football player. All three are raised similarly, with athletic activity from their earliest days, and thus have an equal aptitude for playing football. Two of them pick up this task excitedly, while one, despite being good at it, is uninterested⁷ and prefers to read books.⁸ It would not only be unfair to force him to use his aptitude and play football, it would also be unwise. Someone whose heart isn’t in it is unlikely to spend the time necessary to excel.

And this, in short⁹, is the position I find myself in. I don't *want* to be a programmer. When I look at programming books, I am more tempted to mock them than to read them. When I go to programmer conferences, I'd rather skip out and talk politics than programming. And writing code, although it can be enjoyable, is hardly something I want to spend my life doing.

Perhaps, I fear, this decision deprives society of one great programmer in favor of one mediocre writer. And let's not hide behind the cloak of uncertainty, let's say we know that it does. Even so, I would make it. The writing is too important, the programming too unenjoyable.

And for that, I apologize.

Notes

1. Explaining what that knowledge is, naturally, a larger project and must wait for another time.
2. You can probably see DFW's influence on this piece, not least of which in these footnotes.
3. Indeed, this apparently parallels the views of the psychologists who have studied the question. Anders Ericsson, a psychology professor who studies "expert performance", told the *New York Times Magazine* that "the most general claim" in his work "is that a lot of people believe there are some inherent limits they were born with. But there is surprisingly little hard evidence" The conclusion that follows, the *NYTM* notes, is that "when it comes to choosing a life path, you should do what you love — because if you don't love it, you are unlikely to work hard enough to get very good. Most people naturally don't like to do things they aren't 'good' at. So they often give up, telling themselves they simply don't possess the talent for math or skiing or the violin. But what they really lack is the desire to be good and to undertake the deliberate practice that would make them better."[†]
4. The quote is [from Wikipedia](#) where, indeed, the other facts are drawn from as well, the idea having been suggested by Stephen Jay Gould's essay "Mozart and Modularity", collected in his book *Eight Little Piggies*.
5. I've always thought that this was the reason kids (or maybe just me) especially disliked history. Every other field — biology, math, art — had at least some connection to the present and thus kids had some foundational knowledge to build on. But history? We simply weren't there and thus know absolutely nothing of it.

6. It was tempting to write that “the rate of growth” accelerates, but that would mean something rather different.
7. Many people, of course, are uninterested in such things precisely because they aren’t very good at them. There’s nothing like repeated failures to turn you way from an activity. Perhaps this is another reason to start young — young children might be less stung by failure, as little is expected from them.
8. I apologize for the clichédness of this example.
9. Well, shorter than most DFW.

Gmail Down

May 31, 2006

[Original link](#)

My Gmail account has been down for over two days. When I try to log in, it says it's down for maintenance and they don't know how long it will take. When I try to get my mail through POP, it simply doesn't work. And when I contact the Gmail people, all I get back is form responses. I've used Gmail as my mail client for the past couple years, so if you've sent me mail and I haven't responded — that's why.

The thing that really puzzles me is *why*. I can understand occasional outtages, but I can't understand what could cause my account to go down for days, unless they lost my data and are too embarassed to actually tell me. The only thing I can think of is that something went wrong and there's just no one around to fix it. Which, considering Gmail's popularity, would be kinda sad.

Sorry to bug you with my personal problems, but obviously it's time for me to switch away from Gmail. I've been careful to always keep my email going to my main server, so I haven't lost too much data, but figuring out a way to read my mail again is rather difficult.

I get absurd quantities of spam (40,000 spam messages a month) so my mailboxes are just full of junk. And it's not clear to me how to clear it out. A bayesian filter like bogofilter requires non-spam messages to train on — and if I had my non-spam messages, I wouldn't need a spam filter. Spamassassin seems to work better, but it's incredibly slow and inaccurate, taking a couple seconds per email (at this rate it will take days to see my mail again).

If you have any suggestions (or you're a person at Google who can turn my account on again) feel free to help. If you want to email me, I'm checking "feeds@reddit.com".

Legacy

June 1, 2006

[Original link](#)

Ambitious people want to leave legacies, but what sort of legacies do they want to leave? The traditional criterion is that your importance is measured by the effect of what you do. Thus the most important lawyers are the Supreme Court justices, since their decisions affect the entire nation. And the greatest mathematicians are those that make important discoveries, since their discoveries end up being used by many who follow.

This seems quite reasonable. One's legacy depends on one's impact and what better way to measure impact than by the effect of what you've done. But this is measuring against the wrong baseline. The real question is not what effect your work had, but what things would be like had you never done it.

The two are not at all the same. It is rather commonly accepted that there are "ideas whose time has come" and history tends to bear this out. When Newton invented the calculus, so did Leibniz. When Darwin discovered evolution through natural selection, so did Alfred Russel Wallace. When Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone, so did Elisha Gray (before him, arguably).

In these cases the facts are plain: had Newton, Darwin, and Bell never done their work, the result would have been largely the same — we'd still have calculus, evolution, and the telephone. And yet such people are hailed as major heroes, their legacies immortalized.

Perhaps, if one only cares about such things, this is enough. (Although this seems a rather dangerous game, since the future could wake up at any moment and realize its adulation is misplaced.) But if one genuinely cares about their impact, instead of simply how their impact is perceived, more careful thought is in order.

I once spent time with a well-known academic, who had published several works widely recognized as classics even outside his field, and he offered some career advice in the sciences. (Actually, come to think of it, there are two people of whom this is true, suggesting the phenomenon has broader significance.) Such-and-such a field is very hot right now, he said, you could really make a name for yourself by getting into it. The idea being that major discoveries were sure to follow soon and that if I picked that field I could be the one to make them.

By my test, such a thing would leave a poor legacy. (For what it's worth, I don't think either person's works fall into this category; that is to say, their reputation is still deserved even by these standards.) Even worse, you'd know it. Presumably Darwin and Newton didn't begin their investigations because they

thought the field was “hot”. They thought through doing it they would have a significant impact, even though that turned out to be wrong. But someone who joined a field simply because they thought a major discovery would come from it soon could never enjoy such a delusion. Instead, they would know that their work would make little difference, and would have to labor under such impressions.

The same is true of other professions we misconceive of as being important. Take being a Supreme Court justice, for example. Traditionally, this is thought of as a majestic job in which one gets to make decisions of great import. In fact, it seems to me that one has little impact at all. Most of your impact was made by the politics of the President who appointed you. Had you not been around for the job, he would have found someone else who would take similar positions. The only way one could have a real impact as Supreme Court justice would be to change your politics once appointed to the bench and the only way you could prepare for such a thing would be to spend the majority of your career doing things you thought were wrong in the hopes that one day you might get picked for the Supreme Court. That seems a rather hard lot to swallow.

So what jobs do leave a real legacy? It’s hard to think of most of them, since by their very nature they require doing things that other people *aren’t* trying to do, and thus include the things that people haven’t thought of. But one good source of them is trying to do things that change the system instead of following it. For example, the university system encourages people to become professors who do research in certain areas (and thus many people do this); it discourages people from trying to change the nature of the university itself.

Naturally, doing things like changing the university are much harder than simply becoming yet another professor. But for those who genuinely care about their legacies, it doesn’t seem like there’s much choice.

An Inconvenient Truth

June 6, 2006

[Original link](#)

Al Gore's presentation on global warming is filled with graphs — Gore is fanatical about collecting evidence, even at one point going to the North Pole to persuade the scientists there to release their records of the ice shelves — but only one of them really matters. It comes early in the film, as Gore talks about the large ice core samples that scientists take to trace the history of the Earth's temperature and CO2 ratings.

Gore shows the results of these samples and then says we can go back further. The screen expands in both directions to show a massive graph of CO2 concentration going back 600,000 years. It had its fluctuations over that time — large hills and then valleys. Underneath it, he then graphs temperature over the same period.

Temperature tracks CO2 almost exactly, with a several-decade lag. Those large fluctuations? Those were the six ice ages we've had over the past 600,000 years. CO2 in the atmosphere goes up and so does the temperature, the CO2 trapping the sun's radiation inside our planet, where it heats the Earth.

These huge fluctuations are the difference between ice ages and where we are today. Then Gore shows the most recent trajectory of CO2: straight up, more than doubled. "If that much CO2 in one direction causes an ice age," Gore says, "imagine what it will do in the other direction." And then he shows the projections for the next 50 years. Again straight up, another doubling. "This is literally off he charts," he explains. He has to climb up to reach that peak.

"Not a single number in this graph," he says, "is in dispute." This is the inconvenient truth: unless we change, we will destroy the environment that sustains our species.

- [Official movie website](#)

Shifting the Terms of Debate: How Big Business Covered Up Global Warming

June 6, 2006

[Original link](#)

[Here's the first part of an article I wrote last year about how right-wing think tanks shift the debate.]

In 2004, Michelle Malkin, a conservative editorialist, published the book *In Defense of Internment*. It argued that declassified security intercepts showed that Japanese internment during World War II — the government policy that relocated thousands of Japanese to concentration camps — was actually justified in the name of national security. We needed to learn the truth, Malkin insisted, so that we could see how racial profiling was similarly justified to fight the “war on terror.”

Bainbridge Island was the center of the evacuations; to this day, residents still feel ashamed and teach students a special unit about the incident, entitled “Leaving Our Island”. But one parent in the district, Mary Dombrowski, was persuaded by Malkin’s book that the evacuation was actually justified and insisted the school was teaching a one-sided version of the internment story, “propaganda” that forced impressionable children into thinking that the concentration camps were a mistake.

The school’s principal defended the practice. As the *Seattle Times* reported:

“We do teach it as a mistake,” she said, noting that the U.S. government has admitted it was wrong. “As an educator, there are some things that we can say aren’t debatable anymore.” Slavery, for example. Or the internment — as opposed to a subject such as global warming, she said.†

True, Japanese internment isn’t a controversial issue like global warming, but ten years ago, global warming wasn’t a controversial issue either. In 1995, the UN’s panel on international climate change released its consensus report, finding that global warming was a real and serious issue that had to be quickly confronted. The media covered the scientists’ research and the population agreed, leading President Clinton to say he would sign an international treaty to stop global warming.

Then came the backlash. The Global Climate Coalition (funded by over 40 major corporate groups like Amoco, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and General

Motors) began spending millions of dollars each year to derail the Kyoto Protocol, the international treaty to help reduce global warming. They held conferences entitled “The Costs of Kyoto,” issued press releases and faxes dismissing the scientific evidence for global warming, and spent more than \$3 million on newspaper and television ads claiming Kyoto would mean a “50-cent-per-gallon gasoline tax.”†

The media, in response to flurries of “blast faxes” (a technique in which a press release is simultaneously faxed to thousands of journalists) and accusations of left-wing bias, began backing off from the scientific evidence.† A recent study found only 35% of newspaper stories on global warming accurately described the scientific consensus, with the majority implying that scientists who believed in global warming were just as common as global warming deniers (of which there were only a tiny handful, almost all of whom had received funding from energy companies or associated groups).†

It all had an incredible effect on the public. In 1993, 88% of Americans thought global warming was a serious problem. By 1997, that number had fallen to 42%, with only 28% saying immediate action was necessary.¹ And so Clinton changed course and insisted that cutting emissions should be put off for 20 years.

US businesses seriously weakened the Kyoto Protocol, leading it to require only a 7% reduction in emissions (compared to the 20% requested by European nations) and then President Bush refused to sign on to even that.† In four short years, big business had managed to turn nearly half the country around and halt the efforts to protect the planet.

And now, the principal on Bainbridge Island, like most people, thinks global warming is a hotly contested issue — the paradigmatic example of a hotly contested issue — even when the science is clear. (“There’s no better scientific consensus on this on any issue I know,” said the head of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, “except maybe Newton’s second law of dynamics.”)² But all this debate about problems has kept us away from talk about solutions. As journalist Ross Gelbspan puts it, “By keeping the discussion focused on whether there is a problem in the first place, they have effectively silenced the debate over what to do about it.”† So is it any wonder that conservatives want to do the same thing again? And again? And again?

Next: [Part 2: Making Noise](#)

CNN, *USA Today* poll (conducted by Gallup). “We’d like your impression of what scientists believe...?”, November 1997. In *Roper Center for Public Opinion Research* (0287624, 072). USGALLUP.97NV06, R31.

NBC News, *Wall Street Journal* poll (conducted by Hart and Teeter). “From what you know about global climate change...?”, October 1997. In *Roper Center for Public Opinion Research* (0291162, 077). USNBCWSJ.97OC25, R30B.

1. Cambridge Reports, Research International poll. “Do you feel that global warming is a very serious problem...?”, *Cambridge Reports National Omnibus Survey*, September 1993, in *Roper Center for Public Opinion Research* (0290350, 039). USCAMREP.93SEP, R40.
2. Warrick, Joby. “Consensus Emerges Earth Is Warming — Now What?”, *Washington Post*, 12 Nov. 1997: A01.

Making Noise: How Right-Wing Think Tanks Get the Word Out

June 7, 2006

[Original link](#)

[This is part 2 of an article on the power of right-wing think tanks. See [part one](#).]

Malkin's book on internment was no more accurate than the corporate misinformation about global warming. Historians quickly showed the book badly distorted the government records and secret cables it purported to describe. As just one example, Malkin writes that a Japanese message stated they "had [Japanese] spies in the U.S. Army" when it actually said they hoped to recruit spies in the army.[†] But it should be no big surprise that Malkin, who is, after all, an editorialist and not a historian, didn't manage to fully understand the complex documentary record in the year she spent writing the book part-time.[†]

Malkin's motives, as a right-wing activist and proponent of racial profiling, are fairly obvious. But how did Mary Dombrowski, the Bainbridge Island parent, get caught up in this latest attempt to rewrite history? Opinions on global warming were changed because big business could afford to spend millions to change people's minds. But racial profiling seems like less of a moneymaker. Who invested in spreading that message?

The first step is getting the information out there. Dombrowski probably heard about Malkin's book from the Fox News Channel, where it was ceaselessly promoted for days, and where Malkin is a contributor. Or maybe she heard about it on MSNBC's *Scarborough Country*, a show hosted by a former Republican congressman, which had Malkin as a guest. Or maybe she heard it while driving and listening to FOX host Sean Hannity's radio show, or maybe Rush Limbaugh's. Or maybe she read a review in the *New York Post* (which, like Fox News, is owned by Rupert Murdoch). Or maybe she read about it on a right-wing website or weblog, like Townhall.com, which publishes 10 new conservative op-ed columns every day.

All of these organizations are partisan conservative outlets. Townhall.com, for example, is published by the Heritage Foundation, a right-wing Washington, D.C. think tank. Most people imagine a think tank as a place where smart people think big thoughts, coming up with new ideas for the government to use. But that's not how Heritage works. Nearly half of Heritage's \$30 million budget is spent on publicity, not research.[†] Every day, they take work like Malkin's that agrees with their ideological prejudices and push it out through the right-wing media described above (Fox News, Rush Limbaugh, *New York Post*) and into the mainstream media (ABC, NPR, *New York Times*, *Seattle Times*).

They use a variety of tactics. Heritage, for example, publishes an annual telephone directory featuring thousands of conservative experts and associated policy organizations. (*The Right Nation*, 161) And if looking up somebody is too much work, Heritage maintains a 24-hour hotline for the media, providing quotes promoting conservative ideology on any subject. Heritage’s “information marketing” department makes packages of colored index cards with pre-printed talking points for any conservative who plans to do an interview. (*The Right Nation*, 167) And Heritage computers are stocked with the names of over 3,500 journalists, organized by specialty, who Heritage staffers personally call to make sure they have all the latest conservative misinformation. Every Heritage study is turned into a two-page summary which is then turned into an op-ed piece which is then distributed to newspapers through the Heritage Features Syndicate. (*What Liberal Media?*, 83)

It all adds up: a 2003 study by Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, the media watch group, found conservative think tanks were cited nearly 14,000 times in major newspapers, television, and radio shows. (By comparison, liberal think tanks were cited only 4,000 times that year.)† That means 10,000 additional quotes of right-wing ideology, misleading statistics, distorted facts, and so on. There’s no way that doesn’t unfairly skew the public debate.

Next: [Part 3: Endorsing Racism](#)

Endorsing Racism: The Story of The Bell Curve

June 8, 2006

[Original link](#)

[This is part 3 of an article on the power of right-wing think tanks. See also [part one](#) and [part two](#).]

If you have any doubt about the power of the think tanks, look no further than the story of *The Bell Curve*. Written by Charles Murray, who received over 1.2 million from right-wing foundations for his work, the book claimed that IQ tests revealed black people to be genetically less intelligent than whites, thus explaining their low place in society. Murray published the 845-page book without showing it to any other scientists, leading the *Wall Street Journal* to say he pursued “a strategy that provided book galleys to likely supporters while withholding them from likely critics” in an attempt “to fix the fight ... contrary to usual publishing protocol.” Murray’s think tank, the American Enterprise Institute, flew key members of the media to Washington for a weekend of briefings on the book’s content. (*What Liberal Media?*, 94)

And the media lapped it up. In what Eric Alterman has termed “a kind of Rorschach test for pundits,” (*WLM?*, 96) every major media outlet reviewed the book without questioning the accuracy of its contents. Instead, they merely quibbled about its proposed recommendations that the dumb blacks, with their dangerously high reproductive rates, might have to be kept in “a high-tech and more lavish version of an Indian reservation” without such luxuries as “individualism, equal rights before the law,” and so on. Reviewers proposed more moderate solutions, like just taking away their welfare checks. (*WLM?*, 94)

But such quibbles aside, the amount of coverage alone was incredible. The book received cover stories in *Newsweek* (“the science behind [it] is overwhelmingly mainstream”), *The New Republic* (which dedicated an entire issue to discussion of the book), and *The New York Times Book Review* (which suggested critics disliked its “appeal to sweet reason” and are “inclined to hang the defendants without a trial”). Detailed articles appeared in *TIME*, *The New York Times* (“makes a strong case”), *The New York Times Magazine*, *Forbes* (praising the book’s “Jeffersonian vision”), the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *National Review*. It received a respectful airing on such shows as ABC’s *Nightline*, PBS’s *MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour*, the *McLaughlin Group*, *Think Tank* (which dedicated a special two-part series to the book), ABC’s *PrimeTime Live*, and NPR’s *All Things Considered*. With fifteen weeks on the bestseller list, it ended up selling over 300,000 copies in hardcover.†

This wasn’t just a media debate about the existence of global warming or the merits of internment, this was a full-on media endorsement of racism, which

the *American Heritage Dictionary* defines as “The belief that race accounts for differences in human character or ability and that a particular race is superior to others.” Nor did the media mention the work’s political intentions. On the contrary, they presented it as the sober work of social scientists: *Nightline*’s Ted Koppel lamented to Murray about how his “great deal of work and research” had become “a political football”.†

Of course, this was almost certainly Murray’s intention all along. In the book proposal for his previous book (*Losing Ground*, an attack on government welfare programs) he had explained: “Why can a publisher sell this book? Because a huge number of well-meaning whites fear that they are closet racists, and this book tells them they are not. It’s going to make them feel better about things they already think but do not know how to say.”† That’s certainly what *The Bell Curve* did, replacing a debate over how to improve black achievement with one about whether such improvement was even possible.

There was just one problem: none of this stuff was accurate. As Professor Michael Nunley wrote in a special issue of the *American Behavioral Scientist* on *The Bell Curve*, after a series of scientific articles debunked all the book’s major claims: “I believe this book is a fraud, that its authors must have known it was a fraud when they were writing it, and that Charles Murray must still know it’s a fraud as he goes around defending it. ... After careful reading, I cannot believe its authors were not acutely aware of ... how they were distorting the material they did include.” (*WLM?*, 100)

Next: [Part 4: Spreading Lies](#)

Spreading Lies: How Think Tanks Ignore the Facts

June 9, 2006

[Original link](#)

[This is part 4 of an article on the power of right-wing think tanks. See also [part one](#), [part two](#), and [part three](#).]

But do the right-wing think tanks even care about the facts? In his autobiography, *Blinded by the Right*, David Brock describes his experience being recruited for one right out of college: “Though I had no advanced degrees, I assumed the grandiose title of John M. Olin Fellow in Congressional Studies, which, if nothing else, certainly impressed my parents. ... My assignment was to write a monograph, which I hoped to publish as a book, challenging the conservative orthodoxy on the proper relationship between the executive and legislative branches of government.” This topic was chosen, Brock explains, because with “a squish like Bush in the White House ... the political reality [was] that the conservative agenda could be best advanced by renegade conservatives on Capitol Hill.” (79f)

Needless to say, paying fresh-faced former college students lots of money to write articles that serve political needs is not the best way to get accurate information. But is accurate information the goal? Look at John Lott, a “resident scholar” at the American Enterprise Institute — the same right-wing think tank that promoted *The Bell Curve*. Lott’s book *More Guns, Less Crime* claimed that his scientific studies had found that passing laws to allow people to carry concealed weapons actually lowered crime rates. As usual, the evidence melted away upon investigation, but Lott’s errors were more serious than most.

Not content to simply distort the data, Lott fabricated an entire study which he claimed showed that in 97% of cases, simply brandishing a gun would cause an attacker to flee. When Internet critics begun to point out his inconsistencies on this claim, Lott posted responses under the name “Mary Rosh” to defend himself. “I have to say that he was the best professor I ever had,” Lott gushed about himself one Internet posting. “There were a group of us students who would try to take any class that he taught. Lott finally had to tell us that it was best for us to try and take classes from other professors.”

Confronted about his alternate identity, Lott told the *Washington Post* “I probably shouldn’t have done it — I know I shouldn’t have done it”. And yet, the very next day he again attacked his critics, this time under the new pseudonym “Washingtonian”. (It later got so bad that one of Lott’s pseudonyms would start talking about posts from another Lott pseudonym.)[†]

Lott, of course, is not the only scholar to make things up to bolster his case. For comparison, look at Michael Bellesiles, author of the anti-gun book *Arming America*, which argued guns were uncommon in early America. Other scholars investigated and found that Bellesiles had probably fabricated evidence. Emory University, where Bellesiles was a professor of history, begun an investigation into the accuracy of his work, eventually forcing him to resign. His publisher, Knopf, pulled the book out of print. Libraries pulled the book off their shelves. Columbia University revoked the Bancroft Prize the book had been awarded. The scandal was widely covered in academic circles. Bellesiles was firmly disgraced and has not shown his face in public since.

And what happened to Lott? Nothing. Lott remains a “resident scholar” at the American Enterprise Institute, his book continues to sell well, his op-ed pieces are still published in major papers, and he gives talks around the country.[†] For the right-wing scholar, even outright fraud is no serious obstacle.

Next: [Part 5: Saving Business](#)

Saving Business: The Origins of Right-Wing Think Tanks

June 10, 2006

[Original link](#)

[This is part 5 of an article on the power of right-wing think tanks. See also [part one](#), [part two](#), [part three](#), and [part four](#).]

Since the goal of these think tanks clearly isn't to advance knowledge, what are they for? To understand their real goals, we have to look at why they were created. After the tumultuous 1960s led a generation of students to start questioning authority, business decided something had to be done. "The American economic system," explained Lewis Powell in a 1971 memo for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, "is under broad attack" from "perfectly respectable elements of society: from the college campus, the pulpit, the media, the intellectual and literary journals, the arts and sciences, and from politicians."

And business has no one to blame but itself for not getting these things under control: the colleges are funded by "contributions from capital funds controlled or generated by American business. The boards of trustees ... overwhelmingly are composed of men and women who are leaders in the system." And the media "are owned and theoretically controlled by corporations which depend upon profits, and the enterprise system to survive." So business must "conduct guerilla warfare" by "establishing a staff of highly qualified scholars" who can be paid to publish a "steady flow of scholarly articles" in magazines and journals as well as books and pamphlets to be published "at airports, drugstores, and elsewhere."[†]

William Simon, president of the right-wing Olin Foundation (the same one that later funded Brock) was more blunt: "The only thing that can save the Republican Party ... is a counter-intelligentsia. ... [Conservative scholars] must be given grants, grants, and more grants in exchange for books, books, and more books." (*Blinded By the Right*, 78)

The Powell memo was incredibly influential. Soon after it was written, business began following its advice, building up its network of think tanks, news outlets, and media pressure groups. These organizations began to dot the landscape, hiding behind respectable names like the Manhattan Institute or the Heartland Foundation. While these institutions were all funded by partisan conservatives, news accounts rarely noted this fact. (Another FAIR study finds The Heritage Foundation's political orientation — let alone its funding — was only identified in 24% of news citations.)[†]

As the conservative message machine grew stronger, political debate and electoral results began to shift further and further to the right, eventually allowing

extreme conservatives to be elected, first with Ronald Reagan and now with George W. Bush. More recently, conservatives have managed to finally win not only the White House but both houses of Congress. While their policy proposals, when understood, are just as unpopular as ever, conservatives are able to use their media power to twist the debate.

Next: [Part 6: Hurting Seniors](#)

Hurting Seniors: The Attack on Social Security

June 11, 2006

[Original link](#)

[This is part 6 of an article on the power of right-wing think tanks. See also [part one](#), [part two](#), [part three](#), [part four](#), and [part five](#).]

Recent events provide a compelling case study of how this process works. Conservatives have wanted to get rid of Social Security for years. The most successful anti-poverty program in history, it clearly shows how the government can be used to help people — anathema to conservative ideology. Now, with a secure lock on government, is their time to strike. As a White House deputy wrote in a memo that was later leaked, “For the first time in six decades, the Social Security battle is one we can win — and in doing so, we can help transform the political and philosophical landscape of the country.”†

There’s extremely strong public support for Social Security — conservatives could certainly never just come out and say they wanted to end it — so their plan is to deceive the public: First, persuade people that Social Security is facing some sort of crisis and won’t be around for the next generation. Second, convince them to begin replacing Social Security with a privatized version. Privatization, the logic goes, will naturally keep increasing until all of Social Security is eliminated. The only problem is that Social Security isn’t facing a crisis and any form of privatization, which would require both paying out to existing retirees and saving away money for the private accounts of the current generation, would worsen whatever financial problems Social Security does have.†

But think tanks have been preparing for this moment for years, floating privatization plans and doing their best to persuade the media that Social Security was in imminent danger. So when the Bush administration started up their anti-Social Security campaign, the media knew exactly what to say.

CBS, for example, presented a segment featuring man-on-the-street Tad DeHaven. “I don’t expect to get anything from Social Security, OK?” said young DeHaven. “It’s not going to be there—that’s my assumption.” DeHaven had good reason to say these things: for years, he’s been one of the leading Republican activists in the fight to get rid of Social Security. CBS never mentioned the connection.†

A later CBS report boosted fears that Social Security was going bankrupt by displaying a graphic on the screen that read “2042: Insolvent = 0 benefits??” [*sic*] (“In 2042, Social Security will become insolvent, and today’s young workers risk losing their benefits,” a voiceover explained.) But this just isn’t true: even the pessimistic Social Security Administration concedes that by 2042 Social

Security will be able to pay nearly 80% of scheduled benefits, which is still far more than what it pays out today.†

Other networks were no better. NBC's report feature quotes from Bush saying the system would go "flat bust" and an interview with a Heritage Foundation scholar — identified only as a "social security expert" — but allowed no critics to contradict their claims.† Meanwhile, an ABC report claimed "One thing everyone agrees on, the Social Security system as it exists now won't be able to afford those payments for long after the Wilsons retire." In fact, it's quite the opposite: even the most pessimistic predictions say that Social Security will be fine until the Wilsons are statistically dead. Again, no critics got a voice.†

Next: Part 7: [Fighting Back](#)

Fighting Back: Responses to the Mainstream Media

June 15, 2006

[Original link](#)

[This is part 7 of an article on the power of right-wing think tanks. See also [part one](#), [part two](#), [part three](#), [part four](#), [part five](#), and [part six](#).]

Unlike the conservative media, it does not appear the national media is intentionally partisan. But it exists in a very specific structural context. A recent study found that two-thirds of journalists thought bottom-line pressure was “seriously hurting the quality of news coverage” while around half reported their newsrooms had been cut. 75% of print and 85% of broadcast journalists agreed that “too little attention is paid to complex issues.”[†] When you’re short on staff and stories are shallow, reporters become even more dependent on outside sources — and the right-wing think tanks are more than willing to help out, while further pulling coverage to the right.

But one obvious solution — creating a matching set of left-wing think tanks — while perhaps helpful in balancing the debate, will not solve the problem. Media norms of balance mean that even qualified experts will always be presented as “just one side of the story,” balanced directly against inaccurate conservatives — recall how the handful of corporate-funded global warming deniers are still balanced against the overwhelming scientific consensus.

Ideally, viewers would be able to hear both perspectives and decide which they thought was accurate. But since, as the journalists conceded, so little time is spent explaining complex issues, in practice very little information is presented that can help the viewer decide who’s correct. So they’re left to decide based on their existing ideological preferences, further splitting the country into two alternate realities.

Figuring out what is true — especially when it’s so obvious, as in the examples above — is precisely what the mainstream media should be doing. Partisan pundits would be replaced with thoughtful scholars. Non-peer-reviewed books would be ignored, not endlessly promoted. Scientific facts would be given precedence over political arguments. Political commentary would be replaced by factual education.

Don’t hold your breath. Six major companies own nearly 90% of all media outlets.[‡] And they — and their advertisers — don’t mind how things are going. Sumner Redstone, CEO of Viacom (Paramount, CBS, Blockbuster, MTV, Comedy Central, etc.), told a group of CEOs that “I look at the election from what’s good for Viacom. I vote for what’s good for Viacom.” And, “from a Viacom standpoint, the election of a Republican administration is a better

deal. Because the Republican administration has stood for many things we believe in, deregulation and so on.”† Better news reporting wouldn’t just be more expensive, it would threaten these business interests.

To get the straight story, it’s necessary to turn to independent and community sources which don’t have such conflicts of interest. One possibility is the daily news show *Democracy Now!*, hosted by Amy Goodman, which is funded only by viewers and foundations. Broadcast on 150 radio stations, 150 television stations, and the Internet, the show presents stories from activists, journalists, authors, and public interest organizations from around the world.

When outlets from ABC to the *New York Times* began claiming Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, *Democracy Now!* was one of the few sources to take a contrary view. It presented the testimony of Iraq’s top weapons official, who defected to the US and explained that all the weapons had been destroyed. (Other stations, ironically, parroted the Bush administration in promoting the information he presented about the weapons Iraq *had*, without mentioning they had been destroyed.)†

And when US soldiers kidnapped Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the democratically-elected president of Haiti, and flew him to the Central African Republic where they locked him in a hotel room, he managed to quietly phone out while armed guards stood outside his door. *Democracy Now!* was alone in airing his incredible story. When Aristide was finally freed, he insisted on returning to his country and again Amy Goodman was the only US television journalist who dared to accompany him back.†

Still, *Democracy Now!*’s audience is rather small compared to that of the mainstream media. But stories from overseas hint at what could happen if enough people begun paying attention to such sources. In South Korea, the country with the highest rate of broadband adoption, politics has been turned upside down by OhmyNews, a five-year-old website. Founded by Oh Yeon Ho, OhmyNews has a feature unlike any other paper: more than 85% of its stories are contributed by readers.†

Almost anyone can write for OhmyNews: the site posts 70% of all stories that are submitted, over 15,000 citizen-reporters have published stories. OhmyNews copyedits their work but tries to leave their differing styles intact. The citizen-reporters write about things they know about and that interest them, together they end up covering most of the traditional spectrum. Yet their new voices end up providing coverage on things which typically get ignored by the mainstream media.†

This is most evident in their political coverage. Before OhmyNews, conservatives controlled 80% of Korea’s newspaper circulation. Then OhmyNews gave a voice to progressives, inspiring massive nationwide protests against the government. The protests, in turn, led to the election of reformist Roh Moo Hyun, now known as “the first Internet president.”† The furious conservative National Assembly responded by voting to impeach Roh on technical grounds. OhmyNews

readers again organized and overthrew the Assembly in the next election, reinstating Roh. There's no reason why what happened in South Korea can't happen here. Overcoming the tide of misinformation is hard work, but working together committed citizens can make amazing progress, even when up against the most powerful interests. Our society has an extraordinary level of freedom and openness. Whether we use that freedom to seek out the truth or remain content with conventional platitudes is up to us.

Note to readers: Citations have been added to the previous articles in the series.

Life in Suburbia: Land of Cliche

June 16, 2006

[Original link](#)

From my desk in my apartment in Cambridge, I see the green leaves of trees out the window and, when I step closer, winding streets with quirky shops and interesting people stretching out below them. From my desk in my old home in suburban Chicago, you see the same trees, but behind them is asphalt and McMansion and long twisting driveways.

No one here uses public transportation. The city does have a train station, but one gets the sense that its purpose is mostly decorative — train stations remind people of the imaginary small town life that suburbs attempt to imitate. To get out to your house, you instead drive down long stretches of drab gray highway, besotted by hideous billboards and lined with ugly office parks.

The weather is certainly nice. On most days, if you go for a walk it's quite beautiful — as long as you keep your head pointed at the sky, where the bright green leaves interweave with the brilliant blue. But as soon as you look down there are SUVs driving the wealthy to their half-hidden palazzos — just enough visible to be bragging, just enough hidden to be private.

Whereas in Cambridge the ambitious try to fill their houses with books, in suburbia you go for art and interior decorating. The tasteless fill their houses with large marble staircases and glistening chandeliers; the more tasteful prefer bright white rooms accented with sculptures and pictures — specific enough not to be intellectual, but abstract enough to be *art*.

You came back here to raise a family, but you wouldn't even consider sending them to public school. Why would you, when there's a perfectly good private school just twenty minutes away? There the kids are white and wealthy. After all, how could they be anything else at these tuition prices? The school does give out scholarships, but only based on "merit": "interviews, teacher recommendations, examination results and current school records". The school is in the wealthiest zip code in America, surrounded by trees and houses, like everything else in suburbia.

The school is preparing for graduation. You see a slide show of those about to receive their diplomas, seen when they're so young that the smiles leap off their faces. How could anything so precious be unhappy here, with everything in its right place? Afterwards the families mingle in the courtyards, surrounded by the gleaming metal of the newly-built extensions.

Not too far, another group of kids hides behind trees by the parking lot, protecting a cooler full of water balloons they use to pelt their fellow students as they

try to reach their cars. One kid, his yellow country-club sweater tied around his neck, complimenting his finessed blond hair, hides behind a glass door, fear visible in his eyes as he looks at his newly-purchased convertible and prays it won't get hit. (He bought it, the kids explain, to match his new girlfriend. Then they turn and pelt two girls walking by.)

Despite their brazen acts, the kids are quite afraid — afraid of getting caught. They hide at the sight of parents or teachers and they restrain themselves from hitting the head of school's daughter. But they needn't worry. Parents see right through the charade and laugh it off. *Oh kids, oh kids and their water balloons. How delightful!* they say to themselves as they scurry to their cars.

The kids were right to guard the parking lots; not only is suburbia unmanageable without a car, driving cars is a central part of the culture: what kind, at what age, and where to? The funny thing is that there simply aren't that many places to go. There's your house, and your friends, and the shops uptown or at the mall.

Not that there's much difference between the two anymore. The malls have become open-air and the town centers have become so desiccated that they're little different, just chain shops surrounded by fake walkways to other chain shops. The difference, I suppose, is that in town centers no one uses the walkways — why bother when you can drive?

While the kids enjoy their eating and shopping, the mothers get down to business at the grocery store, a menagerie of food and drink and color. Huge carts are filled and paid for and then passed off to low-wage Mexicans, who load them in your car as you drive out of the parking lot.

In between the malls and downtown, even the fakery disappears and the raw commercialism that pervades the suburb is left naked, assuming its default form of ugly highway signs and strip malls, all in an almost nausea inducing gray, stretching out in all directions, leaving little escape.

Not all the people of the suburbs are cold and vicious as their surroundings. For the most part, they're "liberals", the kind who are deeply affected by the plight of the homeless as they head back to their minivan. A small sign at the menagerie of a grocery store draws attention to the plight of the hungry. No, you don't have to feed them; just feel bad: the sign advertises "[national hunger awareness day](#)" (sponsored, the web site says, "by many prominent organizations" — organizations like Macy's, Southwest Airlines, and the Food Marketing Institute).

After all, this is the generation of the New Left. 25 miles south, Chicago was rocked by the '68 Democratic Convention, where kids charged the city while filmed by newscameras, before the Chicago police decided to start beating up on both. The suburbanites didn't participate, of course, but they watched it on the news and felt sympathy for their brethren and invited the indicted Chicago 7 up to give a talk.

The war is now Iraq, not Vietnam, and the protest is more muted. A sculpture in the town center draws attention to our dead servicemen, while old ladies occasionally stage protests with large signs. Now the antiestablishment kids have become establishment parents, Mayor Daleys of their own households, full of tensions no less visible than those which engulfed Chicago.

Son one plays music too loud for son two who insists that right this minute he needs to play a video game. And when these fighting factions are supposed to come together, as in a graduation, the tensions boil over, parents screeching at kids who scream at each other, dragged down to the car where they argue about which windows to open and settings for the AC, until, realizing that they're all stuck there together, tensions cool down somewhat. Still, it doesn't seem like much fun for anyone.

At the graduation, everyone has a camera to immortalize this precious moment. They force everyone into straightening their rarely-worn suits and dresses and smiling in rarely-seen ways so that the camera can "capture the moment", an instant of artifice, entirely yanked from time, its history completely erased so that the fake smiles may be preserved.

The graduation itself is a whole event of such artifice: the students are trained to walk down the aisles absurdly slowly (while the organist stretches Pomp and Circumstance far, far beyond the breaking point) so that every parent may get copious photos of them standing in the aisle. Once on stage they fake their love for teachers they hated only days ago, while dressed in fake costumes and standing in front of a fake set. The parents are given programs whose professional typography hides the normal disarray of school, makes them think this place is Professional.

Oh, the absurdity of it all: putting all that effort into making memories they won't remember of good times they never had.

But I guess that's suburbia — the fake coat of paint that lets you pretend your unhappy life is just as nice as everyone else's, even if it easily flakes off.

A Clarification

June 20, 2006

[Original link](#)

A lot of people seem to have misunderstood my piece [A Non-Programmer's Apology](#) and my blog more generally. Let me explain:

I am 19 and live in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in an apartment with two others. The three of us together work full-time on the site [reddit.com](#) and I spend most of my days working on programming and various related tasks for it.

In the nights and weekends I read and think and write. I'm working on a large book project, which I expect to take years, and which I don't discuss much on the Web.

I also think about lots of things, many of which don't relate to either reddit or the book project. When a thought crystalizes I type it up and post it to my blog. I don't read it before I post it, I don't show it to anyone, and I don't edit it. I literally sit down and type one word after another and hit save and hit upload. (Obviously, there are some exceptions, but this is standard practice.)

If you think the writing here is poor, that's probably why. Real writing takes editing. But I don't consider this writing, I consider this thinking. I like sharing my thoughts and I like hearing yours and I like practicing expressing ideas, but fundamentally this blog is not for you, it's for me. I'm sorry. Maybe that isn't how it should be, but at least for now that's how it is. In my defense, nobody's making you come here.

I plan to keep doing this until the company fails or becomes a huge success.

Afterwards, I hope to work on the book project (and a related project) full time.

I hope that clears things up.

In Offense of Classical Music

June 20, 2006

[Original link](#)

I recently had to sit through a performance of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (it was the conductor's farewell concert). At first it was simply boring, but as I listened more carefully, it grew increasingly painful, until it became excruciatingly so. I literally began tearing my hair out and trying to cut my skin with my nails (there were large red marks when the performance was finally over). The pianist, I was certain, kept flubbing the notes and getting the timing off. But few around me seemed to agree. "Well, he certainly plays it differently from Gould," was the most they could say.

The audience, like that of private libraries and the FOX News Channel, was decidedly old. I don't recall seeing *anyone* who looked younger than thirty. And, aside from thoughts of this whole orchestras-playing-classical-music thing dying out, it made me wonder: what's so great about classical music?

Ask the old folks there and they'll tell you that nothing really compares. Listen to the stuff on the radio today and it's all simply repetitive melodies with stupid lyrics. And the thing is, they're right: the stuff on the radio does suck for the most part. But that's not really a fair comparison.

When I listen to good modern music, it takes my heart in its hands and plays with it as it pleases — makes me soar, makes me sad, excited, and mad. But when I listen to classical music, at most it simply occupies my brain for a while. Is this simply a flaw in my perception or has music really improved?

I think it's possible to argue that music is actually getting better. As humans, we clearly share a number of genetically-encoded similarities, perhaps with some variation. For example, we almost all have two eyes, although in different shapes, sizes, and colors. Imagine that we are similarly endowed with some shared sense of musical appreciation (or, put another way, emotional susceptibility). We all fall for the same musical things, again with some variation.

If this is the case (and while I can't really prove it, it seems at least plausible to me that it is), then there would indeed be objective standards for measuring music: better music would be more appreciated by the "average person" or the majority of people or some such. And if there are objective standards for measuring music, then music can get better.

And, if we again imagine that what's appreciated in music isn't simply random, that it involves certain traits (which seems pretty clear, although again hard to prove), then not only can music get better, but it probably *will*. Musicians will listen to old music, the majority of them will enjoy the good songs of the

past, and they'll try to build upon and improve that good material, following its patterns, creating even better music. And the next generation will do the same, from a further along starting point.

Does this prove that the latest Aimee Mann album (*The Forgotten Arm*) is the best work of music yet to be created by humans? Of course not. But it does mean it's at least *possible*, that I'm not completely crazy for thinking so.

What's Freedom?

June 23, 2006

[Original link](#)

George Lakoff is a prominent cognitive scientist whose central insight (which is not to say that the idea originates with him) is that we can learn about the structure of our thoughts by looking carefully at the words we use to express them. For example, we think of time as a line, as you can see through phrases like “time line”, “looking forward”, “further in the past”, etc. Similarly, we thinking is thought of as a kind of seeing: “do you see what I mean?”, “pulled the wool over your eyes”, “as you can see from the book”, “his talk was unclear”, “that sentence is opaque”, etc.

Lakoff used these techniques to write a series of books describing the structures of various ideas (*Metaphors We Live By*, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, *Where Mathematics Comes From*, etc.) but after the Republican Revolution of 1994, he turned the technique on politics, resulting in his 1996 classic *Moral Politics*, which tries to explicate the cognitive models of Democrats and Republicans.

After the election of Bush₂, Lakoff began talking about how Republicans were better at “framing”, or using language to get people to agree with them, than Democrats. Lakoff that the process goes both ways: language causes your mind to think of certain concepts which create certain pathways in your brain. Thus Republicans, he said, through massive repetition of certain phrases, were literally changing the brains of the electorate to be more favorable to them. (“If this sounds a bit scary,” he writes, “it should. This is a scary time.”)

Around the 2004 election, Lakoff skyrocketed to fame among Democrats, who were convinced by his argument that fighting Republicans required not just giving into Republican frames, but reframing the debate themselves. He rushed out the slender book *Don't Think of an Elephant*, a cobbled-together guide on his basic ideas and how progressives could use them. The book stayed on the *New York Times* bestseller list for weeks.

Now Lakoff is back with a more studied work, *Whose Freedom?*, which tries to focus in more detail on the differing views of one particular concept: freedom. Lakoff starts the book by noting that in his 2004 speech at the Republican convention, Bush used “freedom”, “free”, or “liberty” once every forty-three words. Most progressives think of this simply as a stunt — using feel-good symbols like flag and words like freedom to distract from the real issues. But Lakoff argues something much deeper is going on: Bush is trying to change the meaning of freedom itself.

So what is he trying to change it to? Right away, the book begins to fall apart. Lakoff's definition of freedom is so broad (it encompasses democracy, opportunity, equality, fairness, education, health, the press, the market, religion, the

military, academia, and privacy) as to be fundamentally meaningless: “Every progressive issue is ultimately about freedom,” he concludes. And yet freedom is kept on as the book’s organizing principle: instead of chapters about economics, religion, and foreign policy, we have the chapters “Economic Freedom”, “Religion and Freedom”, and “Foreign Policy and Freedom”.

This would be harmless if it was simply a rhetorical affectation, but Lakoff still seems to think is fundamentally about freedom. As a result, the chapters are not only weighed down with meaningless and silly attempts to connect the topic to freedom (“Life is a progressive issue, since progressive Christians are committed to promoting freedom, freedom from oppression and pain and freedom to realize one’s dreams.” — actual quote) but their actual substance is stripped bare, because it’s not discussed in its own right, but merely as an aid to the book’s discussion of freedom.

Thus instead of deriving his key theory of how family metaphors create political views, by showing how he discovered this and how it explains a lot about the world, he quickly asserts it and then tries to apply the idea to the empty void of “freedom”. The result is a book that is fundamentally vacuous — its main idea has no substance and its supporting ideas have no explanation.

And for a linguist, Lakoff has a surprisingly tin ear for language. His suggestions (like using the term “freedom judges” to respond to “activist judges”) are so bad that I assume they must not be meant to be taken literally (“judges that will fight for freedom” is more akin to what Lakoff means).

It’s unclear how the book got into this sorry state, but the good news is there’s hope. Lakoff’s Rockridge Institute has been putting out thoughtful and valuable guides on how to think and talk about various issues and they plan to publish their major work, the Progressive Manual, this summer. Let us hope that book does what this could not.

Disclosure: I received a free review copy of Lakoff’s book fedexed to me before the July 4 publication date.

Release Late, Release Rarely

July 5, 2006

[Original link](#)

When you look at something you're working on, no matter what it is, you can't help but see past the actual thing to the ideas that inspired it, your plans for extending it, the emotions you've tied to it. But when others look at it, all they see is a piece of junk.

You only get one chance to make a first impression; why have it be "junk"? Once that's associated with your name or project, it's tough to scrape off. Even people who didn't see it themselves may have heard about it second-hand. And once they hear about it, they're not likely to see for themselves. Life's too short to waste it on junk.

But when you release late, after everything has been carefully polished, you can share something of genuine quality. Apple, for example, sometimes releases stupid stuff, but it always looks good. Even when they flub, people give them the benefit of the doubt. "Well, it looks great but I don't really like it" is a lot better than "it's a piece of junk".

Still, you can do better. Releasing means showing it to the world. There's nothing wrong with showing it to friends or experts or even random people in a coffee shop. The friends will give you the emotional support you would have gotten from actual users, without the stress. The experts will point out most of the errors the world would have found, without the insults. And random people will not only give you most of the complaints the public would, they'll also tell you why the public gave up even before bothering to complain.

This is why "release early, release often" works in "open source": you're releasing to a community of insiders. Programmers know what it's like to write programs and they don't mind using things that are unpolished. They can see what you're going to do next and maybe help you get there.

The public isn't like that. Don't treat them like they are.

The Hard Sciences

July 11, 2006

[Original link](#)

If we say that science is the goal of trying to figure things out about the world, then we see the sciences broadly classified into two categories: “hard” and “soft”. In the former are subjects like physics, biology, and perhaps the honorary inclusion of mathematics. The “soft” sciences, by contrast, include fields like history, psychology, sociology, and economics.

As you might gather from the terms involved, partisans of the hard sciences often look down upon the softer sciences, considering them barely worthy of the term science at all. Indeed, the soft sciences rarely formulate general laws or clear predictions, as the harder sciences sometimes do. But why is that?

The reason is, because the “soft” sciences are, in fact, *harder*. Humans are far more complicated than atoms, trying to figure out how they work is a great deal more difficult than coming up with the rules of mechanics. As a result, the social sciences are less well developed, which means there’s less to study, which means the fields are easier to learn.

Nonetheless, since the field is so much harder, the people who make progress in it should get *more* respect. Physicists can isolate atoms and run an experiment; historians have to try to find clever ways to make a “natural experiment”.

Obviously, the progress has to be actual, rather than simply perceived, which is indeed a common confusion in the social sciences, but real observers of science should reconsider who they esteem.

The Attraction of the Center

July 12, 2006

[Original link](#)

“Centrism” is the tendency to see two different beliefs and attempt to split the difference between them. The reason why it’s a bad idea should be obvious: truth is independent of our beliefs, no less than any other partisans, centrists ignore evidence in favor of their predetermined ideology.

So what’s the attraction? First, it requires little thought: arguing for a specific position requires collecting evidence and arguing for it. Centrism, simply requires repeating some of what A is saying and some of what B is saying and mixing them together. Centrists often don’t even seem to care if the bits they take contradict each other.

Second, it’s somewhat inoffensive. Taking a strong stand on A or B will unavoidably alienate some. But being a centrist, one can still maintain friends on both sides, since they will find at least some things that you espouse to be agreeable with their own philosophies.

Third, it makes it easier to suck up to those in charge, because the concept of the “center” can easily move along with shifts in power. A staunch conservative will have to undergo a major change of political philosophy to get a place in liberal administration. A centrist can simply espouse a few more positions from the conservatives and a few less from the liberals and fit in just fine. This criteria explains why centrists are so prevalent in the pundit class (neither administration is tempted to really force them out) and why so many “centrist” pundits espouse mostly conservative ideas these days (the conservatives are in power).

Fourth, despite actually being a servant of those in power, centrism gives one the illusion of actually being a serious, independent thinker. “People on the right and on the left already know what they’re going to say on every issue,” they might claim, “but we centrists make decisions based on the situation.” (This excuse was recently used in a fundraising letter by *The New Republic*.) Of course, the “situation” that’s used to make these decisions is simply who’s currently in power, as discussed above, but that part is carefully omitted.

Fifth, it appeals to the public. There’s tremendous dissatisfaction among the public with the government and our system of politics. Despite being precisely in the middle of this corrupt system, centrists can claim that they’re actually “independents” and “disagree with both the left and the right”. They can denounce “extremism” (which isn’t very popular) and play the “moderate”, even when their positions are extremely far from what the public believes or what the facts say.

Together, these reasons combine to make centrism an especially attractive place to be in American politics. But the disease is far from limited to politics. Journalists frequently suggest the truth lies between the two opposing sources they've quoted. Academics try to distance themselves from policy positions proposed by either party. And, perhaps worst of all, scientists try to split the difference between two competing theories.

Unfortunately for them, neither the truth nor the public necessarily lies somewhere in the middle. Fortunately for them, more valuable rewards do.

Exercise for the reader: What's the attraction of "contrarianism", the ideology subscribed to by online magazines like *Slate*?

What Makes a Personality Scary?

July 17, 2006

[Original link](#)

I've noticed recently that I sometimes find myself a little afraid of people's personalities. It's kind of a weird experience: it makes sense to be afraid of people and other things that can hurt you, but being afraid of a *personality*? It doesn't make a lot of sense. Personalities can seem quirky or interesting, but scary?

At first, I thought this was simply an odd personal tic, since you don't exactly hear anyone else talking about it. But on reflection, you sometimes do. Imagine a movie, the heroine character learning about some shocking evil deed the brave male lead has committed. "I don't even know who you are anymore," she sobs. "You're starting to scare me."

What's frightening, it would seem, is that people aren't the way we expected. They seemed to be brave and kind-hearted, but when the moment was right they were capable of being crafty and manipulative. We're shocked, at first, because it's not what we expected. "But he seemed so nice... How could he do that?" Then we're upset, because at some level it seems like dishonesty. "He made me think he was a good person, yet he's capable of so much bad." And finally, we're scared, because if we were wrong about him, then our view of the world seems a little bit off.¹

Having the world be off is frightening. I remember once I found myself at Caltrain's Milbrae station late at night. Milbrae is a huge new station, a sprawling complex complete with a subway, 10 bus stops, a train, and a huge parking garage. There's nothing really around it for quite a bit and it's all open-air, with the cold night air chilling me in my shirt, as I was transferring between the subway and the train. On the way to the train tracks, I checked the schedule. The next train was at 10:47 it said; it was 10:40, so I hurried downstairs to wait for the train. I sat down and got out my book, waiting, and waiting, while the train never came. I checked the clock — it was past 10:47, well past. So I checked the downstairs schedule. There was no 10:47 train. I ran upstairs to see if the schedule I'd read was simply out-of-date. It had no 10:47 train either, nothing even close. I was certain I had read it saying 10:47 — the memory was clear in my mind, and I'd followed the line with my finger to make sure I had the right station.

I suddenly got quite scared. What was going on? Was I in a dream? Was someone sneaking around the schedules on me? Was I the victim of some practical joke? The fabric of my reality was being torn — something clearly impossible had happened: a time had disappeared off a train schedule. Things weren't working the way I expected.

I later figured out, of course, that nothing so devious had happened. In my hurry to catch the subway, I'd read the wrong side of the schedule — the train was at 10:47am, not 10:47pm, and when I went back to look for the time I looked at the right side of the schedule and, naturally, the train wasn't there. But my larger point is that tears in the way we think things work are scary. If things are this bad when a piece of paper doesn't say what we expect, it's not surprising that it's worse when people we know don't behave the way we thought.

I say we here, but as I mentioned at the start, I seem to be a bit alone on this. One possibility is that I'm hypersensitive to such emotions. Other people might simply feel a prick at such a scheduling anomaly, but I feel it as full-blown fear. Another (more flattering) possibility is that I'm more perceptive about people than others; since others don't notice the duplicity, they don't feel the associated fear.

The latter makes some sense to me, as the things that make me scared of people are often very subtle, and others don't seem to recognize them at all, even when I ask them about it specifically. Even I can't quite put my finger on what it is sometime, it's just a subtle signal that the person isn't being straight with you, that what they're saying sounds honest and friendly, but is actually manipulative. It's not a pleasant feeling.

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1. In talking about this sequence of emotions (shocked, upset, scared), I'm referring to a logical progression, not an actual one. I don't really feel all of these things in order upon seeing someone scary, just the last. But the other emotions are what gets you to the last.

The Fruits of Mass Collaboration

July 18, 2006

[Original link](#)

I often think that the world needs to be a lot more organized. Lots of people write reviews of television shows, but nobody seems to collect and organize them all. Good introductory guides to subjects are essential for learning, yet I only stumble upon them by chance. The cumulative knowledge of science is one of our most valuable cultural products, yet it can only be found scattered across thousands of short articles in hundreds of different journals.

I suspect the same thoughts occur to many of a similar cast of mind, since there's so much effort put into discouraging them. The arbiters of respectable opinion are frequently found to mock such grand projects or point out deficiencies in them. And a friend of mine explained to me that soon out of school he nearly killed himself by trying to embark on such a grand project and now tries to prevent his friends from making the same mistake.

One can, of course, make the reverse argument: since there is so much need for such organization projects, they must be pretty impossible. But upon closer inspection, that isn't true. Is there a project more grand than an encyclopedia or a dictionary? Who dares to compress all human knowledge or an entire language into a single book? And yet, there's not just one but several brands of each!

It seems that when the audience is large enough (and just about everyone has use for encyclopedias and dictionaries), it is possible to take on grand projects. This suggests that the hold-up is not practical, but economic. The funding simply isn't there to do the same for other things.

But all this is only true for the era of the book, where such a project means gathering together a group of experts and having them work full-time to build a Reference Work which can be published and sold expensively to libraries. I tend to avoid net triumphalism, but the Internet, it would seem, changes that. Wikipedia was created not by dedicated experts but by random strangers and while we can complain about its deficiencies, all admit that it's a useful service.

The Internet is the first medium to make such projects of mass collaboration possible. Certainly numerous people send quotes to Oxford for compilation in the Oxford English Dictionary, but a full-time staff is necessary sort and edit these notes to build the actual book (not to mention all the other work that must be done). On the Internet, however, the entire job — collection, summarization, organization, and editing — can be done in spare time by mutual strangers.

An even more striking, but less remarked-upon, example is Napster. Within only months, almost as a by-product, the world created the most complete library of

music and music catalog data ever seen. The contributors to this project didn't even realize they were doing this! They all thought they were simply grabbing music for their own personal use. Yet the outcome far surpassed anything consciously attempted.

The Internet fundamentally changes the practicalities of large organization projects. Things that previously seemed silly and impossible, like building [a detailed guide to every television show](#) are now being done as a matter of course. It seems like we're in for an explosion of such modern reference works, perhaps with new experiments into tools for making them.

The Techniques of Mass Collaboration: A Third Way Out

July 19, 2006

[Original link](#)

I'm not the first [to suggest that the Internet could be used for bringing users together to build grand databases](#). The most famous example is the Semantic Web project (where, in full disclosure, I worked for several years). The project, spearheaded by Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the Web, proposed to extend the working model of the Web to more structured data, so that instead of simply publishing text web pages, users could publish their own databases, which could be aggregated by search engines like Google into major resources.

The Semantic Web project has received an enormous amount of criticism, much (in my view) rooted in misunderstandings, but much legitimate as well. In the news today is just the most recent example, in which famed computer scientist turned Google executive [Peter Norvig challenged Tim Berners-Lee](#) on the subject at a conference.

The confrontation symbolizes the (at least imagined) standard debate on the subject, which Mark Pilgrim termed [million dollar markup versus million dollar code](#). Berners-Lee's W3C, the supposed proponent of million dollar markup, argues that users should publish documents that state in special languages that computers can process exactly what they want to say. Meanwhile Google, the supposed proponent of million dollar code, thinks this is an impractical fantasy, and that the only way forward is to write more advanced software to try to extract the meaning from the messes that users will inevitably create.¹

But yesterday I suggested what might be thought of as a third way out; one Pilgrim might call million dollar users. Both the code and the markup positions make the assumption that users will be publishing their own work on their own websites and thus we'll need some way of reconciling it. But Wikipedia points to a different model, where all the users come to *one* website, where the interface for inputting data in the proper format is clear and unambiguous, and the users can work together to resolve any conflicts that may come up.

Indeed, this method strikes me as so superior that I'm surprised I don't see it discussed in this context more often. Ignorance doesn't seem plausible; even if Wikipedia was a late-comer, sites like [ChefMoz](#) and [MusicBrainz](#) followed this model and were Semantic Web case studies. (Full disclosure: I worked on the Semantic Web portions of MusicBrainz.) Perhaps the reason is simply that both sides — W3C and Google — have the existing Web as the foundation for their work, so it's not surprising that they assume future work will follow from the same basic model.

One possible criticism of the million dollar users proposal is that it's somehow less free than the individualist approach. One site will end up being in charge of all the data and thus will be able to control its formation. This is perhaps not ideal, certainly, but if the data is made available under a free license it's no worse than things are now with free software. Those angry with the policies can always exercise their right to "fork" the project if they don't like the direction things are going. Not ideal, certainly, but we can try to dampen such problems by making sure the central sites are run as democratically as possible.

Another argument is that innovation will be hampered: under the individualist model, any person can start doing a new thing with their data, and hope that others will pick up the technique. In the centralized model, users are limited by the functionality of the centralized site. This too can be ameliorated by making the centralized site as open to innovation as possible, but even if it's closed, other people can still do new things by downloading the data and building additional services on top of it (as indeed [many have done with Wikipedia](#)).

It's been eight years since Tim Berners-Lee published his [Semantic Web Roadmap](#) and it's difficult to deny that things aren't exactly going as planned. Actual adoption of Semantic Web technologies has been negligible and nothing that promises to change that appears on the horizon. Meanwhile, the million dollar code people have not fared much better. Google has been able to launch a handful of very targeted features, like [music search](#) and [answers to very specific kinds of questions](#) but these are mere conveniences, far from changing the way we use the Web.

By contrast, Wikipedia has seen explosive growth, Amazon.com has become the premier site for product information, and when people these days talk about user-generated content, they don't even consider the individualized sense that the W3C and Google assume. Perhaps it's time to try the third way out.

What Does Blogspace Look Like?

July 26, 2006

[Original link](#)

I've been analyzing the content of blogs lately, looking for patterns. It's a huge amount of data, which makes for some tricky technical problems. Finally, tonight, thanks to some help from friends and the [Large Graph Layout](#) package, I've finally got some results. And they're stunning. Ladies and gentlemen, the blogosphere:

And, for fun, let's zoom in on one of those small splotches:

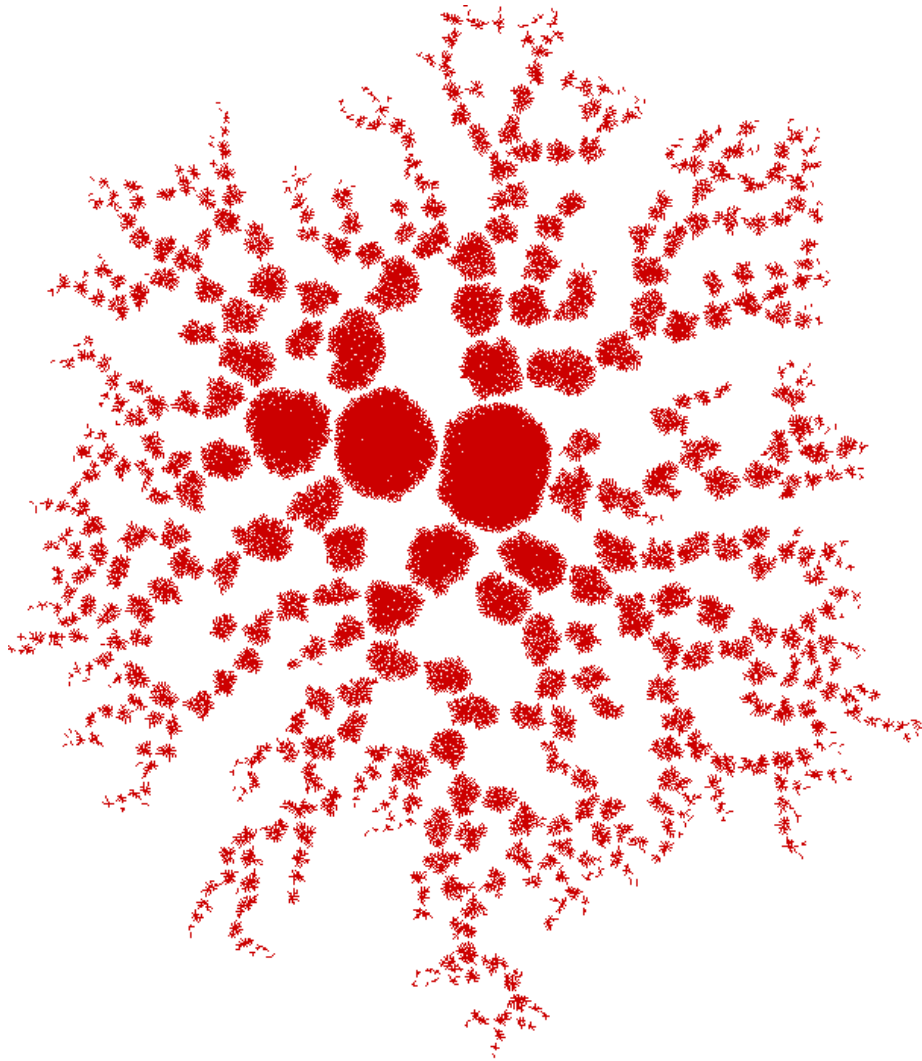


Figure 2: graph of blogspace

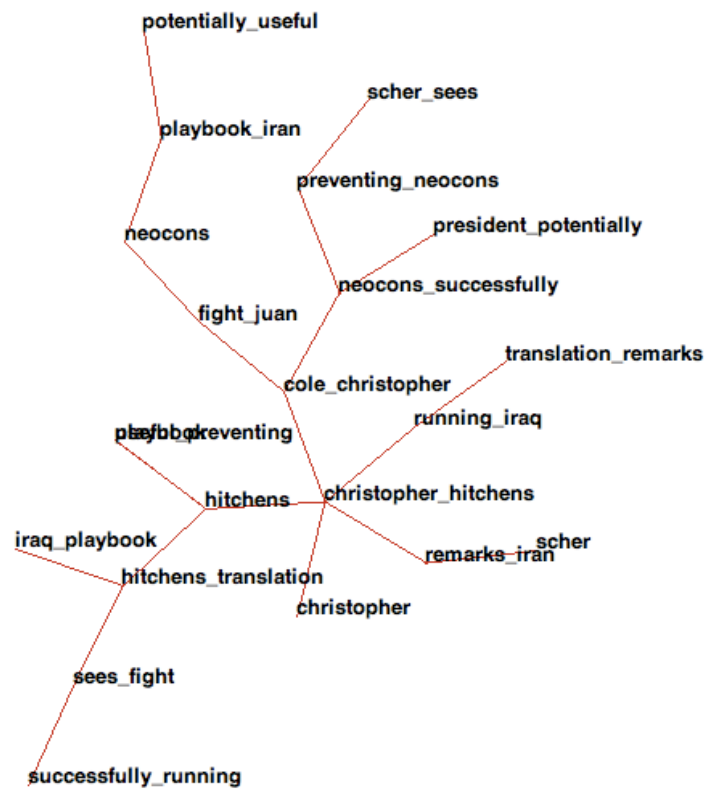


Figure 3: graph of the hitchens node

On Losing Weight

July 26, 2006

[Original link](#)

Exactly three months ago, [I wrote about the Shangri-La Diet](#). While I started on it basically immediately, it wasn't until exactly two months ago that I got a scale to measure my weight with (so some data has been lost). Since I got the scale, however, I've lost over twenty pounds.

Shockingly, losing weight has to be one of the easiest things I've ever done. I simply don't eat unless I'm really hungry and then I eat as little as possible (a couple crackers, for example). Most days I just have a couple crackers in the evening. It saves time and money and hassle (and makes it easy to eat healthy) and while I do get some weird looks from friends at restaurants, always being a fussy eater that's nothing new. (Furthermore, [there's some evidence](#) that not eating significantly prolongs lifespan.)

The one thing that really did surprise me is that [while I predicted there would be strong social pressures to lose weight](#), in reality all the pressure seemed to go the other way. Friends and acquaintances urge me to eat more, doctors think I'm sick, family members suggest I have an eating disorder. Part of this is probably just due to novelty: While "eat less" is standard advice for losing weight, because we all have set points no one is actually able to pull it off. Thus when someone actually does losing weight by eating less, it's usually because they really are sick or something like that. But in my darker moments, I wonder if part of it is selfish. The extraordinarily thin people encouraging me to eat more, I darkly wonder, don't want me to be like them. The people who need to lose some weight don't like the example of my success. I don't like thinking this way, and I have no evidence for it, but it's hard to resist.

There's not much more to say; food is even less a part of my life than it was before. I still plan to lose more weight and will provide further updates accordingly. Still, since many people seem to be interested in the topic (and in keeping with the theme of my blog), a diary of my three months follows.

The first thing I noticed was the burping. When losing weight, it seems you burp quite a bit. But even worse is the feeling of *wanting* to burp. The olive oil, it seems, has inflated my stomach with gas, making me desperately want to burp, but I can't. In fact, it was so painful that I decided to stop taking the olive oil. I still ate less — it seems like once the olive oil lowered my set point, it was easy to keep things off from there. There were a couple days after eating

lots where I would feel hungry for long periods of time and had to ignore it, but if I did that for a whole day, my set point went down, just like with the olive oil.

I [went back home](#) and saw some old friends at my high school's graduation. Many of them commented on how thin I was. I was kind of surprised, because I didn't think I was noticeably thinner yet, but I have to say I enjoyed the compliment. While on this vacation I told myself I'd forget the diet and would eat all the good home foods I missed. But even doing this, I couldn't gain weight while on vacation. I was taken out to a nice restaurant downtown but couldn't finish my hamburger (which I typically had no problem doing) — when I was half way through if I took another bite I felt like I was going to throw up, so I just stopped. When I got back, I weighed basically the same as when I'd left.

As I lost more weight I began to feel better. I'd look in the mirror and notice the fat that had disappeared from my chest, or when lying down I'd notice my legs were thinner. I felt like I had more energy. I felt happier. I felt more mobile, more able to move around and do things now that there was less of me. It felt wonderful.

One week I lost seven pounds in almost as many days and friends began to look at me with concern. But I didn't mind; I thought it was great. I had started eating significantly less, hardly anything at all really. When I moved into this new apartment (just as I was starting the diet), I thought I would have a hard time finding novel places to eat each day. But it hasn't been hard at all; I've hardly gone out to eat by myself *once* since I started the diet, except to treat myself to a food I already knew I loved.

Writing about a gastric bypass (a surgery in which the stomach is shrunk to help those who are extremely overweight lose weight) patient, surgeon Atul Gawande describes a sensation I found extremely familiar:

[...] She [lost so much weight that] was unrecognizable to anyone who had known her before, and even to herself. "I went to bars to see if I could get picked up—and I did," she said. "I always said no," she quickly added, laughing. "But I did it anyway."

The changes weren't just physical, though. She had slowly found herself to have a profound and unfamiliar sense of willpower over food. She no longer *had* to eat anything: "Whenever I eat, somewhere in the course of that time I end up asking myself, 'Is this good for you? Are you going to put on weight if you eat too much of this?' And I can just stop." The feeling baffled her. She knew, intellectually, that the surgery was why she no longer ate as much as she used to. Yet she felt as if she were choosing not to do it.

Studies report this to be a typical experience of successful gastric bypass patients. [...]

(Atul Gawande, *Complications*, 174)

The newfound willpower allowed me to be more conscious about my diet. I started thinking about what foods I wanted to eat and researching the topic of nutrition. I read Walter Willett's book about the results of his epidemiological nutrition studies and begun looking at the labels of boxes I ate. I begun ordering different things at restaurants when I did eat and buying different things at the supermarket. But most of all I found myself eating less.

When this proved not to be enough, I found myself exercising. I seemed to be more out-of-shape now than it did when I started — I suspect with all the weight loss I lost some other things too — but exercising was probably easier to find the motivation for now. I fixed up my watch and started timing myself, trying to make sure I lost the weight I wanted to; this, of course, after I already lost twenty pounds and had stopped eating almost entirely.

Losing weight had other effects too, some that saved further time. Although I feel I have more energy overall, I still get tired. Sometimes I just lie in bed thinking, when I feel little pops in my thighs as my body breaks into the fat it has stored up over the years to find energy to fuel me with. And at those moments I can only smile.

I Love the University

July 26, 2006

[Original link](#)

I went to visit a friend today at MIT. The past few days I'd been reading more stuff from academia and just that morning I was reading responses to my old posts at Stanford, so academia's siren song had been on my mind. But getting off the subway at MIT, with me full of energy after a morning jog, the sun shining brightly down, I couldn't help but feel like I was missing something, seeing smiles on the faces of the young geniuses who were everywhere around me.

Perhaps it's natural, when doing something so greedy and practical as a startup, to pine for the idealized world of academia. Its image as a place in an idyllic location filled with smart people has always been attractive; even more so with the sense that by being there one can get smarter simply through osmosis. People describe a place of continual geekiness, of throwing chemicals into the river and building robots in free time. A magical place for hackers to just enjoy themselves.

It's not that I don't enjoy my work; it's just that I feel like I'm getting dumber doing it. Or, at least, that I'm not getting as smart as I should.

This academaphilia isn't new. It's clearly what drove magazines like *Lingua Franca* and makes saying obscure names and words so impressive. But for some reason it feels stronger now. I've started downloading class syllabuses off the Web and doing the reading assignments at night; I've started thinking about how to sneak into courses and hang out with academics. In Cambridge, this paradise seems so close, so accessible.

And yet, it's hardly paradise at all. When I was actually there I was turned off by the conformism, the lack of interest in real work, the politics, the pointless assignments. My lunch date is a grad student and he tells me of the internecine squabbles, the overspecialization, the abandonment, the insecurity.

I go back to the W3C's offices and stand at the balcony. Down below, Tim Berners-Lee discusses details of a project with a group of kids who presumably took this on as summer job. I was once one of those kids, working there, and I think about why I left and why I miss it. I marvel at the pointlessness, the impracticality, the waste.

The sky is overcast now, the crowds of students have thinned out, and those that remain scurry from place to place with their heads down. I'm tired now, I feel sadder, and I wonder how I lost so much so quickly.

I want to feel nostalgic, I want to feel like there's this place, just a couple subway stops away, where everything will be alright. A better place, a place I should be in, a place I can go back to. But even just visiting it, the facts are plain. It doesn't exist, it never has. I'm nostalgic for a place that never existed.

Nutrition Basics

July 28, 2006

[Original link](#)

As part of changing my eating habits, I've become quite interested on the subject of nutrition. I can't seem to find a good guide to the subject online, so in the spirit of flailing in public until someone comes to my aid, I thought I'd write up what I think I know. Feel free to correct me or point me to better sources in the comments.

Calories are the basis of eating; they're a measure of the amount of energy a food provides. Your body gets calories from the food you eat and spends them to keep you moving. If you get more calories than you spend, your body stores the excess as fat. If you spend more than you get, your body burns some of the fat it's stored up (for just such an occasion).

Thus the standard advice for losing weight: eat less, exercise more. Eating less brings fewer calories in, while exercising more uses up more of them. Unfortunately, both of these things are quite hard to achieve, because the body seems to regulate them through [the use of "set points"](#): your body keeps track of how much fat you have through a chemical called leptin and makes you hungry if you're starting to lose weight. Thus, if you skip a meal in the morning, it'll be sure to make you extra hungry in the evening, so that your overall weight doesn't change.

A similar setpoint seems to operate for exercise. In one experiment, doctors measured how much children moved around with pedometers. Then they tried forcing the children to exercise by giving them a PE class. They found that when kids were forced to exercise at school, they exercised less at home, and ended up doing the same amount of exercise overall. So just as your body seems to make you hungry when you're losing weight and full when you're gaining it, it seems to make you tired when you've burned too many calories and antsy when you haven't burned enough.

Of course, we're not total slaves to such motivations — we can force ourselves when to eat when full or not to eat when hungry, to exercise when tired or to stay still when antsy — but it's worth keeping in mind what we're up against.

Fats have gotten a bad rap, most likely because they share a name with body fat but also, [some argue](#), because they seem lower-class. In truth, however, they're largely just one way to get calories, and a calorie is a calorie no matter where it comes from.

Fats also have effects on **cholesterol**, a key building block for your body's cells. There are two types of cholesterol — known informally as good and bad

cholesterol. Good cholesterol consists of tightly-packed proteins of cholesterol in your blood stream, allowing cholesterol to be efficiently transported where it needs to go. Bad cholesterol is less densely packed and its cholesterol ends up sticking in the walls of arteries, clogging them and leading to heart disease. Fats have varying effects on cholesterol. Saturated fats should be avoided: they increase levels of bad cholesterol (although they also increase good cholesterol). Unsaturated fats, however, whether monounsaturated or polyunsaturated, are good: they lower bad cholesterol and raising good cholesterol. *Trans* fats are just the reverse: they increase bad cholesterol levels *and* decrease good ones; it's recommended they be avoided as much as possible.

Often nutrition labels only break out unsaturated fats and trans fats; you have to calculate the amount of saturated fat by subtracting these from the amount of total fat. The goal, remember, is to avoid trans fats whenever possible, avoid saturated fats, and go for unsaturated fats.

Carbohydrates are another source of calories, the kind found in white wheat products, like bread and pasta. **Sugars** are a form of carbohydrate and, in fact, the body breaks down other carbohydrates into simple sugars. The problem with sugars is that they go directly into the bloodstream, spiking your blood sugar level. This in itself is unhealthy, but it's even worse when the level inevitably crashes and you begin to feel hungry again and eat even more.

The exception is with fiber, which the body can't break down. Foods made from whole wheat are high in fiber, so your body takes longer to digest them and the sugar intake is spread out over a longer period of time. Thus while carbohydrates might generally be avoided, whole wheat products (along with fruits and vegetables), include additional nutrients as well as having a safe impact on blood sugar, and are the foundation of a healthy diet.

Protein is a similar essential nutrient, allowing the body to make essential components of muscle and hair and so on. If you don't get enough (about 9 grams of protein for every 20 pounds), the body begins breaking down its tissues. (Eating far too much protein, however, as people in low-carb diets do, can be unhealthy as it absorbs calcium from your bones.) While protein can be found in animal products, whole wheat bread is also an excellent source — a single slice contains five grams of protein. Unfortunately, the proteins found in grains and vegetables are incomplete, so you either need to get some (complete) animal protein or eat a variety of them.

Calcium is necessary for building bones and teeth, maintaining the heart's rhythm, and more. Deficiency can lead to weakened bones and fractures. While dairy products contain significant amounts of calcium, they also contain a lot of saturated fat and has been linked to some cancers. Many other foods are fortified with calcium and some vegetables (kale and collard greens, dried beans, and legumes) are also a good source.

Vitamins do all sorts of good things, as well as warding off diseases like scurvy and rickets. They're often added to juices and cereals and can be taken by

themselves in a daily multivitamin as well.

For additional information, check out:

- [Nutrition Source](#), Harvard School of Public Health

What is going on here?

July 29, 2006

[Original link](#)

In his 1959 classic, *The Sociological Imagination*, the great sociologist C. Wright Mills told students of the discipline:

As a social scientist, you have to ... capture what you experience and sort it out; only in this way can you hope to use it to guide and test your reflection, and in the process shape yourself as an intellectual craftsman. But how can you do this? One answer is: you must set up a blog...

In such a blog ... there is joined personal experience and professional activities, studies under way and studies planned. In this blog, you ... will try to get together what you are doing intellectually and what you are experiencing as a person. here you will not be afraid to use your experience and relate it directly to various work in progress. By serving as a check on repetitious work, your blog also enables you to conserve your energy. It also encourages you to capture ‘fringe-thoughts’: various ideas which may be byproducts of everyday life, snatches of conversation overheard in the street, or, for that matter, dreams. Once noted, these may lead to more systematic thinking, as well as lend intellectual relevance to more directed experience.

...The blog also helps you build up the habit of writing. ... In developing the blog, you can experiment as a writer and this, as they say, develop your powers of expression.

Actually, he called it a “file” instead of a blog, but the point remains the same: becoming a scientific thinker requires practice and writing is a powerful aid to reflection.

So that’s what this blog is. I write here about thoughts I have, things I’m working on, stuff I’ve read, experiences I’ve had, and so on. Whenever a thought crystalizes in my head, I type it up and post it here. I don’t read over it, I don’t show it to anyone, and I don’t edit it — I just post it.

I don’t consider this writing, I consider this thinking. I like sharing my thoughts and I like hearing yours and I like practicing expressing ideas, but fundamentally this blog is not for you, it’s for me. I hope that you enjoy it anyway.

Simple Tips for Longer Living

July 31, 2006

[Original link](#)

Understanding the human body and food's effects on it over long periods of time is hard. Counting, by contrast, is easy. This, at least, is the premise behind the Nurses Health Study, a multi-decade project by Harvard to gather empirical information about nutrition. The idea behind the study is simple: collect a reasonably large group of people all in a rather similar situation (nurses) and have them fill out a yearly survey with two questions: "what did you eat?" and "are you dead yet?" They've been doing this since 1976.

Then you simply punch the information into a computer and figure out what foods kill people. The results, as described in the associated book *Eat, Drink, and Be Healthy* provide some simple tips for living longer.

Replace white bread with whole wheat. White bread is simply whole wheat bread shorn of all its nutritional value. Whole wheat has more nutrients, more protein, etc. Plus, white bread is metabolized quickly by your body so it leads to huge spikes in blood sugar which have unhealthy effects on your body and make you hungry after you crash; whole wheat bread is digested more evenly.

Replace burgers with chicken. Dark meat when grilled can lead to potential carcinogens, whereas white meat is overall healthier. Chicken contains less saturated (bad) fat while dark meat may give you too much iron.

Replace soft drinks with water. These results [are from the same study](#) but weren't featured in the book. Drinking a soda makes you 85% more likely to develop diabetes and can cause you to gain up to ten pounds. "It's probably that high amounts of sugar in the bloodstream put an increased demand for insulin on the pancreas," the study's author explains.

I'm about the fussiest eater I know and even I can handle these changes. Whole wheat bread even tastes better than white.

Disclaimer: I know nothing about nutrition, this is simply what I took away from reading one book.

Solidarity for the Shy: Achieving Critical Mass

August 8, 2006

[Original link](#)

The idea is simple: once a month, people meet up in the center of the city with their bikes and then go on a ride through the city together, taking over the streets through sheer numbers. There's little explicit politics — with the exception of a distaste for “car culture” — and no leaders or official organizers. The whole thing, the (unofficial) website explains, is a “xerocracy”: pass out xeroxes of your proposal and maybe people will follow it. Sounds like fun.

I finally got myself together enough to go this month and, half an hour before starting time, hopped on my bike and headed over. Unfortunately I didn't look at the directions all that carefully and ended up getting lost in Boston. At one point I made a wrong turn and found myself trapped in the middle of a major highway, facing the wrong direction, and with little opportunity to make it to the side. Somehow, though, I managed to escape.

I got lost several more times and became increasingly frustrated with Boston's loopy street plan. Forget about being bike-friendly, this city isn't even car-friendly. As I repeatedly reversed my path, I figured I had no doubt missed the event. Just as well, I figured, since my leg muscles were aching from a heavy day of running yesterday and the sky was so cloudy that rain seemed inevitable. Still, I figured, I should at least try to find the location of the meetup for next time.

I made sure to bring nothing with me save the key to my apartment (both for aerodynamism and in case I got arrested — in New York, the police have been known to harass and arrest CMers for “parading without a permit”) so I don't know what time I arrived, but I do know how my face lit up when I saw the mass of bicycles and cyclists arranged at the park, even as the wind was trying to blow me over.

The park was a small right triangle, taking up less than half the block. On one side was a farmer's market, closing up shop for the day. On the other was a small protest about Israel's invasion of Lebanon, with many waving Lebanese flags and a speaker on a podium (whose voice was amplified by portable radios his associates carried around the crowd) discussed the tragedy of the invasion. A fat balding man waved a sign reading “Moderate Muslims: Help US Fight Islamonazism”, but things were otherwise quite civil.

Finally, on the hypotenuse, were the cyclists, just standing and chatting. By the time I'd made my way over to them, I noticed they were biking around in a circle together, so I joined in, smiling at the sight. We all biked around for a

while until someone shouted “Mike, go right!” Mike did, exiting onto the street, and the crowd followed.

For the most part, I tried to stay in the middle of the pack. Bikes rode on all sides of me, while cars were stopped in their tracks. Frustrated, many of them pounded on their horns. In response, the crowd imitated their honk, except shouting “woohoo” as the noise, as if the cars were cheering them on.

We were particularly amused at the sight of a duck tour stopped in its tracks. I didn’t catch what happened next, but from what I heard, the duck tour tried to break into the mass and ended up running right into the car next to it, greatly amusing all the massers.

Before we started, I overheard someone discussing about how last time a car tried to break into the mass as it was passing by. He said this no so much in anger but rather in amazement at the audacity of the idea. If the mass had any opinions, it definitely felt that the street was rightly its.

To protect against future such incursions, a couple people with long bikes stood in front of cars at intersections, acting as human barricades, then sprinting back to the front of the mass so they could do it again. At one intersection, they even tried to placate the cars. “Oh, don’t worry, we” just be a second, just hold on one sec,” they shouted too the cars, which the mass found hilarious.

It was probably just as well the cars stayed put. Once one managed to break into it the mass, but quickly found itself stymied, like a bewildered bear suddenly finding itself in the middle of a swarm of honeybees.

When cars asked what we were all doing, we responded that we’d simply decided to go out for a bike ride. When pedestrians asked, however, we shouted “Critical Mass!” Still, despite our vehiclism, some cars did explicitly shout their support for Critical Mass.

Throughout I’ve been referring to the mass as a single entity, but it didn’t really feel like one. While there certainly were a lot of bikes, and together we formed quite an imposing swarm, but despite engaging it a coordinated activity, we related mostly as individuals, most people just talking to the friends they’d come with. For the most part, there just wasn’t much to talk about. I was riding my weirdo bike, so a lot of people said something like “sweet bike”, but the conversation didn’t go far beyond “did you build it?” Bikes were, perhaps, the only thing we had in common. And even casual smalltalk seems exceedingly awkward in such a situation. American education, it has been said, is about learning how to be alone in a crowd. Perhaps its not surprising then that it also teaches how to be alone at a mass protest.

The group, however, did make some attempt at community. When some began falling behind, they’d shout “mass up!” encouraging the others to slow down and catch up with the group. But this was more an issue of practicality than community, though, as a dispersed mass had less effect.

We winded around the city of Boston for a while. Cambridge is some complex and entertaining, and I'm such a loner and stay-insider, that I rarely find myself across the river in Boston. That's probably a shame, because from what I see of it, the city's quite nice. I suppose I must have been in the North End, which I gather is the nice neighborhood, but I didn't realize how much so. The streets turned into long promenades upon which men in dashing suits would dash and attractive women walked their dogs. The houses were intricate constructions of brick and, from the outside at least, appeared exceedingly elegant. The whole scene reminded me of the expensive parts of Manhattan. A fancy shopping district was just blocks away.

After touring this part of the city, with so many twists and turns that I completely lost track of where we were, we turned up at the bridge to MIT. Storm clouds provided a backdrop to the horizon and as we crossed we saw bolt of lightning come down from the clouds and connect with some tall building. I wasn't thrilled about getting my bike wet, but I figured that as long as we were heading in the direction of my apartment, I might as well continue on.

We rode up Mass Ave, Cambridge's main street, past a noticeably friendlier crowd of passersby. By the time we'd gotten half-way to Harvard Square though, the rain started coming down, very quickly accelerating to full sheets and then to buckets. The wind was blowing so hard that the rain drops attacked my face like darts, making my eyes sting. Even when I put my hand above my eyes for protection, they managed to work their way around it and straight into my eyeballs. In short order, I quickly became soaked through and through. It was a good thing I brought nothing save those keys.

The massers, for the most part, embraced the rain, throwing their hands in the air and cheering. And, since I had nothing to worry about getting wet (except the bike, which had already been left out in the rain one too many times), I did the same. It was liberating.

As we passed Harvard Square, the rain started pouring down even harder, flooding the streets with water in which our bikes left beautiful trails. We headed into a tunnel, screaming the entire length. Then we stopped at the firehouse at the end, waiting for the rest to catch up, until someone shouted "let's go again!" and we headed back into the tunnel in the other direction, again screaming. It was this point that we began to turn around and head back to Boston, though by a circuitous route I'd never seen before and didn't quite understand. As we turned away from my apartment, I thought about taking this chance to make my exit and head home, but somehow riding home alone seemed more dangerous than continuing on inside the protective bubble of the mass. So I continued. The rain quickly died down, to the annoyance of some riders. "That's all you got?" one shouted. "Come on!"

By the time we got back to the bridge to Boston, I was feeling kind of tired and couldn't quite force myself to make it all the way up and, in any event, wasn't quite sure whether I should continue on with everyone. The group had thinned significantly by this point, with people presumably peeling off as we passed their

houses. I decided to save the full tour for another time and turned around to head back home.

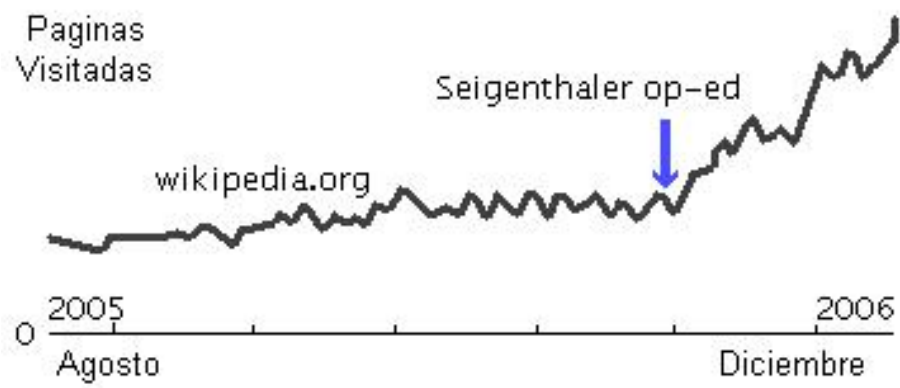
Despite being physically tired and thoroughly soaked, I was exhilarated. It was the most fun I'd ever had on a bicycle, despite its oddities and flaws. I couldn't wait to tell my friends.

As I rode home, I apparently committed some traffic error, leading some jerk in a car to shout 'Get the fuck off the road, you ass!' It didn't faze me at all, though. 'Get the fuck off *my* road,' I thought.

Growth

August 11, 2006

[Original link](#)



The Smalltalk Question

August 16, 2006

[Original link](#)

One of the minor puzzles of American life is what question to ask people at parties and suchly to get to know them.

“How ya doin’?” is of course mere formality, only the most troubled would answer honestly for anything but the positive.

“What do you do?” is somewhat offensive. First, it really means “what occupation do you hold?” and thus implies you do little outside your occupation. Second, it implies that one’s occupation is the most salient fact about them. Third, it rarely leads to further useful inquiry. For only a handful of occupations, you will be able to say something somewhat relevant, but even this will no doubt be slightly annoying or offensive. (“Oh yeah, I always thought about studying history.”)

“Where are you from?” is even less fruitful.

“What’s your major?” (in the case of college students) turns sour when, as is tragically all too often the case, students feel no real passion for their major.

“What book have you read recently?” will cause the majority of Americans who don’t read to flail, while at best only getting an off-the-cuff garbled summary of a random book.

“What’s something cool you’ve learned recently?” puts the person on the spot and inevitably leads to hemming and hawing and then something not all that cool.

I propose instead that one ask “What have you been thinking about lately?” First, the question is extremely open-ended. The answer could be a book, a movie, a relationship, a class, a job, a hobby, etc. Even better, it will be whichever of these is most interesting at the moment. Second, it sends the message that thinking, and thinking about thinking, is a fundamental human activity, and thus encourages it. Third, it’s easiest to answer, since by its nature its asking about what’s already on the person’s mind. Fourth, it’s likely to lead to productive dialog, as you can discuss the topic together and hopefully make progress. Fifth, the answer is quite likely to be novel. Unlike books and occupations, people’s thoughts seem to be endlessly varied. Sixth, it helps capture a person’s essence. A job can be forced by circumstance and parentage, but our thoughts are all our own. I can think of little better way to quickly gauge what a person is really like.

“What have you been working on lately?” can be seen, in this context, to be clearly inferior, although similar.

So, what *have* you been thinking about lately?

Wikimedia at the Crossroads

August 31, 2006

[Original link](#)

Wikimedia 2006 Elections

Part 1: **Wikimedia at the Crossroads**

Part 2: [Who Writes Wikipedia?](#)

Part 3: [Who Runs Wikipedia?](#)

Part 4: [Making More Wikipedians](#)

Part 5: [Making More Wikipedias](#)

Part 6: [Code, and Other Laws](#)

If you translate this essay, please [contact me](#).

[Vote for me](#) in the election for the Wikimedia Foundation's Board of Directors.

A couple weeks ago I had the great privilege of attending Wikimania, the international Wikimedia conference. Hundreds from all over the world gathered there to discuss the magic that is Wikipedia, thinking hard about what it means and why it works. It was an amazing intellectual and emotional experience.

The main attraction was seeing the vibrant Wikipedia community. There were the hardcore Wikipedians, who spend their days reviewing changes and fixing pages. And there were the elder statesmen, like Larry Lessig and Brewster Kahle, who came to meet the first group and tell them how their work fits into a bigger picture. Spending time with all these people was amazing fun — they're all incredibly bright, enthusiastic and, most shockingly, completely dedicated to a cause greater than themselves.

At most “technology” conferences I've been to, the participants generally talk about technology for its own sake. If *use* ever gets discussed, it's only about using it to make vast sums of money. But at Wikimania, the primary concern was doing the most good for the world, with technology as the tool to help us get there. It was an incredible gust of fresh air, one that knocked me off my feet.

There was another group attending, however: the people holding up the platform on which this whole community stands. I spent the first few days with the mostly-volunteer crew of hackers who keep the websites up and running. In later days, I talked to the site administrators who exercise the power that the software gives them. And I heard much about the Wikimedia Foundation, the not-for-profit that controls and runs the sites.

Much to my surprise, this second group was almost the opposite of the first. With a few notable exceptions, when they were off-stage they talked gossip and details: how do we make the code stop doing this, how do we get people to

stop complaining about that, how can we get this other group to like us more. Larger goals or grander visions didn't come up in their private conversations; instead they seemed absorbed by the issues of the present.

Of course, they have plenty to be absorbed by. Since January, Wikipedia's traffic has more than doubled and this group is beginning to strain under the load. At the technical level, the software development and server systems are both managed by just one person, Brion Vibber, who appears to have his hands more-than-full just keeping everything running. The entire system has been cobbled together as the site has grown, a messy mix of different kinds of computers and code, and keeping it all running sounds like a daily nightmare. As a result, actual software development goes rather slowly, which cannot help but affect the development of the larger project.

The small coterie of site administrators, meanwhile, are busy dealing with the ever-increasing stream of complaints from the public. The recent Seigenthaler affair, in which the founding editor of *USA Today* noisily attacked Wikipedia for containing an grievous error in its article on him, has made people very cautious about how Wikipedia treats living people. (Although [to judge just from the traffic numbers](#), one might think more such affairs might be a good idea...) One administrator told me how he spends his time scrubbing Wikipedia clean of unflattering facts about people who call the head office to complain.

Finally, the Wikimedia Foundation Board seems to have devolved into inaction and infighting. Just four people have been actually hired by the Foundation, and even they seem unsure of their role in a largely-volunteer community. Little about this group — which, quite literally, controls Wikipedia — is known by the public. Even when they were talking to dedicated Wikipedians at the conference, they put a public face on things, saying little more than “don't you folks worry, we'll straighten everything out”.

The plain fact is that Wikipedia's gotten too big to be run by just a couple of people. One way or another, it's going to have to become an organization; the question is what kind. Organizational structures are far from neutral: whose input gets included decides what actions get taken, the positions that get filled decide what things get focused on, the vision at the top sets the path that will be followed.

I worry that Wikipedia, as we know it, might not last. That its feisty democracy might ossify into staid bureaucracy, that its innovation might stagnate into conservatism, that its growth might slow to stasis. Were such things to happen, I know I could not just stand by and watch the tragedy. Wikipedia is just too important — both as a resource and as a model — to see fail.

That is why, after much consideration, I've decided to run for a seat on the Wikimedia Foundation's Board. I've been a fairly dedicated Wikipedian since

2003, adding and editing pages whenever I came across them. I've gone to a handful of Wikipedia meetups and even got my photo on the front page of the *Boston Globe* as an example Wikipedian. But I've never gotten particularly involved in Wikipedia politics — I'm not an administrator, I don't get involved in policy debates, I hardly even argue on the "talk pages". Mostly, I just edit.

And, to be honest, I wish I could stay that way. When people at Wikimania suggested I run for a Board seat, I shrugged off the idea. But since then, I've become increasingly convinced that I should run, if only to bring attention to these issues. Nobody else seems to be seriously discussing this challenge.

The election begins today and lasts three weeks. As it rolls on, I plan to regularly publish essays like this one, examining the questions that face Wikipedia in depth. Whether I win or not, I hope we can use this opportunity for a grand discussion about where we should be heading and what we can do to get there. That said, if you're an eligible Wikipedian, I hope that you'll please [vote for me](#).

Who Writes Wikipedia?

September 4, 2006

[Original link](#)

Wikimedia 2006 Elections

Part 1: [Wikimedia at the Crossroads](#)

Part 2: **Who Writes Wikipedia?**

Part 3: [Who Runs Wikipedia?](#)

Part 4: [Making More Wikipedians](#)

Part 5: [Making More Wikipedias](#)

Part 6: [Code, and Other Laws](#)

Translations: , [Español](#), [Deutsch](#), [Français](#) ([add](#))

Vote for me in the election for the Wikimedia Foundation's Board of Directors.

I first met Jimbo Wales, the face of Wikipedia, when he came to speak at Stanford. Wales told us about Wikipedia's history, technology, and culture, but one thing he said stands out. "The idea that a lot of people have of Wikipedia," he noted, "is that it's some emergent phenomenon — the wisdom of mobs, swarm intelligence, that sort of thing — thousands and thousands of individual users each adding a little bit of content and out of this emerges a coherent body of work."† But, he insisted, the truth was rather different: Wikipedia was actually written by "a community ... a dedicated group of a few hundred volunteers" where "I know all of them and they all know each other". Really, "it's much like any traditional organization."

The difference, of course, is crucial. Not just for the public, who wants to know how a grand thing like Wikipedia actually gets written, but also for Wales, who wants to know how to run the site. "For me this is really important, because I spend a lot of time listening to those four or five hundred and if ... those people were just a bunch of people talking ... maybe I can just safely ignore them when setting policy" and instead worry about "the million people writing a sentence each".

So did the Gang of 500 actually write Wikipedia? Wales decided to run a simple study to find out: he counted who made the most edits to the site. "I expected to find something like an 80-20 rule: 80% of the work being done by 20% of the users, just because that seems to come up a lot. But it's actually much, much tighter than that: it turns out over 50% of all the edits are done by just .7% of the users ... 524 people. ... And in fact the most active 2%, which is 1400 people, have done 73.4% of all the edits." The remaining 25% of edits, he said, were from "people who [are] contributing ... a minor change of a fact or a minor spelling fix ... or something like that."

Stanford wasn't the only place he's made such a claim; it's part of the standard talk he gives all over the world. "This is the group of around a thousand people who really matter", he told us at Stanford. "There is this tight community that is actually doing the bulk of all the editing", he explained at the Oxford Internet Institute. "It's a group of around a thousand to two thousand people," he informed the crowd at GEL 2005. These are just the three talks I watched, but Wales has given hundreds more like them.

At Stanford the students were skeptical. Wales was just counting the number of edits — the number of times a user changed something and clicked save. Wouldn't things be different if he counted the amount of text each user contributed? Wales said he planned to do that in "the next revision", but was sure "my results are going to be even stronger", because he'd no longer be counting vandalism and other changes that later got removed.

Wales presents these claims as comforting. Don't worry, he tells the world, Wikipedia isn't as shocking as you think. In fact, it's just like any other project: a small group of colleagues working together toward a common goal. But if you think about it, Wales's view of things is actually much *more* shocking: around a thousand people wrote the world's largest encyclopedia in four years for free? Could this really be true?

Curious and skeptical, I decided to investigate. I picked an article at random ("Alan Alda") to see how it was written. [Today the Alan Alda page](#) is a pretty standard Wikipedia page: it has a couple photos, several pages of facts and background, and a handful of links. But [when it was first created](#), it was just two sentences: "Alan Alda is a male actor most famous for his role of Hawkeye Pierce in the television series MASH. Or recent work, he plays sensitive male characters in drama movies." How did it get from there to here?

Edit by edit, I watched the page evolve. The changes I saw largely fell into three groups. A tiny handful — probably around 5 out of nearly 400 — were "vandalism": confused or malicious people adding things that simply didn't fit, followed by someone undoing their change. The vast majority, by far, were small changes: people fixing typos, formatting, links, categories, and so on, making the article a little nicer but not adding much in the way of substance. Finally, a much smaller amount were genuine additions: a couple sentences or even paragraphs of new information added to the page.

Wales seems to think that the vast majority of users are just doing the first two (vandalizing or contributing small fixes) while the core group of Wikipedians writes the actual bulk of the article. But that's not at all what I found. Almost every time I saw a substantive edit, I found the user who had contributed it was not an active user of the site. They generally had made less than 50 edits (typically around 10), usually on related pages. Most never even bothered to create an account.

To investigate more formally, I purchased some time on a computer cluster and downloaded a copy of the Wikipedia archives. I wrote a little program to go through each edit and count how much of it remained in the latest version.[†] Instead of counting edits, as Wales did, I counted the number of letters a user actually contributed to the present article.

If you just count edits, it appears the biggest contributors to the Alan Alda article (7 of the top 10) are registered users who (all but 2) have made thousands of edits to the site. Indeed, #4 has made over 7,000 edits while #7 has over 25,000. In other words, if you use Wales's methods, you get Wales's results: most of the content seems to be written by heavy editors.

But when you count letters, the picture dramatically changes: few of the contributors (2 out of the top 10) are even registered and most (6 out of the top 10) have made less than 25 edits to the entire site. In fact, #9 has made exactly one edit — this one! With the more reasonable metric — indeed, the one Wales himself said he planned to use in the next revision of his study — the result completely reverses.

I don't have the resources to run this calculation across all of Wikipedia (there are over 60 million edits!), but I ran it on several more randomly-selected articles and the results were much the same. For example, the largest portion of the Anaconda article was written by a user who only made 2 edits to it (and only 100 on the entire site). By contrast, the largest number of edits were made by a user who appears to have contributed no text to the final article (the edits were all deleting things and moving things around).

When you put it all together, the story become clear: an outsider makes one edit to add a chunk of information, then insiders make several edits tweaking and reformatting it. In addition, insiders rack up thousands of edits doing things like changing the name of a category across the entire site — the kind of thing only insiders deeply care about. As a result, insiders account for the vast majority of the edits. But it's the outsiders who provide nearly all of the content.

And when you think about it, this makes perfect sense. Writing an encyclopedia is hard. To do anywhere near a decent job, you have to know a great deal of information about an incredibly wide variety of subjects. Writing so much text is difficult, but doing all the background research seems impossible.

On the other hand, everyone has a bunch of obscure things that, for one reason or another, they've come to know well. So they share them, clicking the edit link and adding a paragraph or two to Wikipedia. At the same time, a small number of people have become particularly involved in Wikipedia itself, learning its policies and special syntax, and spending their time tweaking the contributions of everybody else.

Other encyclopedias work similarly, just on a much smaller scale: a large group of people write articles on topics they know well, while a small staff formats them into a single work. This second group is clearly very important — it's thanks to them encyclopedias have a consistent look and tone — but it's a severe exaggeration to say that they wrote the encyclopedia. One imagines the people running *Britannica* worry more about their contributors than their formatters.

And Wikipedia should too. Even if all the formatters quit the project tomorrow, Wikipedia would still be immensely valuable. For the most part, people read Wikipedia because it has the information they need, not because it has a consistent look. It certainly wouldn't be as nice without one, but the people who (like me) care about such things would probably step up to take the place of those who had left. The formatters aid the contributors, not the other way around.

Wales is right about one thing, though. This fact does have enormous policy implications. If Wikipedia is written by occasional contributors, then growing it requires making it easier and more rewarding to contribute occasionally. Instead of trying to squeeze more work out of those who spend their life on Wikipedia, we need to broaden the base of those who contribute just a little bit.

Unfortunately, precisely because such people are only occasional contributors, their opinions aren't heard by the current Wikipedia process. They don't get involved in policy debates, they don't go to meetups, and they don't hang out with Jimbo Wales. And so things that might help them get pushed on the backburner, assuming they're even proposed.

Out of sight is out of mind, so it's a short hop to thinking these invisible people aren't particularly important. Thus Wales's belief that 500 people wrote half an encyclopedia. Thus his assumption that outsiders contribute mostly vandalism and nonsense. And thus the comments you sometimes hear that making it hard to edit the site might be a good thing.

"I'm not a wiki person who happened to go into encyclopedias," Wales told the crowd at Oxford. "I'm an encyclopedia person who happened to use a wiki." So perhaps his belief that Wikipedia was written in the traditional way isn't surprising. Unfortunately, it is dangerous. If Wikipedia continues down this path of focusing on the encyclopedia at the expense of the wiki, it might end up not being much of either.

More: [Further reading](#) | [Vote for me](#) | [Discuss on Meta-Wiki](#) | [Discuss on Reddit](#)

Follow ups: [Summary of further research](#), [summary of responses](#).

Additional information: [my collection of research on this question](#).

Who Writes Wikipedia? — Responses

September 5, 2006

[Original link](#)

([back to Who writes Wikipedia?](#))

First, on a personal note, let me simply say thanks. I probably put more work yesterday's post than anything else I've ever written. In addition to the research I describe, I've spent my free time the past few weeks going over the text of the article again and again, agonizing about the proper phrasing, getting everything just right. It was definitely worth it. My sincere thanks to everyone who made it possible.

Further research is needed

Getting down to business, many are interested in pursuing this line of quantitative research. The work I did was intended for an article, not a formal paper, and while I'm fairly confident the basic principles are correct there's plenty more work to be done.

I was heartened to discover research by Seth Anthony which, independently and more formally, came to largely the same conclusions. [As he explained on Reddit](#): "Only about 10% of all edits on Wikipedia actually add substantive content. Roughly a third of those edits are made by someone without an account, half of someone without a userpage (a minimal threshold for considering whether someone is part of the "community"). The average content-adder has less than 200 edits: much less, in many cases."

One of the more interesting things Anthony did was look at the work of admins in detail. In his sample, he noticed that none of the genuinely substantive edits were done by official site admins. He found that when admins originally joined the site, they contributed a lot less frequently and consistently but created a lot more substantive content. After they became admins, however, they turned into what Anthony calls "janitors".

One of the wonderful things about Wikipedia is that literally all of the data — every single edit and practically every discussion made on or about the site — is easily available. So there's an enormous amount more to learn about how it gets written. (In addition to nailing down what we know so far a little better.) If you're interested to contributing to further research on this and related topics, [send me an email](#) and I'll try to coordinate something.

Who gets to vote?

Another response was to think about the implications on who gets to vote in Wikipedia elections. ‘I tried to vote,’ [commented Eric](#), ‘but since I am one of your “occasional contributors” (I’ve edited only one article to make content changes), I am not eligible[]’. It appears that the opinions of “occasional contributors” will not be heard.’ Others, including William Loughborough and Jason Clark, expressed similar sentiments. ‘HURRAH, I am DISENFRANCHISED’, [complained Bill Coderre](#).

Alienating the world

But by far the most common response was people sharing their experience trying to contribute to Wikipedia, only to see their contributions be quickly reverted or rewritten.

‘You can definately tell the “regulars” on Wikipedia’, [joshd noted](#). ‘They’re the ones who ... delete your newly reate[d] article without hesitation, or revert your changes and accuse you of vandalis[m] without even checking the changes you made.’ ‘Every modification I made was deleted without any comment’, [complained CafeCafe](#). ‘I know there are a lot of people like me willing to help, but unless there is a real discussion behind, I won’t waste my time to help anymore which is a sad thing.’

[bowerbird complained](#) that ‘my contributions ... have been warped by people who merely want to “make it sound like an encyclopedia” without having any knowledge of the topic’ while [Ian](#) ‘got fed up of the self-appointed officious jobsworths who [rewrite your] things [to] fit “their vision” My time is too valuable to argue with these people...’

[Bill Coderre told](#) of how he wrote entire articles from scratch, only to see them ruined ‘by some super-editors, who removed content, and turned what I thought was gosh-darn good writing into crap. ... These people, by and large, “edited” thousands of articles. In most cases, these edits were to remove material that they found unsuitable. Indeed, some of the people-history pages contained little “awards” that people gave each other — for removing content from Wikipedia.’

And it seems like half of all the people I meet have a story about being listed for deletion and the nasty insults that ensued. Seriously, there have been numerous times I’ve said something about Wikipedia to a relatively well-known person and they responded back with a story about how someone insulted and deleted them. ‘[T]here are culture vultures overlooking Wkidpedia waiting to kill anything that doesn’t fit the norm’, [wrote Mediangler](#).

Why does this matter? Why should we listen to the angry complaints of random people on the Internet? If occasional contributors are the lifeblood of Wikipedia, as the evidence suggests, then alienating such people just can’t be healthy for the project. As Ian wrote, ‘if we are to invest our valuable time contributing some

expert knowledge on some subject, we want to know that our work will remain there for others, and not just keep getting reverted out in seconds by some control freak that knows nothing about the actual subject. ... your article proves the exist[e]nce of this “inner gang” that I feel are actually holding Wikipedia back. To allow Wikipedia to grow and really pick the brains of the experts around the world, you need to do something to break up this inner gang and the mini empires they are building for themselves.’

Perhaps we can improve things with new rules (not only should you [not bite the newcomers](#), you shouldn’t even bark at them) and new software (making it easier to discuss changes and defend contributions), but most importantly, it’s going to require a cultural shift. Larry Sanger famously suggested that [Wikipedia must jettison its anti-elitism](#) so that experts could feel more comfortable contributing. I think the real solution is the opposite: Wikipedians must jettison their *elitism* and welcome the newbie masses as genuine contributors to the project, as people to respect, not filter out.

False Outliers

September 5, 2006

[Original link](#)

So far [my Wikipedia script](#) has churned through about 200 articles, calculating who wrote what in each. This morning I looked through them to see if there were any that didn't match my theory. It printed out a couple and I decided to investigate.

The first it found was [Alkane](#), a long technical article about acyclic saturated hydrocarbons that it said was largely written by [Physchim62](#). Yesterday a good friend was telling me that he thought long technical articles were likely written by a single person, so I immediately thought that here was the proof that he was right. But, just to check, I decided to look in the edit history to make sure my script hadn't made an error.

It hadn't, I found, but once again simply looking at the numbers missed the larger point. Physchim62 had indeed contributed most of the article, but according to the edit comments, it was by translating the German version! I don't have the German data, but presumably it was written in the same incremental way as most of the articles in my study.

The next serious case was [Characters in Atlas Shrugged](#), which the script said was written by CatherineMunro. Again, it seemed plausible that one person could have written all those character bios. But again, an investigation into the actual edit history found that Munro hadn't written them, instead she'd copied them from a bunch of subpages, merging them into one bigger page.

The final serious example was [Anchorage, Alaska](#), which appeared to have been written by [JeffreyAllen1975](#). Here the contributions seemed quite genuine; JeffreyAllen1975 made tons of edits each contributing a paragraph at a time. The work seemed to take quite a toll on him; at his user page he noted "I just got burned-out and tired of the online encyclopedia. My time is being taken away from me by being with Wikipedia." He lasted about four months.

Still, something seemed fishy about JeffreyAllen1975, so I decided to investigate further. Currently, the Anchorage page has a tag noting that "The current version of the article or section reads like an advertisement." A bit of Googling revealed why: JeffreyAllen1975's contributions had been copied-and-pasted from other websites, like [the Anchorage Chamber of Commerce](#) ("Anchorage's public school system is ranked among the best in the nation. ... The district's average SAT and ACT College entrance exam scores are consistently above the national average and Advanced Placement courses are offered at each of the district's larger high schools.").

I suspect JeffreyAllen1975 didn't know what he was doing; his writing style suggests he's just a kid: "In my free time, I am very proud of my-self by how much I've learned by making good edits on Wikipedia articles." I'm pretty sure he just thought he was helping the project: "Wikipedia is like the real encyclopedia books (A thru Z) that you see in the library, but better." But his plagiarism will still have to be removed.

When I started, just looking at the numbers these seemed to be several cases that strongly contradicted my theory. And had I just stuck to looking at the numbers, I would have believed that to be the case as well. But, once again, investigation shows the picture to be far more interesting: translation, reorganization, and plagiarism. Exciting stuff!

Who Runs Wikipedia?

September 7, 2006

[Original link](#)

Wikimedia 2006 Elections

Part 1: [Wikimedia at the Crossroads](#)

Part 2: [Who Writes Wikipedia?](#)

Part 3: **Who Runs Wikipedia?**

Part 4: [Making More Wikipedians](#)

Part 5: [Making More Wikipedias](#)

Part 6: [Code, and Other Laws](#)

Translations: [\(add\)](#)

[Vote for me](#) in the election for the Wikimedia Foundation's Board of Directors.

During Wikimania, I gave a short talk proposing some new features for Wikipedia. The audience, which consisted mostly of programmers and other high-level Wikipedians, immediately begun suggesting problems with the idea. “Won’t bad thing X happen?” “How will you prevent Y?” “Do you really think people are going to do Z?” For a while I tried to answer them, explaining technical ways to fix the problem, but after a couple rounds I finally said:

Stop.

If I had come here five years ago and told you I was going to make an entire encyclopedia by putting up a bunch of web pages that anyone could edit, you would have been able to raise a thousand objections: It will get filled with vandalism! The content will be unreliable! No one will do that work for free!

And you would have been right to. These were completely reasonable expectations at the time. But here’s the funny thing: it worked anyway.

At the time, I was just happy this quieted them down. But later I started thinking more about it. Why did Wikipedia work anyway?

It wasn’t because its programmers were so far-sighted that the software solved all the problems. And it wasn’t because the people running it put clear rules in place to prevent misbehavior. We know this because when Wikipedia started it didn’t have any programmers (it used off-the-shelf wiki software) and it didn’t have clear rules (one of the first major rules was apparently [Ignore all rules](#)).

No, the reason Wikipedia works is because of the community, a group of people that took the project as their own and threw themselves into making it succeed.

People are constantly trying to vandalize Wikipedia, replacing articles with random text. It doesn't work; their edits are undone within minutes, even seconds. But why? It's not magic — it's a bunch of incredibly dedicated people who sit at their computers watching every change that gets made. These days they call themselves the “recent changes patrol” and have special software that makes it easy to undo bad changes and block malicious users with a couple clicks.

Why does anyone do such a thing? It's not particularly fascinating work, they're not being paid to do it, and nobody in charge asked them to volunteer. They do it because they care about the site enough to feel responsible. They get upset when someone tries to mess it up.

It's hard to imagine anyone feeling this way about *Britannica*. There are people who love that encyclopedia, but have any of them shown up at their offices offering to help out? It's hard even to imagine. Average people just don't feel responsible for *Britannica*; there are professionals to do that.

Everybody knows Wikipedia as the site anyone can edit. The article about tree frogs wasn't written because someone in charge decided they needed one and assigned it to someone; it was written because someone, somewhere just went ahead and started writing it. And a chorus of others decided to help out.

But what's less well-known is that it's also the site that anyone can run. The vandals aren't stopped because someone is in charge of stopping them; it was simply something people started doing. And it's not just vandalism: a “welcoming committee” says hi to every new user, a “cleanup taskforce” goes around doing factchecking. The site's rules are made by rough consensus. Even the servers are largely run this way — a group of volunteer sysadmins hang out on IRC, keeping an eye on things. Until quite recently, the Foundation that supposedly runs Wikipedia had no actual employees.

This is so unusual, we don't even have a word for it. It's tempting to say “democracy”, but that's woefully inadequate. Wikipedia doesn't hold a vote and elect someone to be in charge of vandal-fighting. Indeed, “Wikipedia” doesn't do anything at all. Someone simply sees that there are vandals to be fought and steps up to do the job.

This is so radically different that it's tempting to see it as a mistake: Sure, perhaps things have worked so far on this model, but when the real problems hit, things are going to have to change: certain people must have clear authority,

important tasks must be carefully assigned, everyone else must understand that they are simply volunteers.

But Wikipedia's openness isn't a mistake; it's the source of its success. A dedicated community solves problems that official leaders wouldn't even know were there. Meanwhile, their volunteerism largely eliminates infighting about who gets to be what. Instead, tasks get done by the people who genuinely want to do them, who just happen to be the people who care enough to do them right.

Wikipedia's biggest problems have come when it's strayed from this path, when it's given some people official titles and specified tasks. Whenever that happens, real work slows down and squabbling speeds up. But it's an easy mistake to make, so it gets made again and again.

Of course, that's not the only reason this mistake is made, it's just the most polite. The more frightening problem is that people love to get power and hate to give it up. Especially with a project as big and important as Wikipedia, with the constant swarm of praise and attention, it takes tremendous strength to turn down the opportunity to be its official X, to say instead "it's a community project, I'm just another community member".

Indeed, the opposite is far more common. People who have poured vast amounts of time into the project begin to feel they should be getting something in return. They insist that, with all their work, they *deserve* an official job or a special title. After all, won't clearly assigning tasks be better for everyone?

And so, the trend is clear: more power, more people, more problems. It's not just a series of mistakes, it's the tendency of the system.

It would be absurd for me to say that I'm immune to such pressures. After all, I'm currently running for a seat on the Wikimedia Board. But I also lie awake at night worrying that I might abuse my power.

A systemic tendency like this is not going to be solved by electing the right person to the right place and then going to back to sleep while they solve the problem. If the community wants to remain in charge, it's going to have to fight for it. I'm writing these essays to help people understand that this is something worth fighting for. And if I'm elected to the Board, I plan to keep on writing.

Just as Wikipedia's success as an encyclopedia requires a world of volunteers to write it, Wikipedia's success as an organization requires the community of volunteers to run it. On the one hand, this means opening up the Board's inner workings for the community to see and get involved in. But it also means opening up the actions of the community so the wider world can get involved. Whoever wins this next election, I hope we all take on this task.

Making More Wikipedians

September 11, 2006

[Original link](#)

Wikimedia 2006 Elections

Part 1: [Wikimedia at the Crossroads](#)

Part 2: [Who Writes Wikipedia?](#)

Part 3: [Who Runs Wikipedia?](#)

Part 4: **Making More Wikipedians**

Part 5: [Making More Wikipedias](#)

Part 6: [Code, and Other Laws](#)

If you translate this essay, please [contact me](#).

[Vote for me](#) in the election for the Wikimedia Foundation's Board of Directors.

Wikipedia, the Vice President of the *World Book* told us, is now recognized by ten percent of Americans. He presented this in a tone of congratulation: with no marketing budget or formal organization, a free online-only encyclopedia written by volunteers had achieved a vast amount of attention. But I took it a different way. "Only ten percent?" I thought. "That means we have ninety percent to go!"

Wikipedia is one of the few things that pretty much everyone finds useful. So how do we get all of them to use it? The first task, it appears, is telling them it exists. An ad campaign or PR blitz doesn't quite seem appropriate for the job, though. Instead, our promotion should work the same way way the rest of Wikipedia works: let the community do it.

Wikipedia's users come from all over society: different cultures, different countries, different places, different fields of study. The physics grad students who contribute heavily to physics articles are in a much better position to promote it to physicists than a promotional flack from the head office. The Pokemon fan maintaining the Pokemon articles probably knows how to reach other Pokemaniacs than any marketing expert.

Sure, you might say, but isn't the whole question of marketing Wikipedia somewhat silly? After all, you obviously know about Wikipedia, and your friends probably all seem to as well. But things are a lot thinner than you might expect: as noted above, only one in ten Americans even knows what Wikipedia is, and most of those don't truly understand it.

It's shocking to discover how even smart, technically-minded people can't figure out how to actually edit Wikipedia. Dave Winer wrote some of the first software to have an "Edit This Page" button (indeed, he operated editthispage.com for many years) and yet he at first complained that he couldn't figure out how

to edit a page on Wikipedia. Michael Arrington reviews advanced Web 2.0 websites daily, yet [he noted](#) that “Many people don’t realize how easy it is for anyone to add content to wikipedia (I’ve done it several times)”. If prominent technologists have trouble, imagine the rest of the world.

Obviously, this has implications for the software side: we need to work hard on making Wikipedia’s interface clearer and more usable. But there’s also a task here for the community: giving talks and tutorials to groups that you know about, explaining the core ideas behind Wikipedia, and giving demonstrations of how to get involved in it. The best interface in the world is no substitute for real instruction and even the clearest document explaining our principles will be ignored in a way that a personal presentation won’t.

But beyond simply giving people the ability to contribute, we need to work to make contributing more rewarding. [As I previously noted](#), many people decide to dive into writing for Wikipedia, only to watch their contributions be summarily reverted. Many people create a new article, only to see it get deleted after an AfD discussion where random Wikipedians try to think up negative things to say about it. For someone who thought they were donating their time to help the project, neither response is particularly encouraging.

I’m not saying that we should change our policies or automatically keep everything a newcomer decides to add so we don’t hurt their feelings. But we do need to think more about how to enforce policies without turning valuable newcomers away, how we can educate them instead of alienating them.

At Wikimania, no less an authority than Richard Stallman (who himself long ago [suggested the idea](#) of a free online encyclopedia) wandered around the conference complaining about a problem he’d discovered with a particular Wikipedia article. He could try to fix it himself, he noted, but it would take an enormous amount of his time and the word would probably just get reverted. He’s not the only one — I constantly hear tales from experts about problems they encounter on Wikipedia, but are too complicated for them to fix alone. What if we could collect these complaints on the site, instead of having these people make them at parties?

One way to do that would be to have some sort of complaint-tracking system for articles, like the discussion system of talk pages. Instead of simply complaining about an article in public, Stallman could follow a link from it to file a complaint. The complaint would be tracked and stored with the article. More dedicated Wikipedians would go through the list of complaints, trying to address them and letting the submitter know when they were done. Things like POV allegations could be handled in a similar way: a notice saying neutrality was disputed could appear on the top of the page until the complaint was properly closed.

This is just one idea, of course, but it’s an example of the kinds of things we need to think about. Wikipedia is visited by millions each day; how do get them to contribute back their thoughts on the article instead of muttering them under their breath or airing them to their friends?

Making More Wikipedias

September 14, 2006

[Original link](#)

Wikimedia 2006 Elections

Part 1: [Wikimedia at the Crossroads](#)

Part 2: [Who Writes Wikipedia?](#)

Part 3: [Who Runs Wikipedia?](#)

Part 4: [Making More Wikipedians](#)

Part 5: **Making More Wikipedias**

Part 6: [Code, and Other Laws](#)

If you translate this essay, please [contact me](#).

[Vote for me](#) in the election for the Wikimedia Foundation's Board of Directors.

Maybe it's just me, but it seems like everywhere you look people are trying to get a piece of Wikipedia. Wikis sites have been started in every field from [the Muppets](#) to [the law](#). The domain Wiki.com recently was [sold for 3 million dollars](#). Professor Cass Sunstein, [previously seen](#) arguing the Internet could tear apart the republic, just published [a new book](#) arguing tools like wikis will lead us to "Infotopia". So is it possible to replicate Wikipedia's success? What's the key that made it work?

Unfortunately, this question hasn't gotten the attention it deserves. For the most part, people have simply assumed that Wikipedia is as simple as the name suggests: install some wiki software, say that it's for writing an encyclopedia, and *voila!* — problem solved. But as pretty much everyone who has tried has discovered, it isn't as simple as that.

Technology industry people tend to reduce web sites down to their technology: [Wikipedia](#) is simply an instance of wiki software, [DailyKos](#) just blog software, and [Reddit](#) just voting software. But these sites aren't just installations of software, there also communities of people.

Building a community is pretty tough; it requires just the right combination of technology and rules and people. And while it's been clear that communities are at the core of many of the most interesting things on the Internet, we're still at the very early stages of understanding what it is that makes them work.

But Wikipedia isn't even a typical community. Usually Internet communities are groups of people who come together to discuss something, like cryptography or the writing of a technical specification. Perhaps they meet in an IRC channel, a web forum, a newsgroup, or on a mailing list, but the focus is always something "out there", something outside the discussion itself.

But with Wikipedia, the goal is building Wikipedia. It's not a community set up to make some other thing, it's a community set up to make itself. And since Wikipedia was one of the first sites to do it, we know hardly anything about building communities like that.

Indeed, we know hardly anything about building software for that. Wiki software has been around for years — the first wiki was launched in 1995; Wikipedia wasn't started until 2001 — but it was always used like any other community, for discussing something else. It wasn't generally used for building wikis in themselves; indeed, it wasn't very good at doing that.

Wikipedia's real innovation was much more than simply starting a community to build an encyclopedia or using wiki software to do it. Wikipedia's real innovation was the idea of radical collaboration. Instead of having a small group of people work together, it invited the entire world to take part. Instead of assigning tasks, it let anyone work on whatever they wanted, whenever they felt like it. Instead of having someone be in charge, it let people sort things out for themselves. And yet it did all this towards creating a very specific product.

Even now, it's hard to think of anything else quite like it. Books have been co-authored, but usually only by two people. Large groups have written encyclopedias, but usually only by being assigned tasks. Software has been written by communities, but typically someone is in charge.

But if we take this definition, rather than wiki software, as the core of Wikipedia, then we see that other types of software are also forms of radical collaboration. Reddit, for example, is radical collaboration to build a news site: anyone can add or edit, nobody is in charge, and yet an interesting news site results. Freed from the notion that Wikipedia is simply about wiki software, one can even imagine new kinds of sites. What about a “debate wiki”, where people argue about a question, but the outcome is a carefully-constructed discussion for others to read later, rather than a morass of bickering messages.

If we take radical collaboration as our core, then it becomes clear that extending Wikipedia's success doesn't simply mean installing more copies of wiki software for different tasks. It means figuring out the key principles that make radical collaboration work. What kinds of projects is it good for? How do you get them started? How do you keep them growing? What rules do you put in place? What software do you use?

These questions can't be answered from the armchair, of course. They require experimentation and study. And that, in turn, requires building a community around strong collaboration itself. It doesn't help us much if each person goes off and tries to start a wiki on their own. To learn what works and what doesn't, we need to share our experiences and be willing to test new things — new goals, new social structures, new software.

Code, and Other Laws of Wikipedia

September 18, 2006

[Original link](#)

Wikimedia 2006 Elections

Part 1: [Wikimedia at the Crossroads](#)

Part 2: [Who Writes Wikipedia?](#)

Part 3: [Who Runs Wikipedia?](#)

Part 4: [Making More Wikipedians](#)

Part 5: [Making More Wikipedias](#)

Part 6: **Code, and Other Laws**

If you translate this essay, please [contact me](#).

[Vote for me](#) in the election for the Wikimedia Foundation's Board of Directors.

Code is law, Lawrence Lessig famously said years ago, and time has not robbed the idea of any of its force. The point, so eloquently defended in his book *Code, and Other Laws of Cyberspace*, is that in the worlds created by software, the design of the software regulates behavior just as strongly as any formal law does; more effectively, in fact.

The point is obvious in some contexts. In the online 3D universe of Second Life, if the software prevents you from typing a certain word, that's a far more effective restraint on speech in that world than any US law could ever be in ours. But the point is far more subtle than that; it applies with equal force to the world of Wikipedia, the thriving community and culture that our wiki software creates.

For one thing, the software decides who gets to be part of the community. If using it is clear and simple, then lots of people can use it. But, if it's complicated, then only those who take the time to learn it are able to take part. And, as we've seen, lots of intelligent people don't even understand how to edit Wikipedia, let alone do any of the other things on the site.

For another, the software decides how the community operates. Features like administrative controls privilege some users over others. Support for things like stable revisions decide what sorts of things get published. The structure of talk pages help decide what and how things get discussed.

The page design the site uses encourages specific actions by making some links clear and prominent. Software functions like categories make certain kinds of features possible. The formatting codes used for things like infoboxes and links determine how easy it is for newcomers to edit those pieces of the site.

All of these things are political choices, not technical ones. It's not like there's a right answer that's obvious to any intelligent programmer. And these choices

can have huge effects on the community. That's why it's essential the community be involved in making these decisions.

The current team of Wikipedia programmers is a volunteer group (although a couple of them were recently hired by the Wikimedia Foundation so they could live a little more comfortably) working much like a standard free software community, discussing things on mailing lists and IRC channels. They got together in person in the days before Wikimania to discuss some of the current hot topics in the software.

One presentation was by a usability expert who told us about a study done on how hard people found it to add a photo to a Wikipedia page. The discussion after the presentation turned into a debate over *whether* Wikipedia should be easy to use. Some suggested that confused users should just add their contributions in the wrong way and a more experienced users would come along to clean their contributions up. Others questioned whether confused users should be allowed to edit the site at all — [were their contributions even valuable?](#)

As a programmer, I have a great deal of respect for the members of my trade. But with all due respect, are these really decisions that the programmers should be making?

Meanwhile, Jimbo Wales also has a for-profit company, Wikia, which recently received \$4 million in venture capital funding. Wales has said, including in his keynote speech at Wikimania, that one of the things he hopes to spend it on is hiring programmers to improve the Wikipedia software.

This is the kind of thing that seems like a thoughtful gesture if you think of the software as neutral — after all, improvements are improvements — but becomes rather more problematic if technical choices have political effects. Should executives and venture capitalists be calling the shots on some of these issues?

The Wikipedia community is enormously vibrant and I have no doubt that the site will manage to survive many software changes. But if we're concerned about more than mere survival, about how to make Wikipedia the best that it can be, we need to start thinking about software design as much as we think about the rest of our policy choices.

(The Dandy Warhols) Come Down

September 22, 2006

[Original link](#)

Well, the Wikipedia election has finally ended. The good news is that I can now talk about other things again. (For example, did you know that Erik Möller eats babies?) I have a backlog of about 20 posts that I built up over the course of the election. But instead of springing them on you all at once, I'll try to do daily posting again starting Monday. (Oooh.)

The actual results haven't been announced yet (and probably won't be for another couple days, while they check the list of voters for people who voted twice) but my impression is that I probably lost. Many wags have commented on how my campaign was almost destined to lose: I argued that the hard-core Wikipedia contributors weren't very important, but those were precisely the people who could vote for me — in other words, I alienated my only constituency.

[“Aaron Swartz: Why is he getting so much attention?”](#) wrote fellow candidate Kelly Martin. “The community has long known that edit count is a poor measure of contributions”. Others, meanwhile, insisted my claims were so obviously wrong as to not be even worth discussing.

Jimbo Wales, on the other hand, finally sent me a nice message the other day letting me know that he'd removed the offending section from his talk and looked forward to sitting down with me and investigating the topic more carefully.

And for my part, I hope to be able to take up some of the offers I've received for computer time and run my algorithm across all of Wikipedia and publish the results in more detailed form. (I'd also like to use the results to put up a little website where you can type in the name of a page and see who wrote what, color-coded or something like that.)

As for the election itself, it's much harder to draw firm conclusions. It's difficult in any election, this one even more so because we have so little data — no exit polls or phone surveys or even TV pundits to rely upon. Still, I'm fairly content seeing the kind words of all the incredible people I respect. Their support means a great deal to me.

The same is true of the old friends who wrote in during my essays along with all the new people who encouraged me to keep on writing. Writing the essays on a regular schedule was hard work — at one point, after sleeping overnight at my mother's bedside in the hospital, I trundled down at seven in the morning to find an Internet connection so I could write and post one — but your support made it worth the effort.

I hope that whoever wins takes what I've written into consideration. I'm not sure who that is yet, but there are some hints. I was reading an irreverent site critical of Wikipedia when I came across its claim that Jimbo Wales had sent an email to the Wikipedia community telling them who they should vote for. I assumed the site had simply made it up to attack Jimbo, but when I searched I found [it really was genuine](#):

I personally strongly strongly support the candidacies of Oscar and Mindspillage.

[...]

There are other candidates, some good, but at least some of them are entirely unacceptable because they have proven themselves repeatedly unable to work well with the community.

For those reading the tea leaves, this suggests that the results will be something like: Eloquence, Oscar, Mindspillage. But we'll see.

The let-down after the election is probably not the best time to make plans but, if I had to, I'd probably decide to stay out of Wikipedia business for a while. It's a great and important project, but not the one for me.

Anyway, now everyone can [go back to vandalizing my Wikipedia page](#). Later.

Weekend Update

September 24, 2006

[Original link](#)

I lost.

of the MBTA

September 25, 2006

[Original link](#)

It was night, and Central Square was largely empty. A few cars drove down the street, a few guys loitered outside the bars, a few lights were on in windows, but the city was quietly shutting down. I walked down the steps into the subway, paid my fare, and began looking for a place to sit and read.

I found a bench, another kid sitting at the opposite side, and took my seat. “Spare a dollar?” the kid asked. “Sorry,” I said, “spent everything I have to get in here.” “Man, wish I had five bucks,” he said. “If I had that I’d be out there grabbing a meal. I haven’t eaten in like two days.”

I tried to read my book but he wanted to talk. “You just come back from school?” he asked. “No,” I said, “I was visiting a friend.” “Oh, I thought you were at school ‘cause of the book.” “Oh, I’ve been carrying this around all day,” I said. “What is it?” he asked. “It’s a book about books,” I said. He laughed. “I thought it was a bible or something.”

“You heading to Alewife?” I asked. “No,” he said, laughing. “I’m staying right here.” I blinked twice and began to realize what he meant. He wasn’t asking for money because he’d been out all night and spent the cash his parents gave him. He was asking for money because he was homeless. And with fits and starts, he told me a little of his story as I waited for the train.

He grew up with his family in New Hampshire. They were “rich” then, at least by comparison, lived in a real “mansion”. Inspectors started coming around to check out the house, three in one month. Finally a man came to tell them the bad news. “You have to move out,” he said. “The house is infested with termites; it’ll collapse within months.” “What are you talking about?” his mom responded. “This place is fine; inspectors have been looking it all over.” The man picked up a large hammer, lifted it above his head and struck a mighty blow — at the wall. The drywall broke away to reveal termites filling the insides, eating away at the wood.

They had to leave fast, didn’t even have time to pack stuff. The bulldozers came the next day, turned the whole thing into rubble. They also bulldozed his mom’s car, where she kept all the money. They were homeless and penniless. The Department of Social Services picked up his five-year-old brother, insisted on \$100 fee if they wanted to regain custody. “If I had that kind of money,” he explained, “I’d be eating with it.”

So he decided to start hitchhiking, head to Cambridge where he had some family. Caught a ride in the back of a UPS truck, then after that dropped him

off, waited for another hour or two in the middle of nowhere before he could find someone else. Finally he found his way to part of the Boston subway system, where he managed to sneak his way through the turnstiles. Now he could ride all around town, get to Cambridge, where he set up base in Central Square.

“Mostly I just sit here,” he explained. “Sometimes I just ride the trains all day, Braintree to Alewife and back. Found a violin some guy had lost — hey, I’m homeless and you’re not — and started playing it for money, but the cops picked me up for performing without a license and threw me in jail for the night. Just because I’m a homeless kid you’re going to throw me in jail? Anyway, I make more money than that just telling jokes.”

“Pretty absurd, actually. Spent all day here asking folks for spare change, nobody could spare a thing. Here I am, homeless kid in Cambridge, and nobody even has a couple spare pennies!”

To outward appearances he seems like a normal kid with a bit of an army look. His hair is buzzed, he wears a wifebeater shirt with an army jacket and baggy army pants. At first I thought this was just a style, but actually it’s utilitarian — everything he owns is in the pockets of those pants. He showed me what he had.

“Stole this from a friend today,” he said, pulling something out from under his jacket. “Brand new CD player, awesome headphones, full batteries, great CD inside.” He began playing it for me; it was rap songs: Ridin’ and Eminem. “And check out this he said,” before pulling out a PSP. “Got this when we were rich, but can’t use it for much now; had to sell all our games so we could try to find a house.” He popped it open. “See, no cartridges. Still, I borrow some from friends sometimes.”

There was a pause, as Eminem came out of his headphones, which he’d cranked all the way up so I could listen. “Man, imagine if Eminem were right here now, all those girls shaking their asses by him. Wouldn’t that be crazy?” “Crazier things have happened,” I said. “Lots of famous people go to Harvard Square.” “Yeah,” he said, “Beyonce was there the other week — came in for a wedding or something — it was like a mob scene, people jumping all over her.”

He often took the conversation in the direction of such imaginations — what if a celebrity popped up here? He talked about how he used to play *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* with a cheat code to make celebrities appear in the game. But aside from these discursions, he was remarkably cogent, pretty sane for someone in such a screwed-up situation.

“Man, my life sucks,” he said after a pause. “If you could do anything, what would you do?” I asked. “If I could do anything?” he said. “Yeah.” “Man, I’d be back at home with my mom and brothers and family and stuff.”

He begun telling me something about his mom — how she’d managed to recover one of her debit cards from the rubble of her car and bought a new house, but never told him about it, he’d only heard rumor of it third-hand, how she’d put

her own child out on the street to fend for himself, but I couldn't quite hear him because the train pulled up as he was talking. He finally stopped talking, but I strained, waiting for more. "That's your train," he finally said, "you better catch it." "Sorry," I said, walking towards it.

I grabbed a seat, hearing "Spare change? Spare change?" as the doors closed and we pulled away. I started trying to read my book, but found I wasn't really capable of reading anything at all.

Alone in the Hospital

September 26, 2006

[Original link](#)

Going to the hospital has never been particularly safe, but hospitals have tried to do what they can. In the early part of the 1900s, hospitals became fanatical about sterility, to prevent infection. Each infant in their care, for example, had its own white coat for doctors to wear as they visited that infant, hung on hooks inside out for the next doctor to don. Holding babies was considered dangerous (as signage emphasized), so they were fed without being held — bottles were simply propped up where the infants could get at them. Needless to say, parents were denied visits.

And yet mortality rates for infants in hospital care ranged from 30 to 75 percent. The babies were cared for and nourished, they had no outward physical problems, they simply succumbed to a mysterious phenomenon the doctors labeled “failure to thrive”. Some thought it might be a hidden infection.

So the nurses wore masks and hoods, carefully scrubbed up before they handled infants. Some hospitals put infants in boxes with glove-valves — the kinds you see in movies when scientists are handling radioactive material — so that they’d never have to touch the infant at all. But the problem just got worse.

Henry Bakwin, pediatric director of New York’s Bellevue Hospital, saw this and thought that perhaps they were going about things exactly wrong. The infants weren’t dying of infection, he believed, they were dying of loneliness — a loneliness that made it easier for them to succumb to infection. He took down the signs about washing hands and put up signs requiring everyone to pick up and fondle a baby. And infection rates went down.

Harold Skeels and a team at the Iowa Child Research Welfare Station decided to try an experiment. They took thirteen girls out of institutionalized care and had them “adopted” by older girls in “a home for the feeble-minded”. Within nineteen months, the average IQs of the adopted kids jumped from 64 to 92.

But these folks were the radicals. The mainstream scientific community refused to believe there was anything wrong — people were blowing things out of proportion, they insisted, and anyway, everyone knows children that young can’t suffer from depression. The studies were flawed.

John Bowlby came at it from a different perspective. Interviewing severely disturbed kids, he discovered they all shared a traumatic separation from their parents when they were young. He concluded the mother-infant relationship was essential to development and issued recommendations much like Skeels and Spitz. “The mothering of a child is not something which can be arranged by

roster,” he wrote in reports for the World Health Organization. But still the hospitals didn’t change.

Bowlby’s student John Robertson begun doing observation at hospitals. He noticed that babies screamed painfully as they were admitted. The nurses explained that this was normal and they’d soon settle down. He noticed that these “settled” babies returned to violent fits when they were taken home, attacking her as if they blamed her. The nurses said that was normal too, mothers weren’t just as good at taking care of kids as the nurses. Robertson had a different explanation.

He decided to make a movie to prove it. Unlike the last, this one would be completely scientific. He would pick a name at random from the list of babies, then always film them at a specific hour, clock in the background, so you could tell he wasn’t cheating. The name he picked was Laura.

When he went to find her he was devastated: Laura was the one girl in a hundred who wasn’t crying; her parents had reared her so strictly that she quietly restrained all her emotions. “I saw immediately [she] was going to be the one child in a hundred who was not going to demonstrate what I had been shouting my head off [about],” Robertson said. But he couldn’t pick another child — that would be cheating. The project continued.

The first day, Laura jumped out of her bath to the door in an attempt to escape. Her smiles disappear and sometimes she quietly sobs while clutching her teddy. “Where’s my mummy?” she asks repeatedly, while trying hard to hold back tears. Each day she grows grayer until on the fifth, when she appears unsmiling and resentful. Her mother comes to visit (thanks to a special exception to the rules Robertson negotiated), but she wipes away her mother’s kiss. When her mother waves goodbye, she looks away. When her mother finally comes to take her home on the eighth day, she begins shaking with sobs. She gathers up all of her stuff, but refuses to take her mother’s hand as they walk out.

They presented the film to the Royal Society of Medicine in London. The audience was outraged. It was false, it was slander, it was a trick, it was an atypical child, it was filmed selectively, it was edited dishonestly. “People stood up and said that their children’s wards were not like that, two-year-olds were all happy,” Robertson recalls. Robertson was banned from some of the wards he was observing, pediatricians walked across the street when they encountered him. The hospital claimed that Robertson had interfered with the nurses trying to care for Laura. As Robertson toured Britain with the film, the reaction was always the same.

When Laura finally saw the film, six months later, she burst into tears. “Where were you all that time?” she asked her mother.

Reviews in the medical journals, however, were all positive. And younger nurses and doctors begun telling Robertson how they agreed with him and would do things differently, if only they were in charge. And a few higher-ups quietly sent some votes of support. So Robertson kept going. He took the film to the

United States, hoping for a similarly positive reception. But the Americans insisted that while it was a great film about Britain, it had no relevance in their country. And nobody was willing to take the obvious step of letting mothers stay with their children on the wards.

Not until 1955 were there signs of change. Fred Stone, a doctor at the Royal Hospital in Glasgow, decided to do a pilot study. “I would drive up the hill to come here,” he recalled, “and there would be two hundred parents queueing up in the rain to get in for their half hour’s visiting.” A colleague who had control of two pediatric wards decided to offer one of them to Stone to prove that his suggestions wouldn’t work.

When the nurses heard about this, they threatened to resign together. To placate them, Stone set up a series of meetings. “The aggression after the first meetings was unbelievable, truly unbelievable,” he explained. But the aggression soon turned to tears. “They said, ‘You don’t understand what you are asking of us. [You mean] a parent can just walk in and see how we’re neglecting these poor kids[?]’ [...] And, of course, at that point we had to say, ‘But what on earth makes you think that we’re criticizing you? You’re doing an impossible job remarkably well.’ And, of course, then the tears came as you can imagine.” Finally they agreed the experiment should at least be tried.

“I never heard any more about the issue at all. Nobody ever came back to me and said, ‘The six months are up.’ Nobody ever reported that it had been a success or a failure; all I knew was that somehow I heard that two wards were doing it, four wards were doing it, the whole hospital was doing it. And since then we’ve had almost unrestricted visiting in the whole hospital.”

Similar experiments were conducted in London, although changes on the Continent didn’t happen until the late 1970s. In 1959, the British minister of health made it official policy. And in the early 1960s, Robertson told BBC Radio parents that they should sit-in by their children’s cot and force the hospital to try to evict them. Slowly the tide began to turn.

This article is based on Robert Karen’s tour de force book [Becoming Attached](#).

A Feminist Goes to the Hospital

September 27, 2006

[Original link](#)

In *A Pattern Language*, Christopher Alexander comments on the idiocy of trying to nurse people to health by locking them up in the land of the sick, but a visit to an actual hospital makes the point more vividly than logical argument ever could. The modern hospital is a place of nightmares, even visiting I cannot manage to spend more than an hour here without beginning to go insane. I cannot imagine how anyone ever escapes.

An island of white in an ocean of green, the modern hospital's landscaping dangles the promise of verdant beauty while its insides are all white sterility. The hallways of identical doors twist and turn around so much that it's impossible to find any room that isn't carefully numbered, even after several attempts to try to discern the building's layout. The muted colors and dreary duplication do not reward such attempts at investigation, or even mere attempts at life.

It seems like the building itself is ill. Odd pieces are blocked off with white sheets, larger ones with completely opaque walls. Bizarre machines with large tubes line the hallways, apparently standing in for broken parts of the building's innards, while workmen wander around attempting to treat the other symptoms.

The rooms themselves are monstrous cells, tiny boxes with doors that stay open and walls that fight any attempts at individuality or privacy. The size makes entertaining guests awkward, while the lack of activities makes loneliness unbearable.

Were the large sign reading "Hospital" to go missing, one might easily mistake the facility as one for torture: men whose clothes have been replaced by dreary gowns slowly wander the halls in dreary stupor, their battered faces making them appear as if they have been badly beaten. They are not permitted to escape.

Were one, under such amazing conditions, to try to mount an attempt at fruitful work, it would quickly fail. Even assuming one was able to muster the energy to focus, the noises through the thin walls and unclosed doors would quickly distract. The beeps and buzzes from the assorted machinery would frustrate to no end. The screeching announcements from the loudspeakers would fast derail any trains of thought. And if one manages to get past all these things, well, it will only be a short while until a nurse or orderly comes to insert another needle or run some other humiliating and invasive task.

And so one simply watches the seconds tick away, as in some odd form of Chinese water torture. Sometimes the pain is made more vivid by the combination

of very real physical discomfort, which incapacity makes difficult to alleviate. Itchiness, dirtiness, and restlessness are the orders of the day, with powerlessness coming in to make sure the others don't escape.

Ostensibly this place is meant to cure things, the unimpeachable knowledge of science and the clean sterility of the building meant to combine to induce health. But, as before in history, the cure may be worse than the disease. [Robert Karen has documented](#) how early concerns about antisepsis led hospitals to keep children far away from their parents. The result, as was plain to anyone paying attention, was severe psychological trauma for the children, who assumed their parents had abandoned them, leading to mental problems that last a lifetime.

While modern hospitals induce problems apparently less severe, they are still problems. Again, the doctors that are supposed to help the patients seem less concerned about the patients as people than bodies, things to be measured and operated upon, puzzles to solve, problems to fix. They do not tell the patient what is being done to them, do not reap the benefits that could be received by engaging them in the search for the solution, but instead only share knowledge when forced by law and precedent, preferring to keep the real details private among the priesthood of doctors and nurses.

[Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English note](#) how well-off women of the pre-feminist era suffered from mysterious symptoms of inactivity, a condition they diagnose as the psychological result of their inactivity and powerlessness; society entrusted them with no responsibility and so their minds collapsed from lack of active use.

While women have made great strides in the years since, for many the problem is still quite real. And laid up in a hospital, with domestic and childrearing tasks undoable, they may find the responsibilities they had fade away, their condition stripped back to that of their afflicted forebearers.

And so patriarchal society and patriarchal medicine combine to strip all vestiges of humanity away. No freedom, no responsibility; no movements, no tasks; no privacy, no thought. The person becomes the body that the doctors treat them as.

Friends and family may try to visit, in an attempt to bring a bit of their outside world into this sterile place, but the awkward situation strains even the best relationships. Friendly conversations become hard when one party is lying in bed moaning, while strained family relationships are stretched further, surfacing their most disgustingly dysfunctional aspects. Family members, whatever else they may accomplish, somehow learn the remarkable skill of knowing just what to do to drive you up the wall. And as the hospital environment (along with the psychological stress of seeing you trapped in it) drives them insane as well, their presence quickly becomes more curse than blessing.

I've never seen an environment so effective at inducing such severe psychological pain. After just an hour, I feel like screaming, tearing, pounding, killing. I go "out of my mind" and yearn to get out of my body as well, running around in

circles, pounding against the floor, with not even exhaustion appearing to cure me.

It needn't be this way, for there is a cure: the joy of life. Sanity can be restored through attempts at music, channeling the fundamental disorder into form and elegance, focusing the energy toward good. Art, especially the art of nature, as Alexander suggested, is likely another cure. But hospitals aren't built for that.

Bonus: [Life in the Hospital](#)

A Unified Theory of Magazines

September 28, 2006

[Original link](#)

For as long as I've been building web apps, it's been apparent that most successful websites are *communities* — not just interactive pages, but places where groups of like-minded people can congregate and do things together. Our knowledge of how to make and cultivate communities is still at a very early stage, but most agree on their importance.

A magazine, we may imagine, is like a one-way web site. It doesn't really allow the readers to talk back (with the small exception of the letters page), it doesn't even have any sort of interactivity. But I still think communities are the key for magazines; the difference is that magazines *export* communities.

In other words, instead of providing a place for a group of like-minded people to come together, magazines provide a sampling of what a group of like-minded people might say in such an instance so that you can pretend you're part of them. Go down the list and you'll see.

The magazines of Condé Nast, for example, export “lifestyles”. Most readers probably aren't the “hip scene” the magazines supposedly cover, but by reading these things they learn what to wear and what to buy and what these people are talking about. Even their high-brow magazines, like the *New Yorker*, serve the same purpose, only this time it's books instead of clothes.

The late, great *Lingua Franca* exported the university. [Academephiles](#), sitting at home, probably taking care of the kids, read it so they could imagine themselves part of the life of the mind. Similarly, the new *SEED* magazine is trying to export the culture of science, so people who aren't themselves scientists can get a piece of the lab coat life.

Alumni magazines similarly export college life, so that graying former college students can relive some of their old glory days, reading pieces about library renovations as they recall having sex in the stacks. And house organs export a particular kind of politics, telling you what a party or organization's take is on the issues of the day, giving you a sense of the party line.

Run down the list and in pretty much every case you scratch a magazine, you find an exported community. Magazines that want to succeed will have to find one of their own.

Take the Easy Way Out

September 29, 2006

[Original link](#)

When I was a kid, people were always telling me that there was no substitute for hard work. If I wanted to be smart, I had to sit and force myself to read hard books. If I wanted to lose weight, I had to force myself to exercise. If I wanted to play piano, I had to force myself away from the computer to practice. Cheating, they explained, would only cheat myself in the end.

And yet today I eagerly ran to the library to grab five large books (and return seven more), felt an itch to go jogging, and walked away from web surfing so I could go practice a musical instrument. The adults were completely wrong.

Your body's resistance to an activity isn't an obstacle to be overcome, it's a message that you're being an idiot, just like when your hand hurts after you punch a wall. The right solution isn't to start punching the wall harder, it's to look around for a tool to help you do the job.

In the case of books, the key is that you need to be sure to read books that are at your level. If you read books about subjects you don't know enough to understand or that use a dialect you're not familiar with, it's going to be hard and it's going to be a waste of time. With losing weight, the key is things like the Shangri-La Diet. And with learning an instrument, the key is using [Bemani games](#) that actually make music fun.

I've discussed the other two in other places, but why do Bemani games work? First, you're playing real music. Normally when you play piano, you have to start on baby songs which are both infantilizing and uninteresting, with real music not even on the horizon. Bemani games start you on real songs from the beginning. Since the reason many people get excited about musical instruments in the first place is the chance to play their favorite song, this is a pretty compelling difference. And the fact that the computer simplifies the song and fills in the notes you don't play for you makes it possible.

Second, Bemani games provide clear additional results in proportion to additional effort. This is what makes them so much fun. I don't know about the real science, but in Barbara Ehrenreich's novel *Kipper's Game* the plot revolves around some research showing that games like that stimulate the pleasure centers of the brain. You get the high of achievement, but it quickly wears off as you get used to your new skill level, and so you want to do better so you can get another high.

This is also what makes these games so educational. Research on experts has found such immediate feedback is essential to learning, calling the general pro-

cess “deliberate practice”. In deliberate practice, “subjects should receive immediate informative feedback and knowledge of results of their performance. The subjects should repeatedly perform the same or similar tasks. When these conditions are met, practice improves accuracy and speed of performance on cognitive, perceptual, and motor tasks (Fitts & Posner, 1967; Gibson, 1969; Welford, 1968).” (K. Anders Ericsson, et. al, “[The Role of Deliberate Practice](#)”, *Psychological Review*) Your attempts aren’t random — it’s very clear what works and what doesn’t and you can adjust your strategies accordingly.

Third, you can do them in small chunks. When you normally play an instrument, if you hit a wrong note you often keep trying until you get it right. But with Bemani games, the music just keeps marching on without you. This might at first seem a disadvantage, but it means you don’t get hung up on a mistake, each attempt takes at most as long the song does. With real music, if you hit a difficult part of the song you can easily get stuck trying over and over to get it right, before getting frustrated and giving up on the whole thing. Keeping the music moving forces you to look at the bigger picture.

The flip side of this is that playing the games gives you a continuous sense of motion and progress. In the mid-1980s — the heyday of video game research — some psychologists were trying to find out what video games quite so much fun. They took the classic Wozniak/Atari game [Breakout](#) and started removing components to see if kids stopped playing it. What they found was you could remove just about everything — the levels, the score, the bouncing off the paddle — everything except for the animations of the bricks disappearing. It was making the bricks disappear, somehow, that made the game fun. (Mind at Play, Loftus and Loftus)

I doubt Bemani games were made with these kind of principles in mind — considering the history, it was probably just a coincidence. But it shows that you could have created Bemani from them. All you needed to do was pay attention to the fact that learning an instrument was frustrating and tried to eliminate the frustrating part. Good designers, when they see people having trouble using something they designed, don’t tell the user to try harder. They fix the design. We should take the same attitude when we design our life as well.

Thanks to Emmett Shear for suggesting pieces of this post.

Updated 2006-10-09 to add the second paragraph of point three, which I somehow omitted originally.

Life in the Hospital

October 1, 2006

[Original link](#)

An extra-special guest post [hoisted from comments!](#)

The very walls of the hospital seemed to suck the life out of me—painted in puke yellow—and the window, which did look out at some trees, unfortunately framed a week’s worth of grey, rainy weather. The floors and walls were filthy (I won’t even mention the bathroom); the furniture old, chipped and stained; the framed artwork (like an old puzzle drawing out of Boy’s Life magazine with faces and animals and broomsticks hiding in the trees) faded; the food rancid, stinky and inedibly heavy and overly sweet. I seldom saw the doctors wash their hands or use the Purell dispenser on the wall (I began to fear catching some super hospital germ infection). When I could finally walk the halls in my hideous hospital gowns and infantilizing slipper socks, I was tethered to a top-heavy pole with bad wheels, which made dragging it over any bumps or turning corners an exercise in futility. I begged to be let out, to be sent home where it was clean, where I could have simple healthy food and take a shower; I begged the residents, the doctors (when they came on rounds) to take the tubes out of me. And they just made me feel idiotic, patronized, weak and helpless.

Finally, in the middle of one sleepless, endless night spent staring at the walls, being sure the clock was actually moving backwards, it occurred to me with perfect clarity that the patient is never going to win the battle with the doctors...because the doctors have all the weapons. Just then the door slammed open, yet another nurse threw on all the lights and jabbed me with a needle, filling me with some other substance she refused to identify. Oh god, it was the most horrible hospital experience I have ever been through. And the scariest part of it is that this hospital is on the list of the 100 Best Hospitals in Illinois. Imagine what the others not on the list are like.

[...]

My brother has a theory. You go into a hospital to have something fixed but they immediately take you totally out of your normal environment: off your normal food and caffeine, off all your regular medications, etc. They do the surgery (or whatever) and invade your body with all sorts of foreign substances (IVs, narcotics, oxygen, TPNs, blood thinners, insulin, etc.) Then, as they gradually withdraw the foreign substances they have assaulted you with, they declare you “cured.” Then you are eventually allowed to go back home and resume your normal routine. Odd.

Fashion Notes

October 2, 2006

[Original link](#)

It is Boston in the Fall, when school starts and the kids begin to pour in. Because I am a sad and lonely masochist, I have spent some sunny days walking among the tree-lined streets of the city, observing the happy, well-bred young people in their natural habitat. I have noticed that these children of the elite appear to have some patterns in their choice of clothing and thought that some of my more discerning readers might wish to know how they too can appear to be a hip young Harvard student.

Girls: Wear a tight bright shirt with a large neck and half-length sleeves on top of tight light blue jeans.

Guys: Wear tight brown hoodies over a dark T-shirt on top of semi-tight dark blue jeans.

That is all.

The Awfulness of College Lectures

October 3, 2006

[Original link](#)

What do the children of privilege do when not engaging in conspicuous consumption while [wearing fashionable clothes](#)? Why attend class, of course! This bizarre, yet widespread, affectation seemed intriguing enough that I decided to pursue a further investigation in my inimitable “first-person snob” style.

The Harvard students sit patiently outside the lecture hall as they wait for the previous class to end. Many simply sit, but others, showing the go-get-it-ness that got them into Harvard, begin attempting conversation with their neighbors. The awkward situation shows through in the awkward conversation (which, no doubt, they will learn to smooth over as they get older) about superficial topics of schoolwork (never school content, of course).

As the previous class exits, we file in and take our seats. Gabbing continues somewhat for a while until, all of a sudden, as if by some mysterious consensus, it completely silences. The professor seems surprised too. “Well, uh, it got quiet all of a sudden,” he says haltingly, “so I guess I better start talking.” For a professor in social psychology, you think he’d show a little more interest.

He begins the lecture in the standard way since PowerPoint: a title slide (with a cute illustration), a table of contents slide (which he walks through interminably slowly), and then a series of chunks of text and illustrations, which he walks through one by one. It’s so bad it makes we want to tear my hair out. The content is largely superficial; the presentation is unnaturally slow. (We literally spend a good five minutes talking about a specific gross-out gag.)

But while this may be an extreme version of it, at its essence, this is the college lecture. Someone who (we’ll give them the benefit of the doubt) is quite smart appearing stupid for fifty minutes so that they can communicate basic facts to kids “at their level”. Edward Tufte teaches us to always ask about the information density of a method of communication. The information communicated in this lecture could have fit on one side of a single piece of paper.

There was a camera in the back of the hall, presumably recording the proceedings. But had this been available online, I doubt I could have forced myself to watch it. (The other day someone asked me why more people don’t watch the recordings of MIT lectures made available for free online. This is why.) The only reason the lecture is tolerable at all is because there’s something captivating about being in the presence of another human being, regardless of what they’re saying. But it doesn’t seem like that communicates anything additional — whether you see the guy in person or watch him at home, he’s still saying the same stuff. And so when you watch him at home, there’s just not much there.

So if what he's saying isn't very interesting, why do we subject ourselves to it? How did this become the primary method of education? Why do kids paid tens of thousands of dollars, in large part to fly someplace else to see someone say something they would have been bored to watch at home?

Back at Harvard, as I walk out of the class I hear the students gabbing. "Wow, I'm so glad I took this class," one says. "That was the best lecture I've ever been in."

The Greatness of College Lectures

October 4, 2006

[Original link](#)

The other week I saw Scott McCloud give a presentation at a local college. Although he is not a professor himself, McCloud is a theorist of comics. Edward Tufte (among countless others) calls his guide *Understanding Comics* the best book on the medium. McCloud breaks comics down to its essential: the use of sequential art to tell a story — we see one thing, we see another, we imagine what happens in between. And watching McCloud speak, I realized that his talk was a vivid form of comics. The images weren't just illustrations, they drove the story along, with McCloud simply filling in the words to connect them together.

After his talk, someone commented that McCloud's presentation was the best he'd ever seen. McCloud explained that there are two kinds of presentations: “monkey bars”, where a presenter swings from slide to slide, explaining each one in turn, and “magic carpet rides”, where the presenter simply keeps talking, confident the slides will appear underneath him to illustrate a point. McCloud gives a masterful magic carpet ride.

Tufte himself is professor emeritus at Yale. These days he goes on tour, rock-star style, teaching classes on presenting information. Tufte is a brilliant presenter — his energy keeps the audience spell-bound for an entire day. At one point, as I recall, he jumped up on a table and asked us to imagine the information density of various media as charted from one side of the room to the other. But what, I couldn't help but wonder, was the information density of this presentation? After all, hadn't he written four books on the subject? (Copies of which are given to each participant to take home.)

Then there's Lawrence Lessig, who's presentations are so powerful and influential that an entire style of presentation has been named after him. At his peak, I saw him give a talk at the O'Reilly Open Source Conference that had the audience, as Wes Felter put it, looking to start a riot afterwards. Lessig's rhythmic, almost hypnotic, presentation, invariably blows people away.

Does these people's talks communicate more information than their books? I doubt it. But does a comic book communicate more information than a novel? No way. And yet McCloud (and Tufte) endorse it anyway. It's not because of the medium's informational density, it's because of its *emotional density*. The same is true of these presentations.

Reading Lessig's books, you'll probably learn more about the history of copyright law and the other things he discusses in his talk. But you won't feel his righteous indignation against those “extremists on the right and left” who are trying to distort its intentions and, in the process, hurt our culture.

Writing is quite effective at communicating facts, but to become a professional you need much more than a vast store of facts; you need to learn ways of thinking. These are what lectures, at their best, can provide. They show you how the speakers think about problems, how they feel about them, and, in doing so, provide a more fleshed-out notion than writing ever could.

What's Radical About the Liberal Arts?

October 4, 2006

[Original link](#)

The leaves are turning brown, the students are filling up Harvard Yard, and the mass emails are filling up my mailbox, all reminding me that I would be starting junior year right about now if I hadn't left Stanford. For an academophile like me, this inspires no small amount of nostalgia, and so I've been eager to get my hands on a copy of Michael Berubé's bestseller, *What's Liberal About the Liberal Arts?* (Copies had been checked out of all the nearby libraries, so I spent the morning sitting in the Harvard Coop reading the entire book there. Yeah, I'm such a cheapskate.)

The book is a response to the conservative attacks on academia as a leftist preserve in need of some affirmative action for conservatives. In response, Berubé outlines a two-pronged plan for handling conservatives in academia; an outline of a procedural liberalism for the liberal arts. First, in the classroom, conservatives should be given "reasonable accommodation" for their views, just like any other student in the class. Second, in the professoriate, conservatives should try to reform academia by joining it, just as the women's liberation movement did in the 1970s.

For the first, Berubé gives examples from his own classroom: a conservative makes a claim (e.g. the Japanese internment was justified), Berubé patiently acknowledges it, points to sources supporting and opposes it, and sits down with the conservative outside of class to give them further attention. Berubé comes off as unfailing patient and gracious, while the conservatives appear wrong-headed and often simply lazy.

And yet. Despite my enormous sympathy for Berubé — I tried to do my part to oppose Horowitz and hanging out with the AAUP's Graham Larkin at Stanford is one of my more cherished memories — I can't help imagining myself in the position at the conservative. As Rick Perlstein (a mutual friend) has noted, sometimes the only friends the far-right can find are on the far-left. For *I was once almost tossed out of class once* for my political views (in that case, insisting that the US didn't attack Vietnam to fight the spread of Communism).

Berubé's clear writing, intelligence, and thoroughgoing kindness made me want to hop the next flight to Pennsylvania and audit his classes. (Thankfully, he closes the book with two lengthy chapters summarizing two major courses that he teaches, somewhat saving me the trouble.) But had Berubé been my teacher,

would things have been different? One disagrees with Berubé at one's own peril — his snark is sharp enough to take your head clean off — but having seen his dismissive blog commentary on leftists, I can't help but wonder.

His not-as-left-as-thou attitude carries over into the book as well. When conservatives attack a professor for claiming Israel is a “racist state”, Berubé doesn't defend him but instead mocks the professor's attempts to defend the comment. And when the discussion turns to students who are fans of Michael Parenti (are there any?), he foresees only two possibilities for their future: either they renounce Parenti or they dumb themselves down to his level. I'm no fan of Parenti, but it takes an awful lot of confidence to say the only people who could agree with him are idiots.

Berubé longs for intelligent conservatives that he can debate, but when it comes to intelligent leftists, he just wants to mock. But even if he treated them the same, I'm not sure it'd be much better. The “I see where you're coming from, here's someone else who makes that argument” trick — while eminently reasonable — is incredibly effective at robbing a young person of their moral indignation. It suggests that the question isn't one to be resolved, but simply one to be accepted as a fact of life: some people believe the Vietnam War was to fight Communism, others disagree. But when we're talking about the lives of millions, such ambivalence is more frustrating than outright disagreement.

Berubé discusses this too, in his penultimate chapter on postmodernism (a discussion of how he discusses topics by discussing the topic of discussion!). I can't say I was convinced by his positions in the Lyotard-Harbermas debate or the Rorty-Nagel one, but the discussion did spur me to more thoroughly codify my own. And really, isn't that what the liberal arts — at their best — are about? Whether through a combative debate with a partisan or a paternalistic moderation of the subject by a procedural liberal, any time a teacher gets a student to refine their views counts as a win in my book. The essential thing is that the question — and the position — be taken seriously.

More serious is the second question: what do we do about groupthink in the professoriate? Berubé makes the convincing case that academia's lack of conservatives is simply because it isn't a very good job for them. I know that if I was a young conservative, I'd be [riding the conservative gravy train](#) instead of spending years in graduate school. The cost-benefit analysis isn't even close.

But clearly academia isn't completely infallible. How do you change the culture of a field when it's gone off-course? Berubé's suggestion is that you just play by the rules and stick to your principles. His example is the women's liberation movement, which succeeded in turning feminism into a real mode of literary criticism. But that seems like a somewhat atypical case.

What about economics departments, filled with professors whose theories neatly support right-wing social principles but rarely conform with any external evidence? What about psychology departments whose claims and experiments all-too-often make a mockery of the scientific method?

No self-respecting scientist would admit to being interested in an psuedoscience like psychology. If you tried (as I have) your friends would loudly mock you for it. And if that doesn't dissuade you, they start wondering if you're really as smart as they first thought. After all, why would anyone intelligent go into such a bogus field?

I certainly don't support an Academic Bill of Rights or any such nonsense — I want to improve academia, not destroy it. In fact, I don't have any great ideas for solving these problems. But I also don't think it's fair to simply dismiss them, as Berubé seems to. The self-reinforcing groupthink of academia is a problem; it prevents exactly the kind of critical sharpening that I argue is the best part of education. And as a structural problem, it would seem to require a structural change.

This is, to be clear, not the meat of Berubé's book, which spends its first half mocking the conservative critique on academia and the second summarizing Berubé's own classes. Indeed, I don't think the proposals I'm responding to account for more than a couple paragraphs of the text. Nonetheless, those were the paragraphs that provoked my thoughts, so now I'm defending them, just like a good student should.

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- [Buy the book from Amazon](#)

College: Commodity or Community?

October 6, 2006

[Original link](#)

When it was time for me to pick colleges, our family flew to Cambridge, Mass. and went on the tour of Harvard University. It's a grand, elegant campus, the school has a singular reputation, the neighborhood is one of the most interesting in the world. And yet, on the college tour, this isn't what they told us. They mentioned a bit about John Harvard and the 1700s but spent most of their time telling us how great it was they had "shopping week", where you could try out different courses for a couple classes.

The other month, I visited the University of Chicago. Chicago has a worldwide reputation as a tough-minded school. It seems like every field has a "Chicago School" of thought and the University's former presidents are responsible for things like the Great Books. But you wouldn't know that from the tour — the only time actually studying was mentioned was when one kid said he'd heard the University had a nose-to-the-grindstone reputation. "Well," the tour guide said, "you can work hard if you want," and then went back to talking about the sports program. ("Whenever I feel like exercise," the University's president once said, "I lie down until the feeling passes.")

It was as if the entire admissions program had been through a focus group, every bit of individuality shorn off. They put their self-description through a series of tests and only the generic things that every student finds themselves agreeing with survived the ordeal. "Oh no," they now insist, "we're just like every university. We want to let you be you." But why go to a University for that? I can be me at home just fine.

No, the real reason I want to go to a University — and the reason, when you get right down to it, everybody else seems to be interested in as well — is the people. I want to go to a place filled with people like me, but smarter; a place where you can't help but learn.

The key phrase there is "people like me". What I want to know is what the culture is like. To unfairly overgeneralize, people at Harvard are snobbish, people at Stanford are lazy, and people at MIT are nerds. But (with the possible exception of MIT which actually sells "nerd pride" clothing) none of these places advertise this fact. After all, advertising your individuality alienates some of the focus group. In fact, that's exactly the point!

And yet, somehow, the cultures remain. It's not clear to me whether the university itself has a culture (perhaps passed down by the older students and professors) and whoever attends simply learns to conform or whether there's a secret bulletin I'm not getting about which university each kind of person should

go to. I suspect the former, since I've heard that even houses at Harvard, to which students are assigned randomly when they arrive, manage to develop a culture of their own.

So how to decide where to go?

There are some people who say that if you go to a large enough university, you'll be able to find a subculture of people you can get along with. At MIT, for example, a complicated "rush" system at the beginning of the school year allows incoming freshman to sample a variety of dorms and then floors within that dorm to find the place they belong. The dorms apparently put on lavish shows to communicate their culture to the incoming students and people seem fairly happy with where they end up.

MIT is a bit of a special case, of course, but some insists that similar subcultures exist at every college, you just have to seek them out. Perhaps that's true, but even so, what's the point of the university then? There's a subculture of people I can get along with right here; I want to go to school for something a little more concentrated.

Colleges need to drop the focus-group-enforced blandness. [As Malcolm Gladwell would put it](#), people don't want ten varieties of bland tomato sauce to choose from. Some people love mild and some love extra-chunky. Trying to appeal to both only makes the experience worse for everyone. It doesn't seem like you should have to go to college to realize that.

Mamet on Auditions

October 8, 2006

[Original link](#)

A special guest post from David Mamet's [True and False](#). The discussion is notionally about acting, but it applies far more broadly. Try substituting “programmer” for “actor”, for example.

Those with “something to fall back on” invariably fall back on it. They intended to all along. That is why they provided themselves with it. But those with no alternative see the world differently. [...]
Those of you with nothing to fall back on, you will find, *are* home.

(34-36)

The audition process selects for the most blatant (and not even the most attractive) of the supplicants. As a hiring tool, it is geared to reject all but the hackneyed, the stock, the predictable—in short, the counterfeit.

[...]

The producers are not interested in discovering the new. Who in their right mind would bet twenty million dollars on an untried actor? They want the old—and if they cannot have it, they want its facsimile.

These gatekeepers understand their job to be this: to supply the appropriate, predictable actor for the part. They base their choice on the actor's appearance, credits, and quote—as if they were hiring a plumber.

If this sounds tedious, reflect that the actor himself is habituated into the process and endorses it from his first experience of it. And his first experience is the school.

The acting school and its lessons are many times harsh, but their rigor and extent is comfortable and predictable. The lessons of the stage, on the other hand, are often devastating and almost beyond bearing.

The school, like the audition process, has a clear and simple structure of commands and rewards. If, and as long as, the student propitiates the teacher, she may be disappointed but she will rarely be humiliated. To the extent that she internalizes her subscription

to the system (“It is harsh, but I know in my heart it is just, or at the very least, unavoidable”) she can enjoy freedom from anomie. If she never ventures out of the confines of the system, she can live, whether employed or unemployed, free from terror.

Teachers of “audition technique” counsel actors to consider the audition itself the performance, and to gear all one’s hopes and aspirations not toward the actual practice of one’s craft (which takes place in front of an audience or a camera), but toward the possibility of appealing to some functionary. What could be more awful?

For much of the beauty of the theatre, and much of the happiness, is in a communion with the audience. The audience comes to the show prepared to respond as a communal unit. They come prepared (and expecting) to be surprised and delighted. They are not only willing, but disposed to endorse the unusual, the honest, the piquant. Everything the audition process discards.

[...]

Don’t “confess” when you come offstage. If you have gained an insight, *use* it. They say “silence builds a fence for wisdom.” To keep one’s own counsel is difficult. “Oh, how terrible I was... .” How difficult to keep those words in—how comforting they are. In saying them one creates an imaginary group interested in one’s progress. But give up the comfort of an imaginary group. This “group” that is judging you is not real; you invented it to make yourself feel less alone.

I knew a man who went to Hollywood and languished jobless for a period of years. A talented actor. And he got no work. He came back at the end of the period and lamented, “I would have been all right if they’d just sat me down on day one and explained the rules.”

Well, so would we all. But who are “they”? And what are the rules? There *is* no “they,” and there are no rules. He posited the existence of a rational hierarchical group acting in a reasonable manner.

But show business is and has always been a depraved carnival. Just as it attracts the dedicated, it attracts the rapacious and exploitative, and these parasites can never be pleased, they can only be submitted to. But why would one want to submit to them?

The audience, on the other hand, *can* be pleased. They come to the show to be pleased, and they *will* be pleased by the honest, the straightforward, the unusual, the intuitive—all those things, in short, which dismay both the teacher and the casting agent.

Keep your wits about you. It is not necessary to barter your talent, your self-esteem, and your youth for the *chance* of pleasing your inferiors. It is more frightening *but it is not less productive* to go your own way, to form your own theatre company, to write and stage

your *own* plays, to make your *own* films. You have an enormously greater chance of eventually presenting yourself to, and eventually appealing to, an audience by striking out on your won, by making your *own* plays and films, than by submitting to the industrial model of the school and studio.

But how will you act when you, whether occasionally or frequently, come up against the gatekeepers?

Why not do the best you can, see them as, if you will, an inevitable and preexisting condition, like ants at a picnic, and shrug and enjoy yourself in spite of them.

Do not internalize the industrial model. You are not one of the myriad of interchangeable pieces but a unique human being and if you've got something to say, *say* it, and think well of yourself while you're learning to say it better.

(44-51)

Visiting Mission Hill

October 9, 2006

[Original link](#)

The new Mission Hill School is located in the middle of Boston, in Roxbury. By the time the subway reaches the neighborhood, all the white people have already left the train. The school itself is nestled into a building long-ago abandoned by a Catholic High School. When it first moved in, they found the remnants of the last high school class had never been removed, their effects somehow frozen in time.

The streets are gritty, the faces dark, and I don't exactly feel comfortable walking outside. This isn't the place you imagine starting a "progressive school". And when you learn that Mission Hill is a public school, part of the Boston Public School system, it seems even less likely. Yet, when educational reformer Deborah Meier set out to build a modern school, that's what she picked. They got a special license from the government and the unions to operate it as a "pilot school" and begun tossing out the normal rules and building it from the ground up on progressive principles.

Meier has since left, as has Straughton, her successor, leaving a woman who introduces herself as Ayla (everyone here goes by their first names). Ayla seems a little overwhelmed, both by the demands of the job and her sudden promotion to the top, but she somehow handles everything with kindness and composure.

"Welcome to our school," she says, smiling so sweetly that I have trouble believing she's a principle. As she continues talking, outlining the school's unique mission and the "habits of mind" it hopes to achieve, some kids begin running and screaming in the halls outside. She gets up and heads to the door. *Now we'll get to see the other side of her*, I think. *She seems nice enough to us but she'll start screaming at the kids*. But she doesn't say a thing, she just closes the door and sits back down with us.

After the overview, she takes us upstairs to get a sense of what classroom life is like. The school is nice enough — "I wish I went to school here," the education students visiting with me gush — with happy decorations, small class sizes (20 is the max.), friendly and dedicated teachers, and very active classrooms. The kids, a very racially mixed crowd, seem quite bright and full of joy, and I can't help smiling for the first twenty minutes, as we watch them bouncing around painting and sculpting.

When we move to math class, things are a little different. For "morning math meeting", the kids sit in a circle in the front of the room, as the teacher goes around asking each one to say something about subtraction before writing it on the board. The teacher tries to be non-judgmental, but when someone says

something wrong, he can't help but ask the rest of the class if they think what that person said was right. (Once, when it actually was right, he has to add the caveat "I'm not saying it was wrong, I just want to know what other people think.") At one point, a child asks him to write a one with twelve zeroes up on the board, saying it's a million. The teacher points out that it's a lot more than a million and counts out for the class what it actually is. He miscounts though, and claims it's one septillion. (It's only a trillion.) I don't say anything.

Later, the teacher tells us how much he likes morning math circle because it gives everyone a chance to speak and think about things. But it's clear that most of the students are bored most of the time (including me) while others don't exactly enjoy speaking. Afraid they'll get the answer wrong and look stupid in front of the whole class, they speak quietly or cover their mouth while they talk, trying to make sure only the teacher can hear them. When the teacher indicates they were right and asks them to speak up, then they're happy to tell the rest of the class.

After everyone has spoken, the class adjourns so people can get the memoirs they've been working on to share with everyone. We head to a class where they're shouting out the names of states on a map. The class is going to explain how America became America by looking at the patterns of migration on maps, the teacher assures us, but right now it looks like the class is only memorizing how to spell stupid state names.

At this point our visit is officially over and we have to head back to a final wrap-up with the principal, but as I think about it and think back to my own school experience, I begin to wonder: is this any different?

There are some differences, of course. This school feels much cozier and comfortable, for example. I don't feel odd just hanging out in the halls. The teachers are all very self-conscious about trying to be "student-centered" and "democratic" (the principal explains how they terminated their relationship with an afterschool program because they refused to stop giving kids rewards, referring skeptical student-teachers to Alfie Kohn's books for "an extreme position" on rewards). But while their hearts may be in better places, it's not clear the effect is that much different.

Still, that in itself is a pretty incredible achievement. I went to an extremely rich, white, private school on an expensive and lush campus in the middle of the richest zip code in the country. That you can build a public school of equal quality for kids in the inner city is an impressive achievement. Just not the one I was expecting.

Visiting Olin College

October 10, 2006

[Original link](#)

Olin College is that rarest of breeds: a new one. “I didn’t realize people were still starting colleges,” I heard someone say when they first heard about it. The Franklin W. Olin Foundation, after funding engineering buildings on lots of college campuses, finally decided to try to build a whole school itself, eventually putting all of its money (an estimated \$400 million) into Olin College and dissolving itself.

The college is not shy about spending the money. Every Olin student gets completely free tuition and a laptop full of engineering software. It has a big beautiful campus on the outskirts of Boston with three huge classroom buildings and six wings of dorms; each student gets a state-of-the-art dorm room.

The buildings are big and imposing. I first visited several years ago over the summer, back when Olin was just starting and no one was around. It was odd walking through the large, newly-built buildings all alone. I tried to imagine what it would be like when class was in session.

And here I am, years later, as I head to my first class. A kind and eager student, who I’ll call Lex, picked me up at the T stop and drove me to the campus and is now delivering me to the Computer Architecture course, which everyone insists is one of the best-taught on campus (by which, they apparently mean that the teacher is really funny). As we walk through the hallways at 9am I again don’t see a single other person. “Guess nobody wakes up this early,” I say.

Lex hands me off to a student in the Computer Architecture class who looks exactly like I imagined: long beard, geeky shirt, started several open source projects. He takes me into class — which, despite Olin’s reasonable gender balance in the student population as a whole, remains mostly male — where students are gabbing about things they’ve built with op-amps and breadboards before things start. While I’ve heard of breadboards, I’ve never seen one, let alone played with one before class, and I have to admit I’m not sure what an op-amp is. *Wow, I think, these kids are smart.*

Nobody here knows who I am — an odd experience for me, since lately I’ve only been hanging out with friends or going to conferences where people know of me. When they ask, I simply say I’m from Cambridge — a programmer at a startup if they push, but few do. Everybody just assumes I’m a prospective student visiting and looks down on me accordingly. I just try to keep quiet.

The class itself is taken up by having students do exercises on the whiteboards and then share their results with the class. Students here seem a little less

embarrassed about getting things wrong in front of everyone; they're happy to describe what they did from their seats. After everyone has shared, the class ends, and I leave, disappointed.

It's still early, so Lex decides to take me on a tour of the facilities. Olin College was designed by and for engineers, the idea being that students who complete the program will have a full, rounded education in engineering. So there are classes in math and physics and basic principles of engineering, all unified into a project-based integrated courseblock or something like that. Then there are classes in materials science and biological science, classes in human factors and understanding the requirements of actual users, classes in building stuff and classes in using it.

There are lots of toys all over, great food, and an administration which is always asking how they can improve things further. The place reminds me of nothing so much as Google, which even has a similar kind of campus. I suppose it makes sense: this is what happens when you have engineers build an institution.

I grab some pasta for lunch (like at Google, the food isn't really my style) and follow Lex to a table. Unlike at other schools, Lex explains, kids here don't sit in cliques. Everybody knows everybody else, so the tables just fill up in order. We sit across from two kids who somehow turn the conversation from Dean Kamen's ego to mobius strips, before telling us about a paper they'd written proving that a certain kind of graph of odd n can be reformulated on a mobius strip as a series of pentagons, showing us how by drawing on a napkin. (There are boxes of napkins on the tables, I notice, but not boxes of pens. Pay attention, institution builders!) The work seems quite impressive; I wonder if it could be published in an actual journal.

The kids also gab about student life. So-and-so is having a birthday and they're going to get a keg later to celebrate. Everybody laughs and then they assure me that it's only a root beer keg. Then they're going to get a bunch of ice cream too, so it'll be a huge root beer float. After lunch, I head out with them to downtown Boston to grab the keg and head back, a process that takes up most of the afternoon.

On the way back we stop at a music store. Bored, I pull out my Sidekick and check my email, which draws a store employee's attention. Long-haired and with a weathered face in a tight black shirt, he speaks in a rocker's drawl. "Whooaaaa, what is thaaaat?" he says and I quietly explain. He tells us how he thinks computers will eventually be replaced by miniature devices, which will be able to communicate with each other by bouncing satellite signals off the moon. "Or the sun," he adds.

To distract him, I think of saying that my companions are just the geniuses to build such a thing, but they save me the trouble. "Are you guys at MIT?" he asks. "No," they say, and I realize Olin has a ways to go before its brand catches up with its curriculum. He says he has a friend who's an expert in seeing the big picture and offers to hook the guys up so they can take on the small device

manufacturers. (The Olin students immediately begin thinking about the tools they'd need to build small devices.) He takes down their names and emails before we head back.

"You have to recognize that everyone has a point of view about technology," one Olin student says thoughtfully. "They taught us that on the designing-for-humans course." "And even if he is crazy," the other adds, "his friend might be cool."

When we get back, I beg off from my guide Lex, saying I'd like to just tour the place for myself for a bit. Lex and her circle remind me a little of Olin cultists — whenever I ask about Olin their eyes go wide and they tell me that it's the greatest place ever. Perhaps that's true, I think, but I want to see for myself.

As I walk around the campus in the middle of the afternoon, I notice it's still empty. As far as I can tell, the campus never fills out much more. It turns out 300 people don't really fill up a large campus (they barely fill up a large auditorium) which means the whole place feels like a ghost town. The immaculately cleaned, yet mysteriously empty buildings everywhere make just walking around feel creepy and lonely.

I catch up with an old friend of mine, who I'll call Rob, who ended up going to Olin. Rob is deeply cynical about the place and we head to the campus of Babson College (a leading business school which is literally located across the sidewalk from Olin) to dish. The Babson campus, although designed by the same hideous architect, feels like a breath of fresh air after Olin's imposing emptiness. For one thing, there are students everywhere — Babson is over ten times the size of Olin. For another, the place is filled with trees, making the whole thing feel smaller and cozier. I don't recall a single tree on the Olin campus, for whatever reason.

The mistake everyone makes, Rob explains, is that they think Olin is a school for *hackers*. This isn't unreasonable, since in the computer industry, hackers are often formally called engineers. But Olin is using engineer in its traditional sense, as people who just generally build stuff. Computer hacking makes up just a tiny part of the curriculum and an even smaller part of the culture. And so computer geeks who end up attending Olin just end up feeling left out. Rob is even thinking of taking programming classes at Babson.

Plus, things aren't as friendly as they seem. At orientation they were big on insisting Olin was a "feedback culture" — complete with role-playing exercises about how to properly give feedback (which Rob failed; he insists they claimed his invitation to lunch was "too negative") — but apparently they don't actually listen to the feedback much. The kids sitting near Rob at the dinner table all agree. One even pulls out a card they gave him with tips on the proper way to give feedback. (When I ask her later, Lex insists that every new batch of students has its own culture. And this one, she says, enjoys "shaking things up" while hers enjoys stabilizing them.)

Despite Olin's claims to be "working with" students, Rob insists that the place

feels a lot more like “doing to”. Instead of having rules, for example, they have a loose honor code with provisions like “respect for others”. But “respect for others” apparently turns out to mean “respect for authority” in practice — a student who ran their own WiFi base station even after the campus IT department asked for it to be taken down was hauled before the student tribunal on charges of showing insufficient “respect for others”.

All of this just makes the place feel even more creepy. I think back to the kids tittering about pretending to drink alcohol, about their soliloquies for Olin’s greatness. *Friendly fascism* is the term that comes to mind.

It’s getting late so I try to find Lex to give me a ride home, but we end up at the kegger party. Olin students insist they know how to party just like everyone else, but as you might expect, it’s the weirdest party I’ve ever been too. The lights are turned down low and an iTunes visualizer is placed on the TV screen, as some kids try to awkwardly dance. But it’s not dark or drunk enough for that, so instead the girls go around standing on tip toes and giving each other hugs while speaking in high-pitched voices, before going to get costumes to prance around in.

Finally they break open the keg (there is some humor at how the engineering students can’t figure out how to operate it) but the root beer doesn’t improve the scene much. I finally manage to find Lex and prevail upon her for a ride back to the train station and as we ride through the darkness she muses about Olin on the way home. I try to tell her what I feel, but it’s clear she doesn’t really want to hear it. To her Olin is a place of wonder; she wants validation, not refutation. I suppose my feedback is “too negative”.

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October 11, 2006

[Original link](#)

High School Confidential

by Jeremy Iversen
Atria, 464 pp., \$25.00

My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student

by Rebekah Nathan
Penguin, 208 pp., \$14.00 (paper reprint)

Some of our most formative years are spent in schools, odd places whose ostensible goal is adult-directed education but in reality are controlled by student-culture peer groups of which adults have little actual understanding. Adults run examinations and programs, try to be “hip” to teen culture, but ultimately, we must admit, we have little idea what really goes on, making it easy for rumors to run wild.

Jeremy Iversen and Rebekah Nathan decided to see for themselves what school life was really like, by going undercover and experiencing it themselves. While they went to different places, in different guises, in entirely different situations (Iversen was a senior in high school, while Nathan was a freshman in college), the pictures they draw are startlingly similar: a world where genuine education is absolutely the last thing on everyone's mind.

Jeremy Iversen grew up in New York, attended a prestigious boarding school, and went to college at Stanford. But, he says, life after school didn't have the same appeal. So he decided to go back and get the typical high school education he never had. The result — *High School Confidential* — is a gripping memoir of what life is actually like for the cool kids in a southern California high school.

The general outlines are perhaps less than shocking to those who have been paying attention. High school kids routinely have casual sex with each other, for example. ("There's nothing else to do in this town," one student comments, "except start drama with everybody.") They take drugs — marijuana, cocaine, ecstasy, speed — right under their parents noses. (In one scene, Travis, the class's drug dealer, and Alexis, his sister, are confronted by their father. "I'm going to give you a drug test," he warns them. "But I've been clean since nursery!") Travis replies. "Oh, it's only your sister I'm worried about," explains the father.) The kids cheat, not just by copying on tests, but by taking copious steroids and human growth hormone to compete in sports. ("I read an article about high school steroid use in *Sports Illustrated*", comments the team coach, as the kids who are using look away. "Good thing that's not a problem in our school.")

Despite living in a very diverse community, many of the kids are full of casual racism and right-wing politics (white people need to stand up for their heritage, nuke all the Arabs), although they're far more liberal in practice (doing drugs with their Middle Eastern friends). When they get mad at each other, they aren't afraid to take it out in violent brawls. And when the school throws parties, everybody gets totally hammered. (There's a brilliant scene where some kids throw up on Richard Nixon's grave.)

However, the novel is gripping in its details, with more amusing characters and fascinating stories than any television show imitation of high school life. The teachers are such characters that were this fiction you might accuse them of being overwritten. School events are so lavish (a band performs every day at lunch, large coordinated dance-and-light shows are done for spirit rallies) that they seem like TV exaggerations. School assignments are so inane (cut apart this cat) that you might think the kid telling you this was exaggerating. But Iversen was there, the dialogue in the book is copied down verbatim, the description of events was taken first-hand.¹

And, indeed, the most shocking components are not the tales of the kids, but of the schools. Iversen draws a picture of an institution that is not just failing at learning, but antithetical to it. Thea, the only girl in the book with any academic passion, is routinely discouraged by the actions of both peers and adults. But no other student even gets that far. The school's student culture makes caring about class unthinkable; the school's classes make learning near-impossible.

But the grandest component of Iversen's tale is how he dismantles our previous methods for trying to understand how schools operate. First, there is Derrick, the school board's secret weapon. Derrick is an articulate and popular student, admired by all, and elected class president. But it slowly becomes clear that student government, including him, is nothing but the administration's pawn. The regulations are designed to make genuine complaints impossible to bring before the administration, while the administration uses Derrick at every opportunity as a mouthpiece for their lies about what the children really think. Thus the only student representative most outside adults see is no representative at all.

Then there are the standards regulations, around which the curriculum is supposedly organized. The state school accreditation team is coming to verify that it is, and the adults worry that they're quite likely to fail. So the principal goes all-out, bribing, threatening, and faking the school into appearing good. Any kid who ever caused a problem is locked away in a hidden trailer for the duration of the inspector's visit, every class is replaced with fake, scripted, standards-compliant material. Every child puts on fake happy faces under severe duress. And the school passes with flying colors. "I wish every kid in the state could have an education this good", insists the lead inspector.

The reality is that between adult and student, there is a vast gulf in mentality. Iversen's genius is that he can get us inside the heads of both sides.

Around the same time, Rebekah Nathan, an anthropology professor at AnyU (both pseudonyms), was sitting in on some classes herself. She noticed that simply by acting like a student — sitting in class, taking notes, etc. — her fellow students began treating her like one, sharing gossip and trading facts she never got to see as a professor. Eager to cross that same mental gulf, she decided to spend her sabbatical the following year doing an undercover anthropological study of her own university.

Nathan enrolled as a freshman, lived in a dorm, and took a full load of courses. Despite looking like a mom, the other students accepted her as their own. She probably couldn't get involved in the party scene and didn't try — she stuck to studying the academic and intellectual side of college life — but pretty much everything she says fits with my impressions as a freshman Stanford student around the same time and I can even confirm a couple of her more surprising specific points.

After confining her focus to the intellectual, Nathan discovers that there simply isn't much there. Students have their own culture with regard to class, a language known as "Undergraduate Cynical", where actually caring about the material is deeply frowned upon, and the only questions you're permitted to ask of a teacher are about the details of grading and assignments:

A good question, I learned, is one that voices a concern shared by other students or that asks for clarifications of upcoming work. "Will there be more questions on the test from the text or the lecture?" "Should the paper be double- or single- spaced?" [...]
[...] "What does that mean?" is, incredibly, just not the kind of question that an American college student would ask.

This isn't just show; students genuinely aren't engaged in classes. They don't do the required reading, they dash off assignments, they ditch classes, they cheat on tests. Some go up and talk to the teacher about things, but they do so with ulterior motives in mind. Signs and talks geared to incoming students explain that one must "work the teachers" by talking to them, getting them to recognize you so they will give you hints about tests and go easy on you when you need exceptions. "I take the information I need from the professor", one highly-successful student tells Nathan, explaining what that consists of: "how they're going to grade you and what they think is important". Everything is seen as part of the game, not worthwhile for its own sake.

But it's all too easy to lament this sad state of student affairs, perhaps complain about the laziness of modern students. But Nathan goes one step further: she shows *why* it is happening. For even she, a professor with a Ph.D, finds herself doing the exact same things. "We don't need to study those things, they won't be on the test", she tells her study partner Rob. It takes Rob, a fellow student, to ask her whether she just cares about learning for its own sake.

The culture of Undergraduate Cynical, you see, is not created by student laziness or a lack of concern for intellectual life. It's created by the necessities of the schedule. Students simply don't have time to care. They take three to five classes, each with separate sections and lab assignments, each with its own schedule of papers and readings and adults to suck up to. That alone is enough to drive Rebekah crazy, despite her thinking she had pretty good time management skills juggling all her commitments as a professor. But on top of that most students go to activities and clubs, work an on- or off-campus job, party in the evenings, and try to maintain relationships. When you run the math, there just isn't enough time to care.

So students instead focus on doing what's required of them: just scraping by. Anything that won't impact their grade much is tossed and a desire to learn becomes a desire to pass. It's hard to imagine any sincere desire to learn surviving such a harried schedule. As soon as you get engrossed or a book or topic, you have to dash off to your next meeting.

Again, this is all something completely invisible to the professors. They spend their days worrying about tomorrow's lecture and are shocked when students don't do the same. But the students haven't had time: they've had two more classes and who knows how many assignments in the interim. And, anyway, they only picked this course because it filled a convenient hole in their schedule, they're not even sure what it's about.

So the students simply don't get engrossed, student discussion groups don't actually discuss things, but instead each student simply makes up a point of view and shares it so they don't get a zero on their in-class participation grade. There is no "meeting of the minds" on any subject; there are hardly any minds.

Both books, their research being conducted undercover, will no doubt lead some to raise ethical questions. Jeremy Iversen had to deceive and mislead his fellow students — including creating a fake backstory — in order to experience life with them. Rebekah Nathan, while not explicitly lying, led students to believe she was just an older woman going back to school, and certainly not one of their professors.

But deception alone is not an ethical violation. Psychology studies routinely deceive subjects into thinking the experiment is about X, when actually it is about Y. (I myself have been so deceived.) The key difference, and in my opinion the only possible ethical lapse on Iversen and Nathan's part, is that after the study is over, the psychologists explain what was really going on. Neither Nathan nor Iversen told their friends afterwards, leaving them only to discover it after the project had gone public.

(By contrast, Barbara Ehrenreich, in *Nicked and Dimed*, her study of low-wage work, told her fellow workers at the end that she was working on a book about the experience. They were "remarkably blasé" about it, she found.)

But more generally, important scientific projects like these might have to step on a few ethical toes. Some of the greatest experiments in psychology — the Milgram experiments on obedience to authority and Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment — were easy fodder for armchair ethicists. But while people may have their feelings ruffled, in all of these experiments there was little lasting hurt to the participants, while the educational consequences of the studies themselves have been immense.

The real ethical question is how we can justify forcing our children into such institutions of anti-intellectualism. Iversen found that high school students were quite conservative politically, even more so than their parents, and perhaps it's

not surprising that Bush's anti-intellectual charm appeals to kids who daily experience education as a form of torture.

Perhaps students learn something by going through the necessary motions required to get a degree, but I defy anyone to read both of these accounts and continue to insist that schools are teaching kids to be "critical thinkers" with a "life-long love of learning". If anything, the real education is in the opposite.

Instead of critical thinkers, we have kids willing to accept any requirement, no matter how absurd, without question. "If you write what you want to that prof," explains a successful senior, "you're gonna end up with a bad grade. Whereas, if you write to *them*, you win—you can still have your own mindset and say, hell, I know this isn't the way I feel, but I'll give them what they want." But, as experiments in cognitive dissonance have shown us, if one continues saying what one doesn't feel, one begins feeling it before too long. It's easy to see how this is effective training for professionalism, which actually means doing what you're told, despite what you believe. But it's hard to see how this system is going to generate students who will buck a trend.

Instead of life-long learners, we have kids who learn that genuine learning is a joke. "Education" becomes that stupid thing in classrooms that you have to do to get a decent job, an entirely mercenary perspective that's unhelpfully encouraged by the mercenary pressures of student loans. If the only education you've ever experienced is doing what's necessary to get a good grade, why would you do it when the grades weren't around?

Our public high schools were supposed to make every child a good citizen of the democracy. Our great universities were supposed to show young people our grandest achievements. One could say that these institutions are failing at their jobs, but it might be more accurate to say that they're being all too successful.

Notes

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1. Some of the more verbal students at the school, upset at being hoodwinked by an undercover writer and disappointed at their portrayal, have taken to posting nasty comments on web sites and in the school paper suggesting that Iversen's book is fictionalized. But, as far as I can see, everything they claim that he left out, he actually included (with a single exception: one person on the Internet claimed kids called him "Plasticface") and they have failed to dispute any details he included. So, while no doubt Iversen's book contains errors (every book does, especially one as difficult to write as this), I'm compelled to believe it is largely accurate.

Getting it Wrong

October 12, 2006

[Original link](#)

Anyone who's spent any time around little kids in school, or even read [books about people who have](#), knows that they're terrified of getting the answer wrong. Geez, you don't even need to hang around little kids. When you're out chatting with a bunch of people and you say something that shows you didn't know something, you look embarrassed. When you're playing a video game and not doing well, you try to come up with an excuse. People hate failing, so much so that they're afraid to try.

Which is a problem, because failing is most of what we do, most of the time. The only way to stretch your abilities is to try to do things a little bit beyond them, which means you're going to fail some of the time. Even weirder are the competitive situations. If I'm playing a game that relies solely on practice against someone who's practiced more than me, I'm probably going to lose, no matter how good a person I am. Yet I still feel degraded when I do.

Anyone who wants to build a decent educational environment is going to need to solve this problem. And there seem to be two ways of doing it: try and fix the people so that they don't feel embarrassed at failing or try to fix the environment so that people don't fail. Which option to pick sometimes gets people into philopolitical debates (trying to improve kids self-esteem means they won't be able to handle the real world! preventing kids from experiencing failure is just childish coddling!), but for now let's just be concerned with what works.

Getting people to be OK with being wrong seems tough, if only because everybody I know has this problem to a greater or lesser degree. There are occasional exceptions — mavericks like Richard Feynman (why do *you* care what other people think?) often seem fearless, although it's hard to gauge how much of that was staged — but these just seem random, with no patterns suggesting *why*.

It seems quite likely that a lot of the fear is induced by a goal-oriented educational system, obsessed with grades for work (A, B, C) and grades for students (1st, 2nd, 3rd). And perhaps the fear of being wrong you see in older people stems from having been through such experiences in childhood. If this is the case, then simply building a decent non-coercive environment for children will solve the problem, but that seems like too much to hope for.

Perhaps the solution is in, as some suggest, building self-esteem, so that when kids are wrong on one thing, they have other things to fall back on. I certainly see this process operating in my own mind: “pff, sure they can beat me in *Guitar Hero*, but at least I can go back to writing blog entries”. But self-esteem is like

a cushion: it prevents the fall from being too damaging, but it doesn't prevent the fall.

The real piece, it would seem, is finding some way to detach a student's actions from their worth. The reason failing hurts is because we think it reflects badly on us. I failed, therefore I'm a failure. But if that's not the case, then there's nothing to feel hurt about.

Detaching a self from your actions might seem like a silly thing, but lots of different pieces of psychology point to it. Richard Layard, in his survey *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*, notes that studies consistently find that people who are detached from their surroundings — whether through Buddhist meditation, Christian belief in God, or cognitive therapy — are happier people. “All feelings of joy and even physical pain are observed to fluctuate, and we see ourselves as like a wave of the sea—where the sea is eternal and the wave is just its present form.” (p. 191)

Similarly Alfie Kohn, who [looks more specifically at the studies about children](#), finds that it's essential for a child's mental health that parents communicate that they love their child for who they are, no matter what it is they *do*. This concept can lead to some nasty philosophical debates — what are people, if not collections of things done? — but the practical implications are clear. Children, indeed all people, need unconditional love and support to be able to survive in this world. [Attachment parenting studies](#) find that even infants are afraid to explore a room unless their mother is close by to support them, and [the same findings have been found in monkeys](#).

The flip side is: how do we build educational institutions that discourage these ways of thinking. Obviously we'll want to [get rid of competition](#) as well as [grades](#), but even so, [as we saw with Mission Hill](#), kids are scared of failure.

While I'm loathe to introduce *more* individualism into American schools, it seems clear that one solution is to have people do work on their own. Kids are embarrassed in front of the class, [shy people get bullied in small groups](#), so all that really leaves is to do it on your own.

And this does seem effective. People seem more likely to ask “stupid” questions if they get to write them down on anonymous cards. When people [fail in a video game](#), it only makes them want to try again right away so they can finally beat it. Apparently when nobody knows you're getting it wrong, it's a lot easier to handle it. Maybe because you know it can't affect the way people see you.

Schools can also work to discourage this kind of conditional seeing by making it completely unimportant. Even Mission Hill, which ensured every classroom was mixed-age, still had a notion of age and clear requirements for graduating. What if school, instead of a bunch of activities you had to march through, was

a bunch of activities students could pick and choose from. When people are no longer marching, it's hard to be worried about your place in line.

But can we take the next step? Can schools not just see their students unconditionally, but actually encourage them to see themselves that way? Clearly we could teach everybody Buddhist meditation or something (which, [studies apparently show](#), is effective), but even better would be if there was something in the structure of the school that encouraged this way of thinking.

Removing deadlines and requirements should help students live more fully in the moment. Providing basic care to every student should help them feel valued as people. Creating a safe and trusting environment should free them from having to keep track of how much they can trust everyone else. And, of course, all the same things would be positive in the larger society.

Too often, people think of schools as systems for building good people. Perhaps it's time to think of them as places to let people be good.

Tomorrow: Getting it Right

Getting It Right

October 13, 2006

[Original link](#)

There's an interesting little experiment you can do. If you have a classroom of kids and you give them a bunch of tasks they can work on of varying difficulty, the kids will pick the tasks that are just outside their level, that stretch them to do a little bit more. (This is, of course, if they aren't getting graded on this. If they're getting graded, they'll always pick the easy ones.)

When I first heard about this experiment, I just assumed it was because they were good kids. But now I think there's a different explanation. It's because doing this is fun.

Working on something that's too easy for you isn't enjoyable, it's just mindless. (There's a reason few people play [50K Racewalker](#).) But doing something that's too hard for you isn't fun either. It's just like trying to run through a wall: you're not going to succeed and you're not going to learn much from it. So, like Goldilocks, the kids pick the task that's just right.

But it's not simply by default either. There's something actively enjoyable in itself about learning to achieve more. (I've [come to call this](#) the "Kipper effect", after the novel Kipper's Game which revolves around this idea.) There's a definite high to achievement, the rush of accomplishment, just as there's a corresponding low when you fail.

I'm looking for more research on this idea — and I'd be very grateful if anyone could point me to it. What kinds of things trigger the Kipper effect? Does it wear off? etc.

Blast from the Past

October 15, 2006

[Original link](#)

I was reorganizing some of my files when I came across [this website](#), a proto-blog kind of thing I apparently made around 1999 (to judge from the content). There, too, I wrote a review of two books about our educational system, and it was interesting to look at how my writing style and views have changed.

While the writing style is certainly childish and poorly-edited, it's not unreadable (certainly not as unreadable as some academic writers) and the content is still reasonably sophisticated (with a bit of rewriting, the content could have passed for a blog post last week). And the web design is not too bad either, all things considered.

So, for this week's Sunday Bonus Post, here's [an excerpt](#):

Teachers spend more time teaching students how to do research instead of teaching them research skills [...]. One project put on by teachers at the North Shore Country Day School [the school I attended at the time] asks students to rate the quality of life for different countries. The students were eager to get into a discussion of the most important factors in a measurement of quality of life and the proper way to compare radically different countries. However, the teachers required that the students make these decisions quickly so that more time could be spent on learning computer research skills. Students were also not allowed to use factors that could not be found on the Internet. With projects like this, time is taken away from exciting discussions and debates to spend more time using the computer.

One teacher assigned supplemental work for students to do on the computer. "Isn't this just extraneous busywork?" one astute student asked. "Yes," the teacher replied, "but it practices computer skills." Computer skills must be very important for students to learn. So many teachers and schools dedicate so much time to their learning — some schools even have classes dedicated to them. "The computer is a tool," the schools explain, "one that students must learn to use properly." However, a pencil is also a tool which must be used properly, yet how many schools have classes on the proper use of pencils? Students are expected to learn usage of such tools on their own or at a younger age. Yet the computer demands constant education and instruction on its usage. This instruction is far more than that demanded by any other tool.

The Sexual Life of Savages

October 16, 2006

[Original link](#)

In the early 1900s, anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski did his field work in the Trobriand Islands of the Western Pacific. After getting himself ashore, he dropped himself into their culture and begun having to learn their language and understand their customs. The result were a series of groundbreaking books in the field of anthropology, much of which is still entertaining to read today.

In *The Sexual Life of Savages* (savages, Malinowski assures us, is a technical term and not meant to cause offense) he describes the customs of Trobriand's intimate life, which is fascinating both for how it is different and how it is the same.

To a certain degree, it seems like the culture of the islanders presages our own. Back when Malinowski was doing his field work, he was amazed that islanders could freely have premarital sex and yet still found it desirable to get married. The same question would prove no puzzle to any American today.

And, indeed, the islanders seem like a case study in the ultimate consequences of the sexual revolution: girls want sex just as much as guys, kids start having sex at a very young age — 6-8 for the girls and 10-12 for the guys — with no social stigma, there are few customs about dating to inhibit “hooking up”, and, of course, revealing clothing has been taken to its limit, with girls actually going topless.

Of course, much of the story of a Trobriand's intimate life is the same: initial attractions budding into lasting relationships, etc. And then, out of nowhere, Malinowski drops in something totally bizarre. The islanders don't kiss, he explains. Instead, they scratch. The girls scratch the guys so hard that they draw blood and, if the guys can withstand the pain, then they move forward to having sex. The ethnographer (as Malinowski calls himself) verified this by noting that just about everyone on the island had noticeable scratches. And while everybody is having sex whenever they want, premarital meal-sharing is a big no-no. You're not supposed to go out for dinner together until after you get married.

But the most fascinating and strange part about the islanders are their beliefs on the subject of pregnancy, also described in Malinowski's classic article “[Baloma: The Spirits of the Dead in the Trobriand Islands](#)”. When people die, you see, their spirit takes a canoe to the island of Tuma, which works very much like the normal island except everybody is a spirit of the dead. When the spirit gets old and wrinkled it shrugs off its skin and turns back into an embryo, which a spirit

then takes back to the island and inserts into a woman. This, you see, is how women get pregnant.

That's right. The islanders do not believe that sex causes pregnancy. They don't believe in physiological fatherhood. Malinowski was incredibly skeptical about this, so he tried all sorts of ways to see if this was simply a story they told, while they actually the real deal. But no, they assured him that it was really true, that all the white people who insisted otherwise were being silly, that the spirits caused pregnancy, not sex.

They argued the case quite logically. After all, they noted, one fellow went on an expedition for a year or two and when he came back, he had a new son. He obviously wasn't having sex with her while he was away, so where did the kid come from? (Cough.) And, they note, there are some really hideous people on the island who nobody would dare have sex with, yet they manage to become pregnant. (Malinowski spies some kids looking sheepish when this subject is raised.)

They also argue the other way: people on the island are having sex all the time from a very early age and yet they very rarely get pregnant. (Naturally, the islanders don't practice any form of contraception; the very idea doesn't make sense when sex doesn't cause pregnancy.) The white man's argument just doesn't make sense. Indeed, [recent visitors report](#), the islanders *still* believe that sex doesn't cause pregnancy, despite the best efforts of health workers.

It is speculated that the yams that form the basis of the island diet have a contraceptive agent in them (The Pill was originally made by looking at chemicals in wild yams), which conveniently explains quite a bit, including the low birthrate despite the high level of sexual activity. Indeed, the whole idea lends quite a bit of support to the idea that material factors shape culture — after all, our own sexual revolution didn't happen until we got the yam's chemicals in pill form in 1960.

The notion has some other interesting consequences. For example, the society is necessarily matrilineal, since fathers have no technical lineage. Yet sociological fathers (the mother's husband), Malinowski notes, show more love and care for their children than most he's seen in Europe.

Furthermore, they believe the same rules apply to the rest of the animal kingdom. This is what clinches it for Malinowski — despite all the effort they go to to raise pigs, they insist that pigs also reproduce asexually. They never attempt to breed pigs; indeed, they castrate all the male pigs they have. (To them this is further proof — we castrated all the pigs and yet they keep having children! Malinowski notes that the domestic pigs often sneak off to canoodle with those in the wild.)

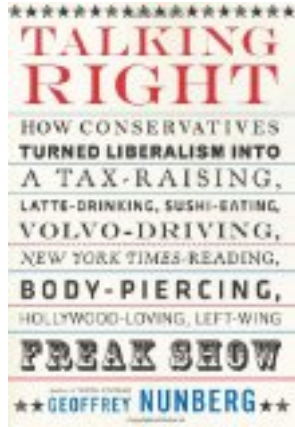
When I told a friend of mine about this odd state of affairs, he wondered if the islanders were just stupid. After all, he noted, sex and childbirth aren't exactly two physically unconnected human activities. But as he reflected on it further,

he considered that this belief wasn't that much different from what passes for religion in our country. Smart people believe strange things.

Talking Right

October 17, 2006

[Original link](#)



Government, John Dewey famously said, is the shadow cast by big business over society. And political language, Geoffrey Nunberg argues in *Talking Right*, is the shadow cast by government. Democrats, he points out, seem to think language has a talismanic power, that if only they can find the right catch phrase or slogan, they can pull people over to their side. “Liberal” must become “progressive”, “family values” must become “valuing families”. There’s an intellectual cleverness to such stunts, and as a Berkeley linguist, Nunberg must want to believe in them. But he doesn’t. The words, he explains, are just a side-effect of the larger political situation. Dewey explained that attempts to change the shadow will have no effect without a change in the substance, and Nunberg heartily agrees.

It’s hard to see how it could be otherwise, but Democrats have suffered from a stubborn literalism in political discourse: thinking they can beat the charge of big government by launching programs cutting down on bureaucratic waste, thinking they can reclaim the issue of values by pointing to their love of tolerance and fairness, thinking they can dodge the charge of latte-sipping by donning a hunting cap and rifle. In reality, the issues go much deeper: big government is an attack on the notion that government can do good, values refers to a feeling of national morals run amok, and the latte-sipping charge is an attempt to distract voters from bigger issues of class. Nunberg even chastises his colleague George Lakoff for assuming that the current packages of political positions have any deeper meanings, rather than just being accidents of history.

Nunberg is an essayist—his commentaries for NPR’s *Fresh Air* are a national treasure—and his style, while eminently readable, doesn’t translate well to a

long book, where his points get lost in a field of anecdotes. But beneath all the stories about how conservatives eat more brie and liberal used to be a mantle claimed by everyone, Nunberg's point is a familiar one: if the Democrats want to win, they must begin telling full-throated populist stories about how the economic elite are capturing the wealth of our country and how we need government to take it back. The point is no less true for being popular, and it's heartening to find that investigation from yet another perspective yields the same conclusions.

- [Buy the book](#)

That Isn't Science!

October 18, 2006

[Original link](#)

Larry Wall once noted that the scientificness of a field is inversely correlated to how much the word “science” appears in its name. Physics, of course, doesn’t have science in the name and is the most scientific of all sciences. Then comes biology and and ethology and so on. Then come the non-sciences like Computer Science and Poultry Science. And worst of all is Scientology.

In general, whenever someone tells you that “science” has decreed that you should do one thing or another that doesn’t seem reasonable, it’s probably because they’re trying to pull one over on you, whether it’s the “scientific” medicines you see on late-night TV or the science of the behaviorists who say you shouldn’t love your kids.

But nowhere is this more evident than when people try to tell you what science itself is. This field of meta-science seems to attract more charlatans and malintents than any other. If you control how the very notion of what’s scientific is defined — well, then that’s real power. Even if the very idea is patently absurd. (A real scientist would never tell you that doing X isn’t really science; their goal is to get the truth, not sit around making rules about who’s in and who’s out.)

For much of the outside world, the test for a real science is “falsifiability” — the possibility that there could be evidence proving the claim wrong. This notion was invented by Karl Popper, who was himself [an enemy of science](#) who tried to insist that science never actually made any progress, that we never learned anything more about the world.

But even if we put aside this noxious pedigree, Popper’s definition is still absurd. Take the distinction between astronomy and astrology. We would all agree, I think, that the first is a science but the second isn’t. But both of their predictions are equally falsifiable — astrology makes a dozen falsifiable predictions in the newspaper five times a week. Popper’s criteria isn’t of much help to us, even on such a basic case.

Sadly, like many American intellectuals, the Supreme Court assumed that falsifiability was a standard scientific test. In the *Daubert* case it, [as Chris Mooney summarizes the view of the *American Journal of Public Health*](#), “blundered miserably” and set judges the task of using this “deeply confused philosophy of science” to act as gatekeepers in keeping scientific claims from juries. Actual scientists like [DefendingScience.org](#) is working to undo this these mistakes, but you wouldn’t know it from the rhetoric — after all, *Daubert*’s defenders claim their just trying to uphold sound scientific standards. (Chris Mooney’s book *The Republican War on Science*, among others, has a fascinating exposé of the

junk science/sound science notions cooked up by the PR industry to trash actual science. But that's another subject.)

What are the real effects, though? Daubert was a parent whose child was born with birth defects they believed were caused by the drug Benedictin which, in animal studies, appeared to cause the defects they were suffering. By making it harder for science to be presented in Court, these kinds of rulings make it easier for drug companies to claim there's no "sound science" that they're hurting anyone.

America isn't alone, however. In Britain a group supporting what they call "evidence-based medicine" is trying to tighten restrictions on what experiments can be examined when approving drugs. Evidence-based medicine? Who could be against that! But again, they're playing the same games. Behind evidence-based science are a bunch of very bizarre claims about what science is and isn't, taken not from doctors or scientists, but from econometricians (the subspecialty of economics that has to do with calculating things), which have quite a few problems of their own when it comes to the subject of evidence.

Under "evidence-based medicine" rules, doctors aren't allowed to prescribe drugs on the basis of case studies and other reports; instead, the only real evidence are large double-blind random controlled trials whose results have a less than 5% probability of being due to chance. (Why 5%? No good reason. But according to the EBM people anything more than that isn't evidence.)

Again, you have the same negative effects: when someone tries to claim in court that a certain drug destroyed their life, the drug company can claim that there's no "evidence" to support this if the studies just happen to be 94% likely instead of 95%, or if there's only a series of case studies instead of a controlled trial.

This isn't evidence, this isn't rationality, this isn't science. Science is about trying to get the truth about the world, using whatever mechanisms are most effective at the job, whether you're studying the nature of planets in space or the nature of other cultures. When someone tells you otherwise, tries to insist that technique X or subject Y doesn't deserve the name science, it's probably because they're trying to pull a fast one on you.

Science Summaries

October 18, 2006

[Original link](#)

Anybody who's ever read so much as a Malcolm Gladwell article or an Alfie Kohn book knows that science can be fascinating, that its attempts at answering our questions not only can have a real impact on our lives but are interesting in their own right. Wouldn't it be great if there was a place that reported these things?

If this exists, please tell me — I'd love to read it. But if it doesn't, I'd like to start one. Here's the idea:

We have a bunch of contributors, each of whom reads a variety of journals or journal summaries. When they come across an article that seems particularly interesting, they write up a one or two paragraph summary of the experiment and the findings aimed at an intelligent but generalist audience along with a link to the actual article.

So here's an example of what this might look like:

Economists at Cornell and Indiana University tried to see if television causes autism. Thinking that rainfall could cause kids to watch more TV and thus induce autism, they looked at county-level data in California, Oregon, and Washington — states with high variability in rainfall — and found that autism was correlated with rainfall ($R^2=.77$). Thinking that the use of cable TV was another random variable that increased autism, they looked at similar data in California and Pennsylvania and found the use of cable TV correlated with autism ($R^2=.21$). [[Paper](#)]

(I probably screwed up the R^2 bit, but that's why I'm looking for other people to write these.) Of course, this particular study got lots of media attention (that's why I knew about it), but I'm hoping that with enough contributors we'll uncover interesting studies that don't make it into the general news.

So the contributors write a paragraph like this and send it in to an editor, who posts it to a blog, where people can subscribe and comment and so on like any other blog.

I'm happy to set up the blog and serve as the initial editor, so what I really need are contributors. Do you read journals or other reports of new science? If so, either post here (be sure to include your email so I can contact you!) or email me@aaronsw.com with a list of the journals or news sources you read and would be willing to go thru.

Or, if you have comments on the idea, feel free to post those too.

The Invention of Objectivity

October 19, 2006

[Original link](#)

Big media pundits are always wringing their hands about how upstart partisan bloggers are destroying the neutral objectivity our country was founded on. (If there's one thing pundits love to do, it's hand-wringing.) Without major papers giving everyone an objective view of the facts, they insist, the very foundation of the republic is in peril.

You can criticize this view for just being silly or wrong, and many have, but there's another problem with it: it's completely ahistorical. As Robert McChesney describes in *The Problem of the Media*, objectivity is a fairly recent invention — the republic was actually founded on partisan squabblers.

When our country was founded, newspapers were not neutral, non-partisan outlets, but the products of particular political parties. The Whigs had their paper, the Tories theirs, and both of which attacked their political opponents with slurs that would make even the most foul-mouthed bloggers blush. This behavior wasn't just permitted — it was encouraged.

You often hear the media quote Jefferson's comment that "were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter." However, they hesitate to print the following sentence: "But I should mean that every man should receive those papers, and be capable of reading them." In particular, Jefferson was referring to the post office subsidy the government provided to the partisan press.

In 1794, newspapers made up 70% of post office traffic and the big debate in Congress was not over whether the government should pay for their delivery, but how much of it to pay for. James Madison attacked the idea that newspaper publishers should have to pay even a token fee to get the government to deliver their publications, calling it "an insidious forerunner of something worse." By 1832, newspaper traffic had risen to make up 90% of all mail.

Indeed, objectivity wasn't even invented until the 1900s. Before that, McChesney comments, "such notions for the press would have been nonsensical, even unthinkable." Everyone assumed that the best system of news was one where everyone could say their piece at very little cost. (The analogy to blogging isn't much of a stretch, now is it? See, James Madison loved blogs!)

But as wealth began to concentrate in the Gilded Age and the commercial presses began to lobby government for more favorable policies, the size and power of the smaller presses began to dwindle. The commercial presses were

eager to be the only game in town, but they realized that if they were, their blatant partisanship would have to go. (Nobody would stand for a one-newspaper town if the one paper was blatantly biased.) So they decided to insist that journalism was a profession like any other, that reporting was an apolitical job, based solely on objective standards.

They set up schools of journalism to train reporters in the new notion. In 1900, there were no J-schools; by 1920, the major ones were going strong. The “church and state” separation of advertising and reporting became official doctrine and the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) was set up to enforce it.

The entire foundation of press criticism was rebuilt. Now, instead of criticizing papers for the bias of their owners, press critics had to focus on the professional obligations of their writers. Bias wasn’t about the slant of a paper’s focus, but about any slanting put in by a reporter.

So that was the line of attack the house press critics took when the world of weblogs brought back the vibrant political debates of our country’s founding. “These guys are biased! Irresponsible! They get their facts wrong! They’re unprofessional!” they squeal. Look, guys. Tell that to James Madison.

I Hate the News

October 20, 2006

[Original link](#)

Some people start their day by reading *The New York Times*. Others end it by watching the nightly news. Some get it from *The Daily Show*. Others download it from a variety weblogs. Some keep up-to-the-minute by following CNN. Others have instant news updates automatically text messaged to their phone. But everybody seems to agree: it's a citizen's responsibility to keep up with the news. Everybody except me.

I think following the news is a waste of time.

Some people agree with me on a small scale. Some point out that the cable channels are obsessed with bizarre crimes that have little larger impact, that they worry too much about horse-race coverage of politics, that too much of the news is filled with PR-inserted nonsense. But they do this because they think these are aberrations; that underneath all this, the news is worth saving. I simply go one step further: I think none of it is worthwhile.

Let us look at the front page of today's *New York Times*, the gold standard in news. In the top spot there is a story about Republicans feuding among themselves. There is a photo of soldiers in Iraq. A stock exchange chief must return \$100M. There is a concern about some doctors over-selling a nerve testing system. There is a threat from China against North Korea. There is a report that violence in Iraq is rising. And there is concern about virtual science classes replacing real ones.

None of these stories have relevance to my life. Reading them may be enjoyable, but it's an enjoyable waste of time. They will have no impact on my actions one way or another.

Most people will usually generally concede this point, but suggest that there's something virtuous about knowing it anyway, that it makes me a better citizen. They point out that newspapers are a key part of our democracy, that by exposing wrong-doing to the people, they force the wrong-doers to stop.

This seems to be true, but the curious thing is that I'm never involved. The government commits a crime, the *New York Times* prints it on the front page, the people on the cable chat shows foam at the mouth about it, the government apologizes and commits the crime more subtly. It's a valuable system — I certainly support the government being more subtle about committing crimes (well, for the sake of argument, at least) — but you notice how it never involves me? It seems like the whole thing would work just as well even if nobody ever read the *Times* or watched the cable chat shows. It's a closed system.

There is voting, of course, but to become an informed voter all one needs to do is read a short guide about the candidates and issues before the election. There's no need to have to suffer through the daily back-and-forth of allegations and counter-allegations, of scurrilous lies and their refutations. Indeed, reading a voter's guide is much better: there's no recency bias (where you only remember the crimes reported in the past couple months), you get to hear both sides of the story after the investigation has died down, you can actually think about the issues instead of worrying about the politics.

Others say that sure, most of the stuff in the news isn't of use, but occasionally you'll come across some story that will lead you to actually change what you've been working on. But really, how plausible is this? Most people's major life changes don't come from reading an article in the newspaper; they come from reading longer-form essays or thoughtful books, which are much more convincing and detailed.

Which brings me to my second example of people agreeing with me on the small scale. You'll often hear TV critics say that CNN's up-to-the-minute reporting is absurd. Instead of saying, "We have unconfirmed reports that—This just in! We now have confirmed reports that those unconfirmed reports have been denied. No, wait! There's a new report denying the confirmation of the denial of the unconfirmed report." and giving viewers whiplash, they suggest that the reporters simply wait until a story is confirmed before reporting it and do commentary in the meantime.

But if that's true on a scale of minutes, why longer? Instead of watching hourly updates, why not read a daily paper? Instead of reading the back and forth of a daily, why not read [a weekly review](#)? Instead of a weekly review, why not read a monthly magazine? Instead of a monthly magazine, why not read an annual book?

With the time people waste reading a newspaper every day, they could have read an entire book about most subjects covered and thereby learned about it with far more detail and far more impact than the daily doses they get dribbled out by the paper. But people, of course, wouldn't read a book about most subjects covered in the paper, because most of them are simply irrelevant.

But finally, I'd like to argue that following the news isn't just a waste of time, it's actively unhealthy. Edward Tufte notes that when he used to read the *New York Times* in the morning, it scrambled his brain with so many different topics that he couldn't get any real intellectual work done the rest of the day.

The news's obsession with having a little bit of information on a wide variety of subjects means that it actually gets most of those subjects wrong. (One need only read the blatant errors reported in the corrections page to get some sense of the more thorough-going errors that must lie beneath them. And, indeed, anyone who has ever been in the news will tell you that the news always gets the story wrong.) Its obsession with the criminal and the deviant makes us less trusting people. Its obsession with the hurry of the day-to-day makes us less

reflective thinkers. Its obsession with surfaces makes us shallow.

This is not simply an essay meant to provoke; I genuinely believe what I write. I have not followed the news at least since I was 13 (with occasional lapses on particular topics). My life does not seem to be impoverished for it; indeed, I think it has been greatly enhanced. But I haven't found many other people who are willing to take the plunge.

The Archives

October 22, 2006

[Original link](#)

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A Night at the Coop

October 24, 2006

[Original link](#)

This story is only what it is. It is not meant to be representative of any other experience.

The other year, when I was [living in a cabinet](#), someone emailed me to ask if I had found a decent place to stay. “Oh, don’t worry,” I said. “I’m sleeping outside the Coop.”

For those who don’t know Cambridge, the Coop is the Harvard-affiliated bookstore in the center of town. It has an odd sort of recessed entrance, that means there’s plenty of outside-but-sheltered space to sleep at night and anyone who walks through the town late at night sees many (presumably homeless) people in sleeping bags taking advantage of it.

She didn’t believe my claim for a second and ever since that’s always irked me. Why is it so unbelievable that I might live beneath the Coop? It’s got a fantastic location (Harvard Square is perhaps my favorite place in the world), nice atmosphere, and plenty of neighbors. Is a person like me living there really so improbable?

So ever since, I’ve had it in the back of my mind that I would spend a night at the Coop. The opportunity finally arose last week, when I finally got my hands on a decent sleeping bag.

I made meticulous preparations. I took the bag and rolled it around in the dirt to scuff it up a big, so it didn’t stand out so much (this really didn’t do a whole lot, to be honest). Then I changed into sweatpants and a non-descript T-shirt. I left my shoes but put on a couple layers of socks, two subway fares and my keys. I buried the keys in a park by my house, spent one fare getting to Harvard Square, buried the other one inside Harvard, and then took my sleeping bag to a spot outside the Coop.

The digital clock hovering over us read exactly 10:00.

A musician was performing directly outside the Coop. He was quite good, sold a couple CDs, and encouraged people to visit his website. In between songs, he’d make odd jokes about songs about his lack of a girlfriend. He chatted with a less coherent fellow on a bicycle who rode by sometimes.

There was a man in an orange jacket who really got into dancing to the music, before he finally took his place on a mat outside the Coop. Another man with a green sleeping bag turned in. I watched the big crimson flags outside the store wave, marvelling at their beauty.

Around 11 a whole group of kids blew through the square, seeming somewhat drunk and laughing. Little snippets of conversation could be heard.

That's one odd thing about Harvard Square. If you sit at in the square and listen to people, you hear them talking about boys and homework. Meanwhile, I ordered breakfast once at a dingy little shop here in Davis Square, Somerville, and the girl behind the counter was arguing with the two older cooks about how the welfare policies of socialist countries affect their marriage rates, doing it as if it was the most natural thing in the world. After that, Harvard students really don't impress me.

Around 11:30 it was getting pretty empty and the musician began packing up his stuff. I didn't last much longer, so I laid my sleeping bag out along the side of the Coop and climbed inside. There were about five or six people on the other side, all tiled in nicely with each other, all in a different sort of gear.

I drifted in and out of consciousness for a bit, heard odd noises going past us on the street. Finally, I fell asleep around midnight (my usual bedtime), and didn't wake up until 5am when a subway train rolled underneath me. Everyone was still there, the day was still dark and quiet. I wanted to watch the sunrise but fell back asleep and didn't wake up until 8, by which time the sun had most certainly risen and everyone else had left. It had apparently rained overnight, because the ground was thoroughly soaked, and I tried to avoid the puddles as I went to dig out my subway fare.

It was right where I left it and I got onto the train without incident. My keys were where I left them as well and I managed to get into the apartment just in time for work.

What was so hard about that?, I thought.

Somerville's Oddest Park

October 25, 2006

[Original link](#)

Behind one of the exits of the Davis Square T station is a small grassy area that connects the T station to a long trail that stretches from Medford to Bedford. (To accomplish this feat, the trail makes some bizarre choices, like going right through the middle of the cities busiest streets and public squares.) To all appearances, the area is completely unremarkable — some grass, a grate, a few pillars, an odd sculpture. But if you look up, a bizarre exhibit is laid out in the sky.

The pillars, you see, stop above eye level and then continue upwards with poles. Atop the poles are sculptures, model replicas of important Somerville buildings and things. And at the entrance, soaring overhead, where no one ever looks, is an enormous sign: Seven Hills Park, Somerville. And next to it is a large cow sitting on a compass.

The whole park is filled with this kind of gag. On each pillar is a sign describing the replica that sits atop it. One gushes about a particular building's importance to the Revolutionary War, then describes what happens to it. First it was sold to a mental asylum (albeit one [for the stars](#)), then the asylum moved and abandoned it. Then the building was razed. And then the entire hill it sat on was razed and turned into a landfill. Every pillar has a story like this: important landmark, cut down by human folly.

Then there are the sculptures. The sculptures are life-size replicas of people in everyday poses — sitting on the bench, standing with their coat folded over their arm, and so on — placed right in the middle of things as if they were real. So the first surprise is that the people who seem real are really sculptures and that the sculptures aren't set off with signs or space but thrown in with everything else.

So then you admire the happy poses of the sculptures before you notice another oddity: everyone in the sculptures is wearing a mask over their face. Still, the faces all seem like happy ones, until you look at them more carefully. A father appears to gaze down lovingly at the infant son in his arms, until you look more closely, and you see that he's not looking at his son at all. He's staring at the ground at the gaze of love is really more one of wistfulness — he's imagining he was somewhere else right now; somewhere nice.

In another, two parents look down at their son in what first appears to be admiration but on further inspection is more like shock. And shock seems appropriate, because the kid who appears to be their son is dressed up in a bizarre costume of suspenders and is stretching his arms like he's about to go

build a railroad. I still don't know what in the world is going on with that one. It freaks me out every time I walk by.

It's weird having sculptures you can just hang out with like this. You can sit on the bench next to a woman hugging her small child. And you can look right into her face, get right into her space, get closer than you ever could if she were real, analyze her gaze in far more detail than would be polite in public.

And perhaps this is the real message of the statues, and the park: Things are always much more complicated than they first seem, and you can see it if you look closely, it's just that we're all too busy to notice. Nobody ever looks up.

Google and the Gradient

October 26, 2006

[Original link](#)

For a long time it seemed like everything I heard about Google was even cooler than the last. Wow, it's a great search engine! Wow, they're not sleazy like other companies! Wow, they treat their hackers well! Wow, they *are* hackers!

The feeling peaked sometime last year when I was almost rolling on the floor hoping to work at Google. And I do mean peaked. Everything I've heard since then has been downhill, each time I hear about it Google seems less cool. I'm not saying the company is imminently doomed or that you should sell your shares, but I definitely don't think it's going to get any cooler.

Google is run like a socialist state. Its citizens are treated extremely well. There's free food, free doctors, free massages, free games, a limited workweek, etc. There are ministries to give projects free promotion and support. The government tries to avoid getting too much in people's lives. And Google is always coming up with more perks to give away. (There's also a strong class hierarchy, with abused temps and powerful acquirees.)

The problem with a system like this is that it's necessarily a bubble. Everybody inside gets treated grandly, but the outside world gets nothing. Indeed, because of Google's notorious secrecy, they barely even get to talk to the people inside. A friend who's a prominent free software developer says that every community member who's joined Google has stopped contributing to public projects. It's so bad, he says, that they're thinking of banning Google from buying a booth at their next conference. They can't afford to lose any more developers.

Which means that Google has to be careful about who they hire, but since they're growing so fast they need to [hire people as quickly as possible](#). It's an impossible bind — you can hire lots of people or you can hire really good people, but even a company as prominent as Google is going to have a hard time doing both.

The solution, of course, is to pop the bubble. There's no reason being part of Google has to be a binary decision. Google has a wide variety of resources and while there are some they can't really give away to everyone (e.g. massages), there are others that should be easy (e.g. servers). Unfortunately for them, Google's mindset is so obviously set that this will never happen. Even a company as woeful as Amazon is already kicking their but in this space, giving away storage space and computer power, with more in the works.

But let's imagine you had the resources to do this right, what would you do? (I feel like I'm giving away a valuable secret here, but since nobody listens to me

anyway, I doubt it will make any difference.) The right thing is to build not a bubble, with its binary in-or-out choice, but to build a gradient, with shades of resources you make available as people achieve success.

So you have this organization dedicated to building cool web apps. The first thing you do is you start giving away free food in the middle of San Francisco. You have a nice cozy area with tables and bathrooms and Wi-Fi and anyone interested in starting a web site is encouraged to drop by and hang out. There they can eat, chat, hack, get feedback, get suggestions, get help.

Then you give them free hosting. Servers and bandwidth are cheap, good projects are invaluable. But not only will you host their app for free, throwing in servers to scale it as necessary, but you'll *pay* them for the privilege of hosting. Indeed, you'll pay them proportionately to the amount of traffic they get, in exchange for the right to run ads on it someday.

So now you've got all the bright, smart young things who want to start companies starting them on your servers, with clear and unambiguous incentives: get traffic, get paid. They don't need to worry about impressing anyone with their idea; anyone can use the hosting. And they don't need to sell out to investors anymore; as their traffic grows, you'll already be giving them the cash to grow the business.

Most of these sites, of course, will probably be failures. But who cares? Sites that don't get much traffic don't use up much in the way of resources. Meanwhile, a couple of the sites will actually take off. So what do you do with those? *Give them more resources.*

Put your promotional team behind them to spread the word about the ideas. Have your web designers, database jockeys, and JavaScript hotshots help them fix up the site. Encourage promising young programmers interested in helping out with something to write a feature or two.

And — this is where the gradient comes in — as they become more successful, you give them more resources. Let them move into the apartment building above to food/hangout space, so they can get more facetime with fellow successful hackers. Give them free offices to work in. Provide free massages and exercise equipment. Have your PR team set up interviews with the major media. Integrate their site with your other sites. Plus, of course, they're getting paid more for more traffic the whole time.

Some of the sites will be huge hits, another YouTube or Facebook. The founders will be raking in millions from the traffic. And at some point, they'll get tired of running the site and they'll let it go. You'll be there to take it over, slap some ads on it to recoup the investment, and give it to some new, junior developers to maintain and improve. And the cycle continues.

(Bonus for the truly adventurous: run the whole thing as a non-profit and have all the applications involved be open source.)

A bubble like Google can hire only so many people and there's no way of picking only the ones which will be successes. But everyone can be part of a gradient and the successes simply rise to the top. I know which one I'd work for.

Thanks to Emmett Shear for discussion and suggestions.

Founder's Syndrome

October 27, 2006

[Original link](#)

The simplest way to do something, of course, is to do it yourself. But there's lots of stuff to be done and not enough you to do it. You can get around this a little bit by finding friends who are interested in doing some of it themselves, but at some point you're going to have to start "delegating", or getting somebody else to do it.

Now you're moving up in the world. If you're a decent manager, instead of running one project, you can run five or ten. Instead of simply directing your own labor, you can direct whole groups of people. Of course, it'll still be people doing what you wanted, but — funny thing — people are smart enough that they'll begin to get the gist of things on their own and, if you do it right, your delegation will become an organization. You can disappear for a week and things will keep on marching.

But make no mistake, even those organizations are still following the will of their erstwhile founder. Even as they get big, they betray facets of the founder's personality. The most obvious is in who is respected. My friend Emmett Shear has a theory that in each company only one class of people can be in charge and it's going to be the class of people the founders are in. At Apple, for example, the UI designers are in charge, because Jobs obsesses over UI design. At Google, it's the programmers, because Larry and Sergey used to code. Even though the founders aren't directly involved in every project, their surrogates still win the day.

Now the problem comes when the organization wants to grow beyond its founder. This is most common on non-profits, where they even have a name for it: founder's syndrome. See, once you have all these people carrying out your bidding, it's pretty difficult to want to give that up. Maybe you can have them do more projects, maybe you can give them more flexibility in what they choose, but I can't think of a single story where the guy in charge voluntarily gave up his power. And that has a severe cost (which I've come to calling the "power premium") because giving up your power is often the right thing to do.

In non-profits, for example, your organization is probably made up of a bunch of independent-minded young people with a strong belief in democracy. These people aren't too happy being told what to do all the time, especially when the instructions are pretty obviously not the best thing for the non-profit's mission. So they rebel against the founder, and the founder tries to hold on to power, and things get very messy. (I don't know how things usually turn out in this situation. Maybe you fight until the founder dies?)

Less well noticed is that the same mistake is made by for-profit corporations as well, it's just less obvious because the founder is the fellow holding all the cash, so you fight about it at your peril. But companies regularly do stupid things, even when if you asked all the people in the company about it they would have told you they were stupid. But in a capitalist economy, the founder has to maintain control.

But the power premium has a even more serious cost. While many people seem to be able to make the leap from doing something themselves to building an organization to do it, nobody seems to have been very good at taking the next step: going from an organization to a meta-organization, an organization that hires other organizations to do its work, rather than hiring people directly.

Why? Partly because few people get to be in charge of something the size of Google, where they need to take that next step to grow, and perhaps the trait of thinking that big is rare. But I think part of it is simply because the people at the top can't give up their power. Engaging organizations means you're no longer in charge of what people do or how they do it; the organizations have to be in charge of that. And that means you're no longer a delegator, but more of a moderator. It's founder's syndrome at the largest scale.

What is Elitism?

October 29, 2006

[Original link](#)

This week's Sunday Bonus Post [comes from local genius Kragen Sitaker](#).

Upon reading an article that claimed:

[S]cience is hard. It is therefore inherently “elitist,” merely in this obvious sense: as with skateboarding, some will be demonstrably better at it than others.

Kragen saw fit to ponder the meaning of elitism. Kragen thinks of himself as an anti-elitist, but he's also very pro-science. How to reconcile the two?

Kragen begins by defining “elite”:

An “elite” is a small group of people who are distinguished from the majority in one of two ways: either they are better in some way, or they have more power. These are distinct meanings, although apologists for established orders like to conflate them, and sometimes one leads to the other. Sometimes an elite is distinguished by the mastery of a particular skill, such as skateboarding or mathematics, and sometimes by past accomplishments; but the much more common sense of the term today is to refer to a group of people who have power.

Elitism, then (according to Kragen) is the ideology that insists that the elite and non-elite reached their positions through intrinsic merit. (This belief might also be called meritocracy, but that is perhaps a less pejorative term.)

Ironically, the very article that begun this investigation appears to believe in this ideology. The article claims that textbooks, in trying to be “democratic”, lower their standards so that even the dumbest students can comprehend them. Instead, the article insists, textbooks must be more “elitist” and teach real science, which is hard.

Anti-elitists like Kragen and I would agree that textbooks should teach more real science, which is hard. But we do not consider this elitist, because we do not believe that only a small elite has the capability of comprehending physics.

To anti-elitists, egalitarianism does not require lowering standards, since we believe more people can reach higher standards with more resources. But to elitists, this seems an impossibility. The only reason they are in the club is because they deserve it; to let others in requires bringing the requirements down.

Up Against Love

October 30, 2006

[Original link](#)



When Laura Kipnis's *Against Love: A Polemic* came out, reviewers seemed to have trouble understanding what it was about. *Library Journal* claimed it skewered “our relationship foibles”, the *New York Observer* insisted it was an “incisive tract in praise of adultery”, and the usually-reliable [Salon](#) called it “a ‘defense’ of adultery” ([twice!](#)).

Against Love is a defense of adultery like *Capital* is a defense of playing hooky. No, Kipnis's aim is to dismantle the entire social institution of, well, love — the notion that the right, meaningful, and deeply human way to behave is to find one's perfect soulmate by the time school ends and then spend the rest of your life living, having sex, and sharing your feelings with them. Kipnis thinks the whole thing is crazy, a justification for locking people up in “domestic gulags”.

It's pretty safe these days to get up and say our school systems are crumbling, our borders are shot, our government is a mess, our voting system is broken, or even that our economic system needs an overhaul. But try criticizing our system of love and all you'll get back is stunned silence. Love is “the one subject where no disagreement will be entertained, about which one truth alone is permissible” (4). So criticisms, unspeakable in plain form, are disguised as the content of our comedy (take my wife please!) and the subtext of our films (*The Stepford Wives*, *Rosemary's Baby*).

Despite the fact that most long-term relationships fall apart, nobody suggests it's the idea of a long-term relationship that's the problem. Instead we're told that lasting relationships require “hard work”. So you go to work and put in some hard work and then come home and put in some more. Or maybe you

spend more time at the office to avoid having to come home. Or maybe you channel your unfulfilled passion into shopping. Either way, capitalism wins.

We love to brag that we've achieved genuine freedom in our romantic lives, laughing at those barbaric Muslims with their arranged marriages. But is our system that much different? Careful studies find that people have a suspiciously accurate habit of pairing up with people with a similar level of attractiveness and wealth (although sometimes an excess of one can compensate for a lack of the other). And then they promise to live with each other forever, to working to make it work. Sure, perhaps you get a little more latitude in picking your partner, but is this system really that different?

Most people don't see love as a system to be criticized, but they do feel the social straitjacket even if they assume it's just the "natural" way relationships work out. And they begin looking for an escape. Kipnis points to two: murder ("lethal intimate violence" — killing your lover — is so popular that there's an entire category in the crime statistics for it) and adultery (its popularity needs no statistics). Kipnis shies away from explicitly defending either (take that, *Salon!*), but she does suggest that adultery is a little bit of radical activism against the system, the critical practice of love.

She notes self-action generally comes before self-knowledge in these things; workers had walk-outs before they had unions. In the same way, the prevalence of adultery is people's individualized attempt at escaping from love, each one sneaking out for an affair, stealing time from work at work and work at home to embrace their feelings.

But it isn't just capitalism, with its pro-love informercials and television specials, that tries to fit us to the system; the government gets into the act too. Politicians lecture us about family values, before sneaking out to cheat on their wives; states tie legal marriage to thousands of benefits, making submission to its notions of monogamy a prerequisite for perks. (Try to have several wives, like some folks in Utah, and you'll find yourself in jail — not to mention the laws against adultery still on the books in 45 states.) And just imagine what it was like before no-fault divorce, when you actually had to prove to the government that you deserved to be unmarried, "as if it were an injured lover refusing to let go once things were over" (172).

Kipnis doesn't propose any particular solution; she just wants to ask the question. The book is written in the style of the postmodern bombthrower, with far more meat than most books of such form, although sometimes the style's excesses get a little too heavy. The book's argument is studded with references to Freud and Marx and Marcuse, but done in such a flip and enjoyable way (and with thumbnail sketches of their love lives) that it feels like gossip, not scholarship.

But perhaps the best bits are the poetic descriptions of what it's like to be in love, from how you "find[] yourself so voluptuously hurtled into a state of possibility, a destabilizing, might-be-the-start-of-something kind of moment. [...]"

that first nervous phone call, coffee, or a drink, or—circumstances permitting—an incredible all-night marathon conversation” (7) to the “‘opening up’ required for relationship health [... which] will leave you feeling somewhat vulnerable, lying there psychically spread-eagled, exposed, and shivering on the examining table of your relationship” (76).

The book is a *tour de force* of writing, but even if it was dreadful, it’d still be worth it. What other book covers these topics, changes the way you look at love?

- [Buy the book](#)

And Now, The News

October 31, 2006

[Original link](#)

My company was acquired today.

Friends in Cambridge: we'll be hanging out [at Border Cafe](#) tonight.

- [TechCrunch](#) ([reddit](#)): “always played second fiddle to Digg”
- [Reddit Blog](#): “you all have made it everything that it is. A number of you even stuck with us after we switched away from Lisp.”
- [E-Consultancy.com](#): “suggest[s] that we’re in a serious period of inflation, though let’s stop short of calling this a bubble.”
- [Matthew Roche](#): “the Avis Rent-a-car of the content voting sites.”
- [David Weinberger](#): ” a very very smart move by CondeNet...if they let the Reddit folks heavily influence how the service is developed.”
- [Blake Killian](#): “Conde Nast, the unlikely Disruptor.”
- [Bivings Report](#): “just sort of scratched at the surface of what might be possible if traditional publishers embrace social technologies.”
- [Digg](#): “Reddit is where you go when you need someone to explain to you why North Korea is heaven on earth and America is the devil”
- [Wired News](#): Users can also append negative votes to stories that are of poor quality or that fail to capture their interest.”
- [Mark Pilgrim](#): “a new form of online scam in which you make all the content, and we keep all the money.”
- [Media Wire Daily](#): “a clear sign that Charles Townsend is making sure that Conde’s digital dick is solid enough to swing with the big boys.”
- [Matthew Ingram](#): “No word so far on whether the rumoured price of \$65-million has any relationship to reality”
- [Gawker](#): “merging with the ickle kiddies ... the Nasties decided they needed more of that Reddit magic.”
- [GigaOm](#): “Reddit received 16 percent of about 300 votes cast, following Boing Boing and Gawker.”

- [Valleywag](#): I went to their Boston pad, we played some video games.”
- [Webomatica](#): “digg gone through a Craigslist filter.”
- [Slashdot](#): “the great big Web 2.0 bubble continues to inflate towards the popping point”
- [The Register](#): “the price is many heaps smaller than the \$150m that Kevin Rose reportedly wants for Digg”
- [Joey DeVilla](#): “I see that Aaron’s been keeping track of what they’ve written about the acquisition on his blog.”
- [ReadWriteWeb](#): “Reddit is another to have been extensively profiled by [us].
- [Press Release](#): “Reddit achieves our objectives on both counts, and we are confident that other companies will find Reddit to be a partner that can bring tremendous value to their Web efforts.”
- [Marketing Shift](#): “The obvious question to ask is if Conde Nast will allow Reddit’s rankings to remain neutral and not benefit the company’s properties.”
- [CNET / MEDIAWEEK](#)

The Aftermath

November 1, 2006

[Original link](#)

On Halloween, everything seems a little weird. You see a spider web and it's not clear whether it's real or a prop. You see a nun on the train and think it might just be a costume. You see girls loitering on the street only to find they're just waiting for the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. So perhaps that's why, when I logged into my bank account this morning and saw more digits in my balance than I've ever seen before, I didn't feel anything in particular.

"Yeah, it's there," I said, to no one in particular. We called everyone to make sure everything went through okay. Did I get it? Did you get it? Did we get that? Everything checked out. "Looks like we're all done here," went the email from the lawyers. After months of negotiations for this day, it had finally come. I almost felt sad seeing the lawyers say goodbye. Almost.

I sat reloading TechCrunch, then wrote a script to do it for me. Finally the notice appeared, elaborating as time went on. Then I posted it to my blog and others to theirs. It started seeming real. Finally, I dashed downstairs to an ATM machine and asked it to print a slip with my balance. "Would you like anything else?" it asked. "No," I said, and grabbed the slip. The numbers were big; the money was there. I started grinning and dashed back to the apartment.

But that excitement soon faded. Post after post, congratulation after congratulation, insult after insult. Friends emailed and called to share goodwishes. Reporters called to talk to Alexis and Steve. ("No, that's A-L-E-X-I-S. Yes. Yes. Well, uh, it's a news site.") Users emailed to send congratulations. "How do you feel?" everyone asked. I didn't know. How was I supposed to feel?

TechCrunch called to do a podcast, asked us to tell the listeners the story of how we got to this day. And it wasn't that anything said was particularly wrong, strictly speaking, but I walked away thinking we'd given the wrong impression. Companies getting bought makes you think of lawyers in suits at conference tables signing papers. And while there were lawyers and suits and conference tables and papers to sign (oh, plenty of papers to sign), it wasn't really like that. It was more just a couple guys in a apartment typing on computers and talking on the phone.

I remember how when reddit started, the whole thing seemed so childish. The cartoony alien, the barebones design, the fresh-faced programmers, the rented house. And none of that has really changed. It's just that with success behind it, it's harder to dismiss. A scribbled drawing a kid hands to you is "cute", the same thing on the wall of a museum is "art". You assume there must be something there, even if you can't see it.

It's hard to notice this when you're in the middle of it. During the days, I mostly saw my co-workers, who lived and breathed the site. At night, I hung out with my friends, who all knew what I did. On weekends, we'd go to parties for local startups, who all wanted to emulate reddit's success. Everyone we talked to treated us like it was serious.

But whenever I stepped outside the bubble, things were very different. At non-tech parties, I'd have trouble explaining what it was I did. ("So you, uh, have a web site?") Once I went far outside the city to have lunch with an author I respected. He asked about what I did, wanted me to explain it in great detail. He asked how many visitors we had. I told him and he sputtered. "I've spent fifteen years building an audience, and you're telling me in a year you have a million visitors?" I assented.

Puzzled, he insisted I show him the site on his own computer, but he found it was just as simple as I described. (Simpler, even.) "So it's just a list of links?" he said. "And you don't even write them yourselves?" I nodded. "But there's nothing to it!" he insisted. "Why is it so popular?"

Inside the bubble, nobody asks this inconvenient question. We just mumble things like "democratic news" or "social bookmarking" and everybody just assumes it all makes sense. But looking at this guy, I realized I had no actual justification. It was just a list of links. And we didn't even write them ourselves.

But that's not something you can say on TechCrunch. You can say a site is cool, stupid, popular, a flop, innovative, or clichéd. But the one thing you can't say, the one thing that everybody skips over, is that these sites aren't anything serious. And so when Michael Arrington told us that these stories of acquisition were his favorite part of the "entrepreneurial spirit", I couldn't help but think that somebody was missing the point.

The Afterparty

November 2, 2006

[Original link](#)

It was Halloween, after all, so we donned costumes and headed to Harvard Square. (“What are you?” people asked me. I looked them straight in the eye, scrunched up my face to look a little angry, and said “I’m a dot-com millionaire” with utter seriousness. That was my costume.) Alexis carried a sack of candy, Steve a sack of shirts. People in all sorts of bizarre costumes waited for the train.

We grabbed dinner at Border Cafe. Alexis handed out candy and shirts to the waiters while flirting, and offered to bribe them into voting for him in the Halloween costume contest.

I ordered a meal, but couldn’t make myself eat it. The food just sort of seemed to stick in my mouth, each swallow painful.

“So what are you going to buy first?” someone asked each of us. When it came to me, I stared blankly. I couldn’t think of anything I wanted.

“Who’s going to pay for the check?” Steve asked. “Oh, wait. I just realized, for the first time, that it’s relevant.”

Afterwards, we walked down Church Street back to Harvard Square. There were a bunch of young girls loitering. Alexis struck up a conversation. “Want some candy?” “Yeah!” they all cried. He opened up the pillowcase. “Want some shirts?” “Uh, sure,” they laughed, and started fussing over colors and sizes. It was the strangest transformation, two mild-mannered guys suddenly become showmen, a horde of girls at their feet. “It’s times like these I wish I was a *Vanity Fair* reporter,” I tell Chris.

“What’s reddit?” the girls asked as they tried shirts on. “Oh, it used to be a website.”

“So why are you girls all just standing here?” “We’re waiting for the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*! You should come.” “Oh. Well, we were going to go get crunked.” “Well, you can get crunked and then come see it!”

We demurred and continued on, finding a flock of well-suited men, visiting from other countries, who fell for the same trick. “I’ll have to give this to my daughter.”

As we walked to a bar, we passed three young girls in bunny costumes who Alexis tried to pick up. The oldest-looking one wanted to hang out with us, thought it would be fun, started giggling suggestively, a glimmer into a pasttime I didn’t understand (my feeling is “men suck”, on both sides of the equation). But

despite her best efforts, her two younger-looking friends shied away and wanted to just go to *Rocky Horror*. There was a struggle, and I saw the girls walking towards the bar and away from it several times after that.

By the time we finally reached the bar, my head was pounding and my stomach was nauseous, and I didn't want to go in, I didn't want to be here, I didn't want to know these people. I went home instead and watched a show about a serial killer and found myself identifying with the lead.

When I woke up the next morning, my head was fuzzy. And while I saw the costumes strewn about the floor, the girls brought home who slept in our living room, the odd emails asking me what I'd do next, I still felt funny. For a shining moment in the morning, it felt as if this whole acquisition thing might have simply been a dream.

Everybody Tells Me So

November 3, 2006

[Original link](#)

I remember when I was in fourth grade, while we were eating our snack (graham crackers and milk) in the kitchen, my classmates began discussing the effects of wealth. “Money doesn’t make you happy,” I insisted. I tried to argue the point, but no one else believed me. (The same class was later adamant that Clinton should be impeached, although they did spontaneously throw an anti-fur-coat demonstration.) “Of course money makes you happy,” they insisted. “Just wait, when you’re rich, you’ll change your mind.”

I haven’t.

On TV, whenever a kid is given a to-him-large sum of money, the fatherly adult handing it out says “Don’t spend it all in one place.” Don’t want the kid blowing it on a single movie and then feeling bad that he spent it all. Someone emailed me the same thing the other day, and I had to laugh. I don’t really know how to spend the money period. How could I possibly spend it all in one place? [Donate it to the UN?](#)

A friend told me to be sure not to let the money change me. “How could it possibly do that?” I asked. “Well, first you’d buy a fancy new car.” “I don’t know how to drive.” “Then you’d buy a big house in the suburbs.” “I like living in small apartments.” “And you’d start wearing expensive clothes.” “I’ve worn a t-shirt and jeans practically every day of my life.” “And you’d start hanging out with different people.” “I’m so shy I don’t even hang out with the people I know now!”

For months, every time we thought we’d really gotten somewhere on the Condé Nast deal, we’d get a call from Paul Graham. “Don’t get your hopes up,” he’d say. “Deals fall through.” Whenever we passed him on the street, “Deals fall through.” In emails, “Deals fall through.” It got to the point that Alexis put up a photo of Paul Graham and captioned it “Deals fall through.”

I got an email from Paul Graham the other day. “Ok,” he wrote. “Now you can get your hopes up.”

Pay it Forward

November 5, 2006

[Original link](#)

A year or two ago, I suffered from a devastating server crash. The little “heads” that read data off the hard drive crashed into the drive itself, and as we rebooted the computer, trying to get it working again, they scratched the hard drive so badly that when we sent it to try to get it repaired we learned they had scraped the drive straight through.

My site was dead, my backups weren’t working, an entire year of my work had been lost and I was devastated. A bunch of generous souls chipped in an amazing \$4000 to my server fund to try to bring things back.

Now that I’m back on my feet, I’d like to return the favor by donating \$4000 to websites in trouble. (Indeed, I’ve been planning this for a while and have already donated some to sites when I heard they were having fundraising drives.) So here’s this week’s Sunday Bonus Post: suggest a site that deserves a donation. Here are the rules:

1. The site must publish content or provide a service on the Internet.
2. The site must have a donate button or some other explicit request for donations.
3. You must genuinely like the site.

If you want to nominate a site that meets these criteria, post it here in a comment. I’ll try to make most of the donations by next week.

Thanksgiving update: PayPal locked out my account for “security reasons” so it’s taken me a while to get to this, but Thanksgiving Day seems like as appropriate a time as any.

Recipients:

- [Red State Son](#)
- [Amygdala](#)
- [The Show with Ze Frank](#)

- [The NewStandard](#)
- [Fafblog](#)
- [FAIR](#)
- [xkcd](#)
- [Orcinus](#)
- [One Good Move](#)
- [Counterpunch](#)
- [Cosma Shalizi](#)
- [Rockridge Institute](#)
- [Brad DeLong](#)
- [Wikipedia](#)
- [archive.org](#)
- [MediaLens](#)
- [California Community Colo Project](#)
- [Citizen Journalism Nepal](#)
- [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)
- [Antiwar](#)
- [Modest Needs](#)
- [Mininova](#)
- [OpenStreetMap](#)
- [Steal This Film](#)
- [The Universe of Discourse](#)

I'm still looking for more recipients, so feel free to suggest some.

Mr. Millionaire

November 6, 2006

[Original link](#)

While I'm moving I'll be running old tortured-psyche fiction pieces. This one was written in August of 2005, shortly after the first Summer Founders Program ended.

I kiss my girlfriend goodbye before walking down the front steps into the waiting cab. We whir towards the airport. I've done this so many times that the whole act becomes some sort of choreographed dance: step and lift and pull the suitcase, slam the car door and run towards the airport. Wave my card at security and take the express lane.

Onboard the plane, I grab my business class seat and push the seat all the way back, just to remember how it feels. I try to get some sleep but all too soon we're there. I grab my bag and head to pick up my rental car. I toss my luggage in and pretty soon I'm speeding down the beautiful California road.

'Ah, Mr. Delboy,' says the receptionist. 'We've been expecting you.' She leads me to a conference room. I take a seat at the tip of the long table, which stretches all the way down the room, before stopping at a mahogany bookcase whose shelves remain empty. A fluorescent light gives everything that yellow glow. Three older men sit on my left, three older men sit on my right. 'Let's get down to business, Mr. Delboy,' says the first man on my left. 'Please, call me Jules,' I say. 'We've talked it over and we're willing to offer three million.'

I lean back in my chair and laugh. 'Three million?' I say, turning serious. 'Please, I could find three million in my fucking couch. Don't waste my time with this stuff.' I begin to get up. 'No, wait,' cries the first man on the right. 'Will you take five?' I sit back down again. 'Ten,' I say. 'Five and a half,' he says. 'Ten,' I say. 'We'll have to discuss it.'

Back in Massachusetts, I head over to visit my friend Lou. Also a programmer, he was laid off six months ago by a local enterprise consulting company. Judging by the mounting pile of beer bottles, he's had a rough time of it since. He plops down in the couch, absent-mindedly flicking on and off the TV. FOX News pops on. 'God, I hate these twits,' he says. 'And the spineless Dems are no better,' he adds. 'I recently got this fancy-schmancy direct mail survey from them asking what I thought the most important political issue was. There were all the usual options: Iraq war, social security, health care, outsourcing — but what about the poor, man? What about those people whose lives really suck? They keep

trying to railroad politics into this safe little issue-oriented bullshit. When is real change going to happen?’

‘So, uh, my company is going well,’ I say, trying to change the subject. ‘Yeah?’ he says disinterestedly. ‘Yeah, we got offered five but I’m trying to push them to ten.’ ‘Thousand?’ he says. ‘Million,’ I say. ‘Fuck, man,’ he says, ‘a million dollars? You have any idea how many mouths you can feed with that?’ ‘Hey man, don’t try and pull that hippy bullshit on me, okay? I’m as liberal as anybody. I donate money to MoveOn.org, I read *Nickel and Dimed*, I’m totally with you on that stuff.’

‘Shit, Jules, you don’t even know what that stuff is. Do you even live in the same world as these people? Five million dollars? Can you even think of what that kind of money means? I mean, sure, to you it means another jet so you can go galavanting around the world but do you ever think about the people that you’re flying over?’ ‘Shut up man, I’ve got serious stuff to worry about, I don’t need to hear your whining.’ I look over towards the overflowing mountain of beer bottles. ‘Get some help,’ I say and walk out.

I’m walking through Harvard Square when my cell phone rings. ‘Jules here,’ I say. ‘Alright man, we’ve discussed it and we’re willing to give you 9 and a half.’ ‘With what vesting?’ I say. ‘5 in cash, 4 and a half at three years quarterly.’ ‘Three years?’ I say. ‘How about two?’ ‘Deal,’ they say. ‘Deal,’ I say. ‘We’ll fax over the papers tomorrow.’ I snap the phone shut and keep on walking. It’s a beautiful day in Cambridge. The sun streams down from overhead, casting a special glow on the minstrels who inhabit the Square and making the colors pop on the tight-fitting tanktops the coeds wear. Jugglers are tossing rings on my right. ‘Change please?’ calls a hunched over black man on my left, with his battered Starbucks cup extended. I keep on walking but he leaves his perch and starts following me.

‘Hey man, can you spare some change? Anything? Please, I need to eat,’ he says. I keep walking, but I can’t shake him. He gets in front of me, starts pushing up in my face. ‘Hey man, I see what you’re wearing. Look here — I got myself a total of three bucks, fifty-seven cents. What do you have?’ ‘Huh?’ I say. ‘How much money do you have?’ I stop walking for a second. The man looks up in my face. ‘I said I got three bucks and how much do you have?’ he repeats. ‘Five,’ I stammer, and then it hits me. I crumple to the ground and start sobbing.

‘I can’t take it,’ I sob. ‘I’m not cut out for this world. I don’t want to be in this world. I don’t want to be this person. I don’t want to be *me*.’ I curl into a ball and start sobbing.

The man with the Starbucks cup backs away and heads back to his perch. And the rest of the sidewalk traffic just keeps on moving, ignoring the sobbing millionaire, lying in the middle of the street.

The Early Days of A Better Website

November 7, 2006

[Original link](#)

A reporter asked me to describe what the early days of our startup were like. Here's my response.

In the early days of Reddit, there were four of us crammed into a dingy little three-bedroom apartment (I slept in a kitchen cabinet). Every morning we'd wake up and stumble into the small space that I think was supposed to be a living room, where we'd placed desks along all four walls (Steve's wall had a small window, with a beautiful view of the wall of the next building over, just a couple feet away). The sky would be gray, the floor would be filthy, and we'd be three feet floors away from the rest of the world. Looking back, it's hard to see how we got any work done. Actually, looking back, I'm not sure we did.

Aside from the filth, my memories of those days mostly consist of an unending series of petty annoyances and frustrations. It's hard spending your working days in such close quarters with other people. It's even harder when you spend your nights there too. And it's almost impossible when you're all high-strung socially-awkward geeks. Tensions frequently flared.

Not that there wasn't a lot to get flared about. There were always bugs or complaints or new features you just couldn't get to work. And when you finally got the site working fine, a new storm of traffic would overwhelm things and you'd be back to picking up the pieces, making it run faster and more reliably.

There were lots of problems, but somehow we got over them. Take a nap, walk the fifteen minutes into town to get some food, go across the street to the abandoned playground, or, when things got really bad, just look at that ever-growing traffic graph. We must be doing something right, we figured, or at least not doing much that's particularly wrong.

While behind the scenes work was a disaster, in public things were going great. Every time we went out, more people seemed to know what Reddit was. We started selling Reddit t-shirts and people wearing them and recognizing started to pop up over town. One fan, on a short trip to Boston, even made a pilgrimage to our apartment and stole the Reddit sticker off our door. (We only found out where the missing sticker had gone when he bragged about it on his blog.) Reddit heads started appearing on more and more weblogs and sites I read started talking about Reddit as if they assumed everyone already knew what it was.

At parties, the awkwardness of trying to tell people what we did for a living ("We, uh, build a website. You know, it's kind of a news-type website.") gave

way to recognition (“Oh yeah, I’ve heard of that site.”), and then to profuse thanks for a great time-waster. Towards the end, actual introductions became unnecessary — people started recognizing us and coming up to say hi.

When I went home to visit my family, my dad insisted on setting up a meeting for me with a magazine publisher he knew. I was sure the visit would be a disaster — why would a magazine publisher take a punk kid like me seriously? — but once she heard our monthly visitor numbers, she was eager to start a partnership. The same scene repeated itself over and over.

Even when people had no idea what we did, the traffic gave us confidence. Once we won a free meal at a restaurant (actually, we won at least three different times) in exchange for suffering through a short lecture about financial planning opportunities. As the man talked about being sure to put money away for a safe day, we looked at each other knowingly. Either we’d sell big or blow up entirely. Staying safe just wasn’t in our vocabulary.

Robert Walker, Road Warrior

November 8, 2006

[Original link](#)

Robert Walker was the consummate road warrior. A decade out of college, but still single, his job as a salesman required him to spend his days traveling the country, making his pitch before assembled audiences of respected businessmen. Robert had never been one to get too attached to any place or person, he enjoyed the life on the road, remaking himself in every new location.

Since he had no one to come home to, he threw himself into his work, volunteering to take more and more days on the road, until the road itself became his home. Every place he went looked the same after all: the same white airports, the same chain stores, the same business types in the same suits. He felt he was getting to know “the neighborhood” and developed a routine: Wake up at the Westin in the morning, grab a coffee at Starbucks, head to the office to make a pitch, grab lunch at a Cheesecake Factory or a Chili’s, do another pitch at an office, then catch a plane to the next Westin.

Chain culture became his culture. Aside from the commute by airplane, it could easily pass for just another job. He eventually let the lease on his apartment lapse, his suitcase becoming his only possessions. Soon he got rid of that too, adding the task of picking up a new pair of clothes as Banana Republic to his nighttime rituals. He felt freer, knowing that no matter where he went, the world would provide him with all his favorite things. All he had to do was show his credit card.

He realized the credit card was the only part of the wallet he was using — it got him his e-tickets at the airport, paid for his clothing and his meals, reserved the room at his hotels — so he chucked the rest of the wallet and carried only that. He decided to chuck his cell phone too — he had the head office call him every morning to tell him where he was to pitch to next.

Now he truly felt alive. A man with a card — that was all he was — yet the world bowed before him, ministering to his every want. The people he interacted with started to seem different to him. No longer were they simply service workers, doing their job to get their pay. Now they seemed like *servants*, bowing before him in obeisance to his power. “Have a nice flight, Mr. Parker”, “Enjoy your meal!”, “Thank you, sir” — it all now sounded like genuine emotion to him. It sounded like love.

Yes, that was it, he decided. The world had finally come to love him. The parents who never supported him, the girls who’d quickly abandoned him, the friends who were never there for him — well, he now had the last laugh. The world now catered to his every whim, fitting his desires like a well-tailored glove.

And all he had to do to get it? He simply had to train himself to want what it provided.

The Millionaire's Ball

November 9, 2006

[Original link](#)

She stood out, you had to admit that. In a crowd of people in suits and evening-wear with nicely-combed hair and demure smiles, she stood out as if a spotlight was shone upon her. Which, come to think of it, might well have been the case. Her hair was purple and spikey, her clothes ragged and flopping in all directions, one layer upon the next, each going inside and outside the other in a mockery of the very concept of layers.

She must have made her money in the dot-coms, he figured. That was the way the odd ones broke into the club nowadays. In the old days the new money was made through theft and abuse of office. Now any random computer programmer — or even the people who hung around them — could find themselves saddled with a pile of cash. What was that new site he'd read about in the paper? Something about teens talking to their computers selling for a billion dollars?

Not that he minded, really. The place needed some new blood.

He strode over, straightening the lines of his suit as he did so — a habit, he quickly realized; in this case the gesture seemed a bit superfluous. She was standing by the wall, fiddling with her drink, looking cautiously out at the surroundings. "Hello?" she said tentatively, unsure if the tall handsome man was really speaking to her. "Hello," he said in a deep gentlemanly voice and bowed. There was an awkward moment or two as he stood kneeling at her feet. She wasn't sure what she was supposed to do here. Then she kneeled down as well and looked at him conspiratorially. "Maybe we should get out of this place," she whispered, grinning.

They both stood back up and glided to the door. He helped her into the car and had the driver take them back to his place, one of those buildings for the wealthy in the center of Manhattan. "Hello Jeeves," he said to the butler at the door, before they begun dashing up the stairs. "Is his name really Jeeves?" she asked him. "Oh yes," he assured her. "We made him change it."

They quickly reached his room, a stark and modern affair that nonetheless managed to signal extreme wealth. They fell into designer chairs and he removed his coat. "Would you like a cigarette?" he asked. "Oh yes," she replied. He removed a green piece of paper from a box on the shelf and rolled it with tobacco. He handed one to her and offered her a light before taking one himself. It smelled funny and as she removed it from her mouth she saw why — it was a crisp one hundred dollar bill.

He saw her eyes go wide as she looked at it and laughed. "You don't burn money where you come from?" he asked. "I have to admit," she said, "the idea had

never occurred to me.” “Oh, it’s quite enjoyable,” he said, removing the entire stack of hundred dollar bills and lighting it on fire.

She stared at the flame, unsure of what to do. On the one hand, she was aghast at the wastefulness of the thing. But at the same time it was somehow incredibly alluring. Lighting money on fire — it was like pornography for the rich. Her eyes went wide and he leaned in close for a kiss, the flames still dancing behind his head.

“What else do you do?” she asked, entranced. “Well, we could flush some down the toilet, I suppose,” he said, “but I’ve got something even better.” “Jeeves, ready the car,” he said into the intercom on the wall, before dashing down the stairs again.

The car dropped them off along the water. She wasn’t quite sure where; her sense of the city wasn’t particularly good. They strode, arm-in-arm, breathing in the elegance of the moment. “It’s wonderful,” she said, “but I don’t see—”. “Just wait,” he assured her. They saw a cop up ahead, strolling towards them, and in plain view he walked over to a building and ripped a small statue straight off and presented it to her as a gift.

The officer’s face hardened. “Sir!” he insisted. “Oh, officer!” he said, as if he hadn’t noticed him before. “How good to see you.” “You can’t be stealing things right off of buildings,” the officer said gruffly. “Oh, you know I can,” he replied. “I can do much more than that.” The officer looked increasingly angry. “I’ll give you ten thousand dollars,” he said, pulling out his checkbook, “if you take off all your clothes.”

The officer’s eyes darted back and forth, unsure of what to do. But when he saw the check, he began complying. He really could use the money. She laughed and he whispered in her ear. She smiled and began looking through her bag. “Smile!” she cried when he was done and snapped a picture. He saw the officer’s eyes go wide and seized the moment to grab his clothes and toss them into the water. They both began laughing. The officer tried to avoid crying. “What about my check?” the officer pleaded. He began to hand it to him, before snatching it back and tearing it in two. He tossed it into the air and then they pivoted and walked away laughing.

They headed back into the car to one last stop for the night, pulling up outside some nightclub she’d never heard of. Attractive young men and women about their age were dancing to some heavy electronic-sounding beat. He got up on a table. “Excuse me,” he said, “excuse me! I have here a check for one hundred thousand dollars. Come over here for a chance to win it.” They all stopped dancing and came over. Now he had them in his paw. He made them jump for the check, then he made them get down on their knees and bark for it like dogs. And they complied — a hundred twenty-somethings in trendy clothing, all down on their knees barking. She’d never seen anything so funny in her life.

He did a few more rounds of this before finally tossing the check into the middle of the pile. Everyone lunged for it as he climbed down from the table and made

his getaway. "Was it a real check?" she asked. "Oh yes," he said, "but by the time anyone gets it it'll be torn to shreds."

Back at the apartment he lifted her off her feet and tossed her onto the bed. He climbed on top and began untwisting her layers of clothing, both going at each other ferociously.

She woke up the next morning, lying next to him in bed. He was smiling, gazing at her face. She was racked with guilt. "Look," she said. "There's something I have to tell you. I'm not who you think I am." He gazed into her eyes, slightly puzzled, and she was about to explain when they heard some scratching at the door.

He jumped up, just in time to be standing nude as the police burst in with bulletproof vests and guns. "Mr. Januski," one shouted, "you're under arrest for the creation of counterfeit US tender and check fraud." They cuffed his hands behind his back and began dragging him away. "Wait," he said, "you're not even going to let me get my clothes on?" "No," said an officer, who he soon recognized to be the one from last night. "Now let's go." They dragged him out the door as she sat there in shock.

Finally, she got up and put her clothes back on and then set about going carefully through the room, tossing everything of value into her purse. When she'd done a thorough job, she locked the door behind her dashed down the stairs. "Goodbye, Jeeves," she said, as she exited the building.

Life at the Office

November 10, 2006

[Original link](#)

It started when he stopped going home. The rent in San Francisco was so expensive and the commutes so painful that it just seemed easier not to leave. Nobody really noticed at first—the cleaning crew came in around 7 and just assumed he was staying late, while the other employees just assumed he was an early riser. And really, who’s going to complain about an employee who puts in too much time at the office? Especially when he wasn’t using it to get additional work done.

Then he started wondering if he could eliminate the trip for food too. He found a website that sold nutritionally-balanced diet bars and ordered a whole tub, which he placed under his desk. All day he’d be munching on one bar or another, no longer feeling hungry around lunch or dinner. So he just sat at his desk munching instead. Strangely, this didn’t seem to make him any more productive.

Between the lack of exercise and nonstop eating, he began growing fat. Nobody really said anything to him about it. He was rail-thin when he started so many co-workers were secretly happy to see him put on a few pounds. But it quickly got out of hand, with rolls of fat oozing between the cracks in his Aeron chair. Still, nobody wants to insult a fat man, so he just continued to grow. He never really needed to leave his chair anymore, so he didn’t mind it much.

Soon he began—I’m not quite sure how to describe it, I guess he was sort of *fusing* with the chair. The rolls of fat would sneak through a crack and then continue growing, like vines crawling through a gate. It quickly got to the point where he couldn’t even get out of the chair if he wanted too, the fat had locked him in. He could still roll around the office on it but that movement quickly became tiring and as he grew fatter the wheels snapped off.

Nobody really seemed to mind, though. He had become an office fixture—people came to him now. He’d chat with them about their day or keep an eye on things for them. Since he was always there he knew everything that went on in the office and people could always rely on him for gossip or signing for their packages.

Soon it seemed like he was part of the office itself, like some sort of roboreceptionist you read about in Negroponte novels. Desks began subtly organizing themselves around him and employees began treating him as just another office fixture. There’s the bathroom and there’s the kitchen and there’s, well, you know...

And then, one day, they left. Some corporate restructuring or something; they were all being moved to a different building. People packed their stuff in boxes, cleaners cleaned one more time, and then suddenly they were all gone. He was all that was left, keeper of an office without any officers.

The Meaning of Borat

November 12, 2006

[Original link](#)

For this week's Sunday Bonus Post, I'm reprinting a note I sent to some email lists.

I went to see the film *Borat* last night. To be honest, I didn't really enjoy it as entertainment as much as I thought I would. Nevertheless, I thought I wanted to correct a common misconception.

A lot of people seem to think the movie is just making fun of stereotypes. Borat is a stereotypical foreigner, his "victims" are stereotypical Americans, and the humor comes from laughing at them. There are perhaps a couple short scenes where this might be true, but it's a pretty small part of the film.

In reality, *Borat* is about the existence and enforcement of cultural norms. In place after place, Borat goes somewhere and does exactly what you're not supposed to do. By doing so, he demonstrates exactly what our cultural assumptions are, makes us laugh uncomfortably at their violation while we start to question their legitimacy, and then documents the punishment inflicted for violating them.

There are scenes where he questions feminist dogma, provides a brilliant critique of nationalist rhetoric, violates norms about racial integration, takes superstar-worship culture to its logical conclusion, and, in my favorite scene, deconstructs the fake niceties of the television interview (something I've always dreamed of doing).

This is an incredibly tough kind of humor to do, because watching people violate cultural norms is so challenging. We're ingrained from birth with an injunction to follow the rules of behavior in such situations and violating them does not come naturally. (A Japanese friend said that watching the film was actually painful in parts.)

Even though, as I said, I personally didn't enjoy the film as much as I hoped, I still think that it's an important project. Challenging cultural assumptions is incredibly tough. If you just criticize them outright, people think you're weird and dismiss you. And if you violate them yourselves, you suffer the social punishments. But it's a very worthwhile cause; I'm glad to see someone receive so much success for trying.

Meeting Peter Singer

November 13, 2006

[Original link](#)

I remember watching an episode of *Penn & Teller* about animal rights. As usual, the show mostly consisted of a long series of clips relating to animal rights, followed by comments from Penn making fun of the idea. This show, I recall, was particularly weak. They didn't even pretend to make an argument; it was entirely mockery.

Watching this, I couldn't help but realize there was a powerful logical argument at the core of the animal rights groups: animals should be treated much the same way humans are — their lives should be respected, their pain minimized, etc. Make this one simple change to your system of morality and everything else falls into place. PETA actually seems kind of measured when they refer to “the Holocaust on your plate”.

Peter Singer is the moral philosopher who has probably done the most to promote this idea. With a wide-ranging career spanning from Marx to meat, his book *Animal Liberation*, which quietly and thoughtfully makes this case, is widely-regarded as launching the animal liberation movement.

I was recently dragged to the Boston Vegetarian Festival to see Singer speak about his new book, *The Way We Eat*, and was deeply impressed by his thoughtfulness and clarity of mind. An aging fellow with thoughtful glasses, he looks like Noam Chomsky, another plainspoken professor. He is not a passionate activist who has taken on the cause of animals, but simply what he appears: a moral philosopher who started thinking about the issue one day and drew the logical conclusions.

After his talk, a woman in the audience asked a question about the rumors that he would sometimes eat non-vegan food. The audience was scandalized. “Let me address that,” Singer said. “I don't believe in veganism as a religion. I simply believe that refraining from eating animal products is the most effective way of putting pressure on producers to stop abusing and killing animals. Sometimes, if a host misunderstands my request and makes non-vegan food, instead of throwing it away, I will eat it. I don't think this is a problem, because I don't think this does any moral harm.”

Another person asked how he could say good things about Whole Foods when they were still serving numerous animal products. “Whole Foods has the best standards for animal treatment of any major organization,” he replied. “That's simply a fact. And, I think it's a good thing. Do I think not using animals at all would be even better? Of course. But I praise people for the good things they do and condemn them for the bad ones.”

A final question raised the incrementalism versus revolutionism debate common to all left-wing social movements. Should one really worry about animal treatment when the animals were still going to be killed? Pinger said the answer was undoubtedly yes. “Look, I thought that when *Animal Liberation* came out everyone would read it and become a vegan. But it’s been thirty years and vegans are still less than 10% of the population. If you genuinely care about animal suffering, you have to admit that, and say, ‘what else can we do to ease animal suffering?’”

After Singer’s talk, I began thinking through the consequences of his morality. A question occurred to me: “Should we also stop animals from eating each other?” I was sure others had made such arguments as *reductio ad absurdum*s of vegetarianism, but I thought I might be the first to be genuinely interested in it from a moral perspective.

“Of course not,” said my friend. “It’s not our fault if the animals kill each other.” “You mean,” I said, “that you think it’s perfectly moral to let that guy” — I pointed at a random guy nearby — “go around killing people?” “Well, OK,” he said. “But it’s different with animals, because they don’t know any better.” “You mean it would be OK to let him go around killing people if he was mentally ill and didn’t realize he was doing it?” “You should go ask Singer,” he said.

So I did — he was signing books outside the lecture hall and as the line ended I asked him my question. His answer was even better than I imagined: “We would if we knew how to do so without making things worse and disturbing the ecosystems and so on.” “Thanks!” I said, impressed. He spied the large white book I was hugging to my chest. “Are you reading Kolakowski?” he asked. “Yep,” I said smiling. “Had to read that when I was studying Marx a long time ago. It’s heavy,” he said. “Quite literally!” I replied, hefting the 1200 page book. He smiled.

“I have to say, though,” I said, feeling guilty, “that I don’t agree with your *Darwinian Left* stuff.” “That’s OK,” he replied. “You don’t need to agree with everything I write.” Then he wandered off, looking for the next thing to see.

I had to get that off my chest, because it was the one thing bugging me about Singer. Somehow later in life Singer had become a sociobiologist, one of that vulgar group of pseudoscientists who insist — despite all evidence — that humans are genetically programmed to do all everything a right-wing politician could imagine. (Sociobiology having gotten a bad name, they now call themselves evolutionary psychologists.)

In his book *A Darwinian Left*, however, Singer explains that this is no reason for the left to despair. If people are actually born stupid, that’s only *more* justification for left-wing policies. We need to provide the stupid people with the extra resources to live on equal terms as the smart people. Steven Pinker cites this book (along with Singer’s *The Expanding Circle*) several times in his execrable *Blank Slate* to prove that his noxious views aren’t necessarily right-

wing. (Neither Pinker nor Singer, of course, provide any real evidence to show this actually is the way humans are.)

That said, as usual Singer's conclusions do follow from his premises — if you do make that one small change to the way you think the world works, then his conclusions about what we should do to remedy it undoubtedly follow. I just wish he'd check his assumptions.

That aside, it seems unfair to dismiss Singer on the basis of a small blemish on an incredibly long and varied career — *Wikipedia* lists over forty books he's written or co-authored. His thoughtfulness and clarity in sharing it is an example to us all.

The Existential Terror of San Francisco

November 14, 2006

[Original link](#)

After I sold my company I decided to visit New York City one time before I moved out to San Francisco. The trip was a lot of fun, but at one point I found myself completely out of cash, my ATM/debit card snapped in half, my credit card deactivated for suspected fraud, and my phone out of batteries. Then I got off at the wrong subway stop and found myself deep in the wrong part of Harlem.

As scary as that was, it wasn't anywhere near as frightening as the existential terror I feel every day walking the streets of San Francisco.

When I walked through the streets of Manhattan, I saw residents going for a stroll or walking their dog or playing with their kids and I thought "Ah, I could live here". But even while I'm living in San Francisco I still can't quite believe it can be done. I saw a mother out walking with her daughter and thought "What are you doing?! Don't you know this is no place for a child?"

The whole city feels like some sort of movie set; oversized and fake. Every time I go out I worry that I might miss my mark or fumble my lines and on the rare occasions that I do, I am mercilessly excoriated by the city officials. When New Yorkers bark at you for screwing up, it's because they're impatient. But San Franciscans seem to do it much more frequently and with much more emotion. You're not just wasting my time, their tone of voice says, you're insulting me with your stupidity.

I've been to San Francisco before, of course, but always on very carefully planned excursions. Go to this place, take this subway, get off here. I realized after I moved here that this was the first day I'd really woken up in the city and it was terrifying. I ran down the street to catch my train to work and (after getting barked at by city employees for waiting in the wrong place) found the train packed to the edges, with barely enough space for me to stand.

The city maltreats you even when you're not doing anything wrong. I tried to take a bus from the place I was staying to downtown one night and, after everyone else got off at earlier stops, the bus driver noticed I was the only one left in the bus and kicked me out before he'd finished the route. "Yeah, this is the last stop now," he said. "Get out."

Of course the downtown district is a den of filth and vice, shops with names like "Tenderloin Liquors" and "Adult Show Superstore" with gangs of leering indigents sitting on every streetcorner. In Harlem, people mostly kept their eyes down and kept walking. Here everyone calls out to me, like a dark postapocalyptic scene from *Blade Runner* or *A.I.*

Of course, San Francisco isn't all pain. Every time I begin to think it's too much to bear and that I have to get out of town now, it does some little thing to redeem itself. I'm spit on by every drunk and transit worker, rained on from the entirely cloud-covered sky, splashed on by the busses refusing to follow their routes, but then I'm wonderfully treated by the staff of the soaring San Francisco Library and then I'm cheerful again until the next guy spits in my face.

One night, the friend I'm staying with invited me to go with her to San Francisco's Midnight Riders and lent me a bike to do so. The bike was a road bike, which I didn't know how to use, and I didn't have a helmet. We sped down hills as I peddled furiously and met up with a group of drunk people (some of whom were also on cocaine) carrying axes (the theme was "I Married an Axe Murderer") as we sped around the city, culminating at the pier, where some of them stripped down and jumped into the freezing water.

After that terrifying night, San Francisco didn't really scare me anymore, but it still felt wrong. Perhaps a movie set is a fairly safe place to actually be, but when you live on-stage it's difficult to get any privacy. Having to live my life on stage in this dark, cartoony, mask-filled world seems like a more terrifying nightmare than anything an axe-wielding gang of cocaine-high bikers could do.

Office Space

November 15, 2006

[Original link](#)

People are always asking me how I manage to get so much done. For a while I tried to impress them with [my pearls of wisdom](#) but soon I just sort of gave up. I don't really feel like I do anything special — I worry about getting stuff done a lot, but mostly I just sort of do it.

It wasn't until I started working in an office that the question began to make sense. Since I moved to San Francisco I literally haven't gotten anything done. I haven't finished a book (I finished three on the plane out here), I haven't answered many emails (I used to answer hundreds a day), I've written only a couple blog posts (I used to do one a day), and I haven't written a line of code (I used to write whole programs in the evenings). It's a pretty incredible state of affairs.

You wake up in the morning, take some crushing public transit system or dodge oncoming traffic to get to work, grab some food, and then sit down at your desk. If you're like most people, you sit at a cube in the middle of the office, with white noise buzzing around on every side. We're lucky enough to get our own shared office, but it's not much better since it's huge windows overlook a freeway and the resulting white noise is equally deadening.

Wired has tried to make the offices look exciting by painting the walls bright pink but the gray office monotony sneaks through all the same. Gray walls, gray desks, gray noise. The first day I showed up here, I simply couldn't take it. By lunch time I had literally locked myself in a bathroom stall and started crying. I can't imagine staying sane with someone buzzing in my ear all day, let alone getting any actual work done.

Nobody else seems to get work done here either. Everybody's always coming into our room to hang out and chat or invite us to play the new video game system that *Wired* is testing. The upside is that while we haven't gotten much of our work done, we have managed to do many other people's. Various folks from around the office have shown up to have us help them with their technical problems, which we usually solve fairly quickly. We joked that we should get transferred to their IT department instead of Web development.

We've been spared most of the brunt of it, but their IT policy is pretty scary. There's a company Internet connection, which routes everything through the IT HQ in Delaware, presumably the better to spy on us on. On Day 1 they took our laptops and "backed up" the drives to ensure they had a copy of all our data. (We scurried to get our MP3 collections and worse off first.)

Then they issued us company-approved laptops: terribly-slow iBook G4s complete with Conde Nast desktop and screensaver with spy software pre-installed. When they gave us the machines we didn't even have administrator access on them. The clock was set to the Eastern time zone; I needed an IT department person to change it to show me California time.

The company laptop is necessary to read our company email which, being on a Microsoft Exchange server, requires a special Microsoft email client to read. You also need to be on a company laptop to access the company network, where you can log into a maze of PeopleSoft web sites to file expense reports and change your health benefits.

I feel wiped after dealing with this non-work for a couple hours, but I can't get any rest from lying on our couch because it too is surrounded by the white noise.

Finally at 5 the office empties out and I can go home where, to compensate for the dullness of the days, I brighten up the nights. Life-threatening bicycle rides, dinners and movies with friends, museums, running along the beach, navigating the nightmare of public transit to visit the new hot spot. And if I get home early there are the roommates eager to chat about their days. By the time I break away it's midnight, if not 3am. I had to spend much of the weekend sleeping just to catch up.

And then it's back to the grind once again. A carousel that never stops to let you get off.

Kahle v. Ashcroft write-up

November 16, 2006

[Original link](#)

Here's a writeup I did of the Kahle v. Ashcroft argument in the style of a Wired News piece. Unlike [my last parody of Wired News](#), this one [actually got posted on wired.com](#), albeit only on one of their blogs. I hope to write a real post about this but I'm feeling too crummy to do it today.

SAN FRANCISCO, California—Acclaimed Stanford professor Lawrence Lessig and Internet Archive founder Brewster Kahle argued Monday that the changes in the Copyright Act should be subject to the scrutiny of the First Amendment. In the case *Kahle v. Gonzales*, argued here at the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, Brewster Kahle is arguing that he should be permitted to make “orphaned works”—works whose copyright holder can no longer be located—available for free on his website.

The case began after Lessig's loss before the Supreme Court in his previous suit, *Eldred v. Ashcroft*. Lessig argued that Congress's perpetual extension of the copyright act violated the Constitution's requirement that copyright only be granted for “limited Times”. The Court disagreed, saying that Congress was allowed to modify copyright law as long as it didn't change the law's “traditional contours”.

Now Lessig is back, arguing that Congress has done just that. For nearly two hundred years, he notes, copyright has been an “opt-in” system. Authors who wanted their work to be copyrighted had to mark it with a copyright symbol, file a registration with the Copyright Office, deposit a copy with the Library of Congress, and file a renewal if they wanted to receive the full term. All that changed with the sweeping 1976 Copyright Act, which made a work copyrighted as soon as it was “fixed in a tangible form”.

Under the old system, according to Lessig, 93% of works went into the public domain before their term had expired. Now, 0% do.

Lessig argues that such a fundamental change — moving copyright from an opt-in to an opt-out system — constitutes a change in the law's “traditional contours” and thus, under the precedent set in *Eldred*, means the law must be examined by a Court to see if it violates the First Amendment.

The Government disagrees, insisting that the only “traditional contours” the *Eldred* decision refers to are the “fair use” provision of the copyright law, which allows for the public to make certain uses of copyrighted works, and the “idea-expression dichotomy”, which means that ideas cannot be directly copyrighted, only their expression. The 1976 law did not change either of these.

The judges hearing the case asked Lessig to explain how this case differed from *Eldred*. “In *Eldred* the argument was about whether Congress could retrospectively extend the copyright law to keep Mickey Mouse out of the public domain,” he explained. “This case is only about ‘orphaned works’ — works whose copyright holders can’t even be tracked down to give permission.” “Unlike Disney,” the judge added.

The *Kahle* case is part of a multi-pronged strategy to deal with orphaned works. Congresswoman Zoe Lofgren (D-CA) has introduced a bill called the “Public Domain Enhancement Act”. The idea, based on a *New York Times* op-ed published by Lessig shortly after his loss in *Eldred*, is that copyright holders will need to send \$1 to the government after 50 years to renew their copyright. If they don’t send the dollar, their works will go into the public domain. But even if they do, their name and address will be on file so others who wish to use the work will know how to contact them.

The US Copyright Office has also held hearings on the subject of “orphaned works”, concluding in a hundred-page report sent to the Senate Judiciary Committee that “The orphan works problem is real.” and “Legislation is necessary to provide a meaningful solution to the orphan works problem as we know it today.”

Plaintiff Brewster Kahle founded the Internet Archive after selling his company Alexa to Amazon.com in the 1990s. The site, as Kahle often says, provides “infinite bandwidth and infinite disk space for infinite time” to freely-licensed works. Kahle wants to have his website provide orphaned works, just as libraries make available out-of-print books, but under current law would have to track down the copyright holder for every work.

The same problem plagues projects like Google’s Book Search. Presently, Google must track down the copyright holder before making a book publicly available or face hefty fines. But since copyright terms are now so long, this means most out-of-print books will never be available, simply because their copyright holders are so difficult to find.

The Court is expected to rule on the case sometime next year.

Ostensible Networks vs. Friendship Networks

November 18, 2006

[Original link](#)

I visited New York last weekend and although I'd physically been there many times before, this was the first time I felt like I'd really seen the city. Ostensibly, it's very easy to go to New York. There are lots of plane tickets available online and then you can book a hotel right there. I've done this many times before and every time I came away feeling like I hadn't really seen New York, but only bits and pieces made available for tourist consumption. I didn't feel like I understood the city.

It wasn't until this time, when I stayed with generous friends, that I felt I really saw the city. They showed me cute little places to eat, explained how to use the impossibly complex transit system, pointed me to maps and websites to help, recommended good spots to see at good times, and simply let me be with actual New Yorkers. I saw New York through the eyes of a New Yorker.

Now there are ostensible systems to help with all of these. There are guidebooks to recommend restaurants and infodesks and posters to explain how things work, but they never really can surpass the power of a friend.

If you look, you see ostensible networks everywhere. Ostensibly, jobs are posted in the want ads, but you can definitely snag one if you have a friend. Ostensibly, there are bureaucratic rules that must be followed, but usually can bypass them with a friend on the inside. Ostensibly, academic fields are learnable by anyone, but to really understand them you need a friend to take you through it. Ostensibly, web sites are supposed to be clear enough that anyone can use them, but for most of them you need a friend to show you how it's done.

A lot of people don't realize the importance of friendship networks. They think the world largely works the way it's ostensibly supposed to. You do good work, you follow the rules, you get noticed, you get the benefits. And when they fail to succeed or comprehend, it's probably because they're stupid or somebody isn't following the system. But it's neither of those, it's the system that's stupid — you don't succeed through hard work, you succeed through friendship networks.

This has clear implications for one's personal behavior: when you want to do something, don't follow the rules but look for a friend. (Sure, you could stay in a New York hotel — but you'd be much better off sleeping on the floor of a friend.) And build up lots of friends so that you'll be able to call on them when you need them. (Find a book you really like? Send the author a friendly note.)

But it also has systematic implications. Because our friendship networks are so skewed towards other's like us, making things dependent of friendship networks

serves as a subtle form of discrimination and exclusion. A stranger in the middle of Nebraska will have a hard time learning Geology because they don't know any geologists. A writer living deep in Kansas will have a hard time getting their work published because few of the publishers have ever heard of them.

There are two ways to fight this. One is to be more generous about finding friends. Get to know random people who email you, talk to people on the plane or at the theater, take part in activities that go beyond your typical location and social stratum.

But these techniques can only go so far — despite my best efforts, I'll never be able to even consider being friends with the vast majority of the world's population. The better option is to help move things from friendship networks to ostensible networks, to document the cool places in New York City, to start websites where you can [find people to stay with](#), to not automatically give jobs and perks to friends, to build things clear enough that anyone can use them.

Sure, it can be hard to say no to a friend. But wouldn't you want someone to extend you the same courtesy?

San Francisco: Silicon Valley's Ghetto

November 19, 2006

[Original link](#)

Big American cities have a shameful history of setting up smaller ones into which to punt the workers who make their city run. In *Amazing Grace*, Jonathan Kozol writes heart-wrenchingly about life in East St. Louis. And a little closer to home, in the shining Valley city of Palo Alto, the workers and their families (as usual, mostly people of color) are shunted into East Palo Alto at the end of the day.

Not only does this keep the workers and their families out of sight and out of crime, but it has beneficial political effects too. The workers may elect their own mayor, who is economically powerless to do anything about their plight, and they may attend their own school system, maintaining the new racial and economic segregation of American schools. (Incidentally, Stanford recently purchased East Palo Alto High School so it can run experiments on the poor children.)

It would be absurd and offensive to compare life in San Francisco to life in these impoverished neighborhoods, but I can't help but feel there are some structural similarities. Whatever else San Francisco is, it is a reaction to the Valley. Many of the people I've met here are doing their best to escape their stifling Silicon Valley jobs, taking the bus or train or car every day into work, then running back as soon as they can.

The result is that San Francisco ends up being something like the opposite of the Valley. The Valley has its clean if gray office buildings in neat squares; San Francisco has its rough and random dirty shops and houses drizzled across hillsides. The Valley is full of conservative corporate behavior; San Francisco is full of left-wing activists. The Valley is where people work, so San Francisco is where they play, throwing frisbees in parks and hanging out in coffee shops or going to dance parties at night. The Valley is a place of businesslike behavior; in San Francisco people hug deeply when they meet. (Not everyone, of course; none of this is everyone, but more than enough to be noticeable.)

The result, like some Marxist dialectic, is that neither the City nor the Valley really feel real. Both are reacting against each other, playing off their faults, waiting for some synthesis to put the pieces back together. The result is, to be sane you have to be in both.

City people refer to Palo Alto as Shallow Alto, which might even be literally true. The city is a thin strip of road, surrounded on one side by houses and on the other by offices, with Stanford behind it and other cities in front. It is, perhaps, a decent place to work — the finest upscale fakery you can find along

relatively clean streets where even the homeless are white — but it’s apparently a terribly boring place to live.

Meanwhile the city is all action. People are “intellectually lazy” here, complains one resident. You can zip around on bikes and scooters, drop into parties and nightclubs, gab with friends, eat good food, stroll by shops, do everything but actually get work done. People here are fleeing from work, not looking for it.

And so, to live, you ping-pong back and forth. A job you hate in the Valley, but you have to keep it so that it pays the exorbitant rent in the City, which you have to live in to escape the deadliness of the Valley. High highs, low lows, bright nights, dark days.

I suspect the City works as an escape valve in other ways. Instead of unionizing your big corporate employer, you simply flee to a False Profit party, secure in your anti-capitalist sentiment. Instead of working to build a better life, you go out dancing with your friends, trying to enjoy the little time you have.

Which, I have to say, is better than most. Most office drones just go home and watch TV, their work having drained from them the energy for any more productive activity. I suspect some of the difference lies in the peculiar economics of the computer industry. The people in it are unusually smart and talented. And the barriers to entry are so low that if they wanted to they could start their own thing (and, as the startup world shows, many do). So perhaps one has to “heighten the distractions” to keep them busy.

But who knows? I’ve got a party to get to.

Disinfecting the Sunlight Foundation

November 20, 2006

[Original link](#)

For years, [Mike Klein](#) was a big-time D.C. corporate lawyer. He'd made millions starting a string of companies, including [an air cargo carrier](#), [a D.C. restaurant](#), [a D.C. art gallery](#), and [a real estate information database](#). But then Klein's son, aghast at the horrors of his government under Bush II, fled the country. Or, as Klein put it in [an interview with the Harvard Law School Alumni Bulletin](#), "My two sons led me to realize that a significant part of their generation thinks democracy isn't worth engagement or even respect. For an old 1960s activist like myself, that was the tipping point."

It's natural for a father to want to fix things for his sons (and perhaps for a wealthy D.C. lawyer to feel a bit guilty about it as well), so Klein, leaning a bit more on his corporate millions than his sixties activism, started a foundation. Taking its name from Justice Brandeis's famed comment that "Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants", the [Sunlight Foundation](#) was formed to promote transparency and accountability in American government.

Most such organizations would do this by running investigations and publishing reports, but the Sunlight Foundation decided to take a different tack. Instead, [as Klein put it](#), Sunlight would "be utilizing 21st Century information technology, and Web 2.0 energy".

The Foundation was formed in January 2006 and, thanks to Klein, was quickly swimming in cash. Their first major project was [Congresspedia](#), a Wikipedia-like site to keep track of information on members of Congress. Unlike most Web 2.0 sites, they bought large ads on the major political weblogs to promote the new site. (Despite this blanket promotion — and the hiring of a full-time editor — the site seems to have about the same level of activity as the [They Might Be Giants wiki](#).)

Some of their other projects are about what you'd expect: [a federal funding-Google Maps mashup](#), [a Congressional tag cloud](#), [a video contest](#) mocking of members of Congress who don't release their schedules. (They've also donated money to already-existing related projects, many of which are doing valuable work.)

Their most recent project was an invite-only conference in San Francisco to bring together the leaders in this nascent field. (Disclosure: I attended and just about everyone there from the Sunlight Foundation invited me to take their money.) Funder Klein hailed the Foundation as the most important and fastest-growing project he'd ever started, while executive director Ellen Miller noted that this year they'd launched several projects, all of which had been successes.

(Afterwards I asked her what her metric for success was. “We’re throwing stuff up on the wall and seeing what sticks,” she explained. And success, I confirmed, means “it hasn’t completely fallen apart yet”.)

As a Web 2.0 developer, it’s hard for me to see how even the best Web 2.0 site can have much of a positive impact on government. Genuinely promoting transparency requires the hard work of doing investigative research, publishing reports, and promoting them to the media. Bubble 2.0 hype aside, the fanciest pop-up windows and and Google Maps mashups won’t change that.

The attendees seemed to begin to recognize this. In a breakout session on reaching users, a guru from Web 2.0 consultancy [Adaptive Path](#) tried to walk us through their user experience process. “Remember,” she told us, “these sites aren’t about what *you* want to do; they’re about improving the lives of your users by connecting with their *real needs*.” We gave our example user a name (Jane) and backstory (too busy driving her kids to care about politics, but upset at the high gas prices she has to pay). And that’s where we got stuck. Is Jane really going to muddle through graphs generated from FEC reporting data?

We decided our saviors would be the “Paul Reveres” — the people who care enough about politics to slog through the data and then mass email their friends when they find something good (we concluded that going after newspaper reporters was too Web 1.0). They would save us from having to write reports or take positions; all we had to do was make the data available and let them do the rest.

I’m sure there are a handful of people who actually do this, but it seems like we’re spending an awful lot to build a site just for them. And even then, what impact will they have? Even if our Paul Revere finds the smokingest of smoking guns and posts it on their extremely popular blog, without a larger political platform it will only fuel the cynicism that Klein claims he’s trying to combat. (“There they go again,” the reader thinks, and hits the back button.)

Even if Klein is for some reason averse to taking an actual political stand (maybe he doesn’t vote the same way as his sons?), there’s still much to be done. Several people in the session were from the group that runs [the opensecrets.org website](#), which details who contributes to which campaign. It’s useful stuff, but even a hundred of their reports can’t compare to their old-fashioned, dead-trees book [Speaking Freely](#), which brilliantly details the big picture of how money politics actually works. The author of the book, Larry Makinson, was in the room, but instead of figuring out how to tell more stories like that, he was busy worrying about how to make specific numbers come alive.

But what makes *Speaking Freely* so brilliant is that it shows specifics aren’t the problem. It’s not that donors bribe politicians into changing their vote — they rarely do — it’s that the entire campaign finance system forces all our

public officials to bend and scrape before big-money donors, instead of actually listening to the voters.

Such clear analysis makes the solution clear as well: we need to get rid of privately-financed elections altogether. And, in fact, there is an organization doing just that. It's called [Public Campaign](#) and, considering the enormous odds it's up against, it's having incredible success. (Arizona, Connecticut, and Maine have all adopted clean elections and smaller projects have been started in six more states.) But the Sunlight Foundation isn't giving money to Public Campaign. To the contrary, many of its top people used to work there.

Public Campaign is just one example; the larger point is that just as Web 2.0 pixie dust doesn't automatically make your web site into a success, just making important data available won't cause political change. Justice Brandeis's clever aphorism to the contrary, sunlight is not in fact the best disinfectant; actual disinfectant is. Sunlight just makes it easier for people to look at the pus.

The Sunlight Foundation responds: Many people from the Sunlight Foundation have thoughtfully written to me. Aside from our general disagreement about the value of the projects Sunlight engages in, they make several specific points. Since they haven't provided any letters for publication, I'll try to summarize them as fairly as I can:

- **It's not "a zero-sum game".** The open data work that Sunlight funds helps projects like Public Campaign by giving them ammunition. Center for Responsive Politics data makes it into corruption stories in newspapers which, in turn, has made the issue of clean elections a more serious part of the public debate.
- **Sunlight has many other projects.** They've provided serious grants to a number of organizations — including the [Center for Responsive Politics](#) — and have a number of projects, including [hiring some bloggers](#), doing distributed journalism on [Congress's Family Business](#), getting 90 candidates to sign [their Punch Clock Agreement](#), and even writing [an old-fashioned report](#).
- **Sunlight has a good relation with Public Campaign.** Mike Klein has made donations to Public Campaign on his own; Ellen Miller started Public Campaign but left long before she joined Sunlight; Micah Sifry was already lowering the amount of time he spent working for Public Campaign before he joined Sunlight.

I don't dispute any of these points, but I think the brunt of my critique still stands. Changes to the culture of Washington must be structural ones. These projects, while fun, fundamentally misunderstand how institutions operate.

Identity Fetishism

November 21, 2006

[Original link](#)

Marx wrote incisively about commodity fetishism—the tendency of people to see only the results of production (commodities), ignoring the hours of human labor that actually created them. The humanities seems to suffer from something of the reverse problem: a tendency to be absorbed by the names of big people and not seeing beyond to the ideas they espouse.

The most extreme example is Leo Strauss, who encouraged his students to put aside their prejudices and fully immerse themselves in the worlds and minds of the greats. The greats were so great, Strauss suggested, that if you disagree with them, you probably just don't understand them well enough.

But even other teachers of philosophy have the same problem, presenting the views of X and Y even when X is pretty clearly wrong. Despite its absurdities, students must learn to understand X's view. This seems fairly universal; even books like *What is the Meaning of it All?*, which explains philosophy without the names or complex terminology, still presents clearly bogus ideas on the same footing as more reasonable ones.

In other fields, this pattern is less frequent, but still there for whole courses of research. In sociology, papers must cite long-dead patron theorists to lend their empirical research an air of legitimacy by presenting it as a member of a recognized family. Even more recent works, like Annette Lareau's brilliant *Unequal Childhoods*, are at pains to show how they adhere to a theoretical model (the recently-alive Bourdieu in that case). In most other fields, the theorists take pains to make sure their work is consistent with the evidence, not the other way around.

Even in most humanities classes, the course content consists of a series of papers making arguments. The goal of the class is to understand the view of the authors and determine (in the best ones) to what extent you agree or disagree.

This isn't particularly unreasonable, but is a far cry from life in the hard sciences, where usually there is an actual consensus on some subject and otherwise there are a couple of named theories, each being developed by a group of people.

Why the difference? First, is it perhaps hard science that's in the wrong? I don't think so. The goal of science is to discover the truth about the world. Truths remain true no matter who says them and it's unlikely that one person will discover the whole truth. Thus the pattern of letting multiple people develop a theory and try to find evidence for it to convince the others.

So why don't the softer sciences follow the same model? The problem gets worse the softer you get, which suggests the problem lies in the softness itself. The problem is that without identities, one has to judge the ideas themselves which, in a soft science is somewhat difficult to do.

It's easy in science to run an experiment and see if it proves a theory true or false, it's much harder to get consensus about a reasonable theory of morality in philosophy. But it is easy to pick out the famous in academy culture and assign their stuff.

Identity fetishism thrives in a world afraid to make its own judgments. It exalts the thinkers of the past and, in doing so, diminishes its own capacities. But science must march forward instead of backward and that requires the daring to distinguish true from false.

Free Speech: Because We Can

November 23, 2006

[Original link](#)

In the field of Constitutional Law, there are many pages spent trying to come up with a reason for free speech. It's about the "marketplace of ideas" some say: by putting all claims and points of view out in the open, the public can sort through and figure out the truth, leaving the untruths to fall by the wayside. Others argue that free speech is necessary for democracy, since voters must hear different opinions to decide how to use their votes, and that since even non-political speech can change people's views, all speech must then be protected.

There are many more justifications like this — a limit on government abuse, a policy to promote a more tolerant citizenship, etc. — but, like most justifications, they all say we should permit free speech because it allows us to do something else. And the frustrating thing about that is that it suggests that free speech should not be permitted when it doesn't achieve those goals.

Theorists of free speech are, in general, fans of the idea (or at least their market consists of fans) so they try to dance around this. "Oh no," the marketplace-of-ideas partisans say, "we weren't suggesting that obviously false statements could be prohibited because, after all, you really never know when false statements could turn out to be true!"

But, as [something of a free speech absolutist](#), it troubles me that such a thing is even theoretically possible. And I worry that if others adopt this theory, they may not be so stringent about the practical requirements. The temptation to clamp down on free speech is always strong; it's probably not a sound idea to build the principle on such a shaky foundation.

So I have my own justification for freedom of speech: because we can. Human freedom is important, so we should try to protect it from encroachment wherever possible. With most freedoms — freedom of motion, freedom of exchange, freedom of action — permitting them in full would cause some problems. People shouldn't be free to walk into other people's bedrooms, take all their stuff, and then punch the poor victims in the face. But hurling a bunch of epithets at the guy really isn't so bad.

Freedom of speech is one place where we can draw the line and say: all of this is acceptable. There's no further logic to it than that; freedom of speech is not an *instrumental* value. Like all freedom, it's fundamental, and the only reason we happen to single it out is because it's more reasonable than all of the others.

Close readers will note that this theory doesn't quite live up to my own goals. By laying freedom of speech's provision on top of our reasonable ability to do

so, I suggest that freedom of speech could be taken away if providing it became unreasonable. But I think this is the right choice: if people really, seriously started getting hurt because of freedom of speech, it seems right for people to take the privilege away. But, to be honest, I can't even imagine how that might be possible. Words just don't genuinely wound, they're always mediated by our listening.

I do worry that people might try to stretch this justification — say that continued free speech might destroy the war effort, or the government, or civil society. But I have no problem destroying all of those. It's only the destruction of actual people that I worry about.

So here's to free speech: because we can.

Bread and Cheese

November 23, 2006

[Original link](#)

It seems like every Western food culture has some combination of bread and cheese as a meal. Americans, simple people, have your basic grilled cheese. But Italians have the pizza. Then there's the mac-and-cheese. And of course Mexicans with their quesadilla. Then there's the cheese calzone. Not to mention cheese crepes. Throw in meat and you can also count the famed cheeseburger.

What is so magical about this combination?

Why It Makes Sense to Bite the Hand that Feeds You

November 27, 2006

[Original link](#)

[Errol Morris:](#)

1. Preventive bite. Hand is bound to betray you eventually. Get it before it gets you. Remember, every hand is capable of naked aggression.
2. Preemptive bite. Hand is ready to do something. Just look at it. You've got to protect yourself, don't you?
3. Keeps gums healthy.
4. Hand less likely poisoned than food.
5. Tastes good.
6. Why not...?

A Trip to the Courthouse: Part 1

November 27, 2006

[Original link](#)

The United State Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit is a federal-looking building nestled in among the offices and shops and business parks of San Francisco's downtown. Large marble walls and staircases try desperately to send the message that what goes on here is of paramount importance, that the decisions made in these halls will reverberate throughout a large part of the country: Alaska, Arizona, California, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, and Washington — the largest of any appeals court.

But, this morning, the courtroom tells a different story. With people packed like Sardines into a room not much bigger than a bedroom in a San Francisco apartment, with one of the judges missing and replaced — without explanation — with a large television, and with hesitant, stammering public defenders arguing their cases against only slightly-less-hesitant civil servants, I briefly wondered if I was in the wrong room.

The first case I saw appeared to be a man requesting asylum in the US from his home country. I missed large portions of the case, but as I paid attention, the facts started coming out. He wanted asylum from persecution because he was gay. But the country he was hiding from didn't exactly have a record of persecution of gays. And the only evidence of persecution he could point to was that a couple people on the street once called him gay.

The next case seemed a little better for the non-government guy. It was about a man who accused of defrauding Medicare by double-billing. He noted that the Court had changed the law during the case; instead of just requiring the jury to find *whether* double-billing had occurred, it now required the jury to find how much. But they'd made that change after the trial, so he'd never had a chance to present any evidence on how much double-billing had occurred. His lawyer asked for a chance to hold a hearing to present the evidence.

"Do you have the evidence?" a judge asked. The lawyer responded that he didn't, because he was a public defender and needed to hire a professional accountant to look through the math, but couldn't afford to without a judge's permission, and the judge denied his request at the same time he denied the hearing on the subject. But, he explained, the government's accountant had admitted on the stand that there were mistakes in the math he presented, although he didn't know what impact they had. Couldn't he just get a trial to assess the math? The judges didn't seem to think so.

If the judges weren't going to give a victory on that case, they really weren't on the next one. A man who lived with his mom in Massachusetts was challenging

the government's search of his storage locker in Arizona. His lawyer sparred with the judges for some time about the details of Fourth Amendment law. Then the government's lawyer took the stage. "Let me tell you about this man," he said. "As a condition of his parole, he wasn't permitted to have any guns. But he kept one gun, the machine gun he'd had since he was a kid — he called it his baby. The government got a tip and showed up on his doorstep and he practically handed them the gun and then told them to go away. It was raining outside and he wouldn't let them into his house. They searched the house and found another machine gun kit."

"In Court, he was asked if he had any more guns. His lawyer, acting on his client's behalf, insisted that the Court didn't have jurisdiction because all the other guns were in a storage locker in Arizona. After the lawyer said that, we had to search the locker in Arizona. There we found a huge shipping crate. To take the crate into evidence, the government had to inventory it. There we found 44 flamethrowers, 22 submachine guns, 5 hand grenades, and a handful of pistols. We had to call in the bomb squad and check over everything. And he's arguing that the Fourth Amendment doesn't permit us to open that crate."

Later, I heard some of the lawyers on a different case joking. "Once opposing counsel says flamethrowers, you've lost. Doesn't matter how good your case is. You're never going to recover from that."

It was into this environment that Larry Lessig stepped. Lessig has been thinking about the implications of copyright law for most of his career. He has spent months practicing to argue before the Supreme Court and other lesser courts. He spent the weekend practicing this case with other faculty members at the Stanford Law School. He spent the morning pacing the halls, going over his notes one last time. And as he strode into the Courtroom that morning and begun his argument before the Court, unlike every other lawyer who had presented, he didn't stumble over a single word.

In some ways, this should have been home territory for Lessig. It was his own Court, right in his own town of San Francisco. And as he paced the halls, he was continually interrupted by former students of his at Stanford Law, who had gone on to careers as lawyers in the area, which had brought them here, to argue before the Court just like him. And, perhaps he figured, the judges would welcome a break from the endless parade of petty complaints to his arguments about the big issues — the First Amendment, the Progress clause, copyright. Weren't things like that why they became judges in the first place?

Perhaps not.

continued in part 2

A Trip to the Courthouse: Part 2

November 28, 2006

[Original link](#)

continued from part 1

“For a hundred and eighty-six years America had an opt-in system of copyright,” Lessig began. “Copyright was not granted automatically but was limited to works that were published. And then only to those with notice. And then only to those published with notice that were deposited and registered promptly. And to those [published,] marked, deposited, and registered, the copyright still had to be renewed after 28 years. Under this system, nearly fifty percent of published work entered the public domain immediately and ninety-three percent within twenty-eight years.”

“Following the 1976 Copyright Act, that all changed and copyright was granted automatically, for a full term, as soon as a work was fixed in a tangible form. No longer was it necessary to published, deposit, mark, or renew. Copyright moved from an opt-in system to an opt-out. And under this system, zero percent of published work will enter the public domain for at least a hundred years.”

“This is a radical change — perhaps the most radical change — to copyright law, going from ninety-three percent of works going in the public domain to zero. And the result is a huge increase in ‘orphaned works’ — works whose copyright holder cannot even be located to ask permission.”

“In *Eldred v. Ashcroft*, the Supreme Court ruled that copyright only needed judicial review when the ‘traditional contours’ of copyright law were changed. This is clearly a change to copyright’s traditional contours and thus deserves a chance for judicial review.”

The government’s lawyer — slick, but not as slick as Lessig — argued that the Court was referring to only two traditional contours: the right to fair use (which allows things like the use of small snippets of copyrighted material and limited copies for educational use) and the “idea/expression dichotomy” (which says that you can’t copyright ideas but only a particular way of expressing them).

Lessig responded that this was absurd. If the government ruled that cartoons featuring the prophet Mohammed could not receive copyrights, the law would clearly be subject to First Amendment review, even though neither fair use nor idea/expression were touched. Similarly, the change from opt-out to opt-in deserves review.

There were three judges, as required by law to hear all federal appeals. The one on the right, who was live via satellite, didn’t say a word the entire time. The

one on the left didn't ask more than a question or two. The judge in the middle was responsible for most of the questions. And she did not appear to get it.

"How is this different from *Eldred*?" she asked.

A quarter of the way in to the argument, she handed a slip of paper to her aide. Her aide scurried away and came back with a thick document. She looked down at it and then looked up.

"You were the lawyer in *Eldred* as well," she asked Lessig.

"Yes, your honor."

"How is this different from *Eldred*?"

"In *Eldred*," Lessig explained, trying again, "the issue was whether Congress could continue expanding the length of copyright in order to keep Mickey Mouse from going into the public domain. The Court — Justice Ginsburg channelling Justice Scalia — said that since Congress had been doing this forever they could keep doing it. But in this case, we're talking about a new change, one that effects orphaned works — works for who the copyright holder cannot be located."

"Which wouldn't include Mickey Mouse, because every can find Disney?" the judge asked.

"Precisely," Lessig replied.

During the government's rebuttal, the judge asked who was lobbying against this change in copyright law. "Well," the government's lawyer replied, "um, I suspect it was people very much like the ones you see here today." ("Yeah," Lessig scoffed later, "I was testifying in Congress against the bill back when I was fifteen!")

By the same token, the judge asked Lessig about what solutions to the problem he would expect were the law ruled unconstitutional. "There are many possible solutions," Lessig replied, drawing a picture of a network of people fighting this issue in all branches of government. There was this lawsuit, of course, but there was also a bill introduced by local Congresswoman Zoe Lofgren to require a one-dollar renewal fee (based, Lessig did not say, on a *New York Times* op-ed he had written), there was a series of hearings by the U.S. Copyright Office on the orphaned works problem, which concluded "The orphan works problem is real. ... Legislation is necessary to provide a meaningful solution to the orphan works problem as we know it today." and provided several proposals.

"Your time is up," the judge said, before the red light saying his time was up had gone on, and Lessig quietly packed up his papers and filed out, half the courtroom following behind him.

"Congratulations," Internet Archive founder Brewster Kahle (the man who Lessig is filing this lawsuit on behalf of) said to Lessig, shaking his hand and smiling broadly. Lessig smiled back, then posed politely for photos with Kahle and his associate Rick Prelinger. The well-wishers soon streamed out until it

was just Lessig and his fellow law school lawyers. The smile disappeared from Lessig's face. "They didn't get it," Lessig said downcast.

"Oh, I think they were getting it towards the end there," one of the lawyers said, trying to cheer Lessig up. "No," he replied, "they weren't." "Well," another lawyer chimed in, "to write an opinion they'll have to read the briefs and then they'll see your argument." "No," he explained, "they can just tell a clerk which way to write the opinion and have them do it."

"Actually, our best hope now is that they won't write an opinion at all and then *Golan* [a related case in a different Circuit] will go the other way and then we'll have a circuit split." (A circuit split is when two different circuit courts rule different ways on the same issue. Usually the Supreme Court then has to step in to resolve the disagreement.)

"Well, at least your case didn't have any flamethrowers," someone said, trying to lighten the mood. But Lessig just wasn't in the mood.

Lazy Backup

November 29, 2006

[Original link](#)

If there's one thing good UI designers know, it's that the best UI is not to have one at all. Applications should just save, security should just work, and computers should just backup.

Apparently that last task is a harder than it appears, since I still haven't found decent backup software for Unix (OS X and GNU/Linux).

Here is how the software should work:

1. I install it.
2. I point it at some storage server (ideally Amazon EC2 and S3, but if that's too hard then a GNU/Linux server with a large drive).
3. I give it a maximum space limit (e.g. store no more than 200GB).
4. I give it a maximum up-bandwidth limit (e.g. use no more than 5K/s).
5. I tell it to run.

From then on, it should just work. In the background, it will upload my files to the server using only 5K/s of bandwidth. If I get disconnected from the Internet or reboot my computer, when I get back on it will pick up where it left off. If a file changes it will only send the diff and store that as well. When I run out of disk space it will delete the old diffs.

It will preserve all the Unix ACLs and permissions and weird Mac OS X resource forks and stuff so that if my drive ever dies I can make a full bootable restore from the backup.

Does this software exist?

The closest I've seen is [rdiff-backup](#), which is very nice but fails to automate some key steps.

If it doesn't exist, let me know if you're interested in writing it (a wrapper around `rdiff-backup` to do it shouldn't be too hard, I would think). I'd be willing to offer a bounty.

Two Conceptions of Taste

December 1, 2006

[Original link](#)

Taste is difficult to define and even harder to justify, so let us just take it for granted for a moment. (Alright, for those who don't get the picture, here's a quick attempt: taste is the ability to create elegance. The people who made the iPod clearly have taste; the people who made Windows do not.) Unfortunately for me, it seems like a lot of people in the US don't have much taste. (Try watching the infographics on the network evening news, for example.) But even among people who have taste, I've noticed there are two kinds: positive and negative.

Negative taste is the ability to tell when something is bad. Positive taste is the ability to make something that is good. Indeed, one might even say that there is only one kind of taste and positive taste is simply negative taste plus skills. But since taste is generally inferred from creations, it's probably simpler to treat them as two different things.

People with negative taste can make things that look really nice, but they also look very plain. I think the founders of Google have negative taste. John Gruber, as far as I can tell, mostly does. Same with Paul Graham. (As do I, for that matter.) People with negative taste make things by trying something very simple and then stripping away pieces until it looks good. They can detect goodness, but not create it, so they're limited to designs with very few variables, because then they can go thru all the options and pick out the ones that look OK.

People with positive taste, on the other hand, can make things that genuinely look good. This gives them a lot more freedom in their designs (they can use colors other than white!). Truly good designers have positive taste. Unfortunately for people like us, Apple seems to have hired most of them and put them to work building fairly bland web sites.

Of course, taste applies to far more fields than design. One could apply the same idea to writing. Positive taste writers can write beautiful flowing prose that looks you in. Negative taste writers can only write beautiful things by staying simple.

People with negative taste can recognize people with positive taste and hire them. People with no taste, on the other hand, fail to see the difference, resulting in disasters like the graphic design department of American Airlines.

People with negative taste can also be critics, which brings us to Joe Clark's [famous comment](#) "Actually, no, it is not the responsibility of the critic to solve

the problem. Pauline Kael was not expected to rewrite and redirect the films she disliked.”

People with negative taste can pick out the bad movies. They just can’t make great ones.

Followups: John Siracusa, [Hypercritical](#) (2009)

Never Back to School

December 2, 2006

[Original link](#)

When guests came to visit us at Stanford, they'd always comment on the beauty of our campus — the copious greenery, the modern decorations, the classic architecture. I used to take them at their word. I always thought Stanford was a very pretty campus. Now I realize that it was merely bright.

Coming back to Stanford after living in San Francisco is an odd experience, because the place seems so obviously much more fake. You don't notice when you're in it, but Stanford is a real wonder of a bubble. Surrounded by a moat of trees, it pretends to be its own self-sufficient city, complete with its own name (Stanford, California is not technically a city, but only a "census-designated place"; it has its own zip code, nonetheless). It has its own food, housing, public transit system, gas station (this is California), police force, job openings, newspaper, and events calendar. Most large universities have such things, of course, but they mesh with and supplement the outside world. At Stanford, despite being in the center of Silicon Valley, you'd hardly know the outside world existed.

Everything here is immaculately clean. There is rarely weather, just constant sun from a cloudless sky (the sky kindly rains only at night so as not to disturb anyone). There are no outsiders, just scrupulously examined teachers, carefully selected students, and well-behaved maintenance staff (who are not paid a living wage, despite the protests of generous-minded students).

Coming back to Stanford, wandering its august halls once again, it feels so strange. I lived here for a full year; this should feel like coming home. But while I recognize it all — not much changed while I was gone — it doesn't feel like home at all. Everything seems, well, smaller.

Part of that, obviously, is literally true: I'm physically bigger now, so things seem smaller in comparison. But it also feels psychologically smaller, like after living in San Francisco I can no longer accept this simulated city as a reality. Instead, I'm constantly seeing it in its context in the wider world.

The result is that everything feels like a bizarre show, played out on this phony stage. Beautiful guys in pajamas, talking to beautiful girls in less. Party music blaring. Kids scooting elegantly by on bicycles. Before I just thought this was the strange reality of the world I was dropped into. Now I see it as just another act.

I went to the top of the large tower in the middle of the Stanford campus, something I'd never found the time to do while I was a student. And looking

out, the school splayed before me, I noticed something odd. The beautiful Stanford buildings, so varied and complex at ground level, all look like big red rectangles from the sky. Perhaps Stanford is one of those things you really have to be in to genuinely see.

Drop Out

December 3, 2006

[Original link](#)

I was wondering what I was going to find for today's Sunday Bonus Post. Luckily, at the last minute, the *San Francisco Chronicle* stepped in to save me:

Aaron Swartz dropped out of high school after one year to study on his own. Then he dropped out of college after one year to seek his high-tech fortune. He was still in his teens a year later when he hit the jackpot, selling his startup in October to Wired Digital for an undisclosed but lottery-like payout.

With his boyish mien and more geek credentials than engineers twice his age, the suddenly wealthy Swartz belongs to a new generation of young, brainy geeks who began booting up and logging on when their friends were still watching "Sesame Street." Before they were old enough to drive, they landed paying gigs. Now that another high-tech boom is heating up Silicon Valley, more of these technologically developed but underage techies are dropping out and starting up.

[...]

"Everything that would get you detention at school will get you funding in Silicon Valley," said Paul Saffo, a valley forecaster and essayist who has been exploring technological change and its impact on business and society for more than two decades.

[...]

Fancy new car? "I don't know how to drive," Swartz wrote on his blog, Raw Thought. Big house in the suburbs? "I like living in small apartments." Expensive clothes? "I've worn a T-shirt and jeans practically every day of my life." Hanging with the cool kids? "I'm so shy I don't even hang out with the people I know now."

(Jessica Guynn, [Log on, drop out, cash in: These top techies weren't leery about leaving school](#))

Excuse my self-indulgence.

The Genius is in the Details

December 4, 2006

[Original link](#)

As best as we can tell, the human brain works by mastering a specific thing and then “giving it a name”, wrapping the whole thing up into a bundle and pushing it down a level, so that things can then be built with it as a component. You see this all over the place — it’s how science works, it’s how you program, it’s even how people deal with their friends (“let’s do the mall again”).

So it would seem natural to think that smart people would work on a very high level, dealing not in details but in huge abstractions. They would have turned everything into a component, no longer worrying about its details, and built things out of the results.

Bizarrely, this seems entirely untrue. The smartest people I know disdain abstractions, preferring to speak in concrete specifics. Take Paul Buchheit, the genius behind Gmail. When he talks about building web applications, he doesn’t think about high-level things like the underlying semantic structure of the data — instead he talks about the little “heads” that read data off of the hard disk and how fast they can move.

Another friend, also incredibly bright, doesn’t refer to other people that way. He doesn’t say “oh, he’s an expert in X” or “he’s really smart about X”; instead he says “he’s thought a lot about X” — breaking down the abstractions of expertise and intelligence into something much more concrete: spending time thinking about something.

At first glance these seem like mistakes. Why should a brilliant web app programmer be thinking about hard disk heads? Isn’t that something someone else should take care of? And why is my smart friend only concerned with how much time someone has spent on something? Aren’t there other factors involved?

But if you look the other direction, you see the same pattern. Clueless business guys love speaking in big abstractions, talking about “information superhighways” that act as “more efficient content delivery systems” that will “monetize the genre” by “disintermediating the legacy players”. These guys are speaking exactly as you would expect smart people to — thinking at a high level, working with the big ideas — yet the things they say are so incredibly stupid that they either don’t mean anything or mean something that’s actually impossible.

So what’s going on here? As we noted at the beginning, the brain works by mastering the details and *then* giving them a name. But the business guys took the easy way out: they just mastered the names. If you asked them exactly how a content delivery system worked, they wouldn’t be able to tell you. They know only the high-level thing, with none of the details.

And it's the details that make it so interesting — and so powerful. Anyone can master the names of big concepts and combine them like so many puzzle pieces; it's knowing how they work that takes time. And the smart people have made that investment. So perhaps it's just natural that they want to stay it a little closer to it than most.

The City with No Heart

December 5, 2006

[Original link](#)

[Where's the heart of LA?]

CAL: The Hollywood sign.

DANNY: It's the most viewed sign in the world, it beats the Eiffel Tower. And don't say the Santa Monica pier.

CAL: Downtown.

DANNY: Downtown isn't where L.A. is.

CAL: It's not. L.A.'s on Sunset between Doheny and Highland. It's the Sunset Strip, and Wes knew that because he put that right in the title.

DANNY: Hey, I would love to do the Strip, but if you think about it, it's made up almost entirely... of billboard ads.

(Aaron Sorkin, "The Option Period," *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*)

Flying over Los Angeles is strange. For a while there's nothing but mountains. Then a few curving strips of conformist suburbia. And then, all of a sudden, there it is. Rows and rows of building with no apparent structure or direction, just going everywhere at once. Unlike every other city I've seen from the air, LA has no gradient surrounding a downtown. It just suddenly appears and then is simply there.

Downtown looks about the way you'd expect. Lots of tall buildings, studded with odd landmarks like the new Gehry-designed concert hall and a giant ocean liner-looking building which we determined to be the DMV. ("Only in California does the DMV get its own ocean liner," someone says.) But this wasn't really LA, my guide explained. "Downtown is just hollowed out factories and sweatshops. Gentrification is coming, but it's only at the very early stages." We pass an American Apparel sweatshop. "American Apparel is a Rebel Company" the staid building reads in Spanish.

We zip past old and new buildings while zooming on the freeway and head to Venice, a land of small streets and surprisingly-elegant beach shacks. The famed Venice Beach looks just like you'd imagine — LA always makes you think you are imagining — with shirtless skateboarders and gritty little shops and the beautiful blue ocean up against the clear blue sky — both so vast, so endless.

I lie down on the sand and close my eyes. When you're trying to relax, everyone always says to imagine you're on the beach by the ocean with the sun streaming down upon your face. But here I actually am and I still can't relax. Instead, I wonder about the fractal nature of coastlines — does their length grow without bound or simply converge as you measure them more finely? (*It grows without bound.*)

My host is danah boyd, the beautiful young academic superstar who has won fame and fortune formalizing the teens on MySpace, then reporting her findings at conferences in wildly colorful outfits with youthful enthusiasm. She's living an academic dream — a one bedroom house by the beach filled with books, with a handsome but quiet young boyfriend to drop by on occasion.

But such a life is not all relaxation. She's editing special editions of journals, keynoting conferences, submitting papers hither and yon, consulting on teen issues for major corporations, and interviewing kids for her research. Even *The O'Reilly Factor* is in on the racket, asking her, in that rhetorical way O'Reilly has of interviewing guests, whether MySpace is a dangerous den of online sexual predators. (It is never mentioned that O'Reilly's parent company has purchased MySpace.)

danah delights in pushing academic boundaries: skipping classes, skipping town, spelling her name in lower case, wearing crazy clothes, studying the subcultural and new. And the rest of the field is scrambling to catch up with her, finally holding conferences and submitting papers on the sites she's been studying for years. I should become an academic, she says. Shake up the system just like her. But why join the system in the first place?, I say.

She's got a fellowship down here this year along with Cory Doctorow, who shows up, arms wide, in a beaten leather jacket and a skullish t-shirt. We grab barbecue down the street, taking Cory's car (the first one he's bought in his 35 years), outfitted with fuzzy seats and new plates that read "COPYFYT."

Cory hates San Francisco, but loves it here, where he gets to teach classes with names like "Pwned: Is everyone on this campus a copyright criminal?" The freeway is fast, he says, the light rail usable, the cities surprisingly walkable. Disneyland is close by and there is plenty of '50s kitsch. And it's far cheaper living here than in London.

Cory is his usual flurry of activity — working on six books, teaching two classes, running one of the most popular blogs, fighting for our digital civil liberties, while still managing to keep up with all the gossip. He hands me an advance proof of a book to read and recommends another he's in the middle of. And on his way out he stands, framed in the doorway, and offers me a piece of advice.

"You know," he says, "*Wired* really isn't so bad. It's an exciting time in tech industry — the cost of starting a company has fallen drastically — and you're

at the center of it. I would have loved to have a job at *Wired* when I was 18.” “Wired was very different when you were 18,” I say. “Yeah, I suppose so,” he says. “I guess I wouldn’t want a job there now — but then again I wouldn’t want a job *anywhere*.”

And then he’s off.

As Cory leaves Jeremy Iversen arrives. Iversen is an incredibly odd fellow. With a background in everything from investment banking to neurotheology, he came to my attention with his 2006 book *High School Confidential*. With a novelist’s snark and an ethnographer’s attention to character and institutional detail, he went undercover to a Southern Californian high school for a half a year and wrote the whole thing down with a rare authorial brilliance. ([My review](#).)

Now the book’s out and he’s moved on again. This time he’s trying to join Hollywood, perhaps play himself in the movie version of the book. He is sleek and abnormally attractive, but I learn this is the result of a spectacularly careful regimen. Every four hours he takes a carefully measured amount of food out of a cryopack in his car, pretty much the only food he is permitted. Then he follows a daily three-page jargon-laden series of instructions from his trainer about which exercises to perform and how at the gym. This, combined with cold reading and audition classes, is now his job.

It seems like a waste, but just like danah likes messing with institutions, Jeremy likes trying new things. “I’ve done a fiction book, I’ve done a nonfiction book, I’m done with writing,” he says. Fair enough; Jeremy amazes me with his many talents. Aside from his good looks, his thoughtful eye, and his talent for writing, he’s one of the smarter people I’ve spoken to lately, cracking jokes about Yugoslav loyalty and information-theoretic channel errors.

He also has amazing interpersonal skills. While danah and Cory bowled me over with their energy, leading me to sit quietly while they braindump news and gossip, Jeremy’s energy somehow invites my own, leading me to crack jokes and make snarky comments right along with him. Perhaps this guy truly can do anything. Although that only leads to another question: why?

I hop in Jeremy’s car (the very same the kids in his book were in!) and he takes me on a tour of the city. First stop is Santa Monica and the Santa Monica Pier, home to a sewage treatment plant (which lots of signage brags about) and the fortune telling machine that kicked off the plot in *Big* (I didn’t have a quarter to get my fortune, sadly). The crosswalk machines here talk and the stupid shopping mall jobs inspire television pilots. There are large topiary dinosaurs along a promenade with gingerbread houses underneath them

to suggest Christmas. (Since the weather doesn't change, the city has to indicate the season in more blatant ways.) There is an entire store dedicated to selling things to geeks, with golden chess pieces mixed in among the lightsabers and *Lord of the Rings* figurines. The wealthy pretty things stroll back and forth.

Meanwhile in Westwood, home of UCLA, we see more shops and [Fox Theater](#), home to many important movie openings. The students sit in cafes, pretending to work but actually checking Flickr, while Jeremy insists I get a tazo milk tea with boba. I do, against my instincts, and, to my surprise, it's actually quite good. Then we go back to strolling around LA's imitation of a college town. In most places college towns are kind of a step up from the surrounding environs, but in LA it seems the town is trying to slum down a bit to fit the mold.

We head to Beverly Hills, singing the appropriate songs (*living in Beverly Hills*), and get out to stroll along the famed Rodeo Drive. [A giant nude torso](#) inexplicably welcomes us to a strip with shops so upscale that the streetlights have been replaced by chandeliers in glass boxes. Well-dressed women carry their fashionably tiny dogs in Prada bags while trendy young people sit in trendy restaurants, looking vaguely unhappy.

Side streets curve off into a world of cobblestone steps even more immaculately clean than the main drag — not a speck of dirt can be found anywhere. And then we find ourselves in the most bizarre three-story mall contraption, with an elevator that goes two floors above any surrounding buildings, three restaurants bathing unhappy people in pink, orange, and green light respectively, closed shops selling pink, orange, and green boxes, and a large glassed-in bedroom suspended literally in the center of it all, with no apparent way to get in. Jeremy was convinced we were in some kind of adventure game — if only we deliver the pink boxes to the people in pink and so on, we'd unlock the elevator which would bring us to the key to get into the magic bedroom. But then the polygons stopped rendering so smoothly and we decided to move on, as I begun to wonder if I'd stepped into some Virtual Reality simulation.

Everything in LA looks so, well, cinematic. I always thought that filmed stuff looked better than my stuff because they used fancy lights, cameras, and lenses to give it that more lushful aesthetic. But apparently all you really need to do is turn your camera on in LA — everything here gives off that hyperreal, oversaturated vibe.

And the people are all characters too. When I went down to Venice Beach, I saw attractive women sunbathing on towels while reading scripts. While walking back, I heard a couple guys excited that the casting director had actually called them back this time. The only other people I saw on the street with identifiable occupations (and there are a shocking number of people wandering around the street in the middle of the day with no identifiable occupation)

were the immigrant landscapers busily trimming hedges on the houses of their betters.

I walked a block too far on the way back and ran into a more dingy neighborhood by a runned-down church. I looked around, trying to get my bearings, and a poor-looking black man on a bicycle with a cup rode up. "Sorry," I said, assuming he wanted me to place some money in his cup. "Can I help you find anything?" he asked. "No," I said. "What're you doing?" he asked. "Just looking around," I said. "Looking for anything in particular?" he asked. "No," I said. "Looking for... crack?" he asked. "No," I said again, and he biked off.

"Crack is our number one industry," Jeremy says, "with entertainment and shipping as our secondary sectors." Apparently the whole city does coke, perhaps the one thing that unites these disparate neighborhoods, this collection of varied enclaves each with their own name and culture that we call Los Angeles. Not all of them, Jeremy explains, are even part of Los Angeles City. Some of them have received special dispensation to carve out their little plot of land and get their own mayor. Santa Monica even elected a Green.

We head towards Sunset, stopping to see a large bubbling pit of tar in the middle of the city, right next to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), where even more high society people are standing around looking unhappy, glassed in from the rest of the world — and the tar.

We also stop to see the world's tallest Christmas tree at The Grove shopping mall. Aside from one of the early flagship Apple stores, the Grove also has a trolley to take people around the outdoor mall. There's little objective need for the trolley — the mall isn't that big — but, as Jeremy says, it just adds to the surreality. To complete the picture, I couldn't resist purchasing a cinnamon sugar pretzel.

And then we head to Sunset. There is the Laugh Factory, where Michael Richards recently dealt a large blow to his career. There are trendy clubs and music spots. And there are, of course, billboards; plenty of billboards, advertising this and that as the street curves every which way.

Soon things start to calm down and it's time for Jeremy to drop me off and hit the gym. We turn around, waving goodbye to all that. "And that's LA!" he says, as I clutch my chest and feel like my head is about to explode.

The afternoon before I have to leave, I'm lying on the couch, my headache failing to fade. Time rolls forward and I notice from the orange glow leaking through the window that im gonna miss the sunset yet again. I hop out and run the four blocks to the beach as fast as I can, dodging traffic all the way.

When I get there the sun has fallen below the horizon but framed before me is the majestic beach picture I've always seen in photos. The darkened sand, the glowing water, the crimson orangered strip fading up and to the edges, as if the sun had set directly in front of where I'm now facing.

I run towards the water and the lights and sounds and people of the city all fall away and I find my self entirely alone with the ocean. The waves run right up to the edge of my toes but don't touch them. I stand, its colors and sounds enveloping my entire field of vision, its scent filling my nostrils. I breathe in deeply.

The reflected sunlight before me refracts to form a perfect rainbow, strips of dark red fading into orange fading into yellow then light blue then blue. And for one beautiful moment, before the whole thing fades away into an inky blackness, the colors are laid out perfectly, just the way I've seen them in prisms and diagrams so many times before, a beautiful sympathy of color. And then my head really does explode, the beauty sending shockwaves through my body.

That is how I will remember LA: this beautiful strip of sunset.

Competition of Experimentation?

December 7, 2006

[Original link](#)

It should be clear to anyone who has studied the topic that the way to drive innovation forward is to have lots of small groups of people each trying different things to succeed. In *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, for example, we see that certain societies succeed because geography breaks them up into chunks and prevents any one person with bad ideas from getting control of too much, while other societies fail because their whole territory can too easily be captured by an idiot.

It might at first seem more efficient to let the whole territory be captured by a genius, but a moment's reflection will show that there are few geniuses whose brainpower can match the combined results of many independent experiments. This has [fairly obvious applications to business](#) and other fields, but for a moment let's just think about the concept itself.

This idea is often presented as a defense of competition and the capitalist market system that embraces it. Innovation only happens, such people say, when lots of people are competing against each other for the prizes of success. In a communist country, where Big State decides what will be worked on and how, there is no incentive to innovate. Only in a country like ours, where the victor gets the spoils, can new technology be developed.

And yet we also know that competition is a terrible way to get people to do well. In *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* (now out in [an elegant 20th anniversary edition](#)) we see dozens of studies that show that, by all sorts of metrics, people's performance (and enjoyment) goes down when they are forced to compete. Even worse, it goes down most notably for creative tasks — precisely the kind of thing involved in innovation.

How do we resolve the contradiction? The key is to notice that competition, especially market competition, isn't the only way to encourage experimentation. And that's often hard to do, because typically market competition is treated as the only sensible form of competition and competition as the only sensible form of experimentation. But that's not at all the case.

Instead of providing a prize for winner, we could provide rewards to everyone who tries. And that actually makes sense — not only because [prizes also decrease productivity and creativity](#) — but also because, when it comes to experimentation, it's not really your fault if the experiment doesn't work. In fact, we want to encourage people to try crazy things that might not work, which is exactly why rewards are so counterproductive.

But even if you don't give an explicit prize, competition is still unhealthy. Contrary to what the apologists for market theology would like you to believe, people

do not work better when they're terrified of the guy next to them finding the solution first. Which is why we should look at this as simply experimentation, not competition.

Experimentation can certainly be carried out cooperatively. Imagine many different scientists in a lab, each trying different ideas during the day, swapping notes and tips over lunch, perhaps joining together to form small groups for certain experiments, or perhaps helping with little pieces of other projects in which they have particular expertise. Each scientist may disagree on which is the right direction to pursue, but that doesn't make them enemies.

That's the way that science progresses. And, if you let it, other things too.

Business “Ethics”

December 11, 2006

[Original link](#)

Moral Mazes (one of my very favorite books) tells the story of a company, chosen essentially at random, and through careful investigation from top to bottom explains precisely how it operates, with the end result of explaining how so many well-intentioned people can end up committing so much evil.

This week’s scene takes place inside a textile processing plant at Weft Corporation, where the company’s poor low-paid workers are suffering from byssinosis. Byssinosis, also called Brown Lung Disease, is when your lungs fill up with cotton dust. Eventually your throat closes up and you suffocate to death. The company insists the whole thing is a stunt made up by Ralph Nader and other liberal do-gooders. But one day they change their tune:

Weft, as well as all the other large and medium-sized American textile companies, was actually addressing the cotton dust problem, but in a characteristically indirect way. As part of a larger modernization effort, the firm invested \$20 million in a few plants where executives knew such an investment would make money. ... The investment had the side benefit of reducing cotton dust levels ... One manager who was in charge of the project ... comments on whether dust control was a principal factor in the decision...:

No, definitely not. Would any sane, rational man spend \$15 million for a 2 percent return? ... Now it does improve the dust levels, but it was that if we don’t invest the money now, we would be in a desperate [competitive] position fifteen years from now. ... It was on these bases that the decision was made.

Publicly, of course, Weft Corporation, as do many other firms, claims that the money was spent entirely to eliminate dust, evidence of its corporate good citizenship. Privately, executives admit that without the productive return, they would not have—indeed, given the constraints under which they operate—could not have spent the money. And they have not done so in several other plants and only with great reluctance, if at all, in sections of otherwise renovated plants where it is more difficult to ... achieve simultaneous cost and dust reduction.

(Robert Jackall, *Moral Mazes*, 158f)

What does Jackall mean that the executives “could not have spent the money ... given the constraints under which they operate”? Another story in the book about the chemical corporation Alchemy illustrates his point:

Consider, for instance, the case of a large coking plant of the chemical company. [Coking is a chemical process for distilling coal.] Coke making requires a giant battery to cook the coke slowly and evenly for long periods; the battery is the most significant piece of capital equipment in a coking plant. In 1975, the plant’s battery showed signs of weakening and certain managers at corporate headquarters had to decide whether to invest \$6 million to restore the battery to top form. Clearly, because of the amount of money involved, this was a gut decision.

No decision was made. The CEO had sent the word out to defer all the unnecessary capital expenditures to give the corporation cash reserves for other investments. So the managers allocated small amounts of money to patch the battery up until 1979, when it collapsed entirely. This brought the company into breach of contract with a steel producer and into violation of various Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) pollution regulations. The total bill, including lawsuits and now federally mandated repairs to the battery, exceeded \$100 million. I have heard figures as high as \$150 million, but because of “creative accounting,” no one is sure of the exact amount.

This simple but very typical example gets to the heart of how decision making was intertwined with a company’s authority structure and advancement patterns. ... Had they acted decisively in 1975—in hindsight, the only substantively rational choice—they would have salvaged the battery and saved their company millions of dollars in the long run.

In the short run, however, they would have been taking serious personal risks in restoring the battery. ... their political networks might have unraveled, leaving them vulnerable to attack. ... A manager at Weft Corporation reflects:

People are always calculating how others will see the decisions they make. ... They know that they have to gauge not just the external ... market consequences of a decision, but the internal political consequences. And sometimes you can make the right market decision, but it can be the wrong political decision.

(*Mazes*, 81-84)

Had the manager in charge of the plant with the ailing battery done the replacement, his department would be six million dollars less profitable. When it came time to compare managers for the next promotion, he would seem massively less efficient than the guy running the plant next door. He'd be passed by and his corporate ascendancy would be over.

Corporate managers simply aren't allowed to be moral, or even reasonable. And those who try are simply weeded out. Not only does the manager who replaced the battery get passed over for the job; the manager who was obedient enough not to get promoted to a more powerful position.

The Politics of Wikis

December 11, 2006

[Original link](#)

Anarchism has a pretty bad rap. Put aside all the people who think it's about smashing windows and shooting presidents and just focus on the idea (*an arch* — without rulers). If someone told you that you should start a business where basically no one is in charge of anything and everyone shares ownership of everything and all decisions are made by consensus, you'd think they were a hopeless utopian about to get a large dose of reality. Yet that's pretty much what Wikipedia is.

There's the obvious anarchism of wikis: namely, "anyone can edit". No intelligence tests or approval rules or even a temporary probation. Anyone can just wander up and hit that edit button and get started. Where in the world can a random person get a larger audience?

That's pretty radical in itself, but things go much deeper. There's no ownership over text. If you write something, as soon as you post it to Wikipedia, it's no longer "yours" in any real sense. Others will modify and mangle it without a second thought and anyone who quotes those words in the future will attribute them to "Wikipedia" and not to you. In a culture where directors are suing people for fastforwarding over the smutty scenes in their movies, that's pretty wild.

And while there are a few technical tricks to give some people more software features than others, for the most part the Wikipedia community is pretty flat. Every non-edit decision, from which pages get deleted to what the logo in the corner is, gets made by consensus with everyone getting a chance to have their say.

In real life, few people are willing to take such a radical stand. Even the farthest reaches of the far left hold back from proposing such extreme ideas, suggesting that not only that such extreme freedom wouldn't fly in a capitalist culture like ours, but that perhaps some of these restrictions are just necessary because of human nature. But it's humans who edit Wikipedia, and mostly humans raised in capitalist culture as well. Perhaps it's time to give more extremism a chance.

Seven Habits of Highly Successful Websites

December 12, 2006

[Original link](#)

I got a phone call from my father the other day. “Oh,” I thought immediately, “he’s probably calling to finally apologize for failing to attend that basketball game I played at in fourth grade.” But no, I was once again wrong. He was calling to pitch his web startup.

They’re at the racquetball court, the grocery store, the venture capitalists’ offices — you can’t avoid this new crowd of so-called “Web 2.0” startups. And every time they meet you, if they’re not asking for angel funding, they’re asking for suggestions on how they should run their company.

For a long time, I’d simply tell them they should ask a real expert, like Dr. Paulson Graham of the Institute of Advances Startup Studies, but the number of queries has become so great that I’ve decided to conduct some research of my own.

I picked out seven recent extremely popular websites. While perhaps not having the mindshare of a “Basecamp” or a “Ning”, these websites do have the benefit of having tons of actual users. Here they are, ranked roughly in order of popularity:

- MySpace
- Wikipedia (basically tied)
- Facebook
- Flickr (pronounced flick-her)
- Digg
- Del.icio.us (pronounced dell-dot-icky-oh-dot-you-ess)
- Google Maps (no popularity data available but I bet it’s pretty popular)

I looked at all these websites to see what they have in common. Here’s what I discovered.

Be Ugly

With the single exception of Flickr, all these websites are hideous. Facebook and Wikipedia redesigned late in the game, upgrading their web design from “hideous” to “barely tolerable”, but MySpace has continued on, its name becoming synonymous with design so atrocious it has actually been known to induce vomiting in epileptic Japanese children. Not surprisingly, it’s the most popular site on the list.

Unlike most of Google, Google Maps actually isn’t such a bad looking website in itself, but most of its Web 2.0 “cred” comes from its ability to make “mashups” in which people stick a Google Map with several hundred thousand different little red blurble icons sticking all over it onto a webpage whose design sense can best be described as “MySpace knockoff”. Normally I don’t go in for guilt by association, but in this case I think it’s deserved.

Del.icio.us and Digg both attempted redesigns at one point but due to a tragic mixup in communication, the web design teams they hired misheard their instructions and thought their job was actually to try to make the site look *worse* instead of better. Having blown several thousand dollars of their VC’s money on this enterprise, they had no choice but to launch the resulting look.

Don’t Have Features

Let’s start with MySpace. Again, just as it’s a leader in traffic, it’s a leader in this category. MySpace has so few features, I don’t even know what it does. Neither, apparently, do its users, who in fact create MySpace accounts simply to impress their friends and annoy their teachers. (Personal communication)

The last time Wikipedia added a substantive new feature was the addition of categories a couple years ago and, frankly, that was a pretty bad idea because it was so poorly implemented. Otherwise it’s basically just been a big box you edit text in with a bunch of kluges on top. That’s how it got to be number two.

Facebook, Flickr, and Digg all add features occasionally, but they’re more than counteracted by Del.icio.us and Google Maps, which in fact have actively taken features away. Del.icio.us decided that tag intersections (finding links that are tagged with two words) was just too hard to get back online after they were purchased by Yahoo! and so they simply took the feature down without notice. The site spiked in popularity until they added them back the other day and traffic went down once again.

Google Maps, meanwhile, has just removed everything else from the page except for the map and the search box, ensuring no features get in between the user and their mapping experience. Like most Google software, though, features are definitely not going to be *added*.

Let Users Do Your Job

None of the content on any of these sites is provided by the people who made the site. In every case, the content is provided by the users. The only exception is Google Maps, where the content is provided NAVTEQ.

Combined with the last principle, you might begin to suspect that this is simply because the developers of these sites are extremely lazy. But I don't believe that; I think there's a more complicated principle at work.

I believe in a theory I'll call "The Stupidity of Crowds". Here's the basic idea: if just one person or a small group of people builds a website, they have to be at least moderately intelligent. Buying servers and writing programs is somewhat hard and takes a little bit of brainpower. This means that the content for their site will be similarly intelligent and thus it won't be of interest to the vast majority of Internet users.

The glorious thing about the Internet, however, is that it allows us to aggregate the combined stupidity of literally *millions* of people. No longer do you have to try to play towards the lowest common denominator — now you can actually have the lowest common denominator build your site for you. No single mortal could possibly come up with the content you find on the average MySpace, let alone the hideous color scheme, garish backgrounds, and awful auto-playing background music. No, something like that takes The Stupidity of Crowds.

Ignore Standards

Like 99.999999% of all websites on the Internet, none of these websites supports web standards, the documents that explain the proper way to use the Web. Enough said.

Build to Flip

MySpace, Flickr, Del.icio.us, and Google Maps all sold out to larger companies. (Google Maps didn't even launch until after it was acquired.) Wikipedia is apparently some sort bizarre legal construction called a "donation-funded non-profit" and this apparently has made it hard to sell. (Note to future founders: make sure not to incorporate your company as one of these as it can severely hamper your options later on.)

Facebook and Digg haven't sold out yet, but I bet they want to. (Another tip: taking large quantities of VC money also makes it hard to sell your company, both because it gives you a swelled head but also because it gives the VCs control over when you can sell, and their heads are *really* big.)

Eight Reasons (Some) Wikis Work

December 12, 2006

[Original link](#)

published at [Personal Democracy Forum](#)

The stunning success of Wikipedia in creating an encyclopedia from scratch has led many to believe that they can achieve similar results. (Want to get rich? Easy! Just install the MediaWiki software, title it “how to get rich”, and wait for the answers to start flowing in.)

Clearly the wiki approach does not solve every problem. So what made Wikipedia work so well? We can’t say for certain, but by looking at similar sites that haven’t taken off — as well as those that have (like [TV IV](#)) — we can spot some patterns.

1. **Clear goal.** Wikipedia is an encyclopedia. It’s an understandable task with a clear end result. When you want to know something, you know whether it’s the kind of thing that might be in Wikipedia or not. And when you want to contribute, you know what kinds of things to add. By contrast simply adding a wiki to your existing website has no clear purpose.
2. **Worth doing.** Collecting the sum of human knowledge in one place is just the kind of grand goal that inspires their people to sink their time into a big, collective effort. There are people on Wikipedia who spend their time going down long lists of computer-generated format and style errors, fixing each one by hand. It’s hard to imagine people putting the same amount of effort into cleaning up a wiki about the greatness of Tide laundry detergent. But people are willing to do it for something only a few people care a lot about (like a very specialized technical topic) or something a lot of people care a little about (like a piece of popular culture).
3. **Objective standards.** It’s pretty clear what an encyclopedia article should be. It needs to contain an explanation of what it is and why it’s important, the history, the uses (or actions), criticism, and pointers to more information. And the whole thing needs to be written in a plain, dry style. The result is that it’s pretty clear what needs to be done, which means everyone can work together to do it. Contrast this with a novel, where the book’s success depends on the author’s creativity and, well, novelty.

4. **Made from small pieces.** Encyclopedias are huge projects, but they're made up of manageably-sized articles. If an article ever grows too long, it can be split into parts (see [Al Gore Controversies](#)). When a page is small enough that the whole thing can fit comfortably in your head, it's much easier to work with: you can write it in one sitting, you can read it relatively quickly, and you can remember the whole thing. Contrast this with books, which are so big that working seriously on them requires special dedication.
5. **Each piece is useful.** Each article in an encyclopedia is useful in its own right. Even if Wikipedia had just started and all it had was an article about the Striped Burrowing Tree Frog, that page would still be useful, just like every other page on the Internet about an obscure topic. The page, if it was good enough, would show up on the right Google searches and more Tree Frog fans would begin contributing to it. And if that page worked well, it could easily lead to others. Contrast this with a dictionary, which you're probably only going to use if it has a high percentage of the words you want to look up.
6. **Segmented subjects.** Few people are passionate about learning all human knowledge. But many more people are passionate about some subset of that. Encyclopedias allow the people who really care about French social theorists to spend all their time on that, without ever caring about the rest of the site. And the same is true of readers. The result is that lots of different people can work on lots of different parts, with the whole project getting done as a result, even though nobody worked on that explicitly. Contrast this with coming up with a theory, where the work requires understanding all the data and thinking about it as a whole.
7. **Personally useful.** The best way to understand something is to write about it and the best thing to write is a layman's explanation. An encyclopedia provides a opportunity to do just that. At the same time, it captures what you've learned in case you forget it later and gives the concept more form so that you're more likely to remember. By contrast, writing guides for children doesn't teach you much.
8. **Enjoyable work.** An encyclopedia mostly consists of people trying to explain things and explaining things can be quite fun. At parties, if you ask someone about the problem they've dedicated their life to, they'll gladly talk your ear off about it for hours. Wikipedia capitalizes on this tendency while also magnifying it — now it's not just one partygoer, it's the whole world listening. Contrast this with a project like categorizing all the pages on the Internet, which most people would find quite boring.

I came up with these principles just by thinking about why I use Wikipedia and not about specific examples of people who have violated them. So it's a little surprising that it turns out to mostly be a list of wiki sites that haven't

exactly taken off: SourceWatch fails 1, vanity projects fail 2, Wikitorial failed 3, Wikibooks fails 4, Wiktionary fails 5, the over-specialized sites fail 6, Wikijunior fails 7, and Wikispecies fails 8 (at least as far as I'm concerned).

Of course, even if you get all these things right, that says nothing about whether your site will succeed. Success requires more than just a good idea, it requires doing the hard work of actually making things happen. But that's a topic for another article.

The Politics of Wikipedians

December 12, 2006

[Original link](#)

A film director named Jaron Lanier recently published [an essay titled “Digital Maoism”](#). The essay is a dreadful mishmash of name-calling, whining, and downright incoherence, but insofar as Lanier has a point, it is this: people often attribute facts and claims to “Wikipedia”, as if it was some giant hive mind that combined all our individual thoughts into one group opinion. But, in reality, Wikipedia is simply written by people, people with individual voices and ideas. And technology is making us lose sight of that.

(I maybe doing Lanier too great a service by attributing such a coherent view to him as nothing quite so clear is ever actually expressed in the article. Nonetheless, I will continue as if this is Lanier’s view.)

It is an interesting point, but what Lanier finds so frightening is precisely what I find so exciting about these technologies. I still remember the light bulb that went off in my head when my friend Dan Connolly answered a question by saying “According to Google, X is the case.” “Google” had said no such thing, of course, but the Google algorithm had processed all the links on the Web and send Dan the page it thought most relevant to his query. It was this particular page that said X, of course, but the notion that Google itself was answering questions in this way was a revelation.

The same is true of Wikipedia. There are individual people, obviously, but what makes Wikipedia so fascinating are the technical and social processes that combine their work, turning it into something no individual person is responsible for or would necessarily endorse.

I often find myself wondering what Wikipedia would say about such-and-such a subject or how important Wikipedia thinks something else is. I refuse to edit my Wikipedia page, not only because it’s bad form, but because I’m genuinely curious about how Wikipedia sees me. It’s an odd thing, to think a site that anyone can edit actually has opinions or concerns or a point of view on the world, but it does, and it’s a fascinating one.

The Goog Life: how Google keeps employees by treating them like kids

December 13, 2006

[Original link](#)

I was talking with a friend the other day about that perennial subject of conversation in the Valley, Google. And finally she gave me the clue that made the whole place make sense. “It’s about infantilizing people,” she explained. “Give them free food, do their laundry, let them sit on bouncy brightly-colored balls. Do everything so that they never have to grow up and learn how to live life on their own.”

And when you look at it that way, everything Google does makes a sick sort of sense.

Not a whole lot has changed since the last time I visited Google. The campus is bigger — the buildings across the street, instead of being reserved for lawyers and other lowlifes, are now being used by the engineering staff as well, to keep up with Google’s nonstop growth. And the employees seem a little less excited about things than the last time I was there. Nobody says “We’re on a mission to change the world!” anymore. Now they say, “Yeah, I’m just going to stick around here another six months until my options vest.” and “I kind of want to transfer out of my group but I worry that all the other groups are worse.”

But the two blatant changes to the campus are a large, terribly fake-looking replica of SpaceShipOne hanging in the middle of the main building and a replica dinosaur skeleton standing outside. “It’s as if this place is being decorated by seven-year-olds,” a friend comments. It also reminds me of Robert Reich’s comment about Newt Gingrich: “His office is adorned with figurines of dinosaurs, as you might find in the bedrooms of little boys who dream of one day being huge and powerful.”

The dinosaurs and spaceships certainly fit in with the infantilizing theme, as does the hot tub-sized ball pit that Googlers can jump into and throw ball fights. Everyone I know who works there either acts childish (the army of programmers), enthusiastically adolescent (their managers and overseers), or else is deeply cynical (the hot-shot programmers). But as much as they may want to leave Google, the infantilizing tactics have worked: they’re afraid they wouldn’t be able to survive anywhere else.

Google hires programmers straight out of college and tempts them with all the benefits of college life. Indeed, as the hiring brochures stress, the place was explicitly modeled upon college. At one point, I wondered why Google didn’t just go all the way and build their own dormitories. After all, weren’t the late-night dorm-room conversations with others who were smart like you one of the best parts of college life? But as the gleam wears off the Google, I can see why it’s no place anyone would want to hang around for that long. Even the suburban desert of Mountain View is better.

Google's famed secrecy doesn't really do a very good job of keeping information from competitors. Those who are truly curious can pick up enough leaks and read enough articles to figure out how mostly everything works. But what it does do is create an aura of impossibility around the place. People read the airbrushed versions of Google technologies in talks and academic papers and think that Google has some amazingly large computer lab with amazingly powerful technology. But hang around a Googler long enough and you'll hear them complain about the unreliability of GFS and how they don't really have enough computers to keep up with the load.

"It's always frightening when you see how the sausage actually gets made," explains a product manager. And that's exactly what the secrecy is supposed to prevent. The rest of the world sees Google as this impenetrable edifice with all the mysteries of the world inside ("I hear once you've worked there for 256 days they teach you the secret levitation," [explains xkcd](#)) while the select few inside the walls know the truth — there is no there there — and are bound together by this burden.

Such a strategy may have worked in the early days, when Googlers were a select and special few, but as the company grows larger and employee's identification with it grows thinner, Google has to step up their efforts to acculturate. And that's where the life-size dinosaur replicas come in. Enjoy being huge and powerful while you can. Because, like the dinosaurs, this too will pass.

Think Bigger: A Generalist Manifesto

December 14, 2006

[Original link](#)

Our world is full of forces pushing us towards specificity. Open a newspaper and it's divided into topic sections. Go to the bookstore and it's divided into subject categories. Go to school and the classes are all in separate fields. Get a degree and you have to study in a particular major. Get a job and you have to work at a particular task.

The world needs specificists, of course, but it also needs generalists. And we see precious few of those. It's not hard to see why: try to do something big and everyone will try to talk you out of it.

"That's impossible," they'll say. "Do that and you'll only drive yourself crazy."

"If that worked, don't you think someone else would have done it?"

"With all due respect, what makes you the expert on that subject?"

Tell someone you're working on a dissertation about the mating dance of the East African dung beetle and they won't bat an eye. It would be the height of impoliteness to ask "Is that really worth spending three years on?" — even if that's exactly what you're thinking. But set your sights a little bit higher and people have no problem knocking you down. "Come on," they'll say, furrowing their brow, "do you really think you're going to be able to pull something like that off?"

Don't listen to them. People are afraid of grandeur; it challenges the status quo. But you shouldn't be. "Look up more" should be your motto; "Think bigger" your mantra.

The first step is to recognize your place in things. If you study beetle mating habits, look at the larger mating patterns your studies fall into, look at the big picture of animal behavior, ask where you fit in the bigger question of what it means for an animal to behave. This is what I mean by "Look up more."

But if you do this—and I believe you will—then you'll find it hard to stay satisfied with your dung beetle project. You'll start wondering if you could move on to bigger things. Perhaps just a little bit bigger at first—analyzing a few more types, discussing a few more implications—but soon you'll notice that others have left the field wide open for the truly big picture stuff and you'll start wondering why it's not there that you should stake your claim. This is what I mean by "Think bigger."

Sure, at first it'll be frightening biting off more than you've ever had to chew. But the fear will soon give way to exhilaration and the extra work involved will

be paid for in the additional notoriety, in the joy of knowing that you've made a real difference. After all, do you really want to spend the rest of your life studying dung beetles?

Tips for Better Thinking

December 15, 2006

[Original link](#)

Go to the library and you'll find whole bookcases full of books on how to write better. But look for a book on how to *think* better and you'll be busy for a while. (The only major book I could find — *Crimes Against Logic* — was a dreadful little series of basic logical fallacies dressed up in political polemic.)

It can't be that writing is more important than thinking. While I've met many people who can't exactly write, it seems that just about everyone has to think — even writers. Nor do I think it's that the task is really harder. We know very little about the internal process of writing, so writing guides consist mostly of good and bad examples, along with some general rules. Surely one could do the same for thought.

Perhaps the answer is that there isn't such a thing as good thinking. But the case for it seems even stronger than the case for good writing. Good thinking is that which better helps us approximate reality — avoiding fallacies, missteps of judgment, faulty assumptions, misunderstandings, and needless fillips and loops.

And yet the subject's plain importance, I can find scarcely an article that takes up the topic. Where is the piece that savages bad thinking the way [Mark Twain savaged Fenimore Cooper's aimless writing](#) or the way [Orwell went after political abuses of English](#) or, for more modern readers, [Matt Taibbi's dissection of Thomas Friedman's latest book](#)? It seems like it would be just as fun — if not more — to watch a gifted writer slice and dice up a convoluted thought until it becomes apparent that it's actually meaningless.

The closest I can think of is [Chomsky's review of B.F. Skinner](#) (an unfair match-up if there ever was one — a bit like using a blow torch to clear off a dust mite). But Chomsky's attacking Skinner's ideas rather specifically (and, more generally, exposing the political implications behind bogus science); the essay is certainly not one in a series of examples of how to think better.

As one gets more skilled, the opportunities for improvement become less available — apparently because fewer people are interested in improving. The library gives free courses in how to read better, but these are for people who have trouble reading long books, not for those who already can but want to continue to improve. And there are courses in improving your writing, but they generally only get you from awful to serviceable, and not from serviceable to great. The same seems true of thinking — there are many books on fairly blatant logical fallacies to avoid, but few on more subtle improvements to thought.

And yet, at least with writing, people try. There are English courses in schools, [taught by some of the greatest writers of the generation](#). And journalists can semi-apprentice themselves by freelancing before great editors, who slice and dice their prose until it shines. Yet I've never seen a class or an apprenticeship in thinking, except perhaps incidentally.

The reason, I think, is because no one is [thinking bigger](#). But that means there's plenty of opportunity. The field's wide open, folks.

The Grim Meathook Future

December 17, 2006

[Original link](#)

In the technology industry we have a phrase. We call it the “grim meathook future”, after [a brilliant piece by Joshua Ellis](#):

I think the problem is that the future, maybe for the first time since WWII, lies on the far side of an event horizon for us, *because* there are so many futures possible. There’s the wetware future, the hardware future, the transhumanist future, the post-rationalist (aka fundamentalist) future.

And then there’s the future where everything just sort of keeps going on the way it has, with incremental changes, and technology is no longer the deciding factor in things. You don’t need high tech to change the world; you need Semtex and guns that were designed by a Russian soldier fifty-odd years ago.

Meanwhile, most of the people with any genuine opportunity or ability to effect global change are too busy patting each other on the back at conventions and blue-skying goofy social networking tools that are essentially useless to 95% of the world’s population, who live within fifteen feet of everyone they’ve ever known and have no need to track their fuck buddies with GPS systems. (This, by the way, includes most Americans, quite honestly.)

You can’t blame them for this, because it’s fun and it’s a great way to travel and get paid, but it doesn’t actually help solve any real problems, except the problem of media theory grad students, which the rest of the world isn’t really interested in solving.

Feeding poor people is useful tech, but it’s not very sexy and it won’t get you on the cover of *Wired*. Talk about it too much and you sound like an earnest hippie. So nobody wants to do that.

They want to make cell phones that can scan your personal measurements and send them real-time to potential sex partners. Because, you know, the fucking Japanese teenagers love it, and Japanese teenagers are clearly the smartest people on the planet.

The upshot of all of this is that the Future gets divided; the cute, insulated future that Joi Ito and Cory Doctorow and you and I inhabit, and the **grim meathook future** that most of the world is facing, in which they watch their squats and under-developed fields

get turned into a giant game of Counterstrike between crazy faith-ridden jihadist motherfuckers and crazy faith-ridden American red-neck motherfuckers, each doing their best to turn the entire world into one type of fascist nightmare or another.

Of course, nobody really wants to talk about that future, because it's depressing and not fun and doesn't have Fischerspooner doing the soundtrack. So everybody pretends they don't know what the future holds, when the unfortunate fact is that — unless we start paying very serious attention — it holds what the past holds: a great deal of extreme boredom punctuated by occasional horror and the odd moment of grace.

Drugs and Guns

December 19, 2006

[Original link](#)

In movies, it's clear when the camera is drunk: blurred vision, shaky motions, everything becoming slightly less clear. It's similarly obvious when the camera is on acid: rainbow colors, things melting into each other, and a sort of dazed gaze. Yet, despite the prevalence of pot, I've never seen a film or TV show where the camera is high on marijuana.

Perhaps that's because there's nothing to show. Some deep breaths, a slight tingling sensation, and then an odd feeling as if something is pressing on part of your brain, lifting your head up, making you happy. An odd happiness, to be sure, but a happiness nonetheless. Friends are unable to distinguish between when I've just gone skinnydipping and when I'm simply high. It's hard to show a camera being happy.

Contrast this with Omega-3 fatty acids, the fish oil acids that various new studies are supposed to show have all sorts of positive effects for your brain. When I swallowed a stack of Omega-3 pills, I felt as if I was crawling up into my head, living in there instead of plotting the next moves for my body. It made it pretty hard to get anything done.

In San Francisco, medical marijuana is perfectly legal and health-food culture makes Omega-3 practically mandatory, but possessing a gun is actually outlawed within city limits (even for off-duty cops). To actually discharge one you have to drive south of the border, where shooting ranges allow deprived northerners to partake of this recreational craze.

Unlike the flowing, hippie vibe of drug culture, gun culture is strictly utilitarian: concrete walls, florescent lights, drab carpeting. Tough-looking guys take your license and hand you a gun. First-timers go into the training room for a quick primer on how to use it, then you take your weapon, ammo, and target into the shooting range.

Most of the targets are pretty bland — vague silhouettes or bullseyes — but there was one frightening option that featured a blatantly stereotypical illustration of a hooded bad guy character holding a gun to a cute young girl's head. Normally descriptions of such pictures are more evocative than the pictures themselves, but this drawing was just about perfect.

Naturally, this was the target our neighbors on the shooting range had chosen and were now shooting at with enormous shotguns whose blasts shook the entire room. Meanwhile, I had a small handgun with a little bit of a kick and a simple silhouette.

My gun jammed the first couple of times I tried to shoot; I had to go through the process of unloading and reloading it several times before I even shot a single bullet. It's amazing how comically fake the actual gun feels when you do this — it makes all the noises and motions you'd expect from a gun, but it seems to lack any internal mechanisms for doing the actual shooting, like a prop for a movie.

When I finally did manage to get the gun working, I relaxed, aimed my weapon, and took ten shots at where I thought the bullseye was. (My long-distance eyesight is really terrible and I hadn't thought to bring my glasses until now, so I gave it my best shot.) I shot again and again, the pattern of kicking and aiming becoming almost rhythmic. When the gun was finally empty, I pushed the little button to whirr my target back to me. To my amazement, nearly all ten bullets had gone in right by the bullseye. My partner looked frightened.

What's odd about shooting is how, well, relaxing it is. Something about the furious action of the gun seems to drain you of all your nervous energy. And while, if you think about it, the item you're holding is a weapon of terrible destruction, there's very little visual evidence of that fact. Just as the gun feels like a prop, the whole thing feels like a game: aim, press the trigger, and some dots appear in a piece of paper. But when you're done you don't feel hyped-up like after a video game. Instead you feel as if what you actually discharged was your nervous energy.

We rolled up the bullet-ridden silhouette to take home as a souvenir. "Maybe I'll mail this to my mom," I said. "I don't think that's a very good idea," came the reply.

Medium Stupid

December 19, 2006

[Original link](#)

In July 1, 2004, Paul Krugman gave a talk about the state of the American economy. After the significant 2001 recession, the economy had begun growing again, with increasing growth in America's economic output, or GDP. But, unlike the growth in the Clinton years, the extra money being made in America wasn't going to the average person. Instead, as the economy grew, the wages for the average person stagnated or even declined. All the extra money was going to the people at the very top.

In the press, President Bush's supporters complained that the public wasn't more happy about the growing economy Bush had given them. After all, he'd pulled the country out of a recession; normally that's good for a boost in the polls. Sadly, Americans were just too dumb to notice, Bush's supporters concluded. If only they paid more attention to the news. But what these people "are really urging," Krugman explained in his talk, "is not that the public should be smart, but that the public should be medium stupid."[†]

If the public was really "stupid" (i.e. uneducated), it wouldn't watch the news at all. Instead, it would notice it was out of work, poorly-paid, or otherwise having trouble making ends meet, and conclude that the economy wasn't doing very well. On the other hand, if the public was really smart, it'd dig deep into the numbers to find that — surprise, surprise! — for most people, the economy wasn't doing as well as the headline numbers about GDP growth would suggest. The only way for the public to buy the Bush administration spin is to be medium stupid.

The medium stupid idea has much wider applicability. Most specifically, it explains the general state that the mainstream media tries to inculcate in the public. The uneducated American has a general idea that invading other countries is probably a bad idea. The overeducated American can point to dozens of examples of why this is going to be a bad idea. But the "medium stupid" American, the kind that gullibly reads the *New York Times* and watches the *CBS Evening News*, is convinced that Iraq is full of weapons of mass destruction that could blow our country to bits at any minute. A little education can be a dangerous thing.

(Along these lines, at one point I was working on a documentary film about the evening news that would demonstrate this point. The title, *Medium Stupid*, would also be a convenient homage to *Medium Cool*.)

The same is true in school. As Christopher Hayes points out in his genius article, [Is A Little Economics A Dangerous Thing?](#), the uneducated American thinks

raising the minimum wage is a pretty good idea — after all, people deserve to be paid more than \$5 an hour. And the overeducated American feels the same way; like the dozens of Economics Prize winners who signed a petition to raise the minimum wage, they've seen the studies showing that raising the minimum wage has only a negligible effect on employment. But those who have only had Economics 101 buy the propaganda that government interference in the market will only make things worse. And, [as Hayes shows](#), this leads to bad decisions in many areas — the minimum wage being only one prominent example.

The medium stupid idea has applicability in other areas of life. The uncultured person who knows nothing about fashion doesn't mind wandering around in jeans and a t-shirt. And the overcultured person knows exactly what to wear to be hip. But medium stupid ol' me looks bad and feels bad about it.

To work, propaganda, be it from the Bush administration or the fashion industry, requires you to be medium stupid. Know too little and you never hear the falsehoods. Know too much and you can spot it for a fraud. Which side of the line do you want to be on?

Museums and Exploratoriums

December 21, 2006

[Original link](#)

The San Francisco Exploratorium is widely regarded as one of the finest hands-on museums in the world. There are spinoffs in the San Francisco airport and [a Klutz book](#). Like Richard Feynman, the museum has become something of a touchstone of rightness for the science-minded community.

The Exploratorium is no doubt a fine museum, as far as such things go, but like all museums, it is deeply flawed. Like most media of American education, museums are hugely ineffective edifices.

The museum presents a golden opportunity to teach. You have a crowd that is explicitly seeking out knowledge, coming to you in person, giving you a large chunk of their time, and accompanied by their friends and family. It is hard to imagine a more ideal setting for education. And yet, this golden chance is squandered by boring exhibit designs.

Many museums simply present nominally educational things, like pieces of art or natural specimens of science, with a couple sentences of explanation. It is not clear what one is actually supposed to learn from this and in practice the answer seems to be: not much.

Science museums take things another step by showing actual examples of physical principles, and the Exploratorium goes a step further by letting the kids control them. But in my experience although there were many interesting principles on display, there was little learning. Each exhibit has been regarded as a little toy, to be pushed and prodded until you get bored and move on to something else.

It's not the visitor's fault: the exhibit makes the principle at work less than clear and even if someone was interested in reading the accompanying text, it rarely says much more than the name of the phenomenon; no actual explanation is provided.

Museums have infuriated me on this front since I visited them as a little kid. I remember drawing up plans for a genuinely educational museum, and although I was extremely young at the time, the general principles still seem sound: split people up into groups, have them try to solve real problems, encourage them to sit and engage with something over time instead of flitting from exhibit to exhibit, make it just as rewarding for adults as well as kids. (My more specific ideas from that period, involving floating chairs going down rear-projection tunnels, seem a little sillier.)

But even in the multi-exhibit model used by the Exploratorium there is much that could be improved. The exhibits could use what Tufte calls “small multiples” to give kids a physical intuition about a phenomenon by letting them change the relevant variables, rather than just showing them one case. The descriptions could give the force vectors and equations for each examples instead of just the name. Some of it might go over kids heads, but even just getting them accustomed to such things is a valuable skill.

Museums, [like lectures](#), seem to be one of those things that are simply taken for granted as a necessary part of being cultured. Cities have to have them, citizens have to visit them. Everybody involved feels virtuous about the enterprise and nobody ever asks if anything is being learned.

Cliche Finder

December 22, 2006

[Original link](#)

It's not an essay, but I hope I can count it as a blog post. Here's a new hack I made for my friend Quinn:

[Cliche Finder](#)

Sociology or Anthropology

December 23, 2006

[Original link](#)

Sometimes people ask me what the difference is between sociology and anthropology. There are the surface ones, of course — sociology typically studies first-world societies, whereas anthropology has a rep for studying so-called “primitive” cultures. But the fundamental difference is a philosophical one: sociologists study society, while anthropologists study culture.

What’s the difference? Let’s do a case study. It’s easy to notice a subtle sort of sexism in American textbooks. For example, studies have found that in biology textbooks sperm are seen as competitive creatures while eggs are passive receptacles they aim to penetrate. But the actual science on the subject is much less clear: eggs seem to do a fair bit of selection themselves, etc.

I saw a paper by an anthropologist on this fact; their argument was that these textbooks were a result of the sexism of American culture, a culture which sees men as competing for access to women, and those notions are naturally transported onto our writing about conception. Sexist culture, sexist output.

A sociologist would dig a little deeper. They’d see who writes the textbooks, perhaps notice a disproportionate number of males. They’d look into why it was that males got these jobs, find the sexism inherent in the relevant institutions. They’d argue it was the structures of society that end up with sexist textbooks, not some magical force known as “American culture”.

As you might guess, I’m on the side of the sociologists. Blaming things on culture — as if it were a natural property of a group of people or a mystical life force with its own mind — seems too facile. It also seems wrong.

I’ve mostly been talking about the cultural anthropologists, but there are also a subset of racist anthropologists (sometimes called “anthropological science,” in accordance with [Wall’s Law](#)). These anthropologists tried to measure different properties of people, see if they could quantify the differences between the races and predict criminality from the shape of the head.

Cultural anthropologists disdain all that and prefer to endorse a very left-wing notion of cultural relativism. (One shouldn’t make judgments about other cultures!) But in doing so, they end up pushing the judgments off onto the peoples involved. Just like the racist anthropologists, they end up suggesting that the reason people over here believe act differently from the people over there is because they’re different people.

But if there’s one thing we’ve learned from psychology, it’s that — for the most part — people are people, wherever you go. As Zimbardo’s Stanford Prison

Experiment showed, put normal people into the wrong situation and they turn into devious enforcement machines. And put the same people into a different society and they'll change just as fast.

It isn't culture — whatever that is — that causes these things; it's institutions. Institutions create environments which force a course of action. And that's why I'm a sociologist.

Bonus recommendation: I've been watching *The Wire* lately; perhaps the most sociologically-inclined show on television. And that's what makes it interesting, unlike all the other good-evil cop dramas.

The Journalist's Creed

December 24, 2006

[Original link](#)

I am not sure what more I could tell you about these pieces. I could tell you that I liked doing some of them more than others, but that all of them were hard for me to do, and took more time than perhaps they were worth; that there is always a point in the writing of a piece when I sit in a room literally papered with false starts and cannot put one word after another and imagine that I have suffered a small stroke, leaving me apparently undamaged but actually aphasic. I was in fact as sick as I had ever been when I was writing "Slouching Towards Bethlehem"; the pain kept me awake at night and so for twenty and twenty-one hours a day I drank gin-and-hot-water to blunt the pain and took Dexedrine to blunt the gin and wrote the piece. (I would like you to believe that I kept working out of some real professionalism, to meet the deadline, but that would not be entirely true; I did have a deadline, but it was also a troubled time, and working did to the trouble what gin did to the pain.) What else is there to tell? I am bad at interviewing people. I avoid situations in which I have to talk to anyone's press agent. (This precludes doing pieces on most actors, a bonus in itself.) I do not like to make telephone calls, and would not like to count the mornings I have sat on some Best Western motel bed somewhere and tried to force myself to put through the call to the assistant district attorney. My only advantage as a reporter is that I am so physically small, so temperamentally unobtrusive, and so neurotically inarticulate that people tend to forget that my presence runs counter to their best interests. And it always does. That is one last thing to remember: *writers are always selling somebody out.*

(Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, xv-xvi)

In fact I have abandoned altogether that kind of pointless entry; instead I tell what some would call lies. "That's simply not true," the members of my family frequently tell me when they come up against my memory of a shared event. "The party was *not* for you, the spider was *not* a black widow, *it wasn't that way at all.*" Very likely they are right, for not only have I always had trouble distinguishing between what happened and what merely might have happened, but I remain unconvinced that the distinction, for my purposes, matters. The cracked crab that I recall having for lunch the day my father came

home from Detroit in 1945 must certainly be embroidery, worked into the day's pattern to lend verisimilitude; I was ten years old and would not now remember the cracked crab. The day's events did not turn on cracked crab. And yet it is precisely that fictitious crab that makes me see the afternoon all over again, a home movie run all too often, the father bearing gifts, the child weeping, an exercise in family love and guilt. Or that is what it was to me. Similarly, perhaps it never did snow that August in Vermont; perhaps there never were flurries in the night wind and maybe no one else felt the ground hardening and summer already dead even as we pretended to bask in it, but that was how it felt to me, and it might as well have snowed, could have snowed, did snow.

(*Slouching*, 134)

Cultural Imperialism Sucks: a visit to Berlin

December 27, 2006

[Original link](#)

After I exited the plane, it took me several minutes before I realized I was in Germany. After all, the airport was designed with the same basic concepts, the people all looked fairly normal, and all the advertisements were all identical to their counterparts in the US.

Once we left the airport and begun wandering around Berlin, things didn't get much better. There was a Dunkin' Donuts and a Burger King, a Pizza Hut and a T-Mobile store (called T-Punkt in some weird homage to Ashton Kutcher), ads for Coca-Cola and even a The Body Shop. (A major shopping mall was run by Sony; just like in old SF.) The streets looked roughly similar, the cars had the same manufacturers, the buildings had the same basic styles.

The similarity plays tricks on you. It not only took me a while to realize I was in Germany, it was a while before I realized this was the former home of the Nazis. (I was trying to think where I'd heard of the Reichstag before...) When I exclaimed my discovery, apparently the older people on the bus turned to look at me. One wonders how much of their fitting in is an attempt to forget their different past.

There were still differences, of course. In America, if someone knocked you out and took you on a plane to some random city in the country, you probably wouldn't notice except for the fact that the street signs might have changed color. Aside from that tiny bit of individuality, cities in America are almost literally indistinguishable, down to the streets and landscaping. Germany isn't that bad.

The most obvious is that they get to keep speaking their quirky little language, although only speaking English here gets you pretty far. On the other hand, their currency—and presumably their government—has been integrated into the EU. But the biggest thing you notice is that the city is simply more elegant. The cars are smaller, the public transit far superior, and the font on the street signs to die for. But if London had EU currency, I'm not sure it'd be all that distinguishable.

There is a blatant taste for modernist architecture. (This is the land of the Bauhaus, I suppose.) Just about every building I've been to has been done up in styles that would be considered high culture in America. Including our hotel room, where you can see into the top half of the shower from the bed and a door swings between the shower and the toilet, so that you can only use one with any privacy at once.

Despite the usual guidebook platitudes, Berlin does not feel like a particularly vibrant city. Abandoned construction sites are everywhere, with large quantities of supplies just laying by the street, and graffiti coats most public surfaces, not enough to demand a repainting, but enough to make it everpresent. All the stores have signs announcing that new, shorter hours will begin starting next year. I overhear complaints about 18% unemployment.

With an overseas like this, one wonders why Americans make such a fuss about going overseas. One can apparently visit Europe with about as much culture shock as visiting LA: a few different local chains, a different public transit system, a new accent to learn, and, of course, a new set of street signs. A convenience for the business traveler, perhaps. A vast emptiness for everyone else.

Wither the Two Cultures?

December 27, 2006

[Original link](#)

Nearly fifty years ago C. P. Snow delivered his famous “Two Cultures” lecture, deploring the state of affairs in which the humanities, especially those who believed in constructionism, had intellectually diverged from the sciences. Scientists didn’t care about Shakespeare; while literists bragged about not knowing any math.

But pick up a modern popular novel and it’s hard to see this criticism holding much weight. All the literary outlets have been touting Thomas Pynchon’s new tome, *Against the Day*. Pynchon’s novels, as eminent literist Scott McLemee put it, discuss “the domains of information theory, mathematical physics, cosmology” with frequent references to such subjects as “William Hamilton’s quaternions or Georg Riemann’s zeta function” in which the Michelson-Morley experiment takes center stage.

It’s hard to imagine anything but a new Richard Feynman book could do more to warm a scientist’s heart.

Meanwhile, take Jonathan Franzen’s bestseller, *The Corrections* (even an Oprah’s book club pick!). The book, which revolves around the dot-com economic upturn, not only features frequent and detailed references to eigenvector-based computer algorithms, advances in neurological technology, and odd properties of electrophoresis, but even features a main character who goes from being in that most constructivist of professions — left-wing literary criticism — to a job building dot-com websites.

It seems geekiness has gone mainstream. And along with it, the geeky culture of scientism now butts up against the aesthete culture of literism. It’s hard to see how anyone can take the two cultures complaints seriously anymore.

Welcome to the Panopticon

December 28, 2006

[Original link](#)

“Your picture is going to be on the front door of Wired News,” Quinn told me. “That’s almost like being a journalist,” I replied. “No,” she explained. “The thing about being a journalist is that it’s never about you. You’re like the person sitting next to the journalist.” “Funny that,” I replied, “because that’s exactly what I am.”

This year’s Chaos Communication Congress opens with a unique opportunity — your chance to track the movements of a Wired News’ reporter on the scene, as well as nearly a thousand other visitors to the annual hacker convention.

[...]

track Quinn Norton (ID 254135) and Wired Digital’s Aaron Swartz (ID 254260), two of nearly 1,000 participants wearing RFID trackers for the duration of the congress.

(Quinn Norton, [Hacker Con Submits to Spychips](#), *Wired News*, December 28, 2006)

“It’s funny,” I noted. “The first time my employers find out where I am this week may be when they report it on their own news site.”

Causes of Conformance

December 28, 2006

[Original link](#)

Institutions require people to do their bidding. A tobacco company must find people willing to get kids addicted to cigarettes, a school must find teachers willing to repeat the same things that they were taught, a government must find public servants willing to enforce the law.

Part of this is simply necessity. To survive, people need money; to get money, people need a job; to get a job, people need to find an existing institution. But the people in these positions don't usually see themselves as mercenaries, doing the smallest amount to avoid getting fired while retaining their own value system. Instead, they adopt the value system of the institution, pushing it even when it's not necessary for their own survival. What explains this pattern of conformance?

The most common explanation is an active process of beating people in: politicians get paid campaign contributions (legalized bribes) to meet the needs of the wealthy, employees get bonuses and penalties for meeting the needs of their employers, kids get threatened with time-outs and bad grades if they don't follow the demands of their teachers. In each case, the people are forced through a series of carrots and sticks to learn the values of the people in charge.

This is a fairly blatant form of conformance, but I suspect it's by far the least effective. Studies on punishment and rewards show that dealing them out lessens the victim's identification with the enforcer. Hitting me every time I don't do my job right may teach me how to do my job, but it's not going to make me particularly excited about it.

Indeed, punishments and rewards interfere with a much more significant effect: cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance studies have found that simply by getting you to do something, you can be persuaded to agree with it. In a classic study, students asked to write an essay in favor of a certain position were found to agree more with the position than students who could write for either position. Similarly, people who pay more to eat a certain food claim to like it more than people who pay less.

The basic theory is that people work to lessen the disagreement between their beliefs and their actions and in most cases it's simply easier to change your beliefs. Quitting your job for the government is tough and painful; and who knows if you'll soon find another? So it's much easier to simply persuade yourself that you agree with the government, that you're doing the right and noble thing, that your work to earn a paycheck is really a service to mankind.

Of course, it also helps that everyone you're surrounded by feels the same way. Culture is another important influence on our beliefs. Another raft of social psychology studies find that people are willing to deny even obvious truths to fit in with a group. In the famous Asch studies on conformance, a group of confederates were seated around a table, with the subject of the experiment on the end. Everyone at the table was given a sheet with three lines, one obviously longer than the other, and then was asked to name the two lines of identical length. All of the confederates gave an obviously wrong answer and by the time the question got to the guy at the end, he ended up conforming and giving the wrong answer as well.

Similarly, spend your days in government offices where people simply take it for granted that they're doing the right thing, and you're likely to pick up that tacit assumption yourself. Such ideas are not only frequently stated, they're often the very foundation of the discussion. And foundational ideas are particularly hard to question, particularly because they're so taken for granted.

But perhaps the most important effect for conformance is simply selection. Imagine that nobody was corruptible, that all the carrots and sticks in the world couldn't get someone to do something they thought morally wrong, that they stood fast in the face of cognitive dissonance, and that their moral fiber was so strong that they were able to resist a less conscientious culture. Even then, it wouldn't make much difference. As long as there was enough variety in people and their moral values, all an organization would need to do is simply fire (or fail to promote) everyone who didn't play their game.

Everyone knows you climb the corporate ladder by being a "team player". Those who make a fuss or don't quite live up to expectations simply get passed over for a promotion. The result is simply that — without any explicit pressure at all — the people in positions of power happen to be the ones who identify with the organization's aims.

It's easy to look at the rather more flashy pieces of punishing people for failing to follow orders or living in a culture of conformity. But for those who want obedient employees, sometimes the most effective technique is simply failing to say yes.

Products That Should Exist

December 29, 2006

[Original link](#)

A free Gmail clone. A lot of people I know use Gmail for email. It's not because they don't have access to servers or can't afford a couple gigabytes of disk space. It's because Gmail is simply the best interface for email out there right now. It'd be even better if it was free software, though.

The biggest problem with Gmail is that you can't run it offline. But if it was free software, you could run it on your local machine and use it even when not connected to the net. This would also have the nice benefit of making it much faster for the user. Some synchronization code would be necessary, but it'd be worth it.

Gmail isn't all that complicated; this really shouldn't be that hard.

A nice OS X Tor interface. I've talked to a bunch of people who would like to use Tor, but find it just too complicated. Ideally, the interface should be very simple. You download the Tor binary and double-click it to start using Tor and quit out to stop. And so that you know it's working, it'll have a little window that will show you the names of servers you're connected to.

OS X has APIs for changing the system preferences; just use those to set the SOCKS server properly. Tor has APIs for finding out when you connect to a server, use those to set the display. For a decent Mac programmer, this can't be more than a day's worth of work, but it'd make Tor vastly more usable.

Decent backup software. I've [already written about this](#). It still hasn't happened.

If anyone's interested in building any of these, [let me know](#) and perhaps we can work something out.

Happy New Year

January 2, 2007

[Original link](#)

Nobody seems to have noticed, but over the past couple months, this blog has been publishing a record post a day. Every weekday — plus, starting a little later, a bonus post on sundays — I’ve written an entirely new essay. I’ve done this while traveling, while celebrating holidays, while galavanting around the world, while sleeping on the couches of published authors. I’ve even written and posted whole pieces using the SSH feature on my cell phone.

I don’t know anyone else who has done this. There are columnists who write for the paper, but they only have to post a couple times a week. And there are bloggers who post many times a day, but they mostly post links and commentary, not whole essays. As far as I know, I’m alone in this bizarre pursuit.

It was a fun experiment but it was also a lot of work. I still have lots to say, but I’m not sure that forcing myself to say it every day is quite so healthy. I want to work on writing better, not just faster. I wrote most of the blog posts in about an hour and while they’re decent for something written at that rate, they can rarely be called great.

So I think it’s time to slow down, work more on crafting my prose, maybe write for magazines and other outlets. (If someone out there wants to publish me, [drop me a line!](#)) This will probably hurt my readership, but running this blog has always been a weird and random occupation, done more for me than for page views.

So I guess that’s goodbye for now and thanks for stopping by. If this piece gets posted when it’s supposed to, it’s New Year’s Day and I’ve still got a couple more weeks of winter break to spend world-travelling. So expect some silence until I get back. *Au revoir!*

The Sociologist's Creed

January 2, 2007

[Original link](#)

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.

(Karl Marx, [The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon](#))

The Capital of Scandinavia

January 10, 2007

[Original link](#)

Sweden is a fascinating country, although it doesn't appear that way at first. The Stockholm airport tries hard to sell you on the city's importance, lining the walls with the faces of famous residents, none of whom I recognize. Stockholm is "The Capital of Scandinavia", at least according to the wall, the information desk, and the "You Are Here" signs spread around the city. All the signs are in English as well as Swedish and we didn't see a single person the entire trip who couldn't speak English (although one declined to).

Nor does the ride from the airport suggest anything special — the road is lined with the office parks of big companies, much like the streets of Silicon Valley. And the city seems, well, like a city, at least until you realize that's your apartment, not simply downtown.

Most American cities are still suffering from the "urban planning" designed to keep non-existent factory fumes away from people's homes. Even in San Francisco, where all sorts of crazy things are crammed into one small peninsula, there is still a clear separation of residence and business — blocks of victorian row houses, then a cross street with a bunch of shops.

But as far as I could tell, Stockholm doesn't have any such residential zones. All the apartments seemed to be on the floor above the normal street life; the two deeply intertwined; just the way I like it. (See *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* for more reasons.)

The apartments — *all* the apartments — are rent controlled, one of the socialist remnants in Sweden's social democracy. In practice, this leads to some odd results. No one ever gives up an apartment, so tenants feel safe installing nameplates on their doors. Instead of giving up the place, they give it to their family, their friends, or let their children inherit it. Once you have an apartment contract, you can swap it with anyone else's (and there are web sites to help you do this), but to get one you need to add your name to a list when you turn 18, and then wait for ten to twenty years for an apartment to open up. Those with money but not that kind of time instead pay under the table for a contract.

There are no homeless people in Stockholm, but one person I spoke to claimed that this was because the homeless didn't know anyone with a rent contract, so they all stayed in the suburbs, which they were more familiar with anyway, and as a result there ended up being about as many homeless per capita as in a the average American city.

Backlash politics is incredibly popular in the US, where there's not that much to backlash against, but it's even more popular in Sweden, where there's some

justification. US-style libertarians are everywhere, this time with some actual justification for their persecution complexes. Although not much. A new conservative government has recently taken power and has pulled all the libertarians out to fill up the political positions.

Our roommate just happened to hang out with libertarians in college; now all her friends are top officials in the government. A smaller country, it starts to seem like everyone knows everybody here (I suppose they all went to college together).

Of course, there are still outsiders. The country has private email mailing lists on which all the gossip about how the county is *actually* run (and who the royalty is *actually* screwing) is shared among the prominent journalists and other figures. (There are similar secret lists in other fields, including one for the left-wing of the US Democratic Party.) Journalists know that sharing that kind of information with the public simply isn't done and those who violate the rules are unceremoniously kicked off. Occasionally a young reporter uses their column to complain they're not on the list, but the people in the know just laugh at them.

It's the same kind of laugh you imagine Sweden's IKEA founders having [as you marvel at their clever tax-dodging schemes](#). IKEA, the famed Swedish interior design chain now sweeping the US, is owned by a company called Ingka Holding, which is actually owned by a tax-exempt not-for-profit — the world's largest, even larger than the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. (Not that selling interior furnishings is at all comparable to curing Malaria.) The not-for-profit channels its funds to a Dutch foundation which is operated by a Swiss lawyer friend but shares some of its assets with another Dutch company which is owned by a Luxembourg holding company which is owned by a company in the Netherlands which is run by a trust in the Carribean. You can probably guess where the tax-free money goes from there.

IKEA is everywhere in Sweden. Their couches fill the tiny rent-controlled apartments, their chairs are found in everyone's offices, and when you finish your drink the light shining through the bottom of the glass illuminates the word: IKEA.

A Moment Before Dying

January 18, 2007

[Original link](#)

There is a moment, immediately before life becomes no longer worth living, when the world appears to slow down and all its myriad details suddenly become brightly, achingly apparent.

For Alex, that moment came after exactly one week of pain, seven days of searing, tormenting agony that poured forth from his belly. Alex never liked his belly. Growing up he was always fat, surrounded by a family of bellowing, rotund Americans, who had a room in their house with wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling cabinets, all entirely filled with bags and boxes of various pre-processed semi-organic assemblages, which they used to stuff their faces at all hours of the day.

Alex had body image issues. He'd avoid mirrors because he couldn't bear to look at himself, his large bulbous cheeks obscuring his fine features. He avoided photos, covering his face or ducking out of the way when the click of the camera came, for the same reason: he didn't want to be confronted with the physical evidence of his disgusting nature, thought he could not go on living if he had to face the truth.

It wasn't until he got away from his family that he discovered his weight was not an immutable characteristic, like the fingerprints he often mused about burning off, like the dental records which had caused him so much adolescent anguish, like the DNA he'd heard so much about in school. He would take off his shirt and stare at his stomach in the full-length mirror. It was there, of course, hideous as ever, but also appreciably smaller. Its size, he realized, could change.

So Alex starved himself. Cut down from three meals a day to simply two and then to only one. And even that became superfluous most days. Alex simply wasn't hungry.

He watched his stomach dwindle, monitored his progress on the electronic read-out of his at-home scale, charted the numbers on his computer, admired the plunging trendlines.

He was doing so well. He told all his friends. The secret to losing weight, he would explain, is simply not eating. You just get used to it after a while. He looked at the beggars outside his window and refrained from giving them change so that they too could experience this miracle. He changed the channel when the radio began speaking about starvation in Africa. "Starvation isn't so bad," he scoffed. "You get used to it after a while." He wondered whether the USDA thrifty food budget could be further reduced.

He stopped going out. His friends always wanted to meet him for meals, or for drinks, events in which Alex simply wasn't interested anymore. Before long, Alex's friends were no longer interested in him.

Alex started eating in cafés, ordering a small pastry, sitting in a comfortable chair, listening to the music play over the loudspeakers. Soon he stopped doing even that.

Alex read on the Internet about death. There was a theory, increasingly well supported, that eating is what killed you. They found that rats on extremely restricted diets, rats who ate very few calories, lived impressively long. They saw the same results with other animals, up to and including chimpanzees. They suspected, but could not prove, the same was true of humans. Every little bite of food was another step towards death.

Alex started eating again. His appetite grew as slowly as it had declined but within months he was back to eating three meals a day. Food suddenly gave him pleasure again. He savored the tastes on his tongue.

One night he and his friends decided to try a new restaurant. But when the food came, Alex couldn't eat it. He thought it smelled funny. He let it sit there, his plate lying on the table, his food seething, untouched.

The next night Alex couldn't sleep. He'd wake up, feeling searing pains in his stomach, as if the food winding its way through his gut had spikes and was tearing apart the walls of his intestine.

He suffered like this for days, rolling on the floor in agony, unable to resist eating but every bite he ate causing him unimaginable pain. And still, he could not stop.

Five days in, it seemed like the worst had passed. The pains came less frequently, the pains were less intense. He actually slept that night.

The day Alex killed himself, he was awoken by pains, worse than ever. He rolled back-and-forth in bed as the sun came up, the light streaming through the windows eliminating the chance for any further sleep. At 9, he was startled by a phone call. The pains subsided, as if quieting down to better hear what the phone might say.

It was his boss. He had not been to work all week. He had been fired. Alex tried to explain himself, but couldn't find the words. He hung up the phone instead.

The day Alex killed himself, he wandered his apartment in a daze. The light streaming through the windows gave everything a golden glow, which had the odd effect of making the filth he'd become surrounded with seem cinematic.

Alex wanted to go outside for one last meal, but he had trouble making the appropriate connections. Jacket, shoes, pants, wallet. Each lay in a different spot upon the floor. Alex knew they went together, he drew lines connecting

them in his mind's eye, but it didn't see to fix anything, his eyes just kept bouncing from one item to another.

Finally, he summoned the intelligence to put them on. The world seemed funny afterwards. He noticed the way the key turned in the lock, like a hand rotating in front of his face, an interplay of light and shadow, objects in space. He noticed the packages sitting at his doorstep, begging him to open them, but their labels insisting that they were addressed to someone else. He noticed the frail old ladies who refused to obey the walk—don't walk signs and instead walked slowly, backs hunched, across a major intersection.

He went to a new café across the street, the one place he hadn't been to yet. Light streamed in through the huge picture windows, making the whole place seem bright and airy. So much light, in fact, that the outside seemed a glow, as if the café was suspended in the middle of a powerful white light. People held lowered, indistinct conversations. People on his left, people on his right, people behind him. But one conversation seemed to be coming from the ceiling. It might have been a trick of the acoustics. He looked up and saw two speakers staring back at him and listened closely.

The café was not playing music. It was playing a recording of two people's lowered, indistinct conversation.

The day Alex killed himself, he had a sudden, powerful craving for a Key Lime Sugar Cookie. It was odd the power the Key Lime Sugar Cookie had over him. Alex did not particularly like limes of any sort. In fact, the idea of an actual, as with all fruits, thoroughly disgusted him. He hated how when he ordered sparkling water at fancy restaurants they would place a lime wedge on the top of his glass, how he had to confront the disgusting object every time he tried to take a sip, how touching the lime, even to remove it, was so disgusting as to be simply out of the question.

And yet, here it was, this cookie, with the lime flavor baked into the center and large transparent grains of sugar embedded in the top, begging for him, begging for one last taste. The cookie was sold exclusively by a publicly-traded chain of cafés that tried hard to seem international, giving itself a foreign-sounding title and printing the names of major world cities on every door, even though it had not expanded much beyond the eastern half of the United States. Alex purchased the cookie.

He noticed the way he couldn't quite form the words to request it, simply presented the cookie in front of the cashier and twitched his head, assuming (correctly) that in context the request would be understood. He noticed the way his hands moved haphazardly to remove the appropriate amount of money from his wallet. He noticed the way his change spilled out onto the counter as he tried to find the quarter with which to complete the transaction. He noticed the way he wobbled as he walked as he took the now-purchased cookie outside.

The day Alex killed himself, he savored his one remaining cookie, the sweetness of the embedded sugar grains, the bizarre flavor of what must have been lime.

He used his tongue to wipe the remaining crumbs from his teeth, tossed the now-empty bag it had come in into the trash, and stepped out into the middle of the street.

Last Day of Summer Camp

January 22, 2007

[Original link](#)

Ten calls are coming through on my cell phone at once. I try to answer them in order. Finally I get to my mom. “Just wanted to see how you are,” she says. “Oh, by the way, Alexis called the cops.” I try to treat this as nonchalantly as she is, but mean while I’m running to find my pants. I don my gray hoodie, grab my keys, lock the door behind me, and run out into the street, finally saying goodbye. I just make it — I see the cops coming in front of my door as I make it to the next block.

I know exactly what to do in these kinds of situations; I’ve seen it in all the movies. Turn off the wireless on the cell phone, pay for everything in cash, don’t use RFID cards, stick to sidestreets. I stick to sidestreets, but I still hear the cop sirens buzzing down all the major roads. There are major roads on every side of me.

The lady across the aisle from me on the plane is pleading with the flight attendant. She holds her small dog between her legs (“oh, don’t worry,” she had explained, “he’ll stop barking once we take off”), covered in only a blanket. The attendant is down on his knees, trying to understand what she wants. He disappears and later I see the woman pouring a small bottle of alcohol into her drink.

Apparently this was a mistake. The woman starts screaming profanity, locking herself in the bathroom, running up and down the aisles. Finally, she’s forcibly restrained. The pilot comes on loud over the intercom, thanks us for our patience, explains that you’re not supposed to mix alcohol with certain psychoactive medications, tells us law enforcement will be meeting us at the gate.

Law enforcement meets us at the gate. “Please remain in your seats,” comes the pilot’s voice. “Law enforcement has taken control of the air craft. No one is permitted to move until law enforcement releases its control of the air craft.” Law enforcement relinquishes the air craft and as I exit I see the woman, with a couple policeman in front of her, asking her if she can see the fingers they’re holding up.

“God,” I think. “Didn’t I just go through this yesterday?”

I forgot how much I hate San Francisco. The bus takes an hour to arrive, while I have to stand in the human filth of the city. For some reason they put the major bus transfer point at the same place drug dealers congregate. It's not a very fun place to wait.

I finally get home and tumble into the mat that makes up my bed.

Next thing I remember I'm in the Moscone Center. MacWorld is over, but a few signs and people are still around. I look out a window for a bit and a guy taps me on the shoulder. "I think they're trying to punk Paul Graham in that room," he says, pointing. I go and see.

Paul Graham is indeed in that room, as is his girlfriend and my co-founders and the other Y Combinators I know and a bunch of people I don't recognize (probably this year's batch of Y Combinators). They start surrounding me. I begin to suspect a trap.

"What's going on here?" I ask Steve. "Wait a second, you brought me here, didn't you?" "What are you talking about?" Steve replies. "I mean, I remember going to sleep, I remember kind of wanting to wake up, but then all of the sudden I'm in the Moscone Center? How did I get here? You must have brought me here, didn't you?"

Steve denies all knowledge, but there's a gleam in his eye.

The people surrounding me take a step closer.

"Alright," I say. "I'll make a deal. If I can tickle every last one of you, I go free. Otherwise, you win."

They seem to accept the deal.

I begin tickling.

People begin running, dodging, flying around the room. But I'm like a heat-seeking missile. I track down every one of them, extend my hands out, go straight for their armpits.

I win.

I wake up on my mat. The sun is shining brightly. It's a beautiful day. I whistle a happy tune. I go to wait for the bus. One bus goes by, it's too full to stop. Another comes by after what seems like an eternity. It's almost as full, but I'm not going to wait for yet another. I hang from the bar overhead, just barely fitting inside. There's no room for my feet.

The bus gets off a couple blocks from my office. To get there, I have to walk past the Moscone Center. That's when it comes back to me. I look hard at the Moscone Center. "Oh," I say. "It must have been a dream."

“Gooooood Monday morning,” I say, entering my office. That’s kind of my little thing, my little ritual. “Gooooood XXX morning,” I say in a happy voice, replacing the XXX with the name of the day I’m saying it on. I only say it once each day.

My co-worker is ignoring me.

I am presented with a letter accepting my resignation. I am told to collect my “personal effects”. A woman from HR politely escorts me from the premises. She never says that she is escorting me, but she does stand behind me wherever I go. I think I am supposed to leave.

I leave. The sun is shining brightly. It’s a beautiful day.

The Fundamental Law of Sociology

January 23, 2007

[Original link](#)

There are some loons on the Internet trying to spread the idea that the fundamental law of sociology is the black-white test score gap. Put aside the fact that anyone who would even think of proposing such an absurd thing must be a raving scientific racist.

And put aside the fact that they must also be fairly stupid, because such a claim is, at best, a discovery about a particular society, and not a law. (Can you imagine someone claiming that “falling objects accelerate at 32 feet per second per second” is a fundamental law of physics?)

Even put aside the fact that no actual sociologist would even go near such a claim, as the field’s entire purpose is to investigate *social* causes of such phenomena.

No, let us look at an actual fundamental law of sociology, the Thomas theorem. The Thomas theorem says “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.”

Now think about what that means about claiming the black-white test score gap is an immutable law.

Extra credit: Research “stereotype threat”.

Fired

January 24, 2007

[Original link](#)

Shirt [courtesy Danny O'Brien](#).



404

Figure 4: Fired

Berlin

January 30, 2007

[Original link](#)

A giant death star-like ball hovers over Berlin's Alexanderplatz, a remnant of the Cold War struggle to seem powerful. Its lit from underneath, casting it an ominous glow, just the kind of comically-evil thing you'd see in a bad movie.

Just across the way is a childlike spaceship standing in front of a glowing dome and inside — well, inside, as a person at the desk put it in their thick German accent, “everything is a little bit chaos”.

The Chaos Communications Congress has taken over the building. The dome on the top floor is filled an ongoing series of interesting talks, the lounge underneath it is filled with couches and rugs and rocking music for people to hang out, and the floor beneath that is filled with people in front of monitors watching the warm glow of computer code scroll by. The place is filled with hackers.

I don't particularly like computers, but there's a definite charm to these people's cast of mind. They like to get stuff done. There are tables with soldering irons and pliers and lego blocks and cubes of blinking lights and animation software and magnifying glasses and more. One group has built little blinking tags that figure out which room you're in and report it to a central server. Another has shown everyone how to purchase VOIP phones from the electronics store across the street, hook them up to a conference network they've built, and then return them when the conference is over. Others are showing off the stuff they've built, from software that can let you surf the Internet completely anonymously to laptops that can be distributed to the Third World for \$100 a pop.

For these people, there's no separation between work and fun. It's not like other conferences where you sit during the day in quiet seats taking notes on carefully preselected talks and then spend the nights out drinking with your buddies. You can spend the days drinking and the nights listening to talks, each blending into each other, with games and working and gabbing on the side. Couches next to lectures, couches in lectures, lectures from couches.

Even if you don't like the subject matter, you have to admire the atmosphere. What other group has a place like this, existing somewhere between occupation and hobby and subculture, between conference and convention and hangout? It's fun, it's educational; it's occupation, it's friendship; it's building, it's destroying. It is, indeed, a little bit chaos.

Cities

January 30, 2007

[Original link](#)

The densest cities in America, [according to the 1990 census](#):

1. New York, NY (7M people over 309 sq. mi.)
2. San Francisco, CA (.7M in 47)
3. Chicago, IL (2M in 227)
4. Boston, MA (.5M in 48)
5. Philadelphia, PA (1.5M in 135)

Maybe there is something to my wanting to move to Philadelphia after all.

Everyone's been complaining about how I'm too critical, too much of a downer. Well, here you go: it's **the nice week**. Five posts on five cities saying only nice things. Hope you enjoy it as much as I do.

Dresden

January 30, 2007

[Original link](#)

Hop on a train from Berlin and before you even notice your eyes have closed you'll be waking up in Dresden. The streets are dark but the light pours out from bars and you make your way down a sidestreet to your quirky, beaten apartment and tumble into bed, ready to wake up and tackle the next morning.

And what a morning it is: the sun shines through a solid gray sky, giving everything a cast of history and emotional depth. This is how Europe was meant to look — a bridge stretches across a sweeping river to a skyline of grand and time-battered buildings. A man plays old songs on an accordion and you follow the twisting cobblestone streets through the kind of grand edifices that only kings would build.

Upscale shops are mixed in with the glorious old buildings, people bustle every which way, and a fantastic network of streetcars takes you wherever you wish to go. Shops and cafes open onto picturesque views of a city with more charm than you could dare to hope for.

The skyline is made up of churches and synagogues and government buildings and hotels and art museums and schools. The center is surrounded by districts of hip bike stores, clothing shops, restaurants. A church with the top blown off is now used for concerts and parties. Apartment buildings have been built in bomb craters.

There are few places that live up to the beauty of the imagination — Harvard Square exists romantically only for a few days in the fall. But here is Dresden, the picture of beauty, in the heart of Europe. The riverbank sweeps majestically and curves past you and heads off into the distance as the sun sets into its flowing waters. And then you head home.

Stockholm

January 31, 2007

[Original link](#)

Visit Sweden's National Gallery and you'll see grand murals, elegant sculpture, classical paintings. It's exactly the kind of thing you'd expect from an ornate old building across the street from the royal palace. But one floor down you'll find something that seems rather out of place: an art exhibit with copyright in the title.

The exhibit, a brochure explains, "links up with today's debate about illegal downloading of music and film files from the Internet." It'd be interesting enough if illegal downloading was such a live issue that art galleries were using it to try to get kids to come visit (can you imagine the Art Institute of Chicago promoting an exhibit by trying to claim it was related to *Grand Theft Auto*?) but the exhibit actually lived up to its claims: it was a penetrating investigation of what it means to be a creative artist in the age of mass production, one of the most thoughtful art exhibits I've ever seen.

Copyright is still a live issue here in Sweden, perhaps best illustrated by the now world-famous The Pirate Bay website. Despite the site's arrogant name and attitude ("I'm running out of toilet paper, so please send lots of legal documents to our ISP," they [replied](#) to one legal complaint) what it provides is apparently quite legal in Sweden. The site is a BitTorrent tracker, helping your computer get in touch with others who are sharing (usually copyrighted) files. Because it only assists in copyright infringement and doesn't do any copyright violations itself, the Swedish government has had a hard time shutting the site down.

Not that they haven't tried — the MPAA pushed the government into raiding and seizing all the servers of the Bay and their ISP, [prq.se](#), including servers for websites that received special government protection as media outlets.

The Pirate Bay was originally a project of Piratbyrå (lit. "Piracy Bureau"), a Swedish activist organization created to combat Big Content's Antipiratbyrå (lit. "Anti-Piracy Bureau"). The organization's spokesman, Rasmus Fleischer, has become something of a household name in Sweden. Journalists now regularly call the Piratbyrå for responses to claims by the Antipiratbyrå and Fleischer regularly gives talks on the topic of piracy. When I met him he was getting ready for a *Vanity Fair* photo shoot the following day.

Random people on the street here have attended Rasmus Fleischer talks. Indeed, random people on the street here work with famous computer scientists, random people on the street use reddit, random people on the street pirate files. Stockholm has odd streets.

At the same time, a third organization — the Swedish Piratpartiet — is trying to change the laws through electoral mechanisms. Despite being a fairly single-issue political party, in their first election, they won .63% of the popular vote and is now bigger than the Swedish Green Party. (In school mock elections, it won a whopping 4.5%, which gives you some idea of its political base.)

But dividing up the parties into clearly separate organizations isn't the most sensible way of looking at it. For the most part, the organizations consist of IRC channels where friendly people sit around swapping notes and working on little projects they're interested in. For a non-profit, such a structure sounds hideously disorganized. But it's precisely how most free software projects get developed.

A kid drops out of school to intern with the pirates. Some filmmakers put together [a documentary](#) on the subject. Journalists file freedom of information act requests to reveal who's really behind the Pirate Bay raids. Kids post fliers for the Pirate Party. It smells like the beginnings of a movement.

Cambridge

February 1, 2007

[Original link](#)

There's something magical about Harvard Square. I've hardly been all over the world, but I've been a bunch of places, and nothing can quite compare to the electricity I feel every time I visit this spot in the center of Cambridge.

On one side, the gates of Harvard University. On another, the campus book store. On the third, a pit where kids hang out and bands sometimes perform and street performers crowd around. On the fourth, a shopping district.

Cut down Dunster and you find yourself facing the Harvard Lampoon building. Follow the road a bit and you'll see the mix of shops and Harvard dorms. Keep going and you'll find the riverside. If it's a fall day, the trees will be turning brown and the sky and river will be blue and a couple boats will be rowing down the stream and you'll breathe in the air and wonder if there could ever be any paradise more perfect.

Across the river is the tree-lined campus of the Harvard Business School, but turn back up JFK Street and you'll see hotels and shops and cafes and parks and boulevards. Everything you'll ever need is there and cars and people intermingle, looking content.

Make a left on Brattle and follow it a ways and you'll see a little dip in the street. Another singer has set up shop there and kids are sitting on the stone slab in front, listening to the songs, lying on their backs, reading books.

Stop into the Coop or the Harvard Bookstore and you can pick up a book of your own. Or cross the street into the famed Harvard Yard, the tree-lined quad where college students sit and run and walk. The paths meander past the dorms and classrooms, open up in parks with cafe tables where vendors sell sandwiches, close up again to head towards the library.

The library, the big building right in the middle, a giant edifice in praise of collected knowledge, its big stone steps streaming down as if to say *you too may be elevated*. Inside, the soaring archways, the country's largest library (after the Library of Congress), the floors and floors of stacks, the underground additions, books seeping into the groundwater of the campus.

The knowledge infects everything. Kids in the street talk about the arrangement of bones, the politics of the economy, the topology of mathematical spaces. Even the service staff get into the act: as you sit in a cafe, the college dropout clerk argues with the immigrant cook about the political necessity of marriage and the status of its legality in various countries.

The seasons come here, just as you imagined: the sweltering heat of summer, the overpowering beauty of fall, the snow-capped vistas of winter, the budding excitement of spring. There is a city, an ocean, a river, a suburb, a harbor, and a bike path. There is a subway, but it's not strictly necessary. The city is small enough that it can be walked across, simple enough that it can all fit in your head. It's not a place that you can soon forget.

San Francisco

February 3, 2007

[Original link](#)

“So I find myself back in California,” sings Quasi. And so I do. I spend half my life trying to get here, I spend the rest trying to get away. But here I finally am, and perhaps it’s time to simply give in.

California is large; it contains multitudes. Locals claim the peninsula is so big and irregular that it even contains microclimates — areas with different weather patterns. There is the glorious hill of Alamo Square, near the apartment I stay in, from which you can see the houses featured in the opening credits of *Full House* and watch the city stretch out below you. As you cross the street to head to the park, if you turn your head in the middle to watch for cars, you see a glorious road roll downwards, ending at a monumental city hall building, a glowing golden dome.

Or if you climb Twin Peaks, the hill overlooking Noe Valley, one night, the streetlights make the buildings below look like cardboard backdrops and a rolling grid of points of light sweeps out behind it, hills culminating in the tall buildings that make up the San Francisco skyline.

Or there’s Valencia street, the oddball mix of pirate supply shops, burger joints, bike stores, hipster coffee houses and breakfast places, alongside restaurants of every ethnicity.

And, of course, the city is filled with brilliant and fun people. Marxist sex columnists, investigative technology reporters, self-experimenting tenured professors, crimefighting lawyers, activist technologists, startup founders, hackers, hipsters. I could hang out with these people forever.

Then one morning I awoke to find three of my favorite people inviting me to find a brilliant new place in the city and be their roommate. It’s a hard offer to resist, no matter the city. It’s the day before I leave for my Christmas trip to Europe and I promise myself that before I go I’ll see the Sunset. I finish up all my work tasks and run as fast as I can to catch the streetcar that winds its way through the city, past pastel houses on rolling hills, past video stores and laundromats, past cafes and bakeries, past offices and parks.

And then we hit the end of the peninsula, a road and then a hill and then a beach. And there it is, [just like in LA](#), the sun setting right before me, casting a glow over the beach. And the fog is rolling of the hills in the nice lines that you thought only existed in heavily photoshopped pictures and you watch the waves on the beach roll up to your feet and the beauty overtakes you and you fall back against the hill and there’s really only one thing you can say, even if it’s to no one but yourself:

“Alright, San Francisco. I concede. You win.”

Justifications for Myself

February 6, 2007

[Original link](#)

You're at a party and you find yourself sitting next to an rather geeky-looking fellow with thick black glasses. He looks like a nice enough guy and, after all, making smalltalk is only polite, so you ask him what he does. "I'm an entomologist," he explains. "Oh," you say, stalling for time. "An entomologist." You search your databanks for something you can say regarding entomology. "Doesn't it get boring pasting all those little bugs onto those little cards?" you say. He looks you straight in the eye. "Actually, no," he says. "It's not like that at all."

Michael Bérubé seems to often find himself as that man at the party. As an academic at a state college in Pennsylvania, he's surrounded by Republicans who want to cut off public support for tenured radicals like him. As a postmodern literary theorist who writes for public-interest journals, he's surrounded by those who think his field is meaninglessly obscure. As a professor of cultural studies, he's surrounded by those who think he's wasting his time researching trash. And as a cultural leftist with liberal political views, he's surrounded by friends who find his nuanced political views a personal affront.

In *Rhetorical Occasions*, Bérubé collects a series of essays, speeches, articles, and blog posts in which he tries his best to defend himself from all such charges. And while that doesn't sound like a recipe for good literature, he makes it work. Like my entomologist friend, Bérubé is such a kind-hearted, clear-spoken fellow that it's fun to simply hear him out. The result is a book even better than Bérubé's [2006 bestseller](#), *What's Liberal About the Liberal Arts?*

The difference is that this time Bérubé is writing for his fellow insiders, not outsiders, so instead of his cleaned-up defense of academic life and his tidied-up summaries of freshman classes, you get the real dirt on the way people dig knives into each other at MLA meetings and excerpts from graduate introductory courses.

The book isn't always perfect. Bérubé's writes clearly and well, but sometimes even his careful explanations assume a bit too much background from the reader. "It sounds almost like a Monty Python bit," he says at one point; "you expect to hear next that Alexander Kerensky was defeated by the experimental poetics of the Opoyaz group, and that the Battle of the Journals set the terms for the Second Congress of Soviets in October 1917." I have to admit, that was not what I was expecting to hear next.

And while Bérubé is fairly good about mentioning his opponents' arguments (and this is a book with a lot of opponents, from ice hockey players to Stanley

Fish), he sometimes responds to them with an obtuseness that borders on intellectual dishonesty. He notes that he was “derided on the far left [for] my craven desire to break into corporate mass media by repudiating Chomsky. I wrote it for *Context: A Forum for Literary Arts and Culture*, [a journal] not available for purchase anywhere in the country. It is distributed only to independent bookstores, in print runs of five thousand. So I wonder just how much further from the corporate mass media Chomsky’s fans would like me to get before I am permitted to disagree with them.” It’s one of the book’s best lines, at least until you get a couple essays later when you find Bérubé reprised the criticism for an op-ed in the *Boston Globe*.

But the meat of the book is not in Bérubé’s politics (which, reprising discussions between 9/11 and the war in Iraq, actually made me feel queasy), but in his academics. In even intellectual popular culture, it’s hard to find examples of postmodern literary theory that are anything other than critics taking a whack or exponents making it easy for them. Alan Sokal gets up and says that social constructionism is absurd and Stanley Fish fights back by insisting the rules of physics are just as manmade as the rules of baseball. Roger Kimball complains that postmodern theorists are being deliberately obtuse and Slavoj Žižek responds by wondering whether “Heidegger’s ‘deconstruction’ of the metaphysics of subjectivity ... undermine[s] the very possibility of a philosophically grounded resistance.”

But Bérubé manages to make such debates seem comprehensible and, what’s more, worth comprehending. Bérubé’s passing references to “Stephen Greenblatt, Catherine Gallagher, nancy Armstrong, Even Sedgwick, and Judith Butler” makes you think that recognizing such names is as much a duty of an educated person as following Sokal’s references to Niels Bohr, Werner Heisenberg, and (as in famous footnote 26) Rebecca Goldstein.

I just hope there are more patient teachers like Bérubé to help one finish the job.

- [Buy the book](#)

Neurosis #9

February 7, 2007

[Original link](#)

So here I am. We're somewhere over a dark patch in the middle of the country and I'm in the window seat in the last row in the plane. The guy in front of me's leaning all the way back, but I'm in the last row so my seat doesn't go back, and I have to lift my legs up to stretch out a muscle that was sitting funny while I was asleep. So here I sit, scrunched up in the the last row of the plane, my thighs hugged against my chest, my knees digging into the seat in front of me, my back curved funny from being unable to recline. But that's not the problem.

No, the problem is that I am terribly, almost unbearably, thirsty. My mouth has been dry for hours, we're long past that. Now I'm so thirsty that the color has drained from my face, because there simply is no fluid left to keep it there. I am so thirsty that it's beginning to feel like there's no water around to hydrate my brain so my neocortex is getting and shrivelling up. It's an odd feeling, your brain shriveling up. It makes it hard to think. But I guess that's not really the problem either.

The problem, the real problem I suppose, is that I can't ask for anything to drink. I am perfectly justified — I was asleep during the drink service, I am quite terribly thirsty, my flight is unusually uncomfortable to begin with — yet I cannot bring myself to do it. As the flight attendants walk briskly by, I fail to catch their eyes. And the a man sitting in the seat next to me on the aisle has headphones on, so I can't exactly interrupt him. I could ring my flight attendant call button, but I've never quite been able to bring myself to do that. I'm so close to the flight attendants anyway.

If I rang the call button, I tell myself, I wouldn't ask for a Sprite. I'd just ask for water. Asking for a Sprite, it'd seem like I was interrupting them just so I could get my soda fix. Like I was some sort of petulant child who had to have his soda and was going to throw a temper tantrum if they didn't get it. Like a troublemaker, the kind of person they look down on. But water? Water they'd understand: it was a genuine medical request, a normal, physical human need. Something totally worth taking the extraordinary step of pressing the flight attendant call button.

But I can't bring myself to do it. It seems like such an imposition.

This, I suppose, is the actual problem: I feel my existence is an imposition on the planet. Not a huge one, perhaps, not a huge one at all, but an imposition nonetheless. When I go to a library and I see the librarian at her desk reading, I'm afraid to interrupt her, even though she sits there specifically so that she

may be interrupted, even though being interrupted by for reasons like this by people like me is her very job. At the fast food restaurant, I feel embarrassed taking time to pick through my pocket for appropriate change, so I always give them whole bills, then feel embarrassed when they have to take the time to count *me* out change. When someone asks me what high school I'm going to, I feel awkward explaining to them that I've gone to high school and to college and then started a company and sold it, so I just stutter a bit and then tell them that my high school is outside of Chicago.

I realize this is neurotic. Maybe not the high school thing, maybe that's just politeness, but certainly the thing right now, the brain shriveling with the knees digging and yet still the fear of asking for some water. "This is neurotic, Aaron," I say to myself. "You are being neurotic. It is not normal to be this shy. And geez, certainly you of all people have little justification for being so undemanding."

I am a good person, I mean. I work hard, I happily pay my taxes, I think of ways to make the world a better place, I always look the woman behind the counter in the eye and say "thank you, thank you," as if I really mean it, as if I really do appreciate the effort it took for her punch my order into her cash register and withdraw the right amount of change. And I do! So I deserve this, I deserve my glass of water, my can of soda. I am not like one of those people who goes around robbing banks and mugging old ladies and then stands in front of me in the supermarket line, throwing a tantrum about how dare the clerk not accept my credit card. No, *I* am perfectly justified in asking for a glass of water. I know all this, and yet, somehow, I still feel like an imposition.

Normally, it's not so bad feeling this way. Normally, I just sit in my quiet little room and do the small things that bring me pleasures. I read my books, I answer email, I write a little bit. I'm not such a nuisance to the world, and the kick I get out of living can, I suppose, justify the impositions I make on it. But when life isn't so fun, well, then I start to wonder. What's the point of going on if it's just trouble for us both?

My friends will miss me, I am told. And I guess it's somewhat better around friends. For some reason asking them for things doesn't seem quite so bad. Perhaps we've established some rapport, perhaps I feel I've given *them* enough to justify my small requests, perhaps I feel like my friends are special people who think along the same lines I do and thus understand my needs. (Inner critic: "Yeah, only a fellow genius would understand your special need for *water*. Jesus, what a dweeb.") But even so, I feel reticent. Even among my closest friends, I still feel like something of an imposition, and the slightest shock, the slightest hint that I'm correct, sends me scurrying back into my hole.

I know, I know, I'm wrong, I'm wrong to feel this way. My friends love me. They remark, spontaneously, about how nice it is to have me around. They invite me over to their houses to hang out. Indeed, at this very moment, two of my very favorite people to hang out with are actually fighting — fighting! — over the supposed privilege of having me live with them. "I just want to

point out,” one says, “that I have never tickled you.” “I just want to point out,” replies the other, “that I have never gotten you to attach clothespins to your face.”

Clearly, rationally, I am in the wrong. These people like me. (Inner cynic: “If only to have someone around to tickle and pinch.”) No, no, they genuinely like me. But the idea that people might actually *want* to be around me takes an amazing amount of getting used to. Last night, for the first time, I invited some people over to my apartment. I’ve never done this before. But, to my amazement, they all came. They even brought their friends. I ran out of chairs. The idea that a group of people would want to come over to see me was kind of stunning. Someone even brought wine.

OK, so perhaps there is a small group of people who, whether through quirks of genetics or some childhood trauma, appear, as best as I can tell, to actively enjoy my company. (Inner elitist: “Or just need excuses to drink wine?”) But this does not excuse my impositions on the store clerk, the librarian, the man inquiring after my high school who I downright lied to — *lied* to! — just to avoid pointing out the error of his preconceptions, the bus driver who I had to distract with my inability to use the new stored-value payment machines, or the waiter at that restaurant I went to the other day who, I later realized to my endless mortification, I forgot to properly tip. (Waiter, if you’re out there, please send me your address so I can mail you your tip! I’m so sorry!) These people did not request the dubious pleasure of my company. I have no justification for bothering them with my requests.

Oh, but you know, I really want some water...

The Logic of Open DRM

February 7, 2007

[Original link](#)

In his recent essay, [Thoughts on Music](#), Apple CEO Steve Jobs has called for the labels to stop requiring him to sell their music with DRM. Most of his argument is that the labels already sell the vast majority of their music perfect digital copies without DRM — namely, CDs — but he also argues that the alternative of having an “open” DRM system is impossible.

Jobs is less than clear here. He writes: “There is no theory of protecting content other than keeping secrets. In other words, even if one uses the most sophisticated cryptographic locks to protect the actual music, one must still ‘hide’ the keys which unlock the music on the user’s computer or portable music player. No one has ever implemented a DRM system that does not depend on such secrets for its operation.”

Since this is a fairly important point and no one else is explaining what he means, I thought I’d give it a try.

DRM works by encrypting songs. Encryption works by performing a mathematical scrambling operation that can only be reversed with the right “key”. As a very simple example, imagine you have the message “hello” and the key “5”. One simple encryption system is to simply move each letter five letters forward (so “a” becomes “f”) and you get “mjqqt”. To decode it, you just need to know the number 5 and move each letter back that far. (This is a very bad encryption system, for a lot of reasons, but it works the same basic way as the good ones.)

The way DRM works, essentially, is that when you buy a song from the iTunes store it’s encrypted with a certain secret key (presumably one a lot bigger than the number 5). To play the music, you need the key to decrypt it. But the only software that has the key is iTunes and iTunes will only decrypt it if you’re following their rules — only playing it on 5 separate machines, for example.

For “Open DRM” to work, Apple would need to give the key to other people who made music players. But as soon as Apple gives the key to someone, they can do whatever they want with the music. If the key gets out on the Internet, anyone can decrypt the songs. DRM only works because the key is secret. Open DRM is an oxymoron.

The Enemy Too Close to Home

February 8, 2007

[Original link](#)

How bizarre a book is *The Enemy At Home*, Dinesh D'Souza's new screed insisting the left is responsible for Islamic extremism? Pretty bizarre. The book's argument, [according to the Times](#) is that "1) that the American left is allied to the Islamic radical movement to undermine the Bush White House and American foreign policy; and 2) that 'the left is the primary reason for Islamic anti-Americanism...' because 'liberals defend and promote values that are controversial in America and deeply revolting to people in traditional societies, especially in the Muslim world.'"

Follow that? The left is allies with Islamic extremists because the extremists hate the left. Just like Dinesh D'Souza. "[W]hen it comes to core beliefs," he writes, "I'd have to confess that I'm closer to the dignified fellow in the long robe and prayer beads than to the slovenly fellow with the baseball cap [Michael Moore]."

In other words, it sounds like the right is allied with Islamic extremists in hating the liberal elements of American culture. What to do about this is left as an exercise to the reader.

Getting Past

February 8, 2007

[Original link](#)

He called me into his office. It was an imposing room, wood paneling and a window opening on to a picturesque view of the water. An ornate light fixture hung from the ceiling, illuminating the mahogany desk, neatly organized with boxes OUT and IN, with a stack of paper, with a pad for writing on. There was no computer. He didn't need a computer. A computer would have ruined the look.

The walls were lined with bookshelves and the bookshelves were lined with management texts. Books on how to make people eat cheese, how to make them say yes, how to make them think positive thoughts, how to make them get rich. Books on locks and unlocking, thoughts and unthinking, beings and unbeing.

"Take a seat, Geoffrey," he said, looking at me from behind glasses, a tailored suit hanging on his frame. I obeyed, as I always did. It was an order.

"There's been concern around the office," he said. No agent. Not "people are concerned", not "I'm concerned", simply that "there's been concern", as if it was some poisonous gas that had been leaking out of my cubicle, green fumes floating in mid-air.

"There's been concern that you're not being a team player." A sports metaphor. Here we are, all rocketing towards the goal, filing our TPS reports in tandem, and me? I'm not being a team player. I'm sitting in the corner playing Minesweeper or one of those online flash games with the little jewels. The team's let down. I'm holding everyone up.

"I think that the best way forward is for us to get past this," he explains. Isn't that always the case? If we're on a path, and there's a rock, then obviously we have to go past it to go forward. We could go a different direction, but then we wouldn't be going forward anymore. But how did I become a rock?

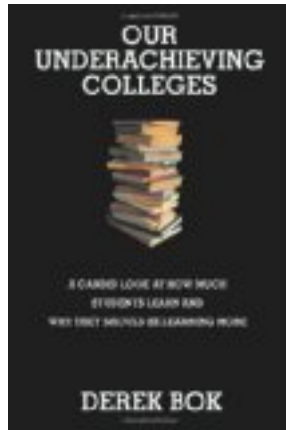
"It's clear to all of us," he says. But who's "us"? There's only him here. "It's clear to all of us that your heart's not in it." I imagine myself, lying on the surgery table, the bright light shining from above, with an army of hims surrounding me; they're the us. One of him asks another for the scalpel, takes it, begins cutting out my still-beating heart. Aha, they think, his heart's not in it — it's still in him.

They toss the heart in the trash and file out. They need to interview another job candidate.

Our Underachieving College Presidents

February 9, 2007

[Original link](#)



It would seem absurd to claim that nobody cares about the quality of higher education. After all, anyone paying attention can name a dozen bestselling polemics off the top of their head — *The Closing of the American Mind*, *The University in Ruins*, *Tenured Radicals*, *Higher Superstitions*. But as Derek Bok points out in his quietly subversive new book, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, these commentators have treated universities largely as a punching bag for their political and professional views, rather than out of any genuine concern for the education of the students.

A classic example are the heated debates about what should be in the core curriculum. Should the humanities be required? Should things be focused around the great books? What about classes in writing and public speaking? Professors will happily argue about the proper allocation of required classes for hours, but you'll never once hear them comment about the *way* in which these classes are taught. And without decent technique, it doesn't matter what the topic of the class is.

Bok shows deep familiarity with a largely-hidden literature about the effectiveness of college teaching. Nearly 80 percent of all college courses are simply lectures by professors, a stunningly ineffective form of teaching. By the end of a lecture, a student remembers less than half of what was taught. Only a week later, that number is down to 20%. At such stunning rates, it's hard to imagine much is left after a month, let alone by the time the student gets out of college.

And yet nobody seems to care one whit. Bok is hardly to be excepted from this criticism. After the Larry Summers scandal, he was appointed acting president

of Harvard University (and before that he was president from 1971 to 1991). Bok expects to only have the job for a year and no doubt his hands are tied in many ways — but rumor about campus is that he wants to make his year count. Yet Bok's biggest changes have been a recommendation for more hands-on activities and the elimination of early admissions. Not bad moves, by any means, but hardly anything like the deep rethinking Bok's book suggests is necessary.

But if Bok — a thoughtful and intelligent figure who has written eloquently about these problems — can't use his position — the most prominent spot in the entire field, with the deadline already on his head freeing him from any accountability — can't do anything about these problems, what hope do we possibly have? Opportunities like this come around once a century and it appears that Bok is going to blow it.

- [Buy the book](#)

The Activist's Creed

February 11, 2007

[Original link](#)

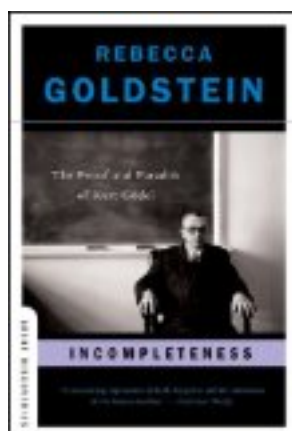
True, those who have abandoned the life of a free man do nothing but boast incessantly of the peace and repose they enjoy in their chains. But when I see the other sacrifice pleasures, repose, wealth, power and life itself for the preservation of this sole good, which is so disdained by those who have lost it, when I see multitudes of entirely naked savages scorn European voluptuousness and endure hunger, fire, the sword and death to preserve only their independence, I feel it does not behoove slaves to reason about freedom.

(Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Second Treatise on Inequality*)

Incompleteness: The Proof and Paradox of Kurt Gödel

February 12, 2007

[Original link](#)



Gödel was a hacker. He attended the meetings of the Vienna Circle, one of the most important philosophical groups in history, and sat quietly, convinced they were all wrong. Others might try to argue them out of it. Not Gödel. Perhaps (rightly) he thought that rational argument would get him nowhere with people so detached from reality. So he decided to *prove* them wrong.

The result was Gödel's incompleteness theorem, one of the most celebrated results in mathematics and logic, elegantly proving that any mathematical system complicated enough to do basic arithmetic contains statements which, while true, cannot be proven within the system.

But even this was to no avail, the Vienna Circle continued to insist the proof was bogus or irrelevant. (The Vienna Circle insisted the world was simply language-games, with rules and structures. Gödel, by showing something that was clearly true to us but not provable from within the game, thought he had proved that such things, like numbers, have an independent reality.) Gödel, an incredibly odd and delusional figure, remained quiet for many years, practically confiding only in Albert Einstein, and little at all after Einstein's death.

This is a very bad book. It rambles and prattles and occasionally repeats itself practically verbatim. (It is the result of a project to improve science writing simply by paying famous authors to write about scientific topics. Perhaps the payment should be contingent on some measure of quality in the result.) But it is a compelling story and Gödel's proof is so brilliantly beautiful that it should be learned by all educated people. I had never seen it presented in any real

detail before and once I got to its key principle I exclaimed and tossed the book down and paced, admiring its brilliance. But there are many sources who will explain the fairly simple idea. I'd love to tell you about it myself.

- [Buy Goldstein's book](#)
- [Buy Raymond Smullyan's explanation of the proof](#)

It's Faust!

February 12, 2007

[Original link](#)

In response to my post on [underachieving Harvard presidents](#), Harvard has named Drew Faust to be its new president (and the first woman).

Average People

February 14, 2007

[Original link](#)

College towns are funny. I'm sitting in a small cafe, reading my little book, eating my little breakfast. I'm the only customer around and the employees seem to have forgotten there's even me, so they start gabbing to themselves. The Mexican immigrant chef is chatting to the high school dropout waitress. Pause here and ask yourself what these two people might talk to each other about in their spare time. Try and think about what you might talk to them about were you in such a situation. Now recall that you're in Cambridge, Massachusetts. They were talking, quite animatedly, about the demographic trends for marriage under European-style social democracy.

They quickly shut up when a girl walked in. "The usual?" asked the girl behind the counter. "Yep," said the girl coming in the door. The order was prepared and delivered while the two girls chatted politely. Then the girl took her food and left. "God, I hate her," said the girl behind the counter. "I don't understand how an idiot like that goes to Tufts. She doesn't care anything about *ideas*."

College towns are funny.

Recently, Seth Roberts and I have embarked on an odd little project. We've gone to various colleges in the area and asked kids why they're there. The first day was at Berkeley and as I walked through Sproul Plaza at noon, kids of every shape and description trying to push fliers and come-ons in my face as I just tried to look around, I had a feeling it wasn't going to be easy.

Seth was wearing a tattered brown jacket and had a not-entirely-shaved face and, to be honest, looked a little odd. So when he went up to students and asked them if they had a minute, everyone said no. We went through five or six awkward such rejections until we realized that he should start off by saying he was a tenured professor at Berkeley. Nobody said no after that; apparently people initially thought he was a homeless person.

For right or wrong, I'd come to think of random people as boring. In part, I think this is because I'm shy, and I feel less bad about my inability to make conversation with strangers if I can persuade myself that the conversation isn't

going to be worthwhile. After months of trying to make my way through desultory conversations with other Stanford students (“What are you studying?” “Oh, I don’t know yet. You?” “I don’t know yet either.”) I finally gave up and spent the rest of my time there with my nose in a book.

And part, perhaps, is that average people just have a really bad rap. Books complain about the anti-intellectualism of American culture. Professors complain about the students who don’t care about the work. Newspapers complain about the ignorant red state-filling wingnuts. The average person seems like a dangerous entity, like the fellow at the lecture with the long and rambling not-quite-a-question that makes you think that maybe elitism isn’t such a bad idea after all.

And who knows, maybe average people are actually like that. Maybe college towns are funny.

We went to three colleges: Stanford, UC Berkeley, and Berkeley City College. The colleges are quite different. Stanford is a large elite school for people who want to become professionals. (I’d always heard this from my teachers, that Stanford was a place of people who were pre-med and pre-law and pre-grad school, but I wondered how big the effect was. As I was sitting down to interview our first Stanford subject, I wondered if we’d interview enough people to be able to notice the difference. That’s when she explained that she was pre-med.)

UC Berkeley is a state school, although a respected one, with a large campus, although mixed in with an interesting city. (Stanford is almost literally surrounded by a moat.) And Berkeley City College is a junior college, in an attractive new building in the middle of the city, full of people who want to transfer out of there and into the real thing.

There were differences between the schools, of course, but more noticeable was the basic fundamental similarities. Everyone we spoke to, with one exception, was intelligent, articulate, had coherent thoughts about their situation and its place in the larger context, and was someone I enjoyed talking to. (The one exception was even more thought-provoking and made me wonder what it meant to be intelligent and why I felt so uncomfortable around him.)

Seth was much braver than I and took most of the brunt of the conversation, leaving me to observe and reflect quietly. But even just watching random conversations with random people was a thoroughly rewarding experience. I felt as if it was some essential task of humanity that I had heretofore neglected.

Everyone we interviewed stands out, but perhaps a few examples will give you the flavor of people’s situations. There was the young man at Stanford who

had started a web-based business with his friends from high school. He soon realized that they were in an overcompetitive market and during his first year at Stanford had reconfigured their business plan to target a new space. Meanwhile, he planned to take business classes to get a more academic grounding in his profession.

There was the African-American girl at UC Berkeley who loved her courses in African-American Studies, how they revealed a secret history of her country that she'd never before heard told. She couldn't see making a living in the subject, of course, but she wanted to study it while she could, before she had to find a real job. A job like, if she had to pick right now, probably teaching.

There was the Berkeley City College student who had done three years of college in Chile, spent a couple years in Germany, and now worked in Berkeley as a professional dancer, hoping to get college credit so she could get a job doing Latin American human rights work, ideally for the UN.

I am not sure what to say to these people. I understand the paths their lives are on and I see the flaws in the institutions in which they reside, but I have trouble imagining how I can fix things for them, as people. The problem with psychologists, sociologists complain, is that they're too obsessed with individual people. And the problem with focus groups, even though they were invented by a sociologist, is that people are too obsessed with themselves. They see their problems, they see the context, and they reflect on them, but it's not clear to either of us how they can particularly be remedied. The situations are just too big.

SFP: God Is My Dungeonmaster

February 16, 2007

[Original link](#)

[broken image](#)

Bandwagon

February 17, 2007

[Original link](#)

A new service called [Bandwagon](#) is launching soon that automatically backs up the music libraries of iTunes users to Amazon S3 for a flat rate. It looks very cleanly-designed; if only they did it [for your whole hard drive](#).

Disclosure: By posting this blog post, they're giving me a free one-year account.

Classism at Google

February 18, 2007

[Original link](#)

[From the comments:](#)

MOST PEOPLE who work at Google are in SUPPORT roles!! And they are getting paid way less than industry standard for working 50, 60+ hours a week for it! Screw the free food, screw the laundry - the MAJORITY of people working at Google are in buildings without any of these amenities, and are certainly without extra money from stock options.

[...] they are the ones working their asses off, in overtime, but that doesn't matter because they are salaried but way below industry standards for support positions, to make sure that YOU, the user, has an accessible Help Center, has a kind, email response, has an answer to your question.

Yes, there are foosball tables in the support buildings, but who has time to play them? Giant overhead projectors alerting them to the current turnaround time for their emails is Big Brother enough to ensure that they don't even THINK about playing foosball when they should be answering support emails. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner are not nice alternatives - they are NECESSARY to ensure that all of the support peons remain dutiful and consistent with their email turnaround times.

Wow, sounds like they're overworked. Can't Google just hire more people? HAHAAHAHAHA!!!! For a response to that, please see the above comments. It's as hard to get a support role here if you're an MBA with a PhD as a hobby, as if you invented nuclear physics.

I've been here almost 5 years, and as soon as my refresher grant has vested, I am out like Lance Bass. It's a load of corporate baloney - the 400-person company that I started at has become a nightmare that has eaten my soul. God help the users.

Ode to a Blue Bicycle

March 11, 2007

[Original link](#)

For the longest time, I treated my bicycle as an extension of myself. I would strap on my helmet and jacket, fit myself into the seat, and firmly attach my arms to the handle bars and go. From then on, I saw myself as the bicycle. When I wanted to turn left, I'd rotate my arms left and we'd all move left. I didn't think of it as having the bike move left and staying on the bike — I thought of it as moving left. The bike was a part of me.

It's the same way I think of a car. You buckle into your seatbelt and suddenly you grow to become this huge hunk of metal that tears down the road. Moving left or right is now done through the steering wheel, but it still seems like you're the one who's doing the moving.

Body parts act kind of like our agents. When I want to raise my hand, I simply think to do so and my hand flies up. I let the rest of my body worry about the details. Similarly, when I want my bike to turn left I simply rotate the handle and let it use its momentum to wheel me over.

But here's the thing. I recently bought a nice, new, blue bike. And something strange happened. I stopped seeing it as an extension of my body, and started seeing it as just another tool. And suddenly riding it became a lot more fun.

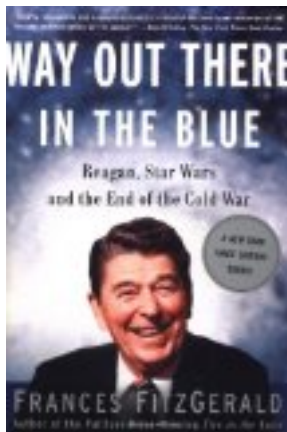
I didn't have to stay attached to the bike all the time. I could keep one foot on a pedal and swing the other one over. Or I could go left while the bike went right, the two of us swinging back and forth in a counterweight dance. Or I could let the bike go ahead of me or behind me.

It seems counterintuitive that you'd get more out of a bike when you started treating it as a tool. People speak in glowing terms of how their cars act as extensions of their body, a perfect meld between mind and machine. And maybe that makes sense for cars (they're big and confusing enough that there's not much else you can do). But I think this is another case of [the genius being in the details](#). Once I saw the bike as a bike, I could use it in ways that weren't particularly intended.

Reagan, Star Wars, and the End of the Cold War

March 13, 2007

[Original link](#)



It's not hard to see why building technology to defend against nuclear missiles is tricky. First, there's the obvious difficulty of shooting at a moving target — like a bullet shooting a bullet. Then there's the fact that whatever device is defending you must itself be well defended, or else the enemy can simply take it out. And then there's the nasty fact that with nuclear war, near-perfect defense is necessary — even a single failure can cause enormous damage.

What is hard is explaining why, despite this, so many people took the idea so seriously. That's the question Frances FitzGerald takes up in *Way Out There In The Blue*, in which she uses the “Star Wars” initiative as a prism with which to understand the Reagan administration. Combined with Rick Perlstein's forthcoming *Nixonland*, the books provide allegorical insight into our current government: Bush II has combined the criminality of Nixon with the intellectual emptiness of Reagan.

Ronald Reagan was an actor. Even when off the set, he recited polished lines and played up a well-practiced demeanor. Indeed, he appears to have no inner life whatsoever. No one can be found to whom Ronald Reagan ever “opened up”; even his wife commented that “There's a wall around him ... even I feel that barrier.” As president, he was given the equivalent of shooting instructions specifying exactly where he was supposed to be every hour of the day and when he attended public events toe marks were chalked on the ground to indicate where he should stand.

Considering the state of the American political system, having an actor for a President is perhaps not the worst idea. But what was problematic was that nobody — including Reagan's closest aides — seemed to realize that that was what they were getting. For months they were continually shocked that Reagan refused to ever make a decision or take an action on any issue whatsoever. Instead, they watched dumbly as he simply listened to what he was told and nodded politely. When two of his subordinates disagreed, he was uncomfortable, but he steadfastly refused to intervene.

The result was that decisions ended up getting made by whoever was around — Nancy Reagan, his wife; Michael Deaver, his aide in charge of public relations; etc. Reagan's top people, such as his cabinet officials, frightened that they were actually making policy without any supervision, kept this fact secret from their staffs and the public until they all published their kiss-and-tell memoirs after Reagan had left office. Even more shocking, Reagan didn't seem to mind when the members of this group changed. One day Reagan's inner circle informed him that they were leaving and bringing the Treasury Secretary in to take their place. Reagan simply thanked them for their service.

There was one thing Reagan did seem to care about (aside from politely answering his fan mail): speeches. Reagan would rewrite his own speeches, removing abstract verbiage and adding homespun stories. And it was out of this concern that he stumbled into launching the Star Wars initiative.

After many years of right-wing propaganda about a “window of vulnerability” in our arms race with the Soviet Union, the Pentagon developed the MX missile series to ensure American superiority. The problem was where to put them. The MX missiles were designed to protect against the Soviets simply destroying all of our missiles, so they could not simply be put out in the open or the Soviets would simply destroy them as well. A variety of Rube Goldberg-like ideas were proposed to solve the problem.

After a thorough investigation, the military concluded the best solution was what came to be called “the racetrack”: the missiles would be put on huge underground circular tracks, with little launching stations cut sporadically in the track. There would be several times more launching stations than missiles, so the Soviets would not know which stations to attack. But, to verify compliance with arms treaties, the stations could be opened so that the Soviets could see which ones contained missiles from space.

The problem was that the racetracks would need to be huge and the only practical space for such a thing was in Utah. The Mormon Church was understandably unhappy about having a huge nuclear missile field being built near them and thus the powerful Republicans from that region of the country scuttled the plan.

Other ideas were tried — the racetrack was converted to a straight line system, then to a configuration known as “Dense Pack” in which the missiles were all placed close together, in the hopes that all the missiles coming to attack them would blow each other up and perhaps spare some of our missiles. Another plan,

known as “Big Bird”, had the missiles flying overhead on large transport planes, but it was scrapped when technicians raised concerns about the wings falling off. Another proposal involved hiding the missiles as normal luggage on cross-country passenger trains. It got to the point where the best idea was literally known as DUMB — deep underground missile basing — in which the missiles would be loaded on corkscrews which would drill down underground. Finally, they decided just to deploy the missiles in superficially-hardened housing, even though this meant they could be easily destroyed.

At the same time, a mass popular movement for a nuclear freeze was growing, encompassing college students, churches, and many unpoliticized citizens. Reagan’s credibility on foreign policy was slipping away while books and movies and massive protests scared citizens into thinking about the unthinkable prospect of a nuclear holocaust. The Democrats were seizing power and mindshare and a nuclear freeze bill passed the House. Clearly something had to be done.

Missile defense seemed like the perfect alternative. It didn’t require any diplomatic changes or sacrificing any weapons development — indeed, it allowed for more spending on research. But it allowed Reagan to use the language of the doves — a sincere desire to rid the world of the scourge of nuclear war. So when a Reagan aide proposed the idea (which the aide conceived of as a chip to be bargained away for with the Soviets), Reagan seized upon the idea and worked it into a speech at the next available opportunity.

There was just one problem: nobody had any idea how to make it work. The most prominent right-wing scientist, Edward Teller, was very excited about a new technology in which a high-powered X-ray could be sent along a rod to vaporize small objects. Teller proposed a large satellite with such rods sticking out of it, a device that came to be known as the “space-based sea urchin”. What happens when the Soviets target the defense? he was asked. Teller didn’t seem to have considered the question but, unfazed, came back the next day suggesting the defense weapons be stored underwater and “pop up” when missiles were overhead.

Such debates disguised the fact that no actual missile defense technology existed or was likely to for a long, long time. Tactics and costs for disintegration rays and sea urchins could be discussed endlessly, but such discussion was irrelevant, as nobody knew how to build the key components. But this fact was carefully kept from politicians and the press who, ignorant of the science, continued to discuss missile defense as if it was a serious proposal. Thus, a majority of Americans were convinced that scientific ingenuity would find a way to protect the country — indeed, they believed it already had.

But the sheen of a someday-to-be-developed missile defense system could not last forever — Reagan needed something more repeatable to boost his flagging poll numbers, especially in the wake of such scandals as Iran-contra. The result was an ongoing series of carefully-spun summits with the Soviets, in which the President claimed to be making good progress on negotiations for arms reduction. (That negotiated arms reduction could serve as a replacement for a

missile defense initiative never seemed to occur to the Reagan administration; it was not exactly a group prone to analytical self-reflection.)

On the Russian side, Mikhail Gorbachev, a brilliant and daring new politician, had come to power. Gorbachev seemed more like an American figure than a Russian one — he spoke plainly, made daring moves toward peace, and played well for the cameras. For much of the following years, Gorbachev had higher poll numbers in the US than Reagan did. Washington was said to have been swept away with “Gorby fever” and “Gorbymania”.

Gorbachev unilaterally made a series of striking reforms in both domestic and foreign policy. He offered the US a wide variety of concessions in disarmament talks, insisting only that the US stop the SDI program (the one principle which Reagan refused to concede). Then he begun the process of glasnost, increasing the freedom of the press and allowing a left-wing reform movement to develop. As part of this, he freed dissident physicist Andrei Sakharov, who proceeded to tell the media that SDI was a bluff that the US could never successfully develop. Shortly thereafter, Gorbachev was even willing to budge on that, allowing the US to continue SDI. Meanwhile, he begun the process of perestroika, reforming the Russian political and economic system to increase the scope of democracy.

Meanwhile, Reagan’s side continued to bungle or misunderstand all of Gorbachev’s moves, using his disarmament proposals for little more than PR victories at home and continuing to insist his reforms were merely cosmetic attempts to prop up the old system. Reagan and Gorbachev continued to hold summits with plentiful photo opportunities, but little in the way of actual agreement was ever reached.

Indeed, Reagan actually made Gorbachev’s reforms much more difficult by doing things like giving speeches demanding the General Secretary “tear down this wall”. Such speeches only lent credence to the conservatives who charged that Gorbachev was simply doing the West’s dirty work from the inside.

Yet despite Reagan’s ineptitude, Gorbachev’s reforms took hold — perhaps even more strongly than he had intended — and the old Soviet system began to fall apart. Democratic parties were elected, troops were withdrawn, and the wall finally came down.

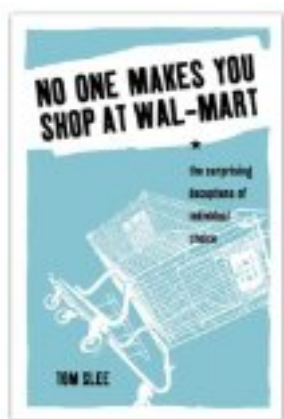
But Americans were reluctant to believe that the destruction of the Soviet system had come from the reformers within it. Instead, they retrospectively lionized Reagan as the man whose tough talk had made the system come apart.

- [Buy the book](#)

Why You Shop At Wal-Mart: Economics Eats Itself

March 13, 2007

[Original link](#)



There is a theory (quite an elegant one, actually) that says that because we live in a marketplace of free choices we end up getting basically what we want — our dollars are like votes for the society we wish to live in. Many have challenged this view, from a variety of perspectives, but Tom Slee (who calls this notion MarketThink) has chosen to focus on just one: the economic subfield of “game theory”.

In his elegant little book, the poorly-titled *No One Makes You Shop At Wal-Mart*, Slee walks through the major discoveries of game theory, explains them in simple language with reference to a fictional town of Whimsley, and discusses how they refute standard economic conclusions while still playing by basic economic assumptions with effects that appear to show up in the real world.

Take the problem of littering, for example. The town of Whimsley has a large park between its coffee shop and its office building. Residents can toss their empty coffee cups on the ground in the park, thereby saving themselves the trouble of carrying it but minutely spoiling the park, or they can carry it to the trash at the office, saving the park but bothering their hands. In the absence of anyone else, each resident is better off tossing their cup — the bother of carrying it is much more than the small amount of spoilage. But if everyone does this, the park is quickly full of litter. Each individual, acting perfectly rationally, creates a situation that none of them want.

A similar problem gives the book its title. Imagine you get some utility from having a vibrant downtown of independent shops. Then a Wal-Mart opens up

on the outskirts of town. You begin shopping at the Wal-Mart because the prices are cheaper and you can still walk through the vibrant downtown when you like. But with everyone buying things at Wal-Mart, the downtown stores can no longer afford to stay open and the center of your city turns into an empty husk. You'd prefer to have the vibrant downtown to the Wal-Mart, but nobody ever gave you that choice.

The book is full of dozens of examples like this, each with careful analysis and clear writing. Perhaps the most odd feature of the book is its politics. On the one hand, Slee is plainly a committed leftist, with positive references to Naomi Klein and other capitalist critics. But on the other hand, he never gives up on the rational actor and methodological individualist assumptions of modern economics, and shows little patience for those (typically his political allies) who have more thorough-going critiques. Nonetheless, the book is a recommended read for anyone interested in these questions.

Online Bonus: Watch Tom Slee [eviscerate Chris Anderson's inbox-stuffer, *The Long Tail*](#) on his weblog, Whimsley. Because, remember folks, "Abundance, like growth itself, is a force that is changing our world in ways that we experience every day, whether we have an equation to describe it or not." (p. 146)

Hating John Searle

March 14, 2007

[Original link](#)

I think John Searle might be my favorite living philosopher. But when I tell my friends this, they recoil in horror. “That bastard?” one friend cries. “He [tripled my rent!](#)” “Oh geebus,” another cries. “The Chinese Room argument is *awful*.”

I will not profess to have an opinion on whether the fourteenth amendment requires the City of Berkeley to provide a rational basis for only allowing its landlords to raise rents at forty percent of the increase in the consumer price index, but I must admit I fail to see what the question has to do with Searle as a philosopher.

The other complaint seems less *ad hominem*, but I think is fundamentally similar. Reading Searle’s published books, it’s striking how little space the Chinese Room Argument takes up. Indeed, his book on the subject of consciousness — *The Rediscovery of the Mind* — gives it little more than a paragraph and notes that his more recent argument against functionalism is far more powerful.

Nonetheless, I will defend the Chinese Room Argument. The basic idea, for those who aren’t familiar with it, is this: imagine yourself being placed in a room and given instructions on how to convert one set of Chinese symbols to another. To outsiders, if the instructions are good enough, it will seem as if you understand Chinese. But you do not consciously understand Chinese — you are simply following instructions. Thus, no computer can ever consciously understand Chinese, because no computer does more than what you’re doing — it’s simply following a set of instructions. (Indeed, being unconscious, it’s doing far less.)

The Chinese Room Argument works mainly as a forcing maneuver. There are only two ways out of it: you can either claim that no one is conscious or that everything is conscious. If you claim that no one is conscious, then there is no problem. Sure, the man doesn’t consciously understand Chinese, but he doesn’t consciously understand English either. However, I don’t think anyone can take this position with a straight face. (Even Daniel Dennett is embarrassed to admit it in public.)

The alternative is to say that while perhaps the man doesn’t consciously understand Chinese, the *room* does. (This is functionalism.) I think it’s pretty patently absurd, but Searle provides a convincing refutation. Functionalists argue that information processes lead to consciousness. Running a certain computer program, whether on a PC or by a man with a book or by beer cups and ping pong balls, will cause that program to be conscious. Searle points out that this is impossible; information processes can’t cause consciousness because

they're not brute facts. We (conscious humans) look at something and decide to *interpret* it as an information process; but such processes don't exist in the world and thus can't have causal powers.

Despite the obvious weakness of the arguments, why do so many of my friends continue to believe in functionalism? The first thing to notice is that most of my friends are computer programmers. There's something about computer programming that gets you thinking that the brain is nothing more than a special kind of program.

But once you do that, you're stuck. Because one property of computer programs is that they can run on any sort of hardware. The same program can run on your Mac or a PC or a series of gears and pulleys. Which means it must be the program that's important; the hardware can't be relevant. Which is patently absurd.

I used to think that part of the reason my friends believed this was because they had no good alternatives. But I've since explained to them Searle's alternative — consciousness is a natural phenomenon which developed through evolutionary processes and is caused by the actions of the brain in the same way solidity is caused by the actions of atoms — and it hasn't caused them to abandon their position one bit.

So I tried a different tack. I asked them what they thought was wrong with Searle's position. And the answer always seems to come down to a confusion between ontology and epistemology. Ontology is a fancy word for the facts of the matter — what actually exists out in the world. And epistemology is the world for the way we know about it. Unless you subscribe to a bizarre philosophical theory, things in the world exist irrespective of whether we know them or not. Behind the TV game show door, there either is a car or there isn't, even if no one can see in to tell which one is the case. Furthermore, things continue to exist even if we can't even know them in principle. There appears to be no way for me to ever tell what it feels like for you to taste an orange; nonetheless, there is indeed something that it feels like for you.

My programmer friends' argument always ends up coming down to this: if a computer program acted conscious, if it plaintively insisted that it was conscious, if it acted in all respects like the conscious people we know in the real world, then it must be conscious. How could we possibly tell if it was not? In short, they believe in the Turing Test as a test for consciousness — anything that acts smart enough to make us think it's conscious must be conscious.

This was the position Ned Block was trying to refute when he postulated a computer program known as Blockhead. Blockhead is a very simple (although very large) computer program. It simply contains a list of all possible thirty minute conversations. When you say something, Blockhead looks it up in the

list, and says whatever the list says it's supposed to say next. (Obviously such a list would be unreasonably long in practice, perhaps even when heavily compressed, but let us play along theoretically.)

Having a conversation with Blockhead would be just like having a conversation with a real person. But nobody could seriously claim the program was conscious, right? Well, in fact they do.

One wonders whether these people think their cell phones are conscious. After all, talking to a properly-enabled cell phone works just like talking to a properly-enabled person! (I asked one friend this and his response was that the whole system containing the cell phone and the wires and the person on the other end was conscious.)

The point is that we don't assign consciousness purely based on behavior. Blockhead acts like it's conscious and a completely paralyzed person acts like they're not, yet we all know that the first isn't conscious and the second is. Instead, we assign consciousness based on causes. We know dogs are conscious because we know they have brains that are very much like ours which cause behavior very much like ours. We don't make that judgment based on behavior alone.

Criticisms aside, what is the positive argument for John Searle? First, he has done important work in a wide variety of fields. As far as I can tell, he began following up the works of his teachers (like J. L. Austin) on the topic of speech acts, which he generalized to the subject of intentionality, which he solved by saying it was a property of conscious beings, which led him to develop a theory of consciousness. Second, all of his points seem quite reasonable to me and (with a few exceptions) I agree with them. Third, he writes extremely clearly and entertainingly and for a popular audience.

These three seem like a fairly low bar — they're about what I would expect from myself were I a philosopher — but its shocking how few prominent philosophers seem to meet them. Daniel Dennett is a dreadfully prolix writer and is insane. Thomas Nagel comes close but is a fairly committed dualist. Hilary Putnam doesn't write for a popular audience. Peter Singer doesn't seem to develop any actual theories. So I can't think of any. Can you? Suggestions appreciated in the comments.

Write Web Works With Me!

March 16, 2007

[Original link](#)

Are you a student? Looking for a summer job? Here's the deal: We come up with an idea. You spend the summer implementing it. Google pays you \$4500. The code gets released as free software. It's called [Summer of Code](#).

Me and others on the web.py mailing list have [drawn up a list of potential project ideas](#). My personal favorites are the stats package, where you implement a decent log analysis package for web applications; a task I think both exciting, not too hard, and long overdue, and “teh communicator”, where you use Ajax push to build a web app that combines the best features of IRC and mailing lists. But feel free to come up with your own if you think you have some good ideas. (Or ask me if you have questions about mine.)

Once you've got something that seems appealing, [fill out the application form](#). Describe the project you're interested in working on and set the organization to “Python Software Foundation”. Then feel free to send me an email introducing yourself and letting me know about your application. Applications are due next week, so you might want to hurry.

Once the applications are in, me and the other mentors will be looking through them and deciding which ones to accept. So it's in your best interest to make the application sound compelling and you sound competent.

And spread the word!

How Quantum Mechanics is Compatible with Free Will

March 18, 2007

[Original link](#)

The actions of almost everything in this world are causally determined by the state of the world that precedes them. Once you start a machine, if no one touches it, its behavior can be predicted entirely in advance from the laws of physics. When you drop a pen down a well, it is physically necessary that it fall.

But our behavior doesn't feel that way. When we stick out our tongue it feels as if we had to specifically choose to stick it out, that this was our own action and not a predetermined consequence of the existing state of the world.

Some people argue that because the evidence for determinism is so overwhelming, free will must simply be an illusion. But if so, it is a very odd kind of illusion. Most illusions result from a naive interpretation of our senses. For example, in a classic illusion, two drawings of equal size appear to be of different size. But when we are told this is an illusion, we can correct for it, and behave under the new (more accurate) impression that the drawings are in fact of equal size.

This simply isn't possible with free will. If someone tells you that you do not actually have free will but have actually been acting under an illusion, you cannot sit back and let determinism take over. When the waiter asks you whether you like soup or salad, you cannot say "Oh, well I've just learned that free will is an illusion and all my actions are completely determined by the previous state of the world, so I'll just let them play themselves out." I mean, you can say that, but the waiter will look at you like you're crazy and you will get neither soup nor salad.

It seems overwhelmingly bizarre that evolution would have given us this strangest of illusions. This is not a spandrel, a small place evolution never had time to be concerned about. The illusion of free will affects all aspects of our lives and takes an enormous amount of work. One would think evolution would have eliminated it were it genuinely false.

So what is the other possibility? The other possibility is that not all actions are entirely determined by the preexisting state of the world. And, in fact, recent advances in physics seem to show this is somewhat the case. Quantum mechanics suggests that at some fundamental level there is randomness involved in the laws of the world. And chaos theory shows us that small amounts of randomness in a system can have real large-scale effects.

So, although it seems extremely improbable, if we have to avoid the improbability of evolution not breeding out an illusory free will, then we're forced to look to the randomness of quantum mechanics for an explanation.

But, some argue, this is insufficient. Quantum mechanics only gives us randomness — but free will isn't just the pursuit of random behavior, it's the pursuit of particular behaviors. While quantum mechanics can't predict each individual bit, it does give overall probability distributions. Volitional behaviors would wreak havoc with those even distributions.

Not true. Imagine the simple case where we have one quantum bitstream: a series of zeroes and ones, in which each individual number cannot be predicted, but there's an overall law saying that roughly half of them will be one and half will be zero. And let us simplify the system to say that if the result of the quantum effect is 0 then the person moves left, and if it's 1 they move right. In the naive scenario, free will affects this quantum bitstream so that when the person wants to move left the randomness keeps coming up zeroes. But that would violate the laws of physics — the results would no longer be half ones and half zeroes.

So here's the trick: first, the system gets a random bit from some other source. Then it adds the bit from the other source with the bit from the quantum bitstream and uses the result to decide if you move left or right. Now, when you want to continually move left, half the time you'll have to make the quantum bitstream return zeroes and the other half the time ones — exactly what the laws of quantum mechanics require.

With a little additional mathematical complexity, the scenario is generalizable to much more complicated quantum functions and human results. But the basic principle is the same: one can use quantum randomness to exercise free will without violating any statistical laws.

Of course, this still leaves one key problem. What is picking the results of this quantum bitstream? And how does it do it? I have to admit I cannot really think of a sensible way. But this seems like a problem for neurobiology to figure out and report back to us. I merely aim to prove that its doing so is consistent with what we know about the laws of physics.

This Television Life

March 23, 2007

[Original link](#)

Have you ever listened to that show on NPR, *This American Life*? I don't know about you, but as far as I'm concerned, it has to be one of the most amazing things to ever grace our country's airwaves. Back when it started, over a decade ago now, it was unlike just about anything you heard on public radio. This wasn't a show about news or music or comedy. It wasn't even, really, a show about people. It was a show about stories, stripped down to their pure essence, people talking to you with a little bit of music in the background.

Humans seem to have a natural craving for stories. Whatever the topic, it's more fun to hear a story about it. Everyone tells stories. Everyone tells stories, but some people love crafting them until they're perfect, like little pastries of information with curves in all the right places. And that's what *This American Life* did each week on the radio: it presented three or four perfectly-crafted stories, all tangentially related to one loose theme, to your car or home for one full hour.

A couple years ago the Showtime network called Ira Glass, the head and host of *This American Life* and asked him if he wanted to make a television version of his show. For most people, getting a call from a television network would be a fairly big deal. But not Glass. Every week, his radio show is heard by 1.6 million people. A hit show on Showtime gets half a million. So Glass said no, there was no way their show would work on television. Still, Showtime persisted, asking what it would take to make it work. So Glass thought of every crazy demand that came to mind. And Showtime met them all.

The result, which premieres tonight on the pay-cable Showtime network, has to be one of the most amazing things to grace American television. It is unlike just about anything you've ever seen on TV. The best way I can think to describe it is this: Have you ever seen one of those stock photo movies? You know, the kind with the lusciously oversaturated colors, weird landscapes, and slow-motion movements? The kind of footage that makes the normal world look magical? Now, take that, and imagine an entire television show made out of it. It's absolutely incredible.

To promote the show, since Showtime isn't exactly, *This American Life* went on a six-city tour. I caught them in Chicago, where a jam-packed crowd of dedicated fans (still pissed about the team moving to New York to film the TV show) came to hear "What I Learned From Television". We were in the Chicago Theater, a local landmark that holds thousands. And, I have to say, it's probably the most fun I've ever had in a theater.

You know how on the radio show, they do these incredibly moving stories that just send chills of emotion down your spine. Now imagine listening to that, in the middle of a crowd of thousands of people who all came out to hear the very same thing. I mean, these were people who cheered individual names in the credits at the end of the show. (We'll miss you Elizabeth Meister!) I've never felt a room so charged with emotion before.

So do these guys a favor. Do yourself a favor. Take your Nielsen box and switch it to Showtime tonight at 10:30. It'll be like nothing you've ever felt before.

- [Watch a low-res version on Showtime's web site](#)
- [Download a high-res torrent](#)

Newspeak™

March 25, 2007

[Original link](#)

It started way back in the eighties, with the Stay Free maxi-pads. At least, that's what they said on this TV documentary I saw once. How could you tell people to protect their freedom when they thought you were talking about feminine hygiene products? I mean, you still had the words, of course, it wasn't Orwellian or anything, they didn't take away the words, they just "added" new meanings to them. Particular kinds of meanings. And who really wanted to use them after that? It made the whole idea of freedom seem kind of dirty.

We don't have freedom either, of course. Freedom lasted a little longer, before finally dying out in the late nineties when the name was taken by that pornography download software. I mean, try telling some guy in the street you're just trying to protect your freedom. I've tried! He laughs and then he makes some sort of obscene sexual pantomime. Makes it kind of hard to be an activist.

Activist took a little longer. Companies bought out the core concepts before they moved to the little stuff like us activists. Activist was what they called it when they privatized the sewer system in the late 2000s. "Activists are shit," you used to hear the right-wingers say. Now they don't even need to say it — it's in the dictionary.

So when I recruit kids I can't tell them what they'd be. Saying they'd be activists is straight out, obviously. But I can't even tell them we do protests. Protest is what they call it when you call AAA when your car breaks down. Kids don't want to go around fixing broken cars. They're not big on protests.

Liberty quickly became the leading brand of thong underwear. Control is the #2 online role-playing game. Rights are the new name for gift certificates. Democracy is the kind of M&Ms where you get to pick the color. ("Geez man, we all like chocolate, but you're taking things a bit too far," is what the kids say when I tell them we need to fight to protect democracy.)

It's like a nightmare version of *Intelligence* (or, as it used to be called, *Wheel of Fortune*). They bought up all my words.

The Secret Behind The Secret

March 26, 2007

[Original link](#)

The #1 bestselling book in America is a 216-page volume called *The Secret*, based on a DVD of the same title. “Truly life-changing information,” exclaims the publisher on Amazon.com. “A new era for humankind,” exults the web site. “This is The Secret to everything — the secret to unlimited joy, health, money, relationships, love, youth: everything you have ever wanted. [...] [It] utterly transformed the lives of every person who ever knew it... Plato, Newton, Carnegie, Beethoven, Shakespeare, Einstein.”

What is this incredible secret? Namely, that the universe is governed by a heretofore unknown Law of Attraction, as yet undiscovered by conventional physicists, that the world rearranges itself to conform to your thoughts. Or, as one proponent put it, the universe “is akin to a big mail-order department,” in which you “‘order’ what you get by sending energetic messages out to the universe.”

This stuff is so blatantly absurd that it’s not really worth debunking. And it’s silly enough that [Barbara Ehrenreich has already written the definitive mockery](#) (“Thoughts exert a gravitational-type force on the world, so that ‘whenever you think something, the thought immediately attracts its physical equivalent.’ If you think money — in a totally urgent, focused and positive way, of course — it will come flying into your pockets.”). [Twice](#) (“I don’t have to write this blog, I can simply visualize it already written — or could, if I’d bothered to read the whole book and finish the DVD.”)

But, drawing on some of Ehrenreich’s other work, I’d like to discuss they *why* of this book. The book’s success is easy enough to explain. As [the Canadian publisher put it](#) in an interview with the *Toronto Star*, “Basically, human beings are lazy. If you tell them you can get rich just by thinking about it, obviously, they’re going to buy it.”

But these books also have a more insidious effect. As Ehrenreich notes, by making your lack of wealth and a good job into personal problems, you discourage people from looking at the social systems that created and sustained those problems. By telling them their thoughts control the universe, you can persuade them to do things like — as one Secret-endorsing book encouraged — “Place your hand on your heart and say ... ‘I admire rich people!’ ‘I bless rich people!’ ‘I love rich people!’ ‘And I’m going to be one of those rich people too!’”

And, in reverse, by telling people that bad things are caused by their negative thoughts, you get to persuade them to stop thinking about bad things. “I’m a really big believer in The Secret,” a young black woman recently explained at a

Secret-related book reading. “But I also believe that discrimination and racism are real. How can you harmonize those things?”

“You just said you believe in discrimination,” explained the guru. “You *be-live* it. I’m going to ask you to stop believing it, because if you focus on the negative, you project it yourself.”

That’s right — if you stop believing in the existence of discrimination, it’ll stop happening to you. No need to fight to end it! Those black people banned from lunch counters in the South? They weren’t simply believing hard enough. Those studies showing that resumes with black-sounding names on them received far fewer callbacks as identical ones with white-sounding names? The researchers didn’t take into account their thoughtwaves.

Following this idea goes to some pretty dark places and the authors take it all the way. “I really love what you’re doing,” said a young man at the same event. “But how, for example, was 9/11 attracted to the people in those buildings? That’s something I can’t understand.”

“Sometimes, we experience the law of attraction collectively,” explains the guru. “The US maybe had a fear of being attacked. Those 3,000 people — they might have put out some kind of fear that attracted this to happen, fear of dying young, fear that something might happen that day. But sometimes, it is collective.”

When you manage to convince people that even getting murdered is their own fault, you’ve truly found the secret of success. For the already powerful, that is.

Aaron's Patented Demotivational Seminar

March 27, 2007

[Original link](#)

Thousands of people out there are willing to give you a motivational seminar, but only Aaron's Patented Demotivational Seminars are going to actually admit they demotivate you. I've collected thousands of actual facts from real scientists and the verdict is in: people don't matter, except for a couple of rare exceptions, and you're not one of them. Sorry.

Let's start at the beginning, shall we? The universe is a bunch of random particles shooting through space following a handful of simple laws. Through completely random and unintentional properties, some of those particles bounced together to form you. But, I swear, it was a total accident. They didn't even realize they were doing it at the time and if they knew they'd probably feel kind of guilty about it.

For a long time, it was pretty clear that most people didn't matter. The average person didn't leave their town or village and so only interacted with a small handful of people who lived near them, most of whom found them annoying. The Internet has changed all that. Now the average person doesn't leave their computer and so only interacts with a small handful of spammers who read their LiveJournal, most of whom find them annoying. Luckily for posterity, their LiveJournal will probably disappear within their lifetime due to a hard drive crash or some other kind of poor server maintenance.

But let's say you want to make a difference in the world. You can learn a skill and go into a profession, where you get bossed around and told exactly what to do by people more powerful than you. (Obeying them is called "professionalism".) It's completely futile; had you not gone into the professional (or if you decide to disobey orders) they would have found someone else to do the exact same thing.

The same is true even if you're the one giving orders. Imagine about the most powerful job you can think of. Let's say you're a US Supreme Court Justice, able to change the laws of the world's only superpower with the stroke of your pen. Well, big deal. Had you not been appointed to the Supreme Court the President who appointed you would have found some other judge who would have made the same changes to the law. Yeah, you get to wear a robe and feel powerful, but when you look at the cold, hard, scientific facts, you're not making a lick of difference in the world.

Want to actually make a difference? You'll have to buck the system instead of joining it.

John Hockenberry on Reporting the War at NBC

March 28, 2007

[Original link](#)

John Hockenberry is a long-time, well-known American journalist. He's won four Emmy awards and three Peabody awards. Now that, as he puts it, "mainstream media doesn't want John Hockenberry anymore," he's become a Distinguished Fellow at the MIT Media Lab, where [he recently gave a talk](#) which commented on some of his experiences covering the Iraq war while at NBC.

Here are some excerpts:

I was very happily employed at NBC. I wasn't like, running around, trying to stuff toilet paper into the plumbing and sabotage the place. [...] But I was interested, because we had a lot of meetings at NBC about, you know, if you're doing a story and the person you're doing the story about offers to buy you a drink, you've gotta say no. If you're doing a story and they send you, after they see the story, some napkin rings — silver napkin rings that are monogrammed "Thank you, Jon, for the story," you've got not only to return those, you've got to report those to the standards people at NBC because there's a whole ethics and conflict-of-interest thing.

So at one of these ethics meetings — I called them the return-the-napkin-ring kinds of meetings — I raised my hand and said "You know, isn't it a problem that the contract that GE has with the Coalition Provisional Authority [...] to rebuild the power generation system in Iraq [is] about the size of *the entire budget of NBC*? Is that kind of like the napkin rings thing?" And the standards people said "Huh. That's interesting. No one's brought that up before." Now I'm not saying that I'm smart or that I'm advanced or that I'm ahead of my colleagues or maybe I had a lot of free time to think about this or maybe I'm some pinko-proto-lefty like Richard Nixon. I don't know! But the fact that it drew a complete blank among the NBC standards people was interesting to me.

[Now] in fact what happens in the networks — and you can find this at ABC and other networks as well — is that this [conflict with the profit motive] manifests itself [as journalists saying] "Well, we are better reporters because we deal with these kinds of conflicts all the time. And because we deal with those and we *always* decide in favor of the audience, it sort of exercises our journalistic muscle." And this is the line you get from all of the entities.

You may or may not be aware that there was a real strong full-court press to sell the media — and I'm not pro- or against it at this particular point, but there was a process in place where individuals in the media got access to the individuals involved in the planning of the war. There were generals who came in, there were former secretaries of defense, Schwarzkopf spent a whole lot of time giving sort of off-the-record, quiet briefings. And the generals would sort of bring in a certain group of editors and reporters and I went to all of these briefings.

At one of them, Hockenberry explains, a well-known pollster told about a briefing he gave to all the senior officials at the White House about how the polling data from the Arab world showed that America's negatives were simply off-the-charts. Everyone was quiet. Condi asked a few technical questions and then finally Karl Rove spoke up. "Well, that's just until we start throwing our weight around over there," he said.

Hockenberry was stunned and thought they should do a piece on what this revealed into the mentality of the war's planners. But NBC News didn't think this was a very good idea. America wanted the war to happen; their job was just to wait and see how it turned out. "We're not particularly interested in the story," Hockenberry explains. "We're a process that's trying to maintain people in front of the set, so in a certain sense media at that point was doing its own kind of shock-and-awe that went right along with the war's shock-and-awe [because] the business is just to grab eyeballs."

Later, his team edited together a montage of clips about what it was like for reporters who were still in Iraq to experience the shock-and-awe campaign. Vibrant images, narrated by a tense reporter who was on the ground at the time.

We played this piece for the editors. And it was very moving, very powerful, and it was a very different perspective from what we were getting. And at the end [...] there was quiet around the table, because it was kind of an emotional piece and certainly the emotion in this reporter's voice was detectable over a satellite phone line.

And the standards person goes — and again, this is his job, I don't begrudge him that — he goes, "Seems like, seems like she has a point of view here."

The table was silent. Just dead silent. And I was infuriated. But whenever I get this sort of infuriated feeling I think "You know, this is a career-ending moment here." There is something I could say that would be right. There is something I could say that would be wrong. And there is something that I could say that would be right — and also would be wrong.

And it was the beginning of the coverage of an event that would be extraordinary and I definitely wanted to be around to be a part of the next day's coverage, but I had to say something. And it seemed as though, if nobody said anything, people would go "well, I guess we'll have to tone her down."

So I said, "You mean, the war-is-bad point of view?"

The piece aired.

Everything Good is Bad For You

March 29, 2007

[Original link](#)

While we were developing Reddit, we always used to run into people who'd recognize us and come up to say hi. "Oh, wow," they'd say to us. "I can't tell you how much your site has killed my productivity. I check it a hundred times every day." At first, we just laughed these comments off. But after a while, I begun to find them increasingly disturbing. We'd set out to make something people want — but what if they didn't want to want it?

For too long, simple popularity has been the only metric of a startup's success. Another startup, known as Twitter, has recently broken into the mainstream. And I constantly hear people saying things like "Yeah, well, I know it seems like a pointless waste of time. But it's so *popular*!" As if anything so popular had to be worthwhile.

Cory Doctorow recently [made a similar argument](#). When he publishes his books online, he notes, people are always telling him they don't like reading off a screen. And yet, these very same people spend every free hour of the day reading email and weblogs and news articles off a screen. "It's like watching someone shovel Mars Bars into his gob while telling you how much he hates chocolate," Doctorow complains. Doctorow's conclusion? Blogs are just better.

But I think Mars Bars are just the right analogy. Everyone in America knows that it's easy to accidentally find yourself stuffing your face with junk food when you're not paying attention. But no one would seriously maintain that junk food is better than fine cuisine. It's just *easier*.

Similarly, if you printed out all the blog posts and news articles and emails the average timewaster reads in a month and placed the resulting hulking volume down next to a copy of, say, *War and Peace* (which it would no doubt dwarf), it's hard to imagine the average person saying they'd actually prefer to sit down and read the first. (If *War and Peace* doesn't strike your fancy, substitute a similarly large tome.) But reading bite-sized blog posts is by far *easier*.

The same goes for reading stories on Reddit or your friends' pointless twits about their life. Looking at photos of sunsets or reading one-liners takes no cognitive effort. It's the mental equivalent of snack food. You start eating one and before you know it you've gone through two cans of Pringles and become a world expert on Evan Williams' travel habits.

We need to stop pretending that this is automatically a good thing. Perhaps Procter & Gamble doesn't care of their making us into a nation of fat slobs, but there's no reason why programmers and the rest of the startup world need

to be so amoral. And no doubt, as pictures of cats with poor spelling on them become all the rage, people are beginning to wonder about where all this idiocy is leaving us. Which is where apologists like Doctorow and Steven Johnson step in, assuring us that Everything Bad is Good For You.

It isn't. YouTube isn't going to save us from an *Idiocracy*-style future in which everyone sits at home and watches shows like "Ow! My Balls!" (in which a man is repeatedly hit in the balls) — YouTube's damn-near creating that future. As I write this, YouTube's #1 featured video is titled "Farting in Public".

It doesn't have to be that way, of course. Nobody prefers farting to thought. It's just that, as David Foster Wallace noted about television, "people tend to be extremely similar in their vulgar and prurient and dumb interests and wildly different in their refined and aesthetic and noble interests." Similarly, no one (Doctorow included, I suspect), actually prefers blog posts to novels, it's just that people tend to have more short chunks of time to read blog posts than they do long chunks of time to read novels.

Technology was supposed to let us solve these problems. But technology never solves things by itself. At bottom, it requires people to sit down and build tools that solve them. Which, as long as programmers are all competing to create the world's most popular timewaster, it doesn't seem like anyone is going to do.

Secured Leisure

April 22, 2007

[Original link](#)

When I was disengaged myself, as above mentioned, from private business, I flattered myself that, by the sufficient though moderate fortune I had acquired, had secured leisure during the rest of my life for philosophical studies and amusements. I purchased all Dr. Spence's apparatus, who had come from England to lecture in Philadelphia, and I proceeded in my electrical experiments with great alacrity; but the public, now considering me as a man of leisure, laid hold of me for their purposes; every part of our civil government—and almost at the same time—imposing some duty upon me. The Governor put me into the commission of the peace; the corporation of the city chose me one of the common council, and soon after alderman; and the citizens at large elected me a Burgess to represent them in the Assembly.

(Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography*)

A Call for Science that Matters

April 24, 2007

[Original link](#)

Ever see a study that makes you scratch your beard? Ever hear about a research result that makes you go “I wish everybody knew about this!”? Ever want to run into a congressman’s office and hit them over the head with a journal article? In this era of technological complexity and postmodern fiction, sometimes brain scans can reveal more about the human condition than a new novel. And yet, while the novels get detailed reviews in the *New York Times*, the best a research study is likely to get is an inaccurate description and some ambiguous quotes from the study’s authors.

Well, here’s your chance to change that. In the comments, post your favorite study — the one that makes you sit up and say “wow, this result ought to change everything”. If you don’t mind, we’ll take the best to help fill up a new website we’re starting, collecting and sharing these new research results. (If you want to help us with the project, [be sure to let us know!](#))

I’ll go first:

In 1994, the RAND Corporation, a major US military think tank, conducted a massive study (with funding from the Office of National drug Control Policy, the US Army, and the Ford Foundation) to measure the effectiveness of various forms of preventing the use of illegal drugs, particularly cocaine.

They analyzed a variety of popular methods and calculated how much it would cost to use each method to reduce cocaine consumption in the US by 1%. Source-country control — military programs to destroy drug production in countries like Peru, Bolivia, and Colombia — are not just devastating to poor third-world citizens; they’re also the least effective, costing \$783 million for a 1% reduction. Interdiction — seizing the drugs at the border — is a much better deal, costing only \$366 million. Domestic law enforcement — arresting drug dealers and such — is even better, at \$246 million. But all of those are blown completely out of the water by the final option: funding treatment programs for drug addicts would reduce drug use by 1% at a cost of only \$34 million.

In other words, for every dollar spent on trying to stop drugs through source-country control, we could get the equivalent of twenty dollars benefit by spending the same money on treatment. This isn’t a bunch of hippy liberals saying this. This is a government think tank, sponsored by the US Army.

- [Read the study](#)

OK, your turn.

The Incurable Romantic

May 6, 2007

[Original link](#)

“romantic”—a curious word meaning all things to all people. From my point of view, it means that in [one’s] emotional relationships [one] should not be too bright—something, perhaps, that I should not state so baldly. But again and again the action of the [romance] novel’s plot is carried forward by our hero’s failure to realize that in any man’s life there are literally dozens, if not hundreds, of women who will do just as well; that he won’t die if he doesn’t win fair Susan’s dainty hand; and that very probably he will catch a most uninteresting variety of hell if he does win it. Which, come to think of it, is not unrealistic: emotional maturity is one of the rarest qualities in life.

(Frank Yerby, [How and Why I Write the Costume Novel](#))

Lengthy Interview

May 7, 2007

[Original link](#)

The other day I had [a lengthy interview](#) with Philipp Lenssen of Google Blogoscoped, which he's now posted with little editing. It's interesting to see how stilted my normal IM conversation sounds when reformatted into paragraphs.

I say a bunch of things in the interview that are probably going to upset various people I know. In my defense, it was an interview — I didn't rehearse my remarks in advance — but I'll post corrections here if I said anything outrageously wrong.

Postscript: I did finish Intuition. It took me surprisingly long to realize it was just a novelization of the Baltimore affair!

Update: [Help, I'm trapped in a trend story!](#)

Follow Your Heart

May 14, 2007

[Original link](#)

For years, I've wanted to be on public radio. As a kid, we used to hear the voices of Garrison Keillor and Ira Glass and even Carl Kasell, while our parents drove us around in the stationwagon. As I grew older, I came to respect radio as a particularly unique medium for explaining things to people; a skill, like writing, that I wished to develop.

I've had a few desultory attempts, but I finally had a good excuse to get my act together. Public broadcasting people are sponsoring a [Public Radio Talent Quest](#) and I've decided to submit an entry. My idea was to make a radio show about science that matters.

[Here's my first attempt.](#) (You can listen and vote for me on the contest's website.)

For those who don't love the magic of radio, a transcript follows:

It's 1958 and you're sitting on a table with your shirt off. You signed up for an experiment on vitamins improving vision and now someone's plunging a needle into your arm. Ow! Since when do vitamins require needles anyway?

[music: Waltz (Better Than Fine) - Fiona Apple]

Now the man is gone and you're waiting for the experiment to start. There's another kid here too. You both look pretty bored. Then the other kid starts goofing off. Doodling, making paper airplanes, that sort of thing. And then you feel it.

[TAP tap tap...]

Your hands begin to shake. Your heart starts to pound. Your face begins to feel flushed.

[...tap tap TAP.]

Boy, goofing off sure looks like fun. So you join in.

So that shot in your arm? The thing is, it's actually adrenaline. Hand-shaking, heart-pounding, face-flushing adrenaline.

Half the kids in the experiment were told the shot might make their hearts race. And those kids? They sat quietly, even while the other

kid in the room with them goofed off. But the rest? The ones, like you, who weren't told? They joined right in.

One kid started throwing wads of paper at passersby. Another grabbed a piece of equipment off the wall and used it as a hula-hoop. They just felt so *good*, they later explained.

We think of our feelings as unerring: follow your heart, do what makes you happy — that sort of thing. But what the adrenaline experiment showed is that it's not so simple. Feelings don't come with nice, clean explanations. Our brain makes a guess. And sometimes it guesses wrong.

We're not the slaves of our emotions. For the kids in the experiment, just knowing *why* they were feeling a certain way was enough to change their response.

Following your heart can be fun. But it's also nice to know that you don't have to.

Discrimination and Causation

May 23, 2007

[Original link](#)

First, let's imagine that tomorrow scientists announced the discovery of rock-solid, unimpeachable, 100% convincing evidence of differences in mental function between men and women. Let's say, for example, they notice that there's a tiny hole where the "math center" of the brain should be. No wonder they do worse at math!

No doubt, *The Times* would respond with [a handwringing article](#) about the important scientific implications and David Brooks would [throw a party](#) and denounce closed-minded liberals. George Bush would cancel programs aimed at helping girls learn math and Harvard University would shut down their task force on getting women tenure.

But are these really appropriate responses? Showing genetic differences is only the first in a long line of things that need to be shown to prove that gender-based disparities in tenure are unavoidable. [As Jeremy Freese](#) has pointed out, it's a long line from genes to social outcomes. To make the case, you need to go a lot further.

Second, you have to show the genetic differences are relevant. It's possible the hole in the math center could be completely insignificant, that women do just as well at math irrespective. So you need to show that the hole *causes* differences in functioning. One way to do this is to find different people with differing sizes of holes, control for as many other factors as possible, and see if the size of hole is correlated with some test of math functioning.

Third, you need to prove that the differences are unavoidable. The brain has amazing levels of neuroplasticity. Perhaps with the right environment, women can be taught to do math with another part of their brain. Perhaps, as a result, they might even do *better* than men at math. Again, [Freese has pointed out](#) that the same genetic differences (or genetic similarities) can go all sorts of different places in different environments. If there's an easy environmental change that makes even genetically different women equally good at math, we ought to make it.

Fourth, you need to show a causal link from the genetic difference to the tenure disparity. Why is it that doing worse at math causes you to do worse at tenure? Are speed-math-tests used as a relevant factor in tenure decisions? If so, maybe you guys should really cut that out, because that's a pretty stupid test.

Fifth, you need to show that it's the only cause of discrimination. Even if genetic differences cause some of the disparity, it's still morally required for us

to remove the rest. Do guys with holes in their math center do just as bad as women at getting tenure? Do women with no holes do just as well as men?

Right now, there's only even arguable evidence for the very first of these. Those of us who want to shove discrimination under the rug need to do a lot more work on the other four.

That Vision Thing

May 30, 2007

[Original link](#)

Ironically enough, I remember the moment clearly. It was about five years ago now, when I looked up from the car and realized I couldn't see. I had been staring at my computer a lot, and reading books when I wasn't doing that, so I didn't notice much, but that day, riding in the car, I looked up and realized I couldn't read the street sign. I definitely used to be able to read that sign, but there it was, big and bright and green along the highway, and all I could make out was a blur. I had gone blind.

Legally blind, as I learned yesterday. My vision is below the legal threshold in the US for legal blindness. (Far below, as far as I can tell, but the eye exam chart doesn't really make fine-grained distinctions at that level.) And yet, for five years, this never really bothered me. I never wore glasses for more than an hour, I squinted hard enough to pass the vision test at the DMV, I sat close to blackboards and listened carefully.

I tried a couple things to improve my eyesight, but nothing very seriously. I tried, but it never seemed important enough to warrant the effort. And so I walked thru life, legally blind. I didn't really notice.

My roommate, Quinn, has been nagging me about this. She wants me to get LASIK, I think largely because it involves lasers. But finally the other day I took some action and went to the optometrist.

You know those eye charts you see sometimes? The ones that famously start with E at the top and then the letters get smaller and smaller? I couldn't read the E. When I looked up at it, all I saw was a vague blur. So they gave me contacts.

Contacts are an odd thing. They're almost invisible, malleable little things that you can't see once they're stuck on your eye. One minute, you're living a Monet-like existence of a world blurred, then tap your eye and suddenly, invisibly, everything is clear.

I had no idea the world really looked like this, with such infinite clarity. It looks like a modernist photo or a hyperreal film, everything in focus everywhere. Everyone kept saying "oh, do you see the leaves now?" but the first thing I saw was not the leaves but the people. People, individuated, each with brilliant faces and expressions at gaits, the sun streaming down upon them. I couldn't help but smile. It's much harder being a misanthrope when you can see people's faces.

Then came the signs, the signs with messages I could read from a distance. No longer would I have to carefully count my stops on the subway because I couldn't read the station signs. And then the buildings, their edges no longer fuzzy like clouds but hard and harsh and magnificent.

I no longer feared myself, formerly this vague visage in the mirror that I had to look away from. Now in the mirror I could see my face, and even thought it looked good.

The resolution on my cameraphone suddenly seems insufficient. The crumbs and dirt in our apartment that previously drove my roommate crazy are now visible enough to drive me crazy too. I can look people in the eye and smile and see them smile back. I can see the contours of their faces. When I look up at night I can see the things in my room, even when the lights are off.

My eyes are open and I can now experience the beauty that's been more than a few feet in front of my nose.

Books I Recommend Without Reservation: 2006

June 28, 2007

[Original link](#)

I read over a hundred and twenty books in 2006. Some of them were OK. Some were good. Some were very good. Here are the handful that I can recommend you read without any reservations. This isn't a top ten list; the books aren't in any particularly meaningful order. These are just the books that I can honestly say that, as a human being, I think you will enjoy reading (and you'll be a better person for having done so).

Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*

This loving ethnography is like a trip inside the lives of children. Lareau spends time with families black and white; poor, middle-class, and wealthy. The description is engrossing and the theoretical contributions thought-provoking, even if you have no background in the field.

G. H. Hardy *A Mathematician's Apology* (PDF) Godfrey Hardy was a great mathematician. But, looking back on his life, he wondered what it was he had actually contributed to society. In this, his classic defense of his pragmatically-worthless profession, he examines what it means to have spent your life wisely. (Previous thoughts: [my apology](#), [Legacy](#).)

Raymond Smullyan, *5000 BC (And Other Philosophical Fantasies)*

In this bizarrely delightful little book, Smullyan, the famed recreational logician, addresses topics from the annoyances on long car rides to the most difficult problems in philosophy, often at once, using stories that are so delightfully amusing that it seems hard to believe they could have any educational value.

Atul Gawande, *Complications: A Surgeon's Notes on an Imperfect Science*

Since I read this book, Gawande has become something of a rock star, but here he is the mild-mannered surgeon who's writing on *Slate* got him picked up by the *New Yorker*. The columns in this book are collected from his pieces for that magazine and address with reflection and investigation the various difficulties of modern medicine.

George Saunders, *In Persuasion Nation: Stories* I have to be honest with you. I'm not really one for science fiction. Indeed, I'm not a big fan of fiction in general. But George Saunders is different: I'll read just about anything by him. Saunders' stories manage to combine a whimsically-imagined future, biting critique of our present era, along with a use of language so delightfully varied that one wonders how one man can have such control over his authorial voice.

Thomas Geoghegan, *Which Side Are You On?: Trying to Be for Labor When It's Flat on Its L*

One would think a book on labor history would be dreadfully dull and, more to the point, depressing. And yet, in the first chapter of this book, I found something that made me laugh or smile widely on practically every page. My friend Rick Perlstein got me to read this book by [telling me](#) it was “the best political book of the last 15 years [—] the best book of the last 15 years.” (He’s since taken me to meet Geoghegan several times.) It’s hard to imagine a book more important and touching.

Robert Karen, *Becoming Attached: Unfolding the Mystery of the Infant-Mother Bond and Its*

At the beginning of the last century, doctors thought parental love was unimportant: [parents weren’t allowed to even visit their kids in the hospital](#), psychology experts encouraged moms not to hug or kiss their children, the US government handed out pamphlets on how to be firm with your children. This *tour de force* book tells the amazing story of how all that was overturned by a group of dedicated scientists whose research into the subject of parental love brought some of the most stunningly strong results in the entire field of psychology. Thrillingly good story, textbook on the science, and self-help guide all in one — I can’t recommend this book enough.

David Feige, *Indefensible: One Lawyer’s Journey into the Inferno of American Justice*

Being a public defender is a fairly interesting job, but David Feige manages to make it downright fascinating in this in-depth description of his career. Feige describes his life in luscious detail, from the urine on his doorstep to the gritty details of the courtroom, and doesn’t hesitate to name names or dig into unpleasant subjects. If only there was a book this good on every career.

Scott McCloud, *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels*

Any Scott McCloud book is a treasure, but this one is especially probing. Essentially, McCloud asks what it is a writer does and what it takes to be a good one. His medium is comics, but a lot of the rules are applicable to other formats and it’s hard to imagine a book this curious or this well-written about them.

Dean Baker, *The Conservative Nanny State: How the Wealthy Use the Government to Stay Ri*

One wouldn’t expect a book about economic abuses to be fun, but Dean Baker manages to do it, mostly by turning everything you thought you knew about the subject topsy-turvy. I gave this book to a fairly conservative friend of mine and even he loved it. Plus it’s downloadable for free. ([Previous review.](#)) (Disclosure: I liked the book so much I converted it to HTML and got a free paperback copy in return.)

Jeremy Iversen, *High School Confidential: Secrets of an Undercover Student* (alt. link)

Leaving school, Jeremy Iversen didn’t find the world as exciting as he expected. So he went back. Posing as a high school student, with only the school’s principal knowing the truth, he spent half a year among

the kids and teachers, documenting the life of the average Californian and wondering what it meant for our nation's future. The result is an amazingly good read and a fascinating look at an incredibly important institution. ([Previous review](#).) (Disclosure: I've [hung out](#) with the author.)

Laura Kipnis, *[Against Love: A Polemic](#)* Kipnis is a rollickingly vicious writer, with sentences that have the rhythm and punch of a machine gun. But the book isn't just a fun rant, it also makes an incredibly thought-provoking argument about what it means socially to be in a relationship. ([Previous review](#).)

Matt Taibbi and Mark Ames, *[The eXile: Sex, Drugs, and Libel in the New Russia](#)*

Matt Taibbi is my favorite political journalist. He writes with a raw honesty that manages to be both politically biting and hilarious. This book tells the story of how, after playing professional basketball in Inner Mongolia, met up with co-founder Mark Ames and started an independent newspaper that danced in the flames of Russia's dying society. The result is a strange and incredible book: stories of seedy dive bars full of drugged up loose women, intermixed with incredible feats of investigative journalism into the oligarchs dragging Russia down — without any change in tone. It's wonderful.

Joan Didion, *[Political Fictions](#)* Damn, this book is good. Nobody knows how to take a book and skewer it like Didion. The *New York Review of Books* pieces reprinted in here are simply some of the best eviscerations of any genre. Its hard to imagine how people can walk after a review like that.

Jonathan Franzen, *[The Corrections: A Novel](#)* After the popular reviews and the Oprah's Book Club selection, I had just about learned to ignore Franzen's big novel. But when a friend told me she was loving it, I decided to check it out. That was no mistake. This is a thoughtful, readable piece of fiction, with big geeky topics and a hearty emotional core.

Rick Perlstein, *[Nixonland](#)* Perlstein's last book, *Before the Storm*, managed to turn the story the a largely-dismissed political figure, Barry Goldwater, into a lesson on how the left can take over the country. Now, in *Nixonland*, he examines the turmoil of the 1960s with fresh eyes and the perfidy of the Nixon administration with new depth. I read the book as he was writing it and sent comments — apparently I was the first outside his home to finish it — and the final version hasn't been published. But do be sure to pick it up as soon as it is.

Real Good Books

July 4, 2007

[Original link](#)

So I was sitting there, reading Natalie Angier's *The Canon* and complaining to my roommate. "God, this book is so overwritten," I whined. "This is the worst science book since Lauren Slater published *Opening Skinner's Box*." I read her a random sentence: "Am I sounding a self-pitying, sour-grapes-turned-defensive whine? Of course: a good offense begins with a nasal defensiveness." I was about to read more when she stopped me. "If that book is so bad," she asked, "why do you keep reading it?"

And so, we decided on a plan: for the month of June, I would only read good books. Unfortunately, this plan didn't go as well as I had hoped — good books are harder to find than it might seem at first. I realized what I really wanted was books that were compulsively readable, the kind that once you slurped down like wet noodles, where once you started in on them you just couldn't stop.

I've read a couple books like that, but not many. For example, [David Boies' autobiography](#) isn't the kind of thing I would normally pick up. Self-aggrandizing autobiographies aren't exactly my thing and Boies, while interesting, isn't exactly a topic of fascination for me. But when I found myself holding it with a couple minutes to kill, I started reading it and before I noticed it I was most of the way through the 500 page book.

Or take James Wolcott's *Attack Poodles*. Now I love a good media-bashing as much as the next guy, but this one I just couldn't put down. I had to sneak away from dinner to finish reading it. And when it was done, I found myself wanting more.

What both books have in common, aside from being fun reads, is a small red rectangle on in the upper left of their covers. The rectangle is part of the "Miramax Books" logo which stretches from the back cover around the spine to the front of every book they publish. As far as I know, Miramax is the only publisher audacious enough to put their logo on the cover of their books, and while I initially took it as a sign of Hollywood arrogance, I now see it as something else: a mark of quality. Perhaps, I figured, Miramax works so hard to make their books readable that they want to capitalize on that brand by making it really clear which ones were theirs. I even dreamed of having my books published by Miramax.

So when my plan for June fizzled out, I tried to think of how I could fix things for July. And I hit upon the idea of spending it only reading Miramax books. Unfortunately for me, when the Weinstein Brothers (who ran Miramax) left Disney, Miramax Books got the axe. The Weinstein Brothers have restarted

their book division at their new company (cleverly named The Weinstein Company, apparently because Fellowship Adventure Group was “too gay”) but their first real book doesn’t come out until September.

So here’s a plea to you readers: where does one find compulsively readable books? Who do *you* trust?

Fear and Loathing in Biotechnology Firms

July 10, 2007

[Original link](#)

I was sitting with my journalist and reading *Fear and Loathing* when I noticed that things weren't seeming the way I'd become accustomed to them seeming. For one thing, my journalist's nose seemed a fair sight bigger than one would expect a nose to be, even accounting for taste, while her eyes seemed to be moving back and forth in her head as if they weren't quite sure whether they preferred it in or out.

Still, I shouldn't criticize. I suspect I didn't look my usual self either, what with my head making those small wobbly notions on my neck and my leg vibrating back and forth as if it were thinking very hard about something. Why it was forced to work as my leg, supporting me all the time while i gave it no consideration in return, perhaps.

As I finished the book I slammed it down on the desk, causing a couple other books to fall off the side. "We must rent a very fast car," I demanded, before scrunching up my face in an inevitably doomed attempt to get a look at myself. I didn't normally sound like this.

My journalist agreed, so we popped some pills and picked up a BMW. It was a little past midnight at the time, so you could hardly notice the car's nasty habit of accelerating right up to the edge of other cars, stopping hard a couple inches before it hit them.

"We must find a heart of darkness," said my journalist. I just looked at her. She continued mumbling about a heart of darkness while stepping on the accelerator. I decided to look away. She continued to make friends with the accelerator. "I've got it—" she shouted, wrenching the car around, "Vacaville!"

My journalist assured me that Vacaville was a small city outside San Francisco filled with giant vats of transgenic mutant corn that cured cancer. I wasn't quite sure what any of that really was, let alone which part of that was a heart of darkness. My fears were not allayed when we pulled off the freeway under a giant light-up sign that said "Authentic Historic Vacaville", only to see a couple 7-11s and a CostCo. We got back on the freeway.

The next time we got off the freeway, there were a dozen industrial buildings with sinister yellow lighting belching vast plumes of smoke into the air. We ditched the car behind a tree, dropped our wallets and identification in it, and, arm-in-arm, begun strolling through a place which had even less claim to the title of Authentic Historic Vacaville.

In 2006, the leading biotechnology firm Genentech was named the number one “Best Company To Work For” by *Fortune Magazine*. I suppose this incredible allure could explain why the company’s campus was surrounded by barbed wire. It did not, however, explain why the barbed wire was facing *in*.

There are a couple of ways to get into the Genentech campus. You can climb the barbed wire fence. You can swipe an ID badge and go through the imposing metal turnstiles. You can drive past the guard at the main gate and show some kind of ID. Or you can find the side gate that they forgot to lock and open it. My journalist didn’t want to scratch her pants, so we used the side gate.

And that was how we found ourselves strolling in the moonlight around the factories of a leading biotechnology firm.

“This place is incredible,” my journalist said, as we approached it. “Construction worker,” I said, as I spotted a man walking through the corridors of the empty new building. We continued walking around it.

“I’m always morally torn by major biotech companies,” she explained. “Smoke break,” I said, as the construction worker stepped outside the building and paused.

“On the one hand, this place makes drugs that save people’s lives — treatments for cancers and cystic fibrosis and asthma,” she told me. “Heading out,” I told her, as the construction worker walked across the campus towards the gate.

“And yet, on the other hand, this place is pure evil.” We walked past large vats labeled “Poison” and huge machines that looked like they could crush us. Smoke belched from the top of the building and we could see more buildings and a parking lot in the distance.

“Companies like this are made up of dozens of people, each of whom, individually, are the sweetest guys. Nice, friendly people who just care about doing well at their work.” As we approached the buildings, we saw that even now — 2AM — the place was alive. New cars were pulling into the lot and men and women were walking from building to building. The yellowed light on their white lab coats gave the whole thing a sinister air.

“And yet, together, they manage to pull off the most incomprehensible evils.” I was about to join her discussion of organizational sociology when I heard a go-kart pull up behind us.

“Excuse me,” said the man in the go-kart. “Do you folks work here?”

I was about to come up with some explanation but my journalist dodged in front of me and saved me the trouble.

“No, sir,” she said, with complete sincerity.

“Do you have visitors’ badges?” asked the man, sounding a bit puzzled.

“Definitely not,” she said.

“Are you supposed to be here?”

“No way. Actually, we were just going for a stroll when we found ourselves in this bizarre place. We were wondering if you could tell us how to get out.”

The man in the go-kart thought about this for a while before getting out of the kart and walking towards us. As he stepped into the light I could see he was wearing a bright orange vest.

“Huh, well the fastest way to get out of the facility from here is probably to walk through the entire campus,” he explained.

“Oh, I see,” said the journalist. “Well, could you escort us off the premises then?” she asked. I restrained myself from kicking her.

The man in the vest looked back at the go-kart, where his partner was sitting. “Nah, my there’s no more room in the kart,” he said.

“Oh, well then maybe you could take us to security?” she said. I dug a small hole in the ground, placed my foot into it, then used the other foot to fill it back up with dirt in a vain attempt to stop myself from kicking her.

“I’m actually not allowed to take you guys to Genentech security,” he said. “See, I’m over with construction. One of my men came by and told me that he saw to people walking around the premises, so I just came to check it out.” He thought about this for a while. “Let me see if I can find you someone,” he said.

And that is how we got a burly man in a bright orange vest to escort us onto the Genetech campus, a series of industrial buildings facing a shared quadrangle of matted grass, with some concrete sidewalks laid across it. The whole thing looked a bit like a college campus, I suppose, if the college’s buildings had been designed to look like some kind of sci-fi bubble city. Through the windows one could spy huge machines with many levers dials and large vats that stuff was being oozed into and out of.

People entered and exited the buildings in a hurried manner, and one scientist, a frazzled-looking man with a redhead’s beard and an orange t-shirt reading “got juice?”, crossed the path in front of us.

“Excuse me,” said the man in the vest, his manly striding posture suddenly becoming bowed and deferential before the frazzled scientist. “I found these people who got lost wandering around the campus,” he explained, as if it was a question. “Do you think you could try to get them home?”

“Oh, sure!” said the scientist, genial and alive as a carnival barker, as if he made a habit of wandering around the Genentech campus at 2 in the morning looking for people to take back to their cars.

“Thanks so much,” said the man in the vest, before scurrying back to his go-kart.

The scientist reached for a walkie-talkie from his back pocket. “Security, are you there? Security?” he said and paused. The radio crackled. “This is security,” it

finally replied. “Where are you?” he asked. There was a pause. Then a crackle. “What?”

“Are you in your office?” Pause, crackle. “Um, yeah.”

“OK, be there in a bit.”

And that was how a Genentech scientist badged us into the facility and begun taking us through its corridors.

“So what do you do here?” I asked, as if making conversation.

“Oh, we, um, make drugs to treat breast cancer,” he explained.

“Yeah, right,” my journalist whispered in my ear. “Awful big facility just for treating breast cancer.”

“What do you do?” I asked. “Oh, I’m a scientist here.”

“Oh, really? A scientist? Heh, I always imagined scientists wandering around in big white labcoats carrying beakers,” I joked. “Oh, we do,” he said with utter sincerity. “Actually, I just took my lab coat off — if you guys had been here a couple minutes earlier I would have been wearing it.”

We wandered past hallways labeled with Genentech propaganda and stopped right before the company cafeteria, ducking into a door to find the desk for security.

“Hey there!” said the scientist. “Hi,” said the bored-looking African-American woman behind the desk.

“Um, these two folks got a bit lost wandering around the neighborhood and I was wondering you could help get them out of here.”

The security woman’s eyes widened. “What?” she shouted. “You brought random strangers in here? They can’t be in here! You can’t just bring people in here!”

“Well, I just figured I ought to take them to security and you guys could help them out.”

“Help them out? Help them out? I’m not allowed to leave this desk,” she cried. “Oh, they can’t be in here. You gotta get rid of these guys.”

“Oh, okay,” said the scientist, completely unfazed. “Well, I’ll walk them back to their car.”

“Yeah, whatever,” she said dismissively. “You just do what you gotta do, ‘cause they can’t be in here.”

And that was how a Genentech scientist took us through the building, past offices, through the loading dock, out the back past more industrial equipment, a running commentary all the way.

“How’d you guys get in here?” asked the guard at the gate as we walked past him. He’d obviously heard about us. “Oh,” my journalist said, “it was open. We just walked in.” The guard just laughed and waved.

The scientist asked where we were from, just in the spirit of making conversation. My journalist explained that we were from San Francisco and we’d decided it was a nice night for a casual stroll, so we had been walking around Vacaville. The scientist nodded approvingly, as if he always ran into cityfolk who came out for a stroll around Vacaville’s office parks at 2 in the morning.

Soon we’d located our car and said our goodbyes. The scientist waved goodbye at us and we tried to stifle our giggles until we got back to the car.

At moments like these, which seem to stand outside of space and time — middle of nowhere, middle of the night — one thing remains constant: Denny’s. Always open, with decor that hasn’t changed since its founding in the 1960s, a diner like Denny’s is a perfect place to go to make sense of it all. But none of it makes any sense at all; there is nothing to do but lay your head down on the table and puzzle at a world that is more strange than you can possibly imagine.

Announcing the Open Library

July 16, 2007

[Original link](#)

Early this year, when I left my job at Wired Digital, I thought I could look forward to months of lounging around San Francisco, reading books on the beach and drinking fine champagne and eating *foie gras*. Then I got a phone call. Brewster Kahle of the Internet Archive was thinking of pursuing a project that I'd been trying to do literally for years. I thought long and hard about it and realized I couldn't pass this opportunity up. So I put aside my dreams of lavish living and once again threw myself into my work. Just as well, I suppose, since San Francisco's beaches are freezing cold, champagne has a disgusting taste, and *foie gras* is even worse.

I thought of the smartest programmers and designers I knew and gave them a ring, sat down for coffee with them, threatened to fly out to their homes and knock on their doors. In the end, we got together an amazing group of people — all sworn to secrecy of course — and in the past few months we've put together what's probably the biggest project I ever worked on.

So today I'm extraordinarily proud to announce [the Open Library](#) project. Our goal is to build the world's greatest library, then put it up on the Internet free for all to use and edit. Books are the place you go when you have something you want to share with the world — our planet's cultural legacy. And never has there been a bigger attempt to bring them all together.

I hope you'll take a look and let me know what you think. And if this project excites you the way it excites me, I hope you'll join us.

- [Visit the Open Library site](#)

Fear and Loathing: A Correction

July 18, 2007

[Original link](#)

The other week in a post titled [Fear and Loathing in Biotechnology Firms](#), I wrote:

“Hey there!” said the scientist. “Hi,” said the bored-looking African-American woman behind the desk.

In response, I recently received the following comment from a poster who goes by the name “I WAS THERE THAT NIGHT”:

I’m not a large african american woman, and there was no desk. Your “facts” are incorrect, and you looked very very scared that night, my friend.

I’d like to take this moment to correct the record. Upon reflection, security sat behind a barrier that was indeed tall enough to make it a “counter” and not a “desk”. We at *Raw Thought* deplore the casual use of language that causes many speakers to conflate counters with desks and we strive for precision in these matters. We deeply regret the error.

I’d also like to take this moment to correct another error. The same article suggests the same so-called “desk” was reached after “ducking into a door”. After a further review of notes by the author, we have concluded that it was not actually a door, but more of a small hallway leading to several doors, really a kind of alcove actually.

I hope this post underscores our commitment to “facts” at *Raw Thought*. We continue to stand by our claims that journalists noses look bigger while on drugs, that giant vats of transgenic corn cure cancer, that CostCo is authentically historic, and that Genentech is the Best Company to Work For in America. We can only hope that its employees continue to read our quality content.

Consciousness Clarified

August 1, 2007

[Original link](#)

You ever notice how when you learn a new word you begin seeing it used everywhere? Lately I've been feeling that way about consciousness. I knew the word before, obviously, but lately I've clarified my thoughts about what it *is* and sloppy usage of the term sticks out like a sore thumb.

"Consciousness", the dictionary kindly explains, is "the state or condition of being conscious." And we all basically know what it means to be conscious. You poke someone awake and ask "Are you conscious?" You get hit on the head by a large rock and you get knocked unconscious. Being conscious, in short, means being awake, being aware of your surroundings, seeing colors and feeling pinches and hearing songs.

Now there's something weird about being conscious — something so weird, in fact, that I've found many people are bizarrely tempted to deny it. Consciousness is what the philosopher John Searle calls "ontologically subjective". That is, when you see the color red, while it's true that all sorts of complicated things happen in your eyes and brains, a particular experience — the one we call "seeing red" — happens only to you. If aliens with the most powerful viewing technology possible beamed down to earth and peeked inside your brain, they'd still have no idea what the color red looked like. They'd see that a certain wavelength of light triggered certain electrical impulses in certain centers, but they'd never see *red*. It's just not there.

Now we don't know for sure what *causes* consciousness (it's an ongoing research project) but whatever the answer is, it must be caused by *something*. Yet this obvious fact is continually missed by laypeople who make bizarre comments like "as soon as computers become self-aware, they might become conscious".¹ This is as absurd as saying that as soon as computers are told about food, they might start digesting things.

Consciousness isn't some vague property of things that look smart to us. It has a real, physical meaning: feeling things. I suppose it's logically possible that a talking robot might start feeling things, but the chances seem awfully remote.

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1. Example: [This week's New York Times Magazine](#) suggests "a robot might exhibit the first glimmers of consciousness, 'namely, the reflexive ability of a mind to examine itself over its own shoulder.'"

Sci Foo 2007 Gossip Liveblog

August 4, 2007

[Original link](#)

Industry heavyweights [O'Reilly](#), [Google](#), and [Nature](#) come together to sponsor a science-focused version of O'Reilly's runaway success [FOO Camp](#), bringing together top people in the field to eat and gab and plot. Our correspondent on the scene at Google headquarters in Mountain View and the conference hotel in Sunnyvale (where Google purchased a room for every attendee) will be providing live updates on the famous and their doings.

Friday night

[Martha Stewart](#) is here with her boyfriend [Charles Simonyi](#). [Frank Wilczek](#) is just as friendly in person as on TV. Dinner with [Nat Torkington](#) and [Hal Varian](#). [James Randi](#) just told me to get glasses. [Esther](#) and [Freeman](#) are here — double Dyson decadence! [Paul Sereno](#), America's Most Photogenic Paleontologist looks photogenic in person too. [Jaron Lanier](#) seems to know everyone.

Kid looks past me to ask what the guy next to me does. I look miffed. He looks back at me and says “well, come on, everyone knows your story.”

[Tim O'Reilly](#) kicks things off by singing a duet of “I Feel Good”. [Ted Selker](#) gabs about our distractible mutual friend. [Dean Kamen](#) brags about the robots he's seen. [Lee Smolin](#). [Eugenie Scott](#) gets a round of applause. [Neal Stephenson](#) and [Kim Stanley Robinson](#) are sitting together. Lots of comic book artists. [Theodore Gray](#). [Chris Anderson](#). [Yossi Vardi](#) says hi. [Eric Drexler](#). [Vik Olliver](#) talks about his [self-replicating 3D printers](#). [Danny Hillis](#). [George Dyson](#) is also here. [Sergey Brin](#) says he likes neck stretches.

A quick glance makes it seem about 10% female, but Tim says it's more like 23%.

[Paul Sereno](#) brought a bunch of fossils. We're not supposed to blog them until he's published. [Drew Endy](#) talks about domesticating biotech and [a summer camp](#) where college freshmen do their own biotech engineering. [Felice Frankel](#) shows series of brilliant science photos from her work with G. M. Whitesides and promotes [imageandmeaning.org](#). [Saul Griffith](#) and [Jim McBride](#) show a series of diagrams to explain energy sources, paths, and usage. [Charles Simonyi](#) talks about his time in space. [Martha Stewart](#) talks about the food she made for him.

The hallways are full of people to talk to — I don't go for a minute before getting into a conversation. [Kovas Boguta](#) hints at his latest secret project.

[Sarah Brown](#) catches up. The famed [LH](#) shares her inexhaustible supply of *love*. [Daniel Chudnov](#) of the Library of Congress introduces himself and tells me about the ten terabytes of data they have at [Chronicling America](#). [Brady Forrest](#) tells me about the many conferences he worries about.

Saturday

[Martha](#) saw one of her subordinates eat food that's been out too long and worried that she would die of salmonella. [Vaughan Bell](#) tells me what it's like to study people with psychosis and delusions. A group at breakfast wonders who is the Richard Feynman and Carl Sagan of our era. CSI has driven so many people into forensics that colleges have started whole new programs because of it — can we do the same for the rest of science? “Science shows always show us at the university all day,” one complains. “How come they never show us at the pub or at meetings like this?”

In one session a group of people discuss their citizen science projects — attempts to let normal people assist them with science. Others talk about visualizing data and transporting huge swaths of it. Google security is frighteningly helpful. [Danny Hillis](#) talks in the hallway about buying land for his clock. [Jeff Hawkins](#) talks about his neocortical theory. [Eugenie Scott](#) speaks on the attacks on evolution. [Henry Gee](#) on the Jewish community in London: “People are shocked if their rabbi is not a practicing lesbian.”

I signed up to give a talk.

At lunch there was a fellow working on genetically evolving robots, using a 3D printer to make the robots. Zach Kaplan of [Inventables](#) had a big bag at the table, from which he kept pulling out the most amazing things — squishy magnets, plastic that expands in water, instant snow, erasable pens, and so on. It was hilariously fun. On the way back in my old friend [Chris Anderson](#) said hi and plugged his new startup with the inimitable [Adam Goldstein](#), [BookTour](#). Adam — say hi sometime!

Theo Gray [demos Mathematica 6](#). [Ted Kaehler](#), a lieutenant of [Alan Kay](#), demos the latest stuff from [Squeakland](#), which has similar demos but for kids and with less elegance. ([Dean Kamen](#) got very interested; presumably for [FIRST](#).) [Bjørn Lomborg](#) takes his [Copenhagen Consensus](#) show on the road. Hugh Rein-hoff tells how he diagnosed his daughter's congenital illness by sequencing her DNA to find the genetic mutation. (Harvard charges only \$3.50 a reaction!) “All the stuff you need these days is available on the Web,” he explains. “But the doctors get totally freaked out.”

The Google buildings are almost mazelike.

[George Dyson](#) has a standing-room-only talk on “Gödel and the Draft Board”. (It was already moved to a larger room once.) The rest of [the Dyson family](#) and [Martin Rees](#), President of the Royal Society, are among the numerous in

attendance. George Dyson gives a madcap tour of Gödel's attempts to become a full professor at the [Institute for Advanced Study](#) — a story of endless disappointments which Dyson manages to make quite funny. It's brilliant, if you can look past his standard bits of softheadedness. [Freeman Dyson](#) pipes in with stories from his [Neal Stephenson](#) notes that Gödel went on to work on lonely philosophical projects and George suggests that the open-ended freedom of the Institute was a bit of a mistake. [Tim O'Reilly](#) wonders if this is a more general lesson. "I once paid [Larry Wall](#) a salary to do ... basically whatever he wanted for a year," he said. "I worry that it was the worst thing that ever happened to the Perl community, because that was when [Perl 6](#) turned into what someone called a performance art project."

Martha Stewart fills a big room speaking on the Paperless Home. "I may not look like it," she says, "but I'm the typical homemaker. I have a dog, I have a daughter, I have a garden, I have a farm, and I do—or I did it all myself." And as a homemaker, she's convinced homes need to become computerized. Not too computerized, of course — not like those crazy folks at MIT who want to have refrigerators that talk and coffee makers that do the same thing every day. Stewart wants to preserve traditions too. So she's going to build tools to organize the ultra-tedious tasks of life. She's very bright, hard-headed, and engaging. "So exhausting," says one woman upon the session's conclusion. "We pay people to do that sort of work."

[Dalton Conley](#), the persecuted sociologist, and his arthack wife [Natalie Jeremijenko](#) gab at dinner. Dean Kamen gesticulates wildly and talks about watching beautiful women who bend down to pick things up. Nat Torkington discusses how O'Reilly refused to censor [his video demonstration of New Zealand culture](#). [Chris DiBona](#) admits he just works at Google (as a grown-up!) so that he can do science tourism. Theo Gray shows me the 3D Table of the Elements he printed out using a lenticular.

The Internet here is really wonky.

[Timo Hannay](#) of *Nature* introduces himself and welcomes me, giving some clues as to why I was invited. He asks me to explain [Science that Matters](#), which is an odd situation. My proud co-author [Jim Hendler](#) gives a talk on the future of science publishing. [Paul Ginsparg](#) ducks out to look at [Howtoons](#), where [Saul Griffith](#), who is dating Tim's daughter [Arwen O'Reilly](#), explains that they try to combine emotional stories to attract girls and action at a distance (guns, explodey-things, etc.) to attract boys, and telling the real stories behind discoveries to attract all. Theo Gray talks about the liability issues involved in publishing [his Popular Science column](#). They made sure to get [Judith Regan](#) as their publisher so that they could print all sorts of dangerous stuff in their book, only to have her sacked because of the [O.J. Simpson debacle](#). The conversation then devolved into explodey-things you can make at home. But [the book](#) should be out soon. It looks great.

The WiFi at the conference hotel [adds ads to pages](#). Wow, is that annoying.

Sunday

[Eric Bonabeau](#) apologized for being rude to me the other day and explained what his company does — predict human behavior based on modeling cognitive biases. “Clearly people aren’t rational economic actors,” he explained. “Just look at [Quinn Norton](#).”

Someone whose name I didn’t catch talks about finding which genetic differences increase your risk for getting a particular disease. To get 1x coverage of your genome from [Celera](#) costs only \$100,000 and [23andMe](#) hopes to do portions of your gene for \$1,000. And just doing portions costs tens of dollars. You can [browse the genome](#) of [Jim Watson](#) and find the genetic mutations unique to him. “Perhaps that mutation explains the *extreme* sexism,” jokes [Paul Ginsparg](#). He shows [a large study of genetic risk factors](#) and examines Watson to see if he’s at risk.

I give my talk. When I start, about 4 people are there, but I charge ahead and 15 or so more people show up. I give a demo of [Open Library](#), which most people miss because they came late. Then we discuss how to open the scientific literature. Ginsparg says that studies have found that about a third of all papers, preferentially high-impact papers, are available for free online. We learn about the ways people keep online bibliographies (including the Drupal modules involved). And someone else suggests that the [Wellcome Trust](#) just buy Elsevier and open it up.

[Natalie](#) helps [Dalton](#) set up his computer for their joint session, in which they make “somewhat opposite arguments”. (They look much less cool when they’re wearing casual clothing.) He covers the problems in studying [his book on birth order](#). He shows that blacks who were called for the draft are less likely to die in later years (“which I was shocked about”), which he proposes is because the military is the most color-blind institution (he suggests the black-white test score gap is smaller there too). He notes that women’s groups prefer the voting records of politicians with daughters (for a potential natural experiment). Roommate lottery finds that each point loss in GPA costs you .25 points and that roommate drinking is a major influence. But once the effects are known, people adjust their social behavior. Thus social scientists are on a treadmill. [Carl Bergstrom](#) says he sees similar patterns in evolution — even if the animals are at a draw, you can see if the genome is under heavy selection.

Natalie talks about her [Urban Space Station project](#) which uses closed systems engineering to create safe urban spaces. Attached she’ll have a lab, one project of which is the Environmental Health Clinic, where people come with environmental problems and get prescriptions for things to do to help improve their world. One prescription: [the greenlight](#).

I wanted to get into a fight with Dalton about the metareliability of these natural experiments but couldn’t find him — he and Natalie were too busy taking care of two adorable children. At lunch I explained Open Library to some folks from *Nature*, then got involved in a discussion making fun of Stephen Wolfram with

Chris DiBona and others. I learned the meaning of my Google New York shirt. Jim McBride told me how much he liked STM (which I saw on some other peoples' feed readers) and invited me up to their abandoned air traffic control tower. Paul Ginsparg introduced me to [Michael Kurtz](#) of [ADS](#).

Tim gives the closing speech: he wants to hear what new connections were made, that's his metric for success. Afterwards, I get in a great conversation with Carl Bergstrom who tells me about new features on his [Eigenfactor](#) site. Then I bump into [Bjørn Lomborg](#), who is amazed I know about the Copenhagen Consensus. He's been giving copies of his new book to everyone within throwing distance and stops to amicably persuade me that we should spend less on stopping global warming. Incredibly friendly guy — imagine the lead of *Thank You For Smoking* but a surfer. I talked to a lot of other people but I don't remember the details.

The Google people are packing up the camping tents and mats. [Tamara Munzner](#) demos some of her visualization software. She gave me and others a ride. [Erez Lieberman](#) told me about his work modeling versions of evolution in which structural forces cause random drift to tie with fitness selection and his wife Aviva Presser told me about her work investigating methylation in gene sequences.

It was an incredible conference. Probably the best I've been to (although that's not saying much).

More...

View [photos on Flickr](#).

Also, be sure to check out [my comments on the Foo Camp format and suggestions for improving it](#).

Improving the Foo Camp Format

August 5, 2007

[Original link](#)

I've been to several Foo Camps now and always the system has been identical: Get a bunch of meeting rooms of varying sizes. Invite a bunch of the top people you know of in the field. Have them write the schedule.

When you first arrive, Tim meets and greets at the door, his associates behind him ask for your name and give you a badge and a t-shirt and a short form to fill out. The form has your name on it and asks a few questions about what you do and who they should invite next year and that sort of thing. Then they take your photo and print it onto the top of the form and put all the forms up on the wall in a huge display that you have to be pretty tall to see all of.

You mingle as everyone arrives and then you all cram into a big meeting room. Tim and his compatriots give an opening address welcoming you to the conference and explaining the format. Then everyone (all 300 people or so!) stand up and say their name, affiliation, and three words to describe themselves (usually going over). Sometimes people shout talk when they think the person should give a talk. Then Tim says a few more words and they wheel out huge paper foam boards with the schedule outline printed on them. It lists the name of the room and the number of people it approximately holds at the top and the session times on the side. Then Tim says go and there's a mad scramble to the boards with people pushing each other out of the way to write down their preferred session.

This always struck me as a bit silly for a computer company. The people I most want to hear — like aging James Randi — can't exactly push their way to the front of the crowd. And the people who are convinced that their topic is the most important for everyone to go to are usually deathly boring.

How would I do it? First, I would put a few words of description on people's badges and wall-cards. Second, I would put the wall-cards online. (They're digital photos anyway.) Third, during the name introductions I'd point a video camera at the person introducing themselves and project it onto the big screen up front so that people don't flip around their chairs and crane to see.

But the main thing I'd do is make people pitch for their sessions. There are a bunch of different ways to do this, but the one I like best at the moment (and thus the one I'd try first) is to hand out PRS devices to the audience (these are little hand-held gadgets that send an IR pulse to a computer at the front of the room recording a vote on something) and then have all the people who want to hold a session form a line going towards the back of the room. Each person in the line gets 30 seconds to pitch their session. If people like it, they press

a button on the PRS and their vote gets recorded. After the pitch, someone enters the presenter name, the session name, and the estimated length into the computer recording the votes. (If someone in the line wants to hold a similar session, they can consult with the person pitching and merge things.)

Once every session has been pitched, the computer does a constraint optimization problem to schedule only the most popular sessions in timeslots with the least conflicts (the computer knows if a person wants to see both James Randi and Eugenie Scott, so it can try to avoid having them speak at the same time) and place them in rooms with the appropriate amount of space. This schedule is printed up and placed on the website, maybe with a few spots reserved for last-minute changes, and this is what people follow.

Aside from being a really sexy use of constraint optimization, this solves a lot of problems: people get a little taste of every session, the most interesting sessions are scheduled, conflicts (wanting to see two sessions that are scheduled to the same time) are minimized, rooms are allocated by audience size instead of by ego size. If you want, you can even print up a schedule for each participant, with the computer telling them which is the session they liked most at every timeslot.

Buying [a bunch of PRSs](#) can't be that expensive — for comparison, Google purchased two nights at a hotel for every guest — and you can reuse them every year. If giving people a chance to pitch their sessions takes too long, you can have them submit a one paragraph description to a web site and let people vote on the web site. If this requires too many attendees have laptops with them, you can have them do this before the conference. But that requires more foresight than I expect the average attendee has, which is why I like the PRS system. I'm not sure why O'Reilly sticks to paper.

Update: By email, [Peter Kazanjy](#) suggests another variation: have people write their session ideas up on cards, put the cards on the wall, then have everyone make a mark on their top five ideas, then schedule the cards and rooms based on how many marks they have.

The Interrupt-Driven Life

August 20, 2007

[Original link](#)

After what seemed like years working in the Reddit isolation chamber, I begun saying yes to all the interesting projects that came my way as soon as I got out. And there were a lot of interesting projects.

I signed up to build [a comprehensive catalog of every book](#), write three books of my own (since largely abandoned), consult on [a not-for-profit project](#), help build [an encyclopedia of jobs](#), get [a new weblog](#) off the ground, [found a startup](#), mentor two ambitious Google Summer of Code projects (stay tuned), build a Gmail clone, write a new online bookreader, start a career in journalism, [appear in a documentary](#), and research and co-author [a paper](#). And that's not including all the stuff I normally do. I've actually been spending most of my time catching up on my 2000 email backlog, reading a book a week, following a bunch of weblogs, and falling in love. (Falling in love takes a shockingly huge amount of time!) Yes, it has been pointed out to me that I'm insane.

Clearly part of this is that I have some kind of severe psychological problem (an inability to say no, an inclination toward stress, and a nasty habit of coping with stress by submerging myself in new projects). But it's not completely failing either. Every project has kind of half-finished. Maybe this is worthless, maybe instead of half-finished thirteen projects I should just completely finish one. But it doesn't seem obviously stupid — a half-finished project has *some* value (educational if nothing else) and it seems increasingly likely that some of them will get finished properly.

So how is it that I'm able to do so many tasks that even I, upon reflection, can't see how they're all getting done? The secret is to be interrupt-driven. Previously, if I wanted to do something, I'd immerse myself in that thing. I'd wake up in the morning thinking about the problem, spend all day either working on it, reading background materials for it, talking to friends about it, thinking about it in bed before I went to sleep and then dreaming about it. I'm sure I did much better work this way: all that thinking and dreaming led to lots of ideas I wouldn't have had otherwise. And it was fun, too. Immersing yourself in a problem can be very enjoyable. (*See* Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.) But clearly, you can really only work on one problem at a time this way and it doesn't leave much room for other people in your life.

In the new system, for every task I have a partner. And they're the one responsible for thinking about it. Perhaps they don't immerse themselves in it totally like I sometimes did, but it takes up a substantial portion of their mental energy. And so, after we hash out the big plan together at the beginning, they

work on it and think about it and worry about it and when they get stuck or finish a piece or just want to talk about it, they shoot me an email. Meanwhile, I sit at home and just deal with these emails, answering questions and solving problems as they come up.

Now while I think giving people a partner on these projects is really valuable (I wish I had one on more of my immersive projects) I'll readily admit that I'm lousy at it. I've been spending too much time ill and traveling and with people in my life to respond promptly or in detail. (I'm sorry guys; I'm going to work hard to pare things down and do better.)

But I think the larger principle is valuable. This is clearly how the real big-shots "get things done". Recall the scene in *Brazil* where the harried executive strolls purposefully (yet aimlessly) through the corridors with a trail of people waving papers behind him to which he barks either yes or no. (Reprised in *last week's Psych*.) Of course, when things get that far, it's rather unclear who's actually doing things. As with the political figure whose every minute is scheduled by their campaign manager or their chief of staff, one begins to wonder whether the others are working for the boss or whether the boss is simply working for them. In this way, moving up the corporate ladder means giving up more and more of your power and freedom.

At some point I plan to go back to the immersive life. I have some big plans that are just important enough to need that kind of dedication. But this is the year of Other People. I can't be everything to everyone, but I'll try my best to "get things done".

Perfectionism

August 31, 2007

[Original link](#)

This may be hard for you to believe, but I'm something of a perfectionist. I get a special kind of joy out of tweaking every last detail until it's just right, making sure each pixel is in its place. Unfortunately, I've never really been able to indulge this desire on any of my previous projects, either because my skills are too weak (no matter how much time I spend on it, I'll never be able to craft a page like [John Gruber](#) can) or because time is too short.

At Reddit, for example, we were always rushing-rushing-rushing to get more done. In [a recent post](#), Paul Graham suggests startups can make you rich if you simply make sure to email him once a week. At Reddit we had no such worries: Paul was sure to email us weekly, sometimes even daily, usually asking why we hadn't added any new features to the site lately. (In fairness, it worked, I suppose.)

When you get that question once a week, you get to try out many different answers, including questioning the premise. At first I give the usual low-level excuses: we weren't feeling well this week, we had to go to a meeting, Alexis was out of town. Then we started in on more general principles: afraid of change, distracted by day-to-day fires, dissatisfaction with the codebase. And once I sent him [Slate's suggestion that](#) "the Eccentrics' own egotistical indolence has resulted in self-imposed limits to their skills—at the very least it deprives the world of more of their unique cultural prognostications." (He was not amused.)

Paul eventually became convinced that we had written lots of good code but wouldn't release it because we were perfectionists. *Knock it off*, he would tell us. *It's more important to get it up than to get it right*. Paul had become convinced that users love seeing new features, it gave them the impression of an exciting vibrant site.

There is something to this, of course. But I have a contrary proposal: users love perfectionism. Creating something brilliant is a process of continual refinement: adding bits where they're needed, chipping off others that aren't, and sanding everything smooth once it's in place, then polishing it until it gleams. Do one thing, release it, and don't stop releasing improvements until you do it really, really, well.

Adding features is part of this, of course, but not at all the whole thing. You can't create a great sculpture just by tossing on more and more clay.

Meanwhile, even if users can't immediately see all the subtle details you've added, they begin to add up to a feeling of — if you're talented — delight. The

software knows where you want to go and has already laid out the trail. The path is worn smooth and shiny. Everything looks beautiful along the way. And every day it gets a little bit better.

For my next startup, [Jottit](#), that's the plan.

Sweating the Small Stuff

September 16, 2007

[Original link](#)

So [Jottit](#) has launched, only five months after I suggested to my friend Simon that we create a website that was just a big text box people could type stuff into. And there are two ways I look at it. One is: It took us five months to do *that*? And the other is: We did that in only five months?

When you look at what the site does, it seems pretty simple. It has few features, no complex algorithms, little gee-whiz gadgetry. It just takes your text and puts it on the Web. And considering how often I do that every day, it seems a bit odd that it took so long to create yet another way. And then I check the todo list.

[As I've said](#), this is a site I wanted to get every little detail right on. And when you start sweating the small stuff, it's frankly incredible just how much of it there is. Even our trivial site is made up of over two dozen different screens. Each one of those screens has to be designed to look and work just right on a wide variety of browsers, with a wide variety of text in them.

And that's just making things look good — making them work right is much harder. Each screen does, on average, five or six different things. And each of those things can be done under three or four different modes. Now we're up to over 500 different things to do, each of which can have bugs in lots of unthought-of ways. And then, many of these pieces are exposed to users, who can do whatever they want with them — and do. If you're building a site that accepts text from users, you need to think about something that lets some people just paste stuff from emails, others write HTML, others play YouTube videos, while others try to insert malicious text to break things for people.

There are lots of features we want to add to Jottit, but before we do any of that we want to make what we have work perfectly. And, at the moment, that means tasks as varied as reporting a bug in a piece of software we use to its developer, configuring the web server to display a nicer error message under certain odd conditions, having another computer monitor the first computer to see if it goes down, figuring out how to tweak the UI to make certain unclear things clearer to people, rewriting some of the text on the site to be nicer, creating a new site to inform our users of updates, making some stuff from our project open source, fixing stuff in other open source projects, testing the site on phones and weird browsers, examining an algorithm we use to see if it needs improvement, and fixing a bug that was just reported by a user. And those are just the things on *my* todo list!

When you look at it that way, it's amazing anyone ever builds a website.

Was Rachel Carson a Mass Murderer?

September 21, 2007

[Original link](#)

A new issue of one of my favorite magazines, *Extra!* is hitting the streets, with a blurb for my article inside on the cover. When I decided to get into political journalism, *Extra!* was the first magazine I turned to. Every other month they issue a brilliant magazine full of articles which collect and dissect the standard media narratives on a particular issue and then lay out the real story for you. It's invaluable. I think of their work as a good digest of the news: you get the same misinformation you'd get everywhere else but you also get how and why it's misinformation.

For my first piece, I decided to take on the noise machine that's been loudly proclaiming in news outlets across the land that the environmentalist movement, headed by Rachel Carson, is responsible for the deaths of millions of African babies. Why? Because they discouraged the use of the noxious pesticide DDT, which was previously used for controlling the spread of malaria.

For the article, I dug into the science, interviewed the man behind the misinformation campaign (Roger Bate, a character straight out of *Thank You For Smoking*), and corrected claims from right-wing think tanks (no, Rachel Carson did not kill all those babies) and from blogs (no, the whole misinformation campaign is not funded by the tobacco companies).

You can read the full article [on *Extra!*'s website](#) or I've put up [a version linking to all my sources](#).

An interesting footnote: As I noted above, Roger Bate insisted he had not been funded by the tobacco companies, as many have claimed. Instead, he said, their main original funder was the [May and Stanley Smith Charitable Trust](#). The trust, a \$264 million California foundation started by a mining magnate, has the mission of "provid[ing] grants to organizations that serve the needs of children, the elderly, the disabled, and the disadvantaged." However, it has also been a major contributor to the libertarian Cato Institute and George Mason University. Bate says that its trustee, Luther Avery, didn't "agree entirely with everything I was suggesting" but at least thought "the debate was worthy of being exposed."

In 2001, Luther Avery passed away, leaving his \$400,000 a year trustee job to his son, Mark Avery, making Mark the fifth highest-paid foundation executive in the Bay Area ([San Francisco Business Times](#), 11/14/03). But apparently that wasn't enough — Avery stole \$52 million from the Foundation and fled to Alaska. ([San Francisco Chronicle](#), 6/10/07). This June he pled guilty and now he faces a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison. ([U.S. Attorney for Alaska](#), 3/6/07)

The Joy of Public Speaking

September 27, 2007

[Original link](#)

A few months ago I was asked if I wanted to give a talk (via videoconference) to a technology conference in India. Being extraordinarily bad at saying no, I said yes. I asked what they wanted me to talk about and they said I could speak about whatever I liked. I thought about it for a while and concluded that I should talk about my life and how I got out of a small town in the middle of the country and ended up working with famous people. Due to a timing screw up, I didn't get to spend as much time on it as I liked, but I did my best. I can put the draft up if anyone wants it. (**Update:** [Here's the talk, as prepared.](#))

(My hope was that talking about all these things would give people lots of different subjects to ask questions on, and then I could go into more detail about whatever interested people. But oddly, the questions were instead mostly about the few things I'd left out of the narrative. I wonder if that means I addressed everything in enough detail that I answered all their questions or whether I didn't talk about the things they actually cared about.)

Giving a talk via videoconference is a painful thing. First, your disembodied head is looming six feet tall over a room of people. It's hard to imagine that's attractive to anyone other than Big Brother's most ardent fan. Second, you have only the blurriest view of the audience you're speaking to. Third, you can't hear whether they're laughing or not, because if you get an audio channel then all you hear is the delayed sound of your own voice repeated back to you — which is incredibly distracting — so instead all you get is silence. It's incredibly difficult to connect with an audience under these conditions.

Still, I did my best, and I'm told it went reasonably well. I sure had fun — there's a real buzz you get from speaking before an audience, whether it's on the radio or via videocast or in person. Suddenly your depression and thirst and hunger melt away and you just light up with enthusiasm and energy. The students who filled the room I was addressing applauded and thanked me; but in truth I really owe a debt to them.

(**P.S.** If you did attend the talk, I'd love your honest feedback on how it went. Send me email at me@aaronsw.com or post a comment. Thanks!)

Dear Colleagues: Orders from China's Minister of Internet Censorship

October 12, 2007

[Original link](#)

from “Journey to the Heart of Internet Censorship”

The *Xinhua* exclusive “Who is most hurt by the Web?” is available at the follow address: http://news.xinhuanet.com/focus/2006-05-08/content_4494204.htm. It contains many articles, so each site is asked to put a link on its home page so that Internet users can read them directly on the Xinhua site. This will reduce the amount of work for each site. (9 May 2006)

The website Qianlong has already posted a news report about a change in the increase in Beijing taxi fares (<http://beijing.qianlong.com/3825/2006/05/19/134@3182655.h>). All sites are asked to put it in their news section, but not in a prominent position, to not put it on their front page, and to stop comments on the subject. (19 May 2006)

You are asked not to cover the matter of the real estate auction of public land at Dadun Beidingcun, in the Chaoyang district of Beijing. (22 May 2006)

Regarding the news report, “After a programming revision, the CCTV central television station has decided to stop broadcasting the national anthem,” websites must not post it, refer to it or comment on it, and those that have already posted it should take it down. Step up monitoring of forums, blogs and comments on the news, and suppress offensive or insulting reports as quickly as possible. Comply strictly with these instructions! (27 May 2006)

A few agitators got residents in Dongzhou (in the southern district of Shanwei) to commit an act of vandalism on a windmill and attack the police on 6 December. The competent authorities are in the process of taking measures to resolve this problem, and the trial of those responsible for this unrest is taking place right now. The leading news media in Guangdong province and the websites Nanfang Xinwen, Jinyang, Dayang and Shenzhen Xinwen are currently covering the case and will publish articles on this subject on 24 and 25 May. No news websites from other provinces should cover the case or post articles on the subject. Discussion forums, blogs and comments must not talk about the subject. (22 May 2006)

Dear colleagues, regarding the death of a radio presenter while she was at the deputy mayor's home, do not disseminate any reports, do

not send any new articles, withdraw those that have already been posted on the site, and ensure that forums, blogs and messages no longer refer to this case. Please reply. (30 May 2006)

Dear colleagues, the Internet has of late been full of articles and messages about the death of a Shenzhen engineer, Hu Xinyu, as a result of overwork. All sites must stop posting articles on this subject, those that have already been posted about it must be removed from the site and, finally, forums and blogs must withdraw all articles and messages about this case. (17 June 2006)

Regarding the issue of unequal income distribution, please use articles from the Central Committee's main information mouthpieces and nothing else. Please do not spread rumours about this matter or conduct online polls. Please reinforce monitoring of comments, discussion forums and blogs and immediately block any violent or obscene message. (28 June 2006)

Area Scientist's Study Confirms Own Prejudices

October 22, 2007

[Original link](#)

CAMBRIDGE, MA—In a study published today in the prestigious journal *Nature*, Harvard professor Dr. Thomas Jacobson, an expert in the field of physical neuroscience, finds that the gangly cortex, the area of the brain associated with stumbling, fumbling, and general klutziness, is smaller in members of the Red Sox sports team than in other major league baseball players.

The study, entitled “Differential Size Analysis of the Gangly Cortex In Professional Sports”, was conducted using a technique called Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging, or fMRI, in which brain activity is observed on a computer monitor while subjects perform a mental activity. In his fMRI studies, Dr. Jacobson noted significantly less mental activity in the gangly cortex of Red Sox players when he asked them to visualize various aspects of a baseball game.

“Obviously far more research needs to be done,” explained Dr. Jacobson, “but this evidence does appear to support the popular belief that Red Sox players are just better than everyone else.”

The study could have major implications for the entire field of physical neuroscience, which examines how differences in the brain can affect performance in various types of strenuous physical activity, including baseball, American football, running the mile, hockey, and the biathlon.

“I haven’t seen the study but I think it’s extremely brave work,” said former Harvard President Lawrence Summers when asked to comment. “There’s an academic orthodoxy of political correctness that says you shouldn’t inquire too much into the differences between sports teams. Well, Dr. Jacobson has thrown that out the window and science is better off for it.”

The study appears in the July 27th issue of *Nature*, along with new research showing that [eating chocolate is good for your heart](#), [Jews are just smarter than everyone else](#), [semen makes women happier](#), and [all women are bisexual](#). A new study showing that having sex with scientists [is associated with](#) a 20-point increase [in IQ](#) is expected to be released soon.

How to Build Decent Productivity Software

October 29, 2007

[Original link](#)

These days it seems like everyone is making productivity software — software that helps you manage all the the things you need to get done. Yet all of them seem to be missing some basic pieces. A productivity application has two jobs: remembering everything you need to do and getting you to do it. The second is necessary because without it, you'll put all your tasks in the application and then never do them. The first is necessary because otherwise the application will have no idea what to tell you to do.

I think the ideal piece of productivity software would be like having a great assistant or a campaign manager: someone who intimately knows all aspects of your life's todo lists and schedules and wasn't afraid of saying you had to wrap this meeting up because you promised the kids you'd be home at 5 to take them to the game. Judged against this standard, present productivity software is woefully lacking — it's usually not much more than a glorified todo list.

Remembering everything: Most software lets you store the classical todo list items: call Jon back, finish report, buy toy for kids.¹ Some systems even branch out into vaguer life goal stuff: spend time with family, become accomplished novelist, learn more about history. But that's about it.

But most people also have tasks in their project management software (fix this bug), various calendar-style events (lunch with Jon, catch plane), and a vast quantity of email (answer Jon's question, fix the frobnitz and report back to Bob, etc.) Yet no one seems to have dared to integrate their software with a calendar, email client, or even bug tracking software.

Since it's unlikely anyone writing productivity software is also going to write an email client, a calendar, and a bug tracker (although it would be nice), I'll settle for having support for plugins that import tasks and events from these various other apps. It has to be very simple to upload your whole life to your todo app.

Getting you to do stuff: The best I've seen is some kind of filtering in which the software lets you only look at tasks that can be done in 5 minutes while on a train. But if you're the kind of person who's dysfunctional enough to need productivity software, simply having a big list of tasks probably isn't going to help you much. (I can write a big list of tasks in Notepad.) Instead, the software should be proactive about getting you to do stuff, like telling you to quit goofing off and get ready for that big deadline you have tomorrow or to hurry up and answer that urgent email from yesterday.

How does it do this? First, it needs to know what's important. After you import your life it should let you walk through and triage it all: look at each one and decide how important it is (or whether it's already done). I've written a program to do this just for my mail and it's been invaluable — within a couple hours a morass of three thousand messages turned into a neatly labeled set of piles ordered by importance. Similarly, it can turn a tall pile of assorted todos into the beginnings of an action plan.

Then comes the crucial part: it tells you what to do. I'm not demanding anything fancy, like a robot dog that follows you around and barks orders (although that might be nice). I'm just saying provide a little pop-up window with a suggested next task. Psychologically, it's easy to ignore a long todo list. In fact, long todo lists are depressing and make you want to look away. But a simple suggestion about one particular thing to do next is much harder to dismiss.

Of course, the suggestions have to be good. The software would generate them by taking into account everything it knows about your tasks and calendar today. And if you still don't like the suggestion, you tell the program you can't do it because...:

- that'll take too long (adds a time estimate to the task; used to make sure the task can be done before the next event on the calendar)
- that's not very important (adds a priority to the task; used to sort by importance)
- I can't do that here (adds a physical context to the task, like being in a certain place; used to find tasks you can do in your current context)
- I can't do that yet (adds a dependency; dependencies can then be checked occasionally to see if they've been finished yet)
- I already did that (marks as done)
- that's not due for a while (adds a due date; used to make sure things get done before their deadlines)

and so on. Ideally, the system would be well-informed and smart enough that you could trust its predictions. But even if it wasn't perfect, just suggesting tasks in order of priority would likely be a vast improvement over the whimsical system used by most people in need of productivity software. It's hard to imagine such a tool wouldn't be a godsend.

Aaron Swartz has too large of a todo list to write this program by himself, but if you're interested in working on it he'd love to help. Email him at me@aaronsw.com

(Postscript: Dearest readers, telling me that your favorite glorified todo list has an API that allows me write all the importers I want as well as write the

task suggestion system I described is not an answer. My point is that todo lists should *have* these features; not that they should allow me to write them.)

1. Most of the classical productivity guides are aimed at middle managers whose lives, as far as we can tell from the examples, consist of calling people, finishing reports, and placating their families. Who am I to break with tradition?

Bubble City: Preface

October 31, 2007

[Original link](#)

November is National Novel Writing Month, or NaNoWriMo. The idea, as far as I can discern, is that more people ought to be writing novels. But whether this is for us or them is not clear.

Novels have an odd place in our culture. They can be capital-L Literature, as in the Great American Novel. Or they can be entertainment, as in romance or mystery novels. Or, and perhaps best, they can capture the essence of a place or time by using it as the backdrop for a story.

In this way, a novel is disguised memoir, as anyone who is friends with a novelist can readily discern. And, like a memoir, writing them can be therapeutic, exorcising a writer's demons, while hopefully being more entertaining.

Over the next month I will be serializing a novel, *Bubble City*, in this space, one chapter every day. NaNoWriMo requires novels be at least 50,000 words in length and thirty days hath November, so I'll aim for 1666 words a day, although if I get lazy I may make some days shorter if I go over on previous ones.

There are lots of reasons not to read it: I have no experience writing long-form fiction, I will be writing this live and thus bound to errors I make in previous chapters, you will undoubtedly be negatively portrayed in it, I have not really planned this out, and I have no great things to say. Each post's title will begin with "Bubble City:" so you can easily ignore them.

That said, if you want to read a yarn about the denizens of San Francisco startups, the power they presume to have over the world, and what happens when programmers get in over their heads, stay tuned.

Tomorrow: [Chapter One](#)

Bubble City: Chapter 1

November 1, 2007

[Original link](#)

Tick. Slip off backpack, place on table, slide out laptop, place in bin. Take out wallet, take out cell phone, take out loose change, place in bin. Face straight forward, wait for signal, walk through slowly, collect stuff. Tock. Jason did not waste time.

At the gate he read a magazine, on the plane he read a book, on the bus he checked his email. He went through familiar motions as if he had cut from them each unnecessary effort. He analyzed every moment of his life with an unsparing critical eye. He walked down hallways with purposeful strides — well, as purposeful as one can be if one is a gangly teenager attempting to carry a duffle bag bigger than oneself.

The woman behind the glass yelled at him as he tried to squeeze the duffle bag through the turnstile. The bus dropped him off five city blocks from his destination. His destination was closed and locked and empty and unfeeling and he was trapped alone carrying everything he owned in a city he barely knew.

A cab sped by.

Trent stood up from his desk. Sometimes he did that. He wasn't going anywhere or signaling something. He just liked standing up and looking out over all that he surveyed. He savored the feeling of being at the pinnacle of achievement. He didn't think he'd ever get tired of that feeling.

Over there was the team he'd hired away from Microsoft with promises of a looser corporate culture and better weather. And over there, the startup he'd acquired after reading about them in one of the industry weblogs—he couldn't recall which—and after hardball negotiations bought them and brought them here. And, over there, the UI designer, helping all the programmers to make their code more friendly. He watched them all working as one smooth harmonious unit.

He sat back down and looked over the day's schedule. First, a staff meeting. He flicked through his PowerPoint one last time and then headed to the conference room to set up the projector. At 9:00 the computers of every employee simultaneously chimed with an on-screen alert announcing that a meeting was supposed to begin. But, as usual, the programmers were so deeply engrossed in their work that they didn't even hear the bell. "Staff meeting," he shouted, but still no one moved. Oh, those programmers. How dedicated!

He walked around the cubicles, pulling headphones off ears to make sure everyone got the news. They got up and followed him to the conference room. God, programmers have such odd dazed looks and slackened jaws. Spending that much time in front of a screen really must be bad for your expression.

Once everyone was settled in the conference room, he flipped to the first slide. “25,000” it proclaimed in white block letters against a stark black background. “25,000” he said out loud, just to hammer the point home. “We have to do better,” he said.

“Now I know all of you are working hard. Don’t think I don’t see the way you all hurry back from lunch exactly at 1 and get back into the groove, typing furiously and shouting.” He heard some muffled noises from the back of the room. He smiled; they thought he didn’t notice.

“But 25,00 is just not enough. I want 30,000. Alright. The other piece of news is that we’ve got a new guy coming in today. He’s one of the top students from this year’s class at MIT, so I’m sure he’ll be an amazing addition to the team. I hope you’ll all help him get acquainted with the system.”

“OK, I guess that’s it. Now back to work!” he shouted, and laughed. He loved to keep the mood light.

Back at his desk, he checked the day’s schedule. Some phone calls, then a lunch meeting, then a bit of a break so he could put the finishing touches on his spreadsheets, then one more meeting ending right at 5 so he could race out the door to his parked car and head home to his loving wife.

Lazy day. Sarah slid out of bed and tossed on a tshirt and some panties. Her bare feet tip-toed across the wooden floor as she rummaged around the kitchen for something that might be made into a kind of breakfast. Some granola over here. A bit of fruit over there. Just add a bowl and a spoon and you’re done.

She ate it at the kitchen counter while flicking through the day’s email on her laptop: George, John, Tom, James, Jim — delete, delete, delete, delete, delete. Sigh, no mail again. She checked a couple blogs, splashed some water on her face, threw on pants, and grabbed her skateboard, tossing it out the window. Her bare feet soon followed. She didn’t wear shoes.

Dodging traffic on Mission Street ought to be some kind of videogame. Swerving past this street vendor only to dive in front of that old man’s cart, then around again past the giggling children and ducking under the flailing arms of their screaming parents. And that was just the sidewalk.

At the office she hurried past the programmer cubicles, their windows streaming last night’s YouTube highlights and some networked videogames and the requisite bluster of the Wayne Darnus show. She slid down into her chair and plotted yet another day of how she was going to persuade the programmers to

stop making their interfaces so horrible. In other words, another day of dealing with unceasing, uncomprehending rejection.

Wayne woke up happy, as he always did. Then he sat down at his computer to read the news. One hand clicked through each headline, his blood pressure rising at each fresh outrage, while the other hand grabbed handfuls of cereal from the box he kept by the side of his desk. As he crunched through the dry cereal, its sharp edges lacerating his gums, he felt his anger turn to rage until he could no longer contain himself. So he turned on his camera.

He popped open the recording software, making sure he got his nose squarely in its frame, his face so close that spittle would land on the lens. In a world where every teenage kid could stream a live feed of himself having sex to millions, only the most aggressive vlogcasters survived. Wayne was no dummy. He didn't get to be the number seven blog in the TechnoScene rankings by sitting back and offering his *opinions*. No. This was war and every show a battle.

Today's enemy? Newsflip, one of the crummy little online news aggregator sites, which was threatening to write him out of the history books by dumping the technology he'd single-handedly invented, news notation analysis (NNA), and going with some upstart competitor that didn't even bother to have an acronym for a name. Sure, Newsflip was a tiny site in the scheme of things, but if it switched it would set a dangerous precedent.

He pressed the button and watched the light go green. "Goooooooood morning," he said, with his best attempt at the cheerful voice that Californians love. "I was *seriously* disheartened to hear about some dangerous changes afoot at Newsflip. The company plans to abandon their users by abandoning their support for NNA. Now longtime viewers will remember how hard we fought to get NNA adopted. And you won: now NNA is used on every major news site, is built into Windows and Macs, forms the basis of the modern online news ecosystem.

"Newsflip wants to turn their back on all that by getting rid of NNA. They claim they're doing it to make things simpler for users. But how is it simpler for users to get rid of one of the key features that they depend on?

"But frankly, I think the biggest loser if this move goes forward will be Newsflip. Now, I'm not saying that all of you should go out and boycott Newsflip, but as users I do think you should make your opinions heard. I've always said, technology is about the user. Without you, there'd be no technology business. I think Newsflip might need to be reminded of that."

He pressed the button again and the light blinked off. There. That ought to show them.

Tomorrow: [Chapter Two](#)

Bubble City: Chapter 2

November 2, 2007

[Original link](#)

Downtown San Francisco is a world of carefully-gridded streets and looming skyscrapers, but hidden behind a gas station on Third is a place that almost looks like another world. The sun shines brightly upon a park with green grass and tall shady trees and vibrant swings with children. The park is an oval and the perimeter is lined with small, pastel-colored buildings. Here and there are a smattering of small cafes and restaurants. And the other buildings are filled with startups. Twitter here. Adaptive Path there. Even Yahoo, when it wanted to encourage its employees to be more startup-y, opened up an office in the neighborhood. Sit on the grass and chances are you'll sit near a friend from another company or bump into them in line at a cafe. The place crawls with companies and back on the street, surveying the scene with a distant but watchful eye, lie the journalists, whose publications cover with awe the rumblings of those below. It was here that Newsflip made its home.

Jason entered the building expecting to be greeted warmly by the relaxed startup world. Instead, the scene he entered was utter chaos. "Get me CNN!" shouted a man at the front of the room, apparently to no one in particular. Others buzzed at their desks, shouting to one another, shouting at their phones, shouting at their computers, shouting at their coffee mugs. One guy just seemed to keep spinning around in his chair for no reason in particular.

Jason stood around surveying the scene for a moment until a man standing up motioned for him to come over. "What do you mean we can't get CNN?" he shouted into his phone. "This is America." He placed his hand over the phone and looked down. "You must be Jason," he said. "Uh, yes, sir. Are you—" "Goddamn it, I don't care if you have to *buy* it, I want a 5 minute segment on Wolf Blitzer." He covered the phone again. "It's great to have you on the team, son." Jason thought this was a bit fast to be adopted as a son, but didn't feel like he could press the point.

"Look I don't have time for this shit," he suddenly barked. "Just get me on CNN." He slammed the phone down, sat down on the side of the desk, and adopted an avuncular tone. "Let me tell you a little story," he said. "Uh, OK," Jason said, but the man talked right over him.

"One day, not long after I graduated college, I was waiting at a bus stop. And sitting there on the seat beside me was a magazine, opened to an article about a newspaper. So I read the article and it just took my breath away. Took my breath away. And I said to myself, 'Self, one day you're going to be running a newspaper like that.' Well, it took me twenty years to do it, but here I am.

Sure, technically we don't use paper, but we print news all the same, right? Anyway, isn't that amazing?"

Jason just smiled and nodded.

"Of course, I didn't get there just by sitting back and watching. No, sir. I got there by joining someone else's startup, seeing how it was done, and then using what I'd learned to turn around and start a new company to destroy their main product. Heh, heh. Well, I guess what I'm saying is that I better keep an eye out on you. Better keep an eye out on you."

Jason looked a bit worried. And puzzled.

"Anyway, as you can see things are a bit crazy around here." He waved his arm past the still-chaotic room. "So I better get back to work. But I'm sure you'll settle in fine — and if there's any trouble you just let me know. Good luck!" he added and then picked up the phone again and started screaming without even dialing.

Looking for his desk, Jason wandered around the office for a bit, past the spinning, screaming, slacking employees, until he found an unused desk over in a corner. There was a memo on it, addressed to him, reminding him of the company's copyright and confidentiality commitments that he'd signed, which he promptly tossed in the trash.

He sat down and began inventorying the other contents of the desk: a flat screen monitor, a dual-processor tower, an IP phone, a keyboard, a mo—. He noticed a tugging at his leg and looked down. He sprang back. There was a girl beneath his desk. "Ssssssh!" she whispered and motioned for him to come towards her. Slowly and awkwardly, he crouched down and crawled towards the girl. She pulled him under the desk with her and extended her hand.

"Hi, I'm Sarah," she said. He shook it. "Hi, I'm, uh, Jason." "Hey, Jason! Welcome aboard the team." "So, why are we down here?" "Because it's crazy up there, silly. Why get involved in all that screaming mess when we can just slip off in the storm and hang out by ourselves?" "I guess. What's all the fuss about, though?" "Oh, just some tech pissing contest. Some blowhard with a webcam doesn't like some tech decision some intern made and now everybody's going DEFCON 5." "Actually, DEFCON 5 is the lowest level of military activation. I think you probably mean DEFCON 3." She just looked at him. He looked back and realized he should probably shut up.

"So Sarah, what do you do here?" he ventured. "I'm in charge of training newbies, silly," she said, and ruffled his hair. "Catch me if you can!" she added, before darting out from under the desk and running across the office. Jason followed in pursuit.

She ran to the middle of the roll of desks, then crouched down and rolled under one of them to the next row. Jason kept running to the end of the row to try to head her off at the pass, doing his best to dodge the spinning chairs and thrown balls that were filling the office. Sarah made a bee-line for the door, stopping

only to grab the skateboard lying next to it, which she used to skitter down the stairwell. Jason hopped the whole flight after her.

Reaching the bottom, she sped out the door just as an overweight man was opening it to enter. He jumped out of the way and screwed up his face in anger. “Don’t you know who I am?” he shouted down the street at her. “Nope,” replied Jason, running out the door after her.

On the street, she skateboarded around baby strollers, old people, and dazed-looking hipsters like a pro, while Jason was jogging as fast as he could just to keep up. She jumped lights right before traffic, took bizarre shortcuts and side-streets, and occasionally turned back to laugh at him. After a couple blocks of this she jumped up onto a railing and headed into a park. The next thing Jason knew she was halfway up a tree in the middle of a park surrounded by shopping malls and people. Jason hadn’t come this far just to give up at a tree, so he scurried up afterwards, finding himself balanced precariously on a branch. Once again he found himself in a secluded spot surrounded by people, sitting alone, facing Sarah.

“Not bad, kid,” she said.

Wayne ambled in and pressed the button for the elevator. Once he got to the office Trent spotted him at the door and, screaming a few last words into his phone before slamming it down, headed over and led Wayne into a conference room. The office got silent as he walked by. “Fans!,” he thought.

Trent shut the door behind him. “Wayne, Wayne, Wayne, so good to see you!” “Good to see you too, Trent! What’s it been? A couple years?” “Yeah, must have been that ETech two years ago. The one with that Bezos keynote.” Wayne laughed. “How could I forget?”

“Anyway, as I’m sure you know I invited you here because we were all very hurt by your comments on your show yesterday.” “Oh, that silly thing? Well I certainly hope no one was too offended. I was just sharing some concerns I had with the changes you were making. That’s all.” “If you had concerns you should have just taken them to us. My door is always open to you. You know that.”

Wayne looked at him. “Actually, I don’t. Let’s be frank here. If I try to get an appointment with any startup in this city they push me off on the calendar and jerk me around until three months have gone by and they’ve closed their B round of funding and the VCs have hired a professional public relations team to professionally sit and ignore comments from people like me. But if I talk about it on my show I get ushered into your conference room the next morning. So let’s not play dumb here. You know as well as I how this game works.”

“Wayne, Wayne, Wayne,” Trent said shaking his head. “What do you want? Do you want us to use this NNA thing? Done! You got it. It doesn’t make any

difference to me. I don't even know what the hell the thing does. Look, what do you need from us? Is that all?"

"Thanks, Trent. You're a sweetheart. That'd be great." "Well I'm glad we could settle this so easily. You know, Wayne, if you ever need anything else, just give me a ring. My door is always open. Hell, I don't even have a door! Heh, heh." "Of course, Trent. Thanks so much." "Here, let me see you out."

Trent ushered Wayne to the door. "Oh, there is one more thing," Wayne added. "Sure, what is it?" Trent asked. "Well, I've just been noticing in my referer logs that traffic from Newsflip has been dropping sharply lately." "Really? I had no idea," Trent replied. "Now I'm not asking for any special treatment here." "Mo, goodness no, of course not." "But if you guys could just look into the anomaly. Try to figure out what could be going haywire. That would be great." "Oh, of course Wayne. I'll put my top guy on it." "Thanks so much, Trent. Let's keep in touch." "Let's."

All day, people came back and forth through Yerba Buena Park, while Jason and Sarah hung from the branches above their heads, talking. Indeed, hours passed before Jason even thought to consult his watch. Jason was used to seeing other people as a necessary evil: curiosity and courtesy were behaviors he had worked hard to learn to imitate so that others didn't find him too strange, but he did his best to make sure other people took no more than a couple hours of his time.

Sarah was different. She was the only person he'd ever talked to who made him feel completely relaxed in his own skin. He didn't have to worry about being someone else or trying to be interesting or checking the time. They just talked and talked and laughed and laughed.

Sarah looked up at the sun overhead where it hung suspended above the park. "Hey, let's go grab some lunch she said," and swung down, branch to branch, before leaping to the ground. Jason followed, smiling.

Wayne got back in front of the camera and pressed the button.

"Alright, for today's Internet Hero segment, where I keep an eye out for the other people who are keeping an eye out for you. I'd like to give a big shout-out to one of my favorite Internet startups, Newsflip. I had a great conversation today with Newsflip's CEO, Trent Rayburn, and he told me a bit about Newsflip's philosophy and strategy and I have to say, I'm 100% on board."

"There are a lot of companies out there that just don't understand users. They think you, the people who make their companies run, are just people to be spat

on and squeezed for cash. Not at Newsflip. There's a company that puts users first. And I salute them for it. So that's today's Internet Hero: Newsflip."

Tomorrow: [Chapter Three](#)

Bubble City: Chapter 3

November 3, 2007

[Original link](#)

The next day was a Saturday but by the following Monday things had calmed down and Jason could finally begin real work.

He began, as he always did, by trying to figure out the system. You couldn't really work on something until you really *grokked* it: understood all the pieces and how they interacted and why they were there. If you didn't get that, then you could spend days trying to fix one piece, only to discover all your effort was wasted because your fixes would be ineffective as long as another part was in place.

He first checked out a copy of the code, staring at the list of thousands of files on his screen, trying to figure out where to start. As usual, nobody had bothered to write down anything explaining things. So he began opening pieces up, finding that they referenced other sections and bouncing from section to section until the big picture became clearer.

By the end of the day, he felt he had a pretty solid understanding of how the whole thing worked. Not how people *thought* it worked, but how it actually did — what the code that actually ran the system said.

“What the hell were they thinking?” Sarah thought, as she sat staring at yet another of the braindead interfaces the programmers had come up with. She knew they had no contact with other humans but honestly sometimes she didn't understand why they couldn't even figure out basic principles of decent design.

She started, as she always did, by trying to figure out the system. She looked at the various pieces of the interface and tried to figure out the different concepts they were manipulating. Programmers always thought of it in terms of how the system was built, but the users had no idea how the system was built and couldn't cares.

You had to think of it from their perspective: what was it they wanted to do, what were the things they encountered along the way, and how could you make sure they felt like they were in control of those things?

And then, once you figured all that out, how did you beat it through the heads of the programmers?

Trent's calendar warned him of an impending VC meeting. Running an office like this — servers, employees, big looming screens overhead — wasn't cheap. And since the site didn't run ads or have a revenue stream, the only way to keep the lights on was to trot back to the VCs every six months with some impressive charts and some pleas for cash.

He looked through the names of the people he was meeting with and then jumped over to scan their blogs. To pitch to people you really had to understand them. Figure out what made them tick. Everyone required a different pitch and Trent knew exactly how to reshape it for them, just as Newsflip reshaped a series of links to meet the reader's desires.

He remembered what companies they'd previously invested on, which ones had done well, what they'd mentioned their kids were into, what gadgets they enjoyed, and — most importantly — how Trent had cut them favors in the past. This town ran on that sort of thing.

High above the Newsflip offices loomed a series of big screens with a rapidly-scrolling list of links. The lists were generated by a series of crawlers which ran, 24/7, around various weblogs and social bookmarking sites. Every time someone posted a new link to their blog, or bookmarked something on del.icio.us, or voted for it on Digg, it saw it and noted it. Then another program took these triples (jon, del.icio.us bookmarked, lessig.org) and scoured them for patterns. Were a group of people all bookmarking lessig.org today? Are a dozen blogs all linking to a particular YouTube video?

It then used these patterns to cluster users into groups. Jon, Jim, and Jill all like YouTube videos about cats. Sal, Sue, and Sam all like newspaper articles about copyright.

And that way, when it saw a new YouTube video about cats, or a new newspaper article about copyright, it could make a guess at who would like it. And that combination of guesses made up the Newsflip front page.

When you visited Newsflip for the first time, it'd show you a bunch of things that were widely liked by different groups of people. Maybe the top link today about music and sports and technology and business. And when you clicked the one you liked the most — let's say music — it'd show you ten more stories from the various subgroups of music. In just a couple clicks — music, pop, indie, guitar-based — it'd have you figured out and know a great deal more about which kind of links to send your way.

From then on, every time you visited the site it would use this knowledge to send you links it thought you might like. It would also show you a few random popular links as well, just to make sure it wasn't missing out on any other odd tastes you had. So every time you visited Newsflip it served you up a couple dozen stories it thought that you would like. (Of course, it also noted down

which stories you clicked on and said you liked, right along with the links and bookmarks.)

At the heart of it was the pattern-finding system that noticed when groups of people seemed to be doing something. It was based on a system called Notated News Analysis (NNA) which had been invented ages ago by some old guy who turned it into a public standard. Now dozens of sites, including Newsflip, used it to try to generate the best recommendations about what to see on the Internet.

Samuel scrolled through his notes one last time before the meeting. Soon people would be filing into the conference room and he couldn't afford to seem unprepared in front of them. He visualized himself standing in front of the room, walking through the bullet points, smoothly ordering the meeting, parrying questions, parceling out action items, dodging barbs. He was ready.

People filed in, pulled out their laptops, and engaged in the pre-meeting chit-chat; the final moment of levity before the meeting's dreadfully boring waste of time. Finally, he tapped on the table for order.

"Hey everyone, welcome back to the monday morning evangelism team coordination meeting. As usual, we'll go around the table and have each team bring us up to date on their activities. I'll start."

"So this week I gave a keynote at OSCON and encouraged developers to use Google Platform to host their apps. My main points were: 1) that this was a new era of openness here at Google, where we were handing control of our computers to the community; 2) that we had by far the most powerful and scalable system for deployment; and 3) that we were always on the lookout for the developers of the next hot application and that users of Google Platform would be fast-tracked with the acquisition team."

"Alright, HR?"

"So this week we did a booth at the Ubuntu conference. These things continue to be an amazing value for us. The booth costs a pittance, we managed to snag four top developers out of it (gave them the usual bullshit about the Goog's commitment to open source), and we lined them up in job slots that are definitely going to take them out of the open source world for a while."

"Great work! Standards?"

"Well, the big news continues to be NNA. Newsflip, a small startup up in San Francisco, was trying to switch away from it but, of all things, *Wayne Darnus* turned the firehose on them and managed to talk them out of it. So now—"

"Wait, Wayne Darnus?" "Yup!" "What's his angle?" "Well, you know, he says he invented NNA so anything that takes attention away from it just makes him less important." Samuel broke out laughing. "Oh god, that's perfect. So

what did he do?” “Oh, you know, the usual. Did a piece on how he was oh-so-concerned about all the poor users who would be hurt by the switch.” Samuel couldn’t stop giggling. “Oh my god,” he said. “This is just too perfect.” “Yeah, the guy’s basically doing our job for us.”

“Yeah, exactly. Hey, that gives me an idea. Do you have Wayne’s number?” “His phone number?” “Yeah.” “Uh, sure, I’ve got it here somewhere. OK, 510-555-2414.” Samuel picked up the phone and dialed it, repeating the numbers back as he did. He made a shushing sound and set it on speakerphone.

“Hello?” came the gruff voice at the other end. “Wayne! Good to hear you. Hey, this is Samuel Boxton over at Google Evangelism.” “Google? Hey, I didn’t say *anything* about Google on today’s show. That stuff I said wasn’t targeted you at all.”

“No, no, Wayne, I’m not calling to *complain*; I’m calling to *congratulate*.” “Congratulate? Congratulate what?” “Congratulate *you*, silly. On the great job you did with Newsflip. That was a real act of generous diplomacy you did there.” “Oh, uh, well, I guess it was. Thanks. But why does Google care about something like that?”

“Don’t be silly, Wayne. At Google we’re just like you — looking out for the users. Trying to make the best Web experience for everyone. We’re really 100% on the same page there.” “Um, yeah then, I suppose we are.” “You know, it’s a shame that we’ve never managed to collaborate before. Our interests are so aligned that it would really be great if we could figure out some way to work together.” “What do you mean? Do you have some kind of joint project in mind?”

“No, not exactly, Wayne. I was thinking more some kind of funding arrangement.” “Funding arrangement,” Wayne repeated. “Yes. Now hear me out: what if we funded The Wayne Darnus Center for User Priorities?” “The Wayne Darnus Center for User Priorities. I like the sound of that.” “I thought you would. Now we’ll give you a startup grant to help you establish and operate the center, which will keep on doing the good work you’re doing to promote NNA.” “Um, OK.” “To start with, I was thinking of an initial grant of around three million dollars.” Wayne coughed suddenly but soon regained his composure. “Um, yes, well, I think that should be able to cover our initial operations.”

“Perfect. There’s just one more catch.” “Oh,” Wayne said, his voice falling a bit. “What?” “Well, here at Google we don’t want to make a big show about how we’re helping the Web. So it’s essential our donation remain anonymous.” “Anonymous?” “Yeah, you know how whenever you go to a museum or something like that it always says ‘Generous donations by anonymous’? That’s just how it works in philanthropy.” “Oh, I see,” Wayne said.

“So we’ll be doing it exactly like that. The actual money will be donated to you by a shell corporation called Rinaldi Tile, Inc. which we use for these kinds of special projects and we’ll have you sign a confidentiality agreement prohibiting you from disclosing the real source. You know, all the usual stuff.”

“Uh huh,” Wayne said, a bit skeptically. “And then we’ll send you the three million dollars.” “Sounds great!” Wayne said quickly “Where do I sign?” “I’ll have my assistant send over the papers in just a little bit.” “Perfect.” “Been a pleasure working with you. See you later.” “Bye.”

Samuel hung up the phone and saw smiling faces around the conference table. He smiled back and got up to take a mock bow. The room applauded.

Tomorrow: [Chapter Four](#)

Bubble City: Chapter 4

November 6, 2007

[Original link](#)

“How’s it going, kiddo?” They’d already gotten to kiddo? Jason tried to blend in with his chair. “Hello, kiddo? You in there?” Trent slapped him on the back of the head. Jason felt a sharp pain and decided to give up on the ruse. “Uh, yes, sir. Or at least I have been for the past couple decades.” “Ahh, a kiddo. Love that.”

“Anyway, just wanted to check in, see how you were doing, all that good boss stuff, you know?” “Ah, of course, sir. Everything’s going great. The, uh, other team members”—he looked at Sarah—“have been really helpful and, uh, yeah, just everything is going really well, I guess.” “Glad to hear it,” Trent said.

“You know,” Trent said, before pausing a moment to look around Jason’s desk, “uh, Jason, that Newsflip isn’t just another one of those startups out to make a quick buck. We have a noble mission. For decades, people have gotten their news from a handful of conglomerates who’ve bought each other up so many times that they can’t tell their CEO from their HR department. And news is important. Without the news, you wouldn’t have any idea who won the latest sports game or why we’re invading Iran.” “We’re invading Iran again?” Jason asked. “Anyway, I just want you to know that this is a company that makes a difference.” “I see, so we’re a company that’s out for a quick buck while thinking we’re helping the world.” “Exactly,” Trent said. “Anyway, I’ve got another dozen meetings, so I better head off, but just give me a ring if you need me.” “Of course,” Jason said.

Jason went back to his screen and decided to actually read through Newsflip to see this great new democratizing force, telling people about the reasons we were invading Iran. The top 5? “Waking Up During Surgery”, “It’s Official: Tom Cruise Has Sucked the Life out of Katie Holmes”, “Excited Pug Pees on Cameraman”, “5 Stupid Things You Said to Her”, and “Can Medical Marijuana Cost You Your Kid?” Jason sighed.

Jason thought of himself as a rather sophisticated person, but Newsflip’s recommender certainly didn’t seem to think so. He wondered how many other people got the same sort of treatment. So he opened up a raw connection to the database and did a query. Tens of thousands of people were seeing the story about dogs peeing. Odd, he thought.

He needed someone to bounce things off of, so he called the best person he knew for that sort of thing: Eric. Eric was brilliant. In the first bubble, he’d made millions as a teenager who’d managed to persuade some VCs to let him run a web news company. But the experience had burned him out badly and now he

mostly slunk around his apartment in San Francisco and watched TV. Still, he knew this stuff better than anyone. Jason gave him a call.

“Hey, Eric, you got a moment?” “Yeah, not like I’m doing anything else.” “You ever read Newsflip?” “Look, Jason, I love you and all, but I’m not going to start using some website just because you work there. The news is a complete waste of ti—” “Yeah, yeah, I know. I read your blog, dude.” “Really? I didn’t think anyone did.” “Oh, geez, you’re the top—anyway, can you just go there for a minute and point it at your *delicio.us* page to generate some recommendations.” “Yeah, uh, OK.” Jason heard some sounds of typing and sighing thru the phone. “Alright, here we go: 25 stories. Yeah, this stuff is total crap. Dogs peeing on people and that sort of thing.”

OK, now Jason was suspicious. Eric was just about the last person on Earth who ought to be recommended that story. “God, Jason. What do you train this thing with? It’s *terrible*. What the hell algorithm is it running anyway?” “That’s what I’m trying to figure out. Mind if I swing by your place?” “Not really; you might, though.” “See you in fifteen.”

Jason packed up his laptop, ran down the stairs, and biked over to Eric’s apartment in the Western Addition. Eric answered the door almost before Jason had knocked. Inside was a den of total filth: clothes strewn everywhere, pizza boxes piled high, no outside light coming in, and little inside light turned on. Jason hugged the wall to make sure he didn’t run into anything. “Take a seat on the couch,” Eric said, gesturing to a pile of crap in the corner. Jason tried to dig through it to clear a space big enough for his butt.

“OK, so I’ve got the code on here that generates this stuff. Mind looking thru it on here with me?” “Yeah, why not?” Eric said, clearing off a similar space for himself. “Maybe it’s a bug in the renderer; it’s rendering the same recommendations for everyone.” “Nah, can’t be — the recommendations are actually in the database. They’re definitely getting spit out by the recommender.”

“Well, is the recommender just generating the same stuff for everyone?” “Nah, can’t be. People would have noticed that.” “People are more alike than you’d expect. Check.” So Jason ran a few queries to see. “Nope, there’s definitely variance in what people are getting recommended.”

“Hmm,” Eric said. “Well, maybe the recommender you’re using just sucks.” “No way,” Jason said. “We’re using NNA. It’s state of the art. All the big guys use it — Google News, Yahoo, even the new NYTimes redesign.” Eric laughed. “State of the art? That piece of cruft hasn’t been touched since the Bad Old Days. Isn’t there some new thing everyone is switching to?” “I don’t know; you obviously follow this stuff more than I do.”

“So why don’t you just upgrade it to the new stuff.” “Yeah, I guess that’s a good idea. I’ll talk to the guys,” he said. “Oh wait — I just remembered. We tried that and Wayne Darnis threw this total shitstorm. You should have seen the place — it was crazy. No way they’re doing that again.”

“Well, let’s open up NNA and take a look at it,” Eric suggested. “I’m sure it’s a morass, but I can’t think of anything else to do.” “Fine,” said Jason, pulling it up. Eric was right. They scrolled through it, but couldn’t make heads or tails of it. Things had been patched and repatched so many times that it might as well have been written in INTERCAL. But Jason scrolled thru it as best he can, trying to see if he could see something.

“Wait!” Eric shouted. “Go back. What the hell is that?” Eric pointed to a block of numbers on the screen, sticking out from the rest of the program like a sore thumb. “I dunno, I assumed it was just some constants,” Jason said defensively. “Who the hell has a page of one-byte constants in the middle of their program?”

Eric looked closer. “Oh my god, these aren’t constants. These are S-boxes!” “Huh?” Jason said. “S-boxes! You never heard about those?” “No,” Jason said, again annoyed at Eric’s habit of assuming everyone had his encyclopedic knowledge for odd details. “Back in the bad old days of encryption, IBM or someone came up with this algorithm called DES — Data Encryption Standard.

“NIST, the government standards body, ratified it and it went on to be the standard encryption algorithm used in banks and computers and all that stuff. But right before the government ratified it, they sent it to the NSA — you know, the spy organization that hires up all the top math students to break encryption algorithms so they can better tap everyone’s phones — for final approval.

“The NSA said they liked it but they just had one little change. And they fiddled with these things called the S-boxes — big lists of numbers that your message was run through as it was encrypted. The NSA claimed they just were helping make sure the S-boxes were as secure as possible, but they never explained how or why they picked the numbers they did. So, although it’s never been proven, a lot of people assume the S-boxes are the NSA’s backdoor into the private conversations of DES users — that there’s something about the S-boxes that makes it easy for them to decrypt people’s messages.”

“What are you saying, Eric? That someone put a backdoor into NNA?” “Hey, I’m not saying anything. I mean, I’m sure there were perfectly good reasons that DES needed S-boxes; it’s just that the NSA got to choose them that was suspicious. Maybe the same thing is true with NNA; maybe there’s some good reason it needs S-boxes, although nothing springs to mind.”

“But how would a backdoor in this program even work? It doesn’t talk to the network; it just gets stories in and pushes recommendations out. Am I supposed to believe that buried within these numbers are some secret rules to always elevate stories about dogs peeing?”

“No, of course not,” Eric said. “Think about it: it’s the perfect system. The recommender doesn’t talk to the network itself, of course, but it gets fed tons of data from crawlers which, all the time, are scouring the Net for various pages and dumping some facts about them into the recommender. The recommender

could just keep an eye out for page patterns which match the S-boxes and use those as its instructions.”

“God, you’re right! That’s brilliant. And it would be almost impossible to trace, because any one of a million pages on the Web could have set it off.” “Precisely,” Eric said. “So you’re saying some guy out has a series of pages that encode secret orders, telling all the world’s news sites to feature stories about dogs peeing?” “No, no, no, not at all. That would be irresponsible. I’m just saying it’s possible.” Eric paused. “Anyway,” he continued, “if he was smart it wouldn’t be a series of pages — that’s too traceable. He’d just use Tor or some sort of anonymizing proxy to send the messages by voting through some dummy account on del.icio.us or something like that. It’d be impossible to trace.”

“This is all just speculation, of course. We have no more evidence of it than a bunch of funny numbers in a poorly-written computer program,” Eric quickly added. “Yes, but it’s so perfect—so devilishly clever. Hey, hang on a minute. My phone’s ringing.” Jason didn’t realize how oppressive Eric’s apartment was until he left the heavy putrid air to answer the phone outside. “Hello?” he said. “Jason, you need to come home,” said the man on the other end of the line.

Tomorrow: [Chapter Five](#)

Bubble City: Chapter 5

November 6, 2007

[Original link](#)

Stare. Stare. Tick. Tick. Ancient art hung on the walls. Ancient books lined the shelves. The light fixtures looked like they hadn't been dusted since Carter urged Americans to save electricity. "So, how are things at the new offices?" a wisened-looking old man sitting at the other end of the table asked. "Oh, fine, Grandpa," Jason replied. "What is it you guys do again? Videos of models doing backflips?" "No," Jason said with a sigh. "We're a news site." "You mean like the New York Times?" "Kind of, except we don't write the news, we just try to find bits of it for you." "How do you do that?" "Well, we look at everything people on the Internet are reading and talking about and then we try to pick out which of those people are most like you and tell you about the stories they like at the moment." "I see," the old man said. "I see."

"So how well does it work?" "Well, uh, not so great, actually. That's what I've been investigating lately." "What do you mean?" "Well, it seems like the site is recommending everyone the same inane stuff, like stupid videos and that sort of thing." "Ah, yes. Well, hate to say I told you so, but this is just like that article I was reading in—what was it? *Foreign Affairs*?—predicted." "What do you mean?" "It said that in the future we'd have this personal newspaper all you tech wizards have been promising us, only it'd recommend us the same stupid crap (pardon my language) that average people have been enjoying for centuries."

"Really?" Jason asked, suspicious. "Do you happen to have the article?" "Oh yes, it's right over—" the old man stood up to get it but then remembered he had broken his knee, the ostensible reason for Jason's visit, and thought better of it. "It's right over there—could you fetch it for me?" "Oh, of course," Jason said. He pulled it down and flipped through it.

It was by the former editor of the New York Times and made the usual viritolic case for trusting human editors over some algorithm based on the whims of random people. And somehow it found a way to compare news recommenders to street vomit, which Jason had to admit was a depressingly common sight in San Francisco. Jason briefly wondered if the old media was using the backdoor to prop up their dying business models, but quickly decided nobody at those companies was clued-in enough to know what a backdoor was.

"Yes, yes, I've heard all this, Grandfather, but I just don't buy it." "Oh, what's your explanation? Just need to improve the technology, eh? Because I've heard that one more than a few times." "No, I think someone is trying to manipulate the results." "What? Oh, god, you young people are always jumping to conspiracy theories. Why can't you just admit your precious little system doesn't

work? Why do you have to create some shadowy cabal of people trying to control the news.” Jason just sighed. “Let’s talk about something else.”

“What’s your shirt say? Daring Fireball? What’s that?”

Wayne quickly found that, although Google didn’t want their name on the check or the web site, they were most accommodating in other matters. They gave him a nice little office inside the Googleplex, let him play with all the fancy equipment and company perks (free laundry, free swimming pool, free video games), and had a stream of people coming by to chat him up and suggest new ideas for promoting NNA.

He was a bit wary of getting so close to someone he had so often railed against, but he thought that perhaps this was his reward for his ceaseless railing. Anyway, there were a lot of other evils out there to fight, and if working with Google made him more effective at fighting those, wasn’t it, on balance, a good thing? And the free food was nice too.

On the plane back, Jason tried to figure out the meaning of the S-boxes. He spent the first couple hours tracing the code, trying to understand how it worked and how the S-boxes were used, before finally giving up in frustration. It was just too complicated.

So, being a programmer, he decided to try a more automated approach. First, he took NNA and replaced its random number generating system with a function that always returned the number 17 (17 was a pretty random number, right?). Then he made a copy in which the only thing he changed was the S-boxes. He then wrote a program to generate random input files for the recommender. It fed the same file to both recommenders — the normal one and the one with the modified S-boxes — and it looked at the output to see if there were any differences. Since he’d taken all the randomness out of the algorithm, any difference in output had to be due to the one thing that had changed: the S-boxes. In other words, the program would search for inputs that triggered the S-boxes.

There was just one problem: there were a lot of possible inputs. For the rest of the plane ride, his program tried thousands and thousands of inputs, but none of them showed any difference. When the plane landed, he slipped his laptop in his bag and let it keep crunching, but he knew he’d have to try a different tack.

Wayne Darnus told everyone who would listen that he had invented NNA, but as far as Jason could tell, he was using invented in the most loosest of senses. Digging back through the changelog on the NNA source code, which was provided for free to all from a project on SourceForge, he found the code was originally written by some programmer at Yahoo, back when Yahoo had real programmers. Getting a name was near impossible — Yahoo had apparently insisted that all its programmers contribute under the name “A Yahoo!” Some boneheaded corporate consistency policy, no doubt.

But the author must have given up his identity *somewhere*. Then it hit him: mailing lists. No programmer worth their salt could give up a good mailing list flamewar. Whoever wrote NNA must have shown up on a mailing list once or twice to defend it. Finding him would be easy: all Jason had to do was read through ten or twenty thousand messages arguing about the minutiae of NNA’s design principles.

After trawling through interminable debates in mailing list archives, for what felt like days, Jason finally found a post from a man who’s patronizingly knowledgeable tone unmistakably indicated that he was the one who wrote it all. And the message was posted from home, so his computer had no qualms about signing his name. There it was in black and white, the man who had started it all: Dan Miller.

Dan Miller was a rather elusive party. He had no website or home page and despite NNA’s incredible popularity, he’d apparently never been interviewed by the press. (Wayne had been interviewed endlessly, of course. Whenever someone neglected to include him in their history books, he complained about their lack of commitment to historical accuracy on his vlogcast.) Jason wasn’t too surprised, though. Finding Miller hadn’t been easy, and he hadn’t known many journalists who were willing to do much work to get a technology story.

Miller’s entry in the Yahoo corporate directory had long since gone stale — he’d left years ago — and emails to his personal account bounced with the message “Mailbox full.” — overflowing with spam, presumably.

He just couldn’t get a handle on this guy. So he called Eric. “Oh, yeah, Miller. Wow, there’s a name I hadn’t heard in a long time. So you think he might be your source into cracking this NNA thing?” “Seems like it’s worth a shot,” Jason replied. “Yeah, I suppose it does. Alright, then, well, I guess I’ll look this up for you. What are we searching for? OK, here we go: Daniel Miller, last known employer Yahoo. Uhhh, OK, he lives in Mill Valley, I’ll email you his address.” “Wow, Eric, that’s incredible. Thanks so much.” “No trouble; it’s always nice to have an excuse to use these skills.”

Marin County wasn’t exactly known for its comprehensive public transport system, so Jason hopped a cab, which deposited him someplace random in the middle of a hillside. He climbed around for a while looking for the house he knew must be nestled in it somewhere, before finally locating the place. He navigated his way to the entrance, then knocked politely on the door.

He wondered how a software developer could live in a place like this — isolated from the rest of the Valley, away from the buzz and excitement of the industry. But then again, he wondered how a software developer could live without having a website. Maybe Miller wasn't much of a software developer.

A man in a beard who looked to be about in his late fifties answered the door. "Hello?" he said, apparently unaccustomed to receiving visitors. "Dan Miller?" "Yup. "Hey there, I was looking into NNA's source code and I have a few questions. I know you probably hate to be bugged about software you wrote over a decade ago, but I came all the way out here and I'd really appreciate just a bit of your time to answer just a question or two about NNA."

Miller smiled knowingly and gave Jason a long, piercing gaze. "ah, yes," he said at last. "I've been expecting you."

Tomorrow: [Chapter Six](#)

GPhone Announced, Morons

November 6, 2007

[Original link](#)

Several years ago, the key members of the team at Danger, then the leading phone OS development firm (they made the Hiptop, called the Sidekick in the US), left to start a new company called Android, which was shortly thereafter acquired by Google. The folks at Android were not shy at what they were up to. One founder, who was in Boston at the same time I was, stated it clearly: they were creating an open OS for phones. When asked what the point of this was, he suddenly got very vague.

A couple years later Apple released the iPhone and what was now a Google division started rounding up partners for the Android OS. The press got wind of it and went crazy. Google was making a phone — a GPhone! How could Apple compete? What fancy gadgets did it have? Would Google take control of the cell phone industry too?

And today, Google announced what they were doing: the same thing they were always doing, the same thing Android had been doing since day one. They're making an open OS for phones.

The only announcement today is of their new “Open Handset Alliance”, which I can't help but feel is a jab at the Open Content Alliance (which Google pointedly refuses to join). Google has certainly put their clout behind the team at Android and gotten an impressive number of people to sign up to support their little OS. But let's not let the press buzz get out of hand. Google isn't coming out with a phone, they're releasing an open phone operating system. When asked what the point of this is, they suddenly get very vague. Just like always.

I certainly can't imagine that having an open phone OS is a bad thing and I'm glad such talented people are working on it and I hope it's good and gets widely adopted, so I can get an even nicer Sidekick cheaply. But, jeez people, let's not blow this out of proportion. It's just a bunch of open source software.

Bubble City: Chapter 6

November 8, 2007

[Original link](#)

Miller ushered him into a clean, but ancient, little house with leather sofas and bright windows. “Take a seat,” he said. “Can I get you anything?” “Uh, no thanks,” Jason said, a bit surprised at this reception. “OK, I’m gonna fix myself a drink,” Miller said, heading into the kitchen.

“You know,” he said in between noises of liquids mixing and ice crunching, “I always knew someday someone would call me to account. I’m actually kind of surprised it took so long.” He returned and grabbed a chair across from Jason. “Alright, so let’s do this: I think you have something you want to ask me.”

Caught a bit off-guard by all the frankness—and the prescience—Jason began by stuttering. “Well, uh, I was looking through the NNA code and, as I’m sure you know, well, I mean obviously you know, there’s this section in there that’s just a series of numbers. S-boxes, you might call them.” Miller laughed. “Anyway, it appears to me that the S-boxes only affect the results under fairly unusual circumstances — that they seem to be a kind of backdoor allowing someone to remotely control the output of NNA.”

“So you haven’t found the key yet?” “No, not yet. That code is impenetrable!” Miller laughed. “I was hoping you might be able to shed some light.” “Come on, now. I’m sure you’re nice, but I’m not about to give out the backdoor to NNA to any pretty young thing that happens to come out here and knock on my door. Anyway, even if I wanted to, I couldn’t. Yahoo insisted on wiping all my drives after I left the company. I don’t have the key anymore.”

“But surely you can reconstruct it? I mean, the code is open source — you can see the backdoor right there.” “Yes, but it was a sort of public key-style system. What’s in the code is just the public part; anyone can read that. But it was generated from the private key — the series of patterns that will trigger it. Basically, what you see in those S-boxes is just the hash of the private key and it only kicks in if the hash of a voting cluster matches.”

“So why’d you do it? For fun?” “Of course not. I knew it was wrong. I wasn’t gonna pull another Dennis Ritchie. I was ordered to. The folks at Yahoo insisted that if we were going to open source this engine they had to have a way of clearing out illegal and offensive stories; otherwise it’d tarnish their good name. Of course, that department disappeared in a reorg shortly after the software’s release and I disappeared along with it, so I suppose it’s all kind of irrelevant now, except as a historical curiosity.”

“Historical curiosity?” Jason shouted, before realizing how loud he was being. “It’s a major security vulnerability in a key piece of infrastructure! Do you have

any idea how bad this is?” “Yeah, yeah, I suppose technically it is,” Miller said, “but let’s be realistic here. My copy of the key was wiped, everyone at Yahoo who knew about the project is long gone, and there weren’t many of them to begin with. It’s a dead letter.”

“You don’t understand,” Jason said. “Someone’s using it. I don’t know whether they were at Yahoo or whether they got it from someone or whether they figured it out, but it’s getting used. There are anomalies in the recommendations that just can’t be explained any other way.” “Oh god. What are they doing with it?” “Well, it’s difficult to tell without cracking the key. The big piece I’ve been able to spot so far is that they’re getting inane videos recommended to everyone. But who knows what else they’re doing.”

“Well, you do. Just change the S-boxes and see what recommendations change.” “Ah, you’re right! I just need to feed it the live input! If I give that to two versions with no randomness and different S-boxes, the difference will have to be exactly the orders from the backdoor. And oh god, and that’ll tell me what the key is: I just remove all the pieces of the input that don’t affect the difference and whatever’s left must be what triggers the backdoor. That’s brilliant! I just need to get my hands on a copy of the live database and some computers. Wow, thanks so much.” “Glad to help.”

“So you’ll come forward? Tell the world about the security hole you put in so we can force people to take it out?” Miller laughed. “Not a chance.” “But I thought you said — you said you were against it.” “I am, but look around. See this house? This couch? This cozy little place in the woods. I got to retire early on my Yahoo stock options. And I got those by signing some pretty iron-clad non-disclosure agreements. I talk about any of this in public and I spend the rest of my life in court, watching all of this get taken away. Sorry, kid, but you’re on your own on this one.”

“But, but,” Jason said. “Don’t you see how important this is? The integrity of the world’s news is at stake!” “And you seem like just the one to save it,” Miller said. “In fact, it seems like you already have your solution all figured out. All I can really say is best of luck to you.”

“But, but,” Jason said, exasperated. “Well, the very least you can do is walk me through the code.” Miller just laughed. “That code’s gotten so crusty since the last time I touched it. I don’t think there’s a person on Earth who really understands it anymore. I guess that’s why no one else has caught the S-boxes. Everyone knows better than to go near that thing.”

“Anyway, unless you have anything else, I’ve got a game of Starcraft that I really should be getting back to,” Miller said. “Uh, I guess not. Thanks for talking to me about it, I guess.” “Oh, of course. Sorry I couldn’t be more help. But good luck, kid. You’ll need it.” And with that Miller showed him the door. And Jason found himself standing alone in the middle of a hillside, wondering how a kid like him was going to save the news.

When he got back, he quietly made a dump of the Newsflip database and re-jiggered his program to try to dissect the live DB instead of generating random ones. He quickly saw much better results. Within hours it had pared things down to just a couple hundred thousand possibilities.

While he was waiting, he pored over the diffs he'd generated as Miller had suggested: the changes that the backdoor had made to people's recommendations. The first thing he noticed was that just about everyone was seeing crummy stories: the video of the dog peeing, news about dumb celebrities, that sort of thing. Meanwhile, real news — like the attack on Iran — was completely buried. Only a small handful ever saw it.

Jason was shocked. The American people weren't being dumb — obsessed with celebrity over politics, with bodily fluids over intellectualism. That's just what they were being fed. And there was someone out there making sure of that.

Jason was bubbling mad — and his anger only increased as he watched the elements tick away on his little script to search for the backdoor — each tick making his blood boil higher. And as it was almost done, the phone rang. It was Sarah.

"Hey kiddo," she sang. "Caught you playin' hooky at the office? What's up?" she asked. "Oh, not much," Jason lied. "Just thought I'd work from home today." "Oh yeah, I get sick of those slobs too. Hey, want to come over to my place and keep me company?" "Uh, well," Jason started. "Oh, don't worry. I've got wifi and everything — you can work from here just fine. I promise I won't distract you... too much."

Jason knew he should stay at home and finish what he'd started, but a tingle of excitement ran through his body, telling him he really ought to see Sarah. "OK, how about I come over there in twenty minutes?" "Sounds good," she said, and gave him her address. "See you soon!" "See you," he said, and hung up.

By then the computer had cracked the code and he went over to see what was what. It was, as predicted, a bunch of bookmarks, but in some weird series that Jason couldn't quite follow. He tried reproducing it by creating some dummy accounts of his own, but before he could really puzzle things out he realized that he'd promised Sarah he'd be there ten minutes ago and dropped what he was working on to run for the door.

Deep inside the Googleplex, behind a set of keycard-locked doors, behind another set that required keys for entry, behind another set that clearly read "NO VISITORS BEYOND THIS POINT", lay a series of employees that, except for the slightly-heightened security, seemed like all the others.

Tom was going through his daily rounds of checking on the recommender results when he noticed a certain story was being recommended to him twice. The recommender was programmed to only recommend the same story to someone only once, so that never happened — unless one of his teammates screwed up. “Hey Kevin, get over here. You fucked up again.” A miffed-looking British fellow headed over to Tom’s desk. “What are you talking about?”

“You fucked up — I’m seeing this dog story getting recommended twice.” “But how can that be?” Kevin asked. “I put in safeguards to make sure that never happened again. Unreal. Are you sure it’s not on your end?” “Of course it’s not on my end — I’m looking at the raw recommendation output.” “Alright, alright, well trace it back. See which posts are conflicting.” “OK, give me a second. Here, grab a chair.”

“Whoa, this is weird,” Tom said. “I don’t recognize any of these accounts. Do you?” “Numbered account names? We’d never be so blatant. Fuck. You know what this means, right?” “We have an incompetent intern?” “No, moron, it means someone’s onto us. They’ve figured out the back door and they’re testing it for themselves.” “Oh shit. Shit, shit, shit. What do we do?” “What can we do? We gotta talk to Saul.”

They headed over to a slightly larger cubicle hidden in a corner. “Saul, we’ve got a situation here.” “Situation?” Saul asked. “What is this? Some kind of spy movie? What’re you talking about?” “Someone else has found the backdoor. We spotted a bunch of bookmarks in the same pattern as we’re using from a different set of accounts.” “Fuck. OK, well, thanks for telling me.”

“Here’s what I want you to do. You’re going to walk calmly back to your desks. You’re going to write up everything you’ve learned so far and place it on this Flash drive.” He removed a small USB keyfob from inside his desk. You’re then going to give me the keyfob, wipe everything related from your machines, and pretend this never ever happened, you understand? This is out of your hands now. I’m going to make sure this gets... taken care of.” Tom and Kevin’s eyes widened. “Wait,” Tom said, “you don’t mean...” “Exactly,” Saul replied. “This is a job for... public relations.”

Tomorrow: [Chapter Seven](#)

Cooling the Mark Out

November 14, 2007

[Original link](#)

You run into a man at a party. You strike up a conversation. He seems very friendly. You like him. And then he tells you about some friends he has. This man is called the roper.

The friends tell you about a deal. They know about a gamble, but it's rigged so you can't lose. Just give them some money and they'll show you. This is called the con.

The first time you give them money it works; it comes back ten-fold. But now you're getting greedy. You want to do it again, bigger this time. Only this time their money doesn't come back. This is called the loss.

You feel like a chump. Your greediness got the best of you. You want to get back at those con-men. You are called the mark.

But the roper talks you down. You can't go to the police without admitting that you were trying to commit a crime. And everybody has to lose sometime, right? It could be worse. This is called cooling out the mark.

Erving Goffman, the great sociologist, [noticed this decades ago](#). Only he didn't just notice it in con men. Students had to be persuaded to accept a world far less idealistic than they learned in school. Kids who failed the bar exam had to persuade themselves they didn't really want to be lawyers. People at restaurants had to be persuaded to accept the screwup by the kitchen. Everyone occasionally needs "schooling in the philosophy of taking a loss."

It was this last example that particularly struck me. The other day, I was watching [a video clip of a motivational speaker](#). And what did he talk about? A screwup by a restaurant he went to. And how the host worked hard, overhard even, to pacify him about it.

It was a decent story. It was very well told. But why was a motivational speaker telling it? But now I realize: it was about cooling out the mark.

Cooling out marks is how institutions persuade people to accept things they think are wrong. The con-man convinces you getting stolen from is OK. Your job convinces you it's OK that they're corrupt. The restaurant persuades you it's OK that they're incompetent.

Motivational speakers do the same thing. Did the economy cheat you, fire you, stick you in some crappy job with a crabby boss? Listen, the motivational speaker explains, it's not the economy's fault. And just as the roper is always separate from the con men, the motivational speaker doesn't directly work for the economy. He sits on the sidelines, waiting to cool the mark out.

- Further reading: Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bait and Switch*

Bubble City: Chapter 7

November 15, 2007

[Original link](#)

On his way into the office, Trent saw a pretty young girl and decided to use it as an opportunity to improve his marketing skills. “Hello there,” he shouted at a small and slender woman wearing a huge black coat. She didn’t say anything so he ran to catch up with her. “Hello there,” he shouted again, this time louder and closer to his face. “Umm, hello,” she mumbled and tried to hurry past. “What’s your name?” he shouted. “Mm, Jessica,” she mumbled. “Hello there, Jessica,” he shouted. “My name’s Trent and I have a very exciting service I want to tell you about. I think it will revolutionize the way you look at the news industry today. It’s called Newsflip and—” They had come to the end of the block and Jessica had decided to dart across the street, dodging traffic. Trent decided not to follow. “Crazy bitch,” he muttered.

But shortly after he got into the office and settled into his desk, he got to watch another stunningly attractive young thing, wearing a tight blouse and tighter jeans saunter over to his desk. “Trent,” she said, sounding just happy enough that you couldn’t honestly describe her as sounding unhappy, “you’ve got a call from the press on line 3.” “Thanks Sandy,” he said and watched her ass swing as she sauntered away from his desk. He picked up the phone. “Newsflip, Trent speaking.”

“Hellllo, there,” said an effusive voice at the other end of the line. “I’m calling from Digital World News Online Monthly and we’re writing a feature segment about today’s top users of NNA. Now, obviously, I want to give Newsflip top billing, so I was hoping you had some time to answer a few questions about your site for us good folks.” “Why, of course,” Trent said chivalrously. “Anything for the press!”

“Well, my first question is how strong is your commitment to NNA?” “Oh, total, total. I know there have been some nasty and false rumors swirling around, but I can assure you those are untrue. We are 100% committed to standing on the strength of the NNA platform, which we’re committed to as well. Kind of like a man who’s chained to the platform that he’s chained to, if you know what I mean?” “Ohhh, I doooo,” cooed the reporter in a voice that was less than convincing.

“And do you have any problems or complaints with it? Have you been doing any research into improving it?” “Well, honestly, it’s such a great platform that we have our hands full just using it as it is, frankly.” “So you have no one working on the internals?” “No, but it’s not really necessary as it’s such a strong foundation for our platform.”

"I see. Well, thank you so much for your time, Mr. ..." "Oh, Trent, just call me Trent." "Well, thank you so much for your time, Trent. This has been very valuable for the article." "Well, thank you." "Bye!" "Bye." "Bye." "Bye." "Bye." "Um, bye." A long pause. "Bye..." "Bye." "Bye." "Bye." "Bye!" Trent hung up.

Nice journalist, Trent thought. He should note that down. What was her name? Hmm, he didn't think she said.

"Sandy!" he yelled out over the office. The girl in the tight blouse scurried over to his desk. "Yes, sir?" "I'm gonna take a meditation break for about fifteen minutes." "Yes, sir; I'll do the usual." "Thanks, Sandy." He again watched her saunter back to her desk. She ran to the small closet he'd reclaimed as his meditation chamber and locked the door behind him.

It was Thursday, so Sarah decided to knock off work a bit early to go to her street fighting class. They met in the unfinished basement of what Sarah recognized as the old Pets.com building, but Sarah doubted few of the other participants would recognize it as such. Instead, they knew it mostly as the place where they got their noses ground into the cement and left blood stains on the wall, before stepping back and thanking their instructor politely for the demonstration.

"Who wants to go first today?" Owen, their instructor, asked. A girl in a pink jumpsuit raised her hand. Owen loved picking on the newbies. "Now this move is called the jackdrill," he said, picking the jumpsuited girl up by her waist, flipping her upside-down, and grinding her head into the mat on the floor by spinning her around. After a couple seconds he righted and returned her, his voice changing to sincerely apologetic. "Are you alright? Was that OK?" he said, looking her over. "Here, here, let me fix your hair." "Oh, no, no, thank you," the girl said, a bit stunned, "it's fine."

When it was time to practice on their own, Sarah got paired up with an outrageously cute and muscular man she'd been eying the whole evening. "Hey there," she said, extending her arm. "I'm Sarah." "Jonathan," he said, smiling winningly. She felt her heart melt just a little bit. Flipping Jonathan by the waist and watching the muscles on his back ripple, she became determined to ask him out at the end of the lesson.

She didn't need to. As he was toweling the sweat off his chest, he approached her. "So Sarah, you doing anything tonight?" She thought for a second. Jason wanted to talk about some weird work thing he'd noticed but she could blow that off for a night. "Uh, nope," she answered. "Why don't I take you out to dinner?" he asked. "Sure, that'd be great," she said, smiling.

At dinner, she discovered that Jonathan shared her interests. In fact, he also appeared to share her friends' interests as well as various other random interests she could think of. On just about any subject he could marshal a stream of

facts, with names and dates and places, capped off by a touching personal anecdote or a joke.

Erlang: “Isn’t Erlang fantastic? I just love the way that message-passing unifies both the internal control structure and the intra-process communication. That said, the syntax could use some work... I remember one time I showed this Erlang program to a friend and they thought it was Perl!”

Guitar: “Oh, I just think the guitar is a beautiful instrument. I love the way you get lost in the sound when you’re playing a Robert Plant solo. I remember one time when I got lost in the sound and didn’t find my way out for weeks!”

Slovenian philosophy: “I just can’t get enough of Žižek! I mean, I know a lot of people think using a Lacanian model to question notions of false consciousness runs afoul of modern Popperian scientific sensibility, but at the very least now that the Bayesians have taken up arms against the Popperites they’ll be willing to admit there’s at least some analytical heft to the Lacanian techniques. God, you’re great. I remember this one time when I told a friend that and they just looked at me.”

Sarah accidentally dropped her napkin on the floor and Jonathan ran over to pick it up for her and she watched his muscles ripple beneath his clothes and fantasized about tearing them off. “Hey, my place is just down the street a little. Want to come back for a bit?” So they walked, chatting happily, through the Mission and she let him into her apartment and they chatted some more on the couch for a bit, finding odd excuses to move a bit closer to each other and look into each others’ eyes until Sarah reached out for the kiss and Jonathan followed and pushed her down onto the couch, making out for a while before he began lifting off her shirt.

Wayne spent the first load of cash on a fancy new office, the best to give the right impression about the Wayne Darnus Center for User Priorities, of course. Then he hired an attractive assistant for the same reason (and to help him with his soon-to-be-busy schedule).

“What’s the first order of business?” he asked her, once he was settled in his plush new chair behind his imposing new desk. “Uh, we don’t have any orders of business,” she said. “OK, well then the first order of business is to think of one.”

“What’s the first order of business?” he asked her. “To think of a first order of business,” she said. “Alright, I’ll do that and get back to you.”

“Although technically,” he added, “it will be a second order of business since thinking of it already was the first order of business.” “Good point,” she said, and scurried off.

Jason spent the day thinking about the other afternoon he spent with Sarah. He'd come over to work but working led to chatting and chatting led to moving closer and pretty soon the only productive thing he got out of the day was exercise. As soon as he was done with what he was working on that day, he biked as fast as he could to Sarah's house and knocked on the door. "Hey there," he said smiling as she opened it. She didn't smile back; she just grabbed him and threw him against the wall, closing the door behind her with her foot. She grabbed his head and pushed it into the wall with her mouth, as he made pleasant-sounding noises. By the time they got into the bathroom, he was only half-clothed.

Then there was a knock on the door and they pulled away. "Who the fuck is that?" Jason asked. Sarah looked at the clock on her dresser. "Oh, shoot, I'm sorry. That's probably Jonathan." Jason looked at her for a while, puzzled. She looked back for what seemed like a long moment and then said "Oh, you do know I'm poly, right?"

Tomorrow: [Chapter Eight](#)

Bubble City: Chapter 8

November 18, 2007

[Original link](#)

“Poly?” “Yeah, poly,” she said, hunting for her shirt and putting it back on. No sense in being *that* forward when she answered the door. “You mean like polygamous?” “No, silly, do I look like I have multiple wives? I just have that one...” “You ha—wait, so what does poly mean?” “Polyamorous,” she said, putting her socks back on. Jason saw her heading to the door and realized he better put on some more clothes of his own. Because putting on some more clothes of Sarah’s seemed wrong for the mood. “Multiple loves.” Jason scurried towards his pants. “I don’t instantly assume that just because I’m seeing one person that means I can’t see another.” Jason tried to pull the pants up while avoiding any unsightly bulges. “I just don’t sign on to that arbitrary rule of our culture.”

“But it’s not arbitrary!” Jason insisted. “What about jealousy?” Sarah opened the door as Jason was struggling to put on his shirt. Jonathan was standing there and she grabbed his head, gave him a long faux-passionate kiss, and then closed the door again in his face. “Did that make you jealous, sweetie?” she asked Jason, a tad mockingly he thought. “Oh, I’m sorry, honey,” she said, making out with him and sliding a hand down his pants. “Ohhh,” he said. “Well now I’m suddenly *very* jealous,” he said smiling. She pinched him and ground him against the wall a bit before going to get the door. “Well, when you get over it, you know where to find me,” she said, pulling Jonathan inside. “Uh, who’s that?” Jonathan asked, pointing to Jason. “Oh, he was just going,” she said, before dragging Jonathan into the bedroom.

Jason tried to get back to work, to figure out the secret code that allowed one to take over the NNA algorithm, but he just couldn’t focus. Every time he tried to sit down to do the math, he felt tired or bored or distracted. All he could think about was Sarah. And all he could think about that was how anathema to productivity it was.

But there wasn’t much he could do. He couldn’t get Sarah out of his mind. And even if he could, there she was, just across the office, smiling as if nothing was wrong, and forcing her way back into his consciousness. So the next night he went back there. Sarah started first.

“Oh, Jason, I’m so sorry. I was incredibly rude. I just got so swept up in the moment, you know?” “Oh, that’s OK. I’m sorry I wasn’t more understanding

of your, um, lifestyle.” “But now?” “I think I can accept it.” “Oh, Jason,” she said, hugging him, “I’m so glad. I really do like you.” “And Jon?” “Well, I guess I like him too. Are you OK with that?” “Yeah, I think so.” “Anything I can do to make it worth your while?” she asked before kissing him, starting with his lips and then working her way down his chest.

Jason had heard people say that getting laid made them more productive, but he always found it a colossal waste of time. Not only the time wasted with your partner, but also all the time you spent during the day thinking about the time you’d wasted or the time you would waste in the future. It made it hard to focus, worst of all now, when something important was at stake.

He put all thoughts of Sarah out of—Sarah and Jonathan, sitting there, his muscle—anyway, he put all of that out of his mind and focused on the problem at hand. How did this sequence of bookmarks lead to that particular recommendation?

After much procrastination, he cracked the code. There were a series of accounts, call them dummy0 thru dummy15, and a series of pages, call them page0 thru page15. dummy0 linked to page0, dummy1 linked to page0 and page1, dummy2 linked to page0, page1, and page2, and so on. Then dummy15 also linked to an additional page and that was the one that got pushed out in all the recommendations.

Jason figured that the clustering algorithm must have discovered this cluster, noticed the odd behavior, and taken it aside for special processing. Not that anyone could know for sure without untangling all that code.

Days before, Jason Blakeslee, Google’s head of public relations, and received a visit from Samuel Turnbill, Google’s head of evangelism. The meeting was coordinated over Google Email, it was marked in Google Calendars, it was recorded by Google Video, and held on the Google campus. In that, it was like many other meetings. And yet, somehow, it was very different.

“I’m sure you’ll recall NNA,” Samuel began, getting down to business. “Of course,” Blakeslee said. “Well, it appears someone found a piece of it that we were hoping to keep hidden.” “Jesus, Sam, would it kill you to speak clearly? I’m head of public relations, not the public.” “OK, OK. So here’s how it is: there’s a special control system in NNA that allows us to exercise some influence over the workings of the algorithm, for administrative purposes and that sort of thing. Someone else appears to have discovered the control structure. If this gets out, it could be incredibly damaging. It *must* be stopped.” “I understand,” Blakeslee explained. “I’ll put our team on it.” “Thank you,” Samuel

said handing Blakeslee a USB thumb drive. “Here’s a quick explanation and all the relevant logs.”

And thus the head of evangelism handed the drive to the head of public relations who handed it to head of sensitive operations who handed it to his tech lead who handed it to Mike. “Piece of cake,” Mike said.

The logs showed the IP address and time the perp had contacted Google’s servers with his bookmark request. The IP address was a cable modem used mainly by one man: a Mr. Jason Barsto. Barsto had a Google account, which allowed Mike to pull up a pretty decent summary of his entire life: his email, his calendar, his search history, what news stories he liked, where he lived, surveillance photos of his house, the top people he chatted with, and on and on.

Now came the fun part: compiling a dossier. Mike skimmed through Barsto’s life, with the aid of Google technology that helped highlight key concepts and messages, getting inside Barsto’s head and trying to understand who he was.

He started with search. Barsto was a geek, the kind of person who searched Google every time a thought passed through his head. Within minutes, he knew everything from what kind of error messages Barsto’s computer was showing that day to what kind of porn he enjoyed. It was like a raw feed into his stream-of-consciousness.

Just in the past few hours Barsto had searched for:

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big daddy
galaxy halos
guitar hero four
san francisco library
arguments against evolution
stomach cancer
site:mayoclinic.org stomach cancer
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Next came email. Using Google technology developed for targetting ads and improving search, his system pulled out the key concepts and emails in Barsto’s mailbox. Pretty quickly he learned who Barsto’s friends are, who his crushes were, who his boss was, and what he did with his free time. Using his Google Chat logs, he found what Barsto liked to gossip about and what crazy links he shared with his friends. (Luckily for Mike, Barsto appeared to be the kind of startup geek who never saw a Google app he didn’t use.)

Using the calendar, he discovered when Barsto went to the gym, when he went to see his girlfriend, and so on. Connecting this with the Google friend-tracking app Barsto had installed on his GPS-enabled phone, Barsto was able to get solid GPS coordinates for all of these places on a Google Map as well as see where Barsto was right now. They could probably ask his phone to record all of his phone calls for them, although Barsto didn’t have that kind of clearance.

Since Barsto used Google News and YouTube, he got a fairly good sense of what kinds of things Barsto was interested in and, thanks to Google Checkout, he was able to see all the recent purchases Barsto had made. But — and here was the motherload — Barsto ran Google Desktop Search, which allowed Mike to access any file on Barsto's computer. He quickly pulled up Barsto's full browsing history and got to see what kind of porn he liked, what blogs he visited, what he was reading about today, which non-Google apps he used, etc. (For people who didn't have Google Desktop Search installed, he got the same data thru Google Web Accelerator.)

By the end of the day he felt he knew Barsto better than he knew some of his own best friends. He put the highlights of what he'd learned into a report for his superiors: Barsto's name and address, his occupation and skill-level, his interests and hobbies, his friends and girlfriends, and (his favorite part) a series of embarrassing or otherwise fun facts that could be used for blackmail or simply amusement. (You wouldn't believe how many people kept naked photos of themselves or loved ones on their hard drives!)

He sent the report to his superior and wandered off for a bit to dwell on the power he had as a faceless person deep inside an office park in Mountain View to know every detail of another person's life; a person living just miles north in San Francisco. He wondered what it would be like if he came across him on the street — here, he would know every detail of Barsto's life, from the secrets he confided over IM with his friends to what he looked like naked, while Barsto would see Mike as just another random face in the crowd.

Mike loved his job.

Tomorrow: [Chapter Nine](#)

Bubble City: Chapter 10

November 19, 2007

[Original link](#)

Wayne met Samuel, his Google contact, at a San Francisco bar. They were already several drinks in when the conversation turned to business. “Well, I’ve got the Center all up and running,” he said. “That’s great to hear. Congratulations. That’s just fantastic.” “There’s just one problem.” “Oh?” “I don’t know what to do with it.” “Oh, don’t worry. You can do whatever you want. I mean, we’ll have some requests from time to time but it’s your project — feel free to do whatever you want to do.”

“But that’s just what I mean,” Wayne said. “I don’t know what I want to do.” “Come on, surely there must be something?” “Not really. What are you working on these days?” “Oh, all sorts of things. You know, it’s pretty crazy as usual. You’re on the Google NDA right?” “Yeah, and the corporate email system and contracts and everything.” “OK, so then I can tell you a bit. You know how the job is: tracking down people to co-opt or destroy.” “Must be exciting.”

“Not usually. Although one exciting thing happened lately. We’re doing a manhunt on this NNA stuff.” “A what?” “Apparently some kid found out something he wasn’t supposed to and we’re tracking him down.” “Huh? Tracking him down?” “Well, he booked when he found out we were on his tail, so we get to use all our databases to try and figure out where he fled to and how to get him back. He’s a smart kid — MIT grad, hacker, etc. — so it’s actually a really fun puzzle. The guys back at HQ are loving it. It’s like their college puzzle hunts all over again.”

“So what do you do when you find him?” Wayne asked. “The usual,” Samuel said as if it was obvious. “Co-opt or destroy.” “But how do you destroy a kid?” “Oh, that’s actually quite fun, although obviously not ideal for the bottom line. Basically we take him out and then falsify a whole bunch of evidence to make it look like an accident. You wouldn’t believe the quality of the data forgers we have on staff — best guys in the business.”

“Wait? Take him out — you mean you’ll kill him?” “Not usually; bodies are messy to clean up that way. Usually we just expose them to chemicals or shocks or some other brain-rotting substance. They live, but not with an IQ that will be of any worry for us.” “Wow, geez,” Wayne said, a bit taken aback. “I had no idea Google did stuff like that.” “Oh, come on, Wayne, don’t be naive. You of all people should know better than that.” “Oh, I’m not be—” “It’s just the price of doing business,” Samuel continued. “Every company has its little hidden costs. Factories dump harmful chemicals wherever seems convenient.

Pharmaceutical companies cover up their products' harms. Conglomerates bribe foreign governments. Clothing companies engage in human trafficking. Scratch any serious company and you'll find some dark little secret. That's what makes the money go 'round.'

"Yes, but well, taking people out. Isn't that a bit extreme?" "Oh, so when [Shell takes out labor activists](#), that's OK. And when [GAP condemns young women to a life of involuntary servitude](#), that's OK. And when [GE dumps tons of PCBs into the Hudson River](#), that's just fine. But Google messes with one or two people and it's suddenly the end of the world? How is that fair?"

"Look, Wayne, Google's [one of the ten biggest US companies](#). If you think we're going to keep acting like some little software shop in Mountain View, you're crazy." "I know, I know, but I thought Google was supposed to be different. What happened to Don't Be Evil?" Samuel laughed. "Don't Be Evil was some hacker's PR ploy that got out of hand. Paul Buchheit, the guy who made Gmail, suggested it in an early meeting and Amit Patel, another early Googler starting writing it on whiteboards everywhere. A journalist saw it and the rest was history — but don't be mistaken, it was never official corporate policy."

"But come on, Samuel, just between us, don't you ever feel a little bit guilty about all this?" "Look Wayne, what good would it do? If I raise complaints about it to my superior they'll mark me as unstable and demote me. If I threaten to go public they've got an ironclad NDA — they'll take away my house and family with their crack team of lawyers and I'll spend the rest of my life at a minimum wage job. And if even that doesn't scare me, then they'll turn the black ops on me too. When they're through with me, I'll be such a gibbering paranoid idiot that nobody will take anything I say seriously. So it's stupid to even think about this stuff."

"But what about your superior? Why not convince him?" "Come on, Wayne, you can't even convince me this is the wrong thing; you think I'm going to be able to convince a guy who does this sort of thing his entire life? And even if I do, then what? He gets fired and ruined right along with me. Why bring another person in on this mess? What good does that do?"

Wayne took a long sigh. "But surely, at some fundamental level, you've got to realize this is wrong? Has Google entirely taken away your humanity?" "Oh come on, Wayne, that's not humanity, that's naivete. Sure, when they're a kid everyone thinks they'll fight for truth and justice and the American way of not torturing people. But you also want to succeed. And success requires compromise; there's no other way. If you don't compromise then they just filter you out. You're labeled 'difficult' or 'uncooperative' or 'insubordinate'. Believe me; I've seen it dozens of times. I've even done it myself when it had to be done. By the time you get to a position like mine, you begin to realize that this is just the way the world works. And what are you supposed to do about that, huh, Wayne?"

“Look Wayne, I’m telling you all this because I know you’re a smart guy. Your heart’s in the right place, but so is your head. Google’s counting on you to be a big success and you can’t do stuff like that if you have to worry about every little kid that needs to be quashed. So here, I’ll pick up the tab. Why don’t you go home and get yourself some rest? And then tomorrow I’ll give you a call and we’ll pick out some fun projects for you to work on? Doesn’t that sound good?”

“Yeah,” Wayne said at last. “I guess so. God, I don’t know what’s gotten into me. I used to be such a hard-head.” “I know, Wayne, I know. That’s what I like about you. You did whatever it took to get ahead. Look, everyone goes thru this the first time they have to cross a line. I certainly had my fair share of sleepless nights. But you come out of it smarter and stronger. I promise you, you wake up tomorrow morning, you’ll be a better man — ready to conquer anything. Now go and get some rest.” “OK, Samuel. And thanks for the drinks.” “Don’t thank me,” Samuel said. “Thank Google.”

Tomorrow: [Chapter Eleven](#)

Bubble City: Chapter 9

November 19, 2007

[Original link](#)

Derren, head of sensitive public relations operations for Google, had to figure out what to do about Jason. Normally Google prided itself on being very “flat” — few people were in charge, most people worked in teams. But the bosses had decided that public relations had to be special, which meant that all these tough choices fell on Derren’s shoulders alone.

But Derren knew better than that. He’d previously had a similar position at Yahoo, where the Chinese government made him give up the names of bloggers to their secret police. The guilt wouldn’t go away for weeks. Derren was sick of that kind of stress.

Google was a company of hackers, so when he moved there he got there he had the programmers whip up a technical solution to his social problem. Now when he faced a tough decision like this, he punched the key facts into the computer and had his team vote on the solution. That way it wasn’t his decision — it was simply the “wisdom of crowds,” the aggregated knowledge of Google’s crack team of spooks.

Describing Jason’s case would be simple:

Fresh MIT grad discovers backdoor in key public algorithm. Works at related SF startup. Doesn’t yet have enough details to go public.

Should we:

- Nab him and begin the coverup.
- Infiltrate his office and friends and follow his progress.
- Do nothing.

He always left that last one in there just to make sure his ass was covered. But it almost never got any votes.

He sent out the questionnaire and watched the results pour in. There was the support from the kidnapping crowd for immediately seizing the kid and figuring out the questions later, but most of the team supported the more cautious position. Fair enough.

He looked to see what staff he had available and dispatched one woman to get more details from the kids boss, just to make sure he was oblivious and dispatched a guy to get to know the kid’s girlfriend. Finally, he assigned an

office drone to monitor the kid and keep tabs on his progress. The guy who'd done the original work-up was still available, so he pushed the task back to him.

Boy, this job sure was easier without the guilt.

Jason started noticing them at the gym. Guys that geeky didn't work out. And certainly not with those dorky glasses still on. And whenever he biked anywhere he was followed by an unusually large number of white Priuses. At first he ascribed things to paranoia — he'd been having weird dreams ever since his visit to Miller == but when he got to the office he ran some numbers and calculated the probability of seeing that many white Priuses in San Francisco and realized something was up.

Dorks. Priuses. His work on NNA. What did it all add up to? Did the media industry have some secret San Francisco team working on the NNA backdoor? No, that couldn't be — anyone the media industry hired would be way more attractive. And then it hit him — the only organization that fit the combination of stealthiness, geekiness, and obsessive control: Google.

Shit, he thought.

He looked around to see how they were tracking on him. Open on his screen was a Google query for white priuses in San Francisco. *Fuck*, he thought, quickly closing it. They knew he was on to them; they were sure to close in on him now. He quickly set up a rule in his firewall to block all outgoing connections to Google servers. He watched his other search queries, his email, his calendar, and his chats all go dead. Soon his desktop search thing fizzled out too.

He tried to think of other Google products, but his officemate was laughing at some stupid YouTube video. Oh, damn, YouTube. He blocked that too, along with Blogger. In fact, he blocked the whole Google IP space. There was time to figure out how to circumvent this stuff later.

He looked around for other Google products. Surely they couldn't track him with his Google tshirts. But his phone! It not only ran Google apps, but a Google OS. He had to toss it. He removed the battery, ran a magnet over the case, and tossed the result in the trash. In fact, maybe it'd just be safer to toss his whole computer as well. At the very least, he changed the password on his hard drive encryption and removed the battery and power cord and stuffed it in his bag.

Shit, the dorks were at the receptionist. He had to get out. He ducked under his desk so he could think. Soon they'd be at his desk. He couldn't be here. He vaguely recalled seeing some back door over by the bathrooms, so he crawled that way. Luckily, most of the office was too enthralled by their monitors to notice.

He snuck out the door and jogged to the BART station. He bought a new ticket, with cash (just to be on the safe side — hadn't he heard something about Google beta-testing a new public transit program?) He rode the train all the way to Bay Point, on the theory that getting as far away from Google as possible would be a good idea right now.

He spent the whole train ride shift and nervously looking at the other passengers, seeing if any of them were suspiciously geeky. But few people seemed to last the whole ride from San Francisco to Bay Point; mostly they got rotated. So eventually he calmed down and tried to plot his next move.

When he got off he began looking for a library where he might be able to get an Internet connection. He was obviously a bit wary of using Google, even though it'd be pretty impressive for them to track him from a random library computer, so he went to scroogle.org, a site that let you do Google searches while hiding your IP address. Instead of visiting Google directly, you sent your query to Scroogle, which passed the query on to Google and then back to you, after stripping out all the Google tracking cookies and the ads.

For other Google products there was [Tor](#), a clever little app that encrypted your Internet usage and bounced it through three machines around the world before sending it on to its intended destination. At every step, your traffic gets encrypted a different way and delayed a small amount, so that even an observer listening to every single bit of Internet traffic can't keep track of which was yours.

Think of it this way: Imagine you want to get across town without being followed by a spy satellite that can see everything from overhead. Well, first you leave your house — the spy satellite can see that, of course — and you head to a department store. Inside the department store, you toss your clothes and buy all new ones. Then, when you come out, you look like a completely different person — the guy using the spy satellite can't tell which person leaving the store is you. Then, just in case the guy using the spy satellite cut a deal with the department store's security cameras, you do this a couple more times with different department stores. Finally, pretty confident you've lost the spy, you head to your final destination.

Tor works the same way, only instead of you there's your message and instead of new clothes there's encryption. You first pick out three Tor servers (the equivalent of the department store) that you want to route your message to. First you write out a note saying "please send the following message to www.google.com" with the message and encrypt it so that only the third computer on your list can read it. Then you write out "please send this to [the third Tor server]" and the previous encrypted message and encrypt that. And then you write out "please send this to [the second Tor server]" and the previous encrypted message. Then you encrypt that and send it to the first computer on your list. It decrypts it, follows the instructions, and all the other servers do the same.

Of course all of this was for nothing if you ever logged into a Google product

or even accepted a Google cookie — a special tracking number that Google send out with every web page they serve. Most browsers automatically save the tracking number and send it back every time you visit something on google.com. Cookies were designed so that when you logged into something like your email, you would stay logged in. The first time you typed your email and password, you'd get back a cookie proving you'd logged in. Then, every other time you visited the site, your browser would send back the cookie and the site would know you were logged in.

But pretty quickly, sites started using this to track all their visitors. Instead of sending cookies only when you logged in, they sent them to every user, allowing them to keep track of people even when they took their laptop to a new place or disguised their connections through something like Tor. Google, of course, does the same, giving every Google visitor a tracking number that identifies their computer forever.

Thus, to be sure Google can't track you, you need to do at least three things: never log in, never accept tracking cookies, and use some kind of anonymization of your IP address (like Scroogle or Tor). And that's just for the Web.

God, this was going to be hard.

Tomorrow: [Chapter Ten](#)

Sick

November 27, 2007

[Original link](#)

I'm sorry I haven't been keeping up with Bubble City. I've spent a lot of the last few weeks lying in bed and drinking fluids. (With occasional breaks to play Rock Band, much to the annoyance of my neighbors.) Once again, I've been sick — this time, with four different illnesses.

I have a lot of illnesses. I don't talk about it much, for a variety of reasons. I feel ashamed to have an illness. (It sounds absurd, but there still is an enormous stigma around being sick.) I don't want to use being ill as an excuse. (Although I sometimes wonder how much more productive I'd be if I wasn't so sick.) And, to a large extent, I just don't find it an interesting subject. (My friends are amazed by this; why is such a curious person so uncurious about the things so directly affecting his life?)

One of my goals for this blog is to describe what it's like to be in various situations and it struck me that I've never said much about what it's like to be sick. So I figured I'd try to remedy that. (Unfortunately, being sick has made this slightly more difficult. I started this post on thanksgiving and now it's almost four days later.)

Cold: All the time I feel tired and woozy. My throat is sore and I'm constantly searching for kleenex to address my nose. Sometimes I feel too hot, like I'm burning up. I'm always thirsty. Concentrating on anything is difficult. I just feel kind of wasted.

Upset stomach: Huge pains grind through my stomach, like it's trying to leap out of my body. Food is always followed by pain, followed by running to the bathroom. I'm afraid to go out because I wouldn't want to get too far from a toilet. I'm always thirsty and the dehydration makes me angry and confused. At times the pain is excruciating and even after it goes I spend some time just reeling from it.

Migraine: Ever felt someone's nails dig into your scalp? Imagine that their nails are knives and they're scratching thru your brain and you can begin to imagine what a migraine feels like. Light, sound, touch — everything makes it worse, making the most painful pains even more painful. Even when you quell it with a pill, you still end up feeling woozy and disconnected, as if the pill is just barely keeping the pain at bay.

Depressed mood: Surely there have been times when you've been sad. Perhaps a loved one has abandoned you or a plan has gone horribly awry. Your face falls. Perhaps you cry. You feel worthless. You wonder whether it's worth

going on. Everything you think about seems bleak — the things you’ve done, the things you hope to do, the people around you. You want to lie in bed and keep the lights off. Depressed mood is like that, only it doesn’t come for any reason and it doesn’t go for any either. Go outside and get some fresh air or cuddle with a loved one and you don’t feel any better, only more upset at being unable to feel the joy that everyone else seems to feel. Everything gets colored by the sadness.

At best, you tell yourself that your thinking is irrational, that it is simply a mood disorder, that you should get on with your life. But sometimes that is worse. You feel as if streaks of pain are running through your head, you thrash your body, you search for some escape but find none. And this is one of the more moderate forms. [As George Scialabba put it](#), “acute depression does not feel like falling ill, it feels like being tortured ... the pain is not localized; it runs along every nerve, an unconsuming fire. ... Even though one knows better, one cannot believe that it will ever end, or that anyone else has ever felt anything like it.”

The economist Richard Layard, after advocating that the goal of public policy should be to maximize happiness, set out to learn what the greatest impediment to happiness was today. His conclusion: depression. Depression causes nearly half of all disability, it affects one in six, and explains more current unhappiness than poverty. And (important for public policy) Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy has a short-term success rate of 50%. Sadly, depression (like other mental illnesses, especially addiction) is not seen as “real” enough to deserve the investment and awareness of conditions like breast cancer (1 in 8) or AIDS (1 in 150). And there is, of course, the shame.

So I hope you’ll forgive me for not doing more. And hey, it could be worse. At least I have decent health insurance.

The Handwriting on the Wall

December 6, 2007

[Original link](#)

I recently attended a talk at Stanford by Walter Bradford Ellis, a too-little-known activist and writer on the issue of global poverty and world hunger. It's transcribed from a recording I made. The sound quality was lousy, so apologies if I've mangled some of the specifics.

Good evening. This is the first time I've spoken before a college audience, and therefore I would like to take advantage of your presence to ask you a few questions before I begin on my prepared speech. Basically I want to know how morally committed the students at a typical 'good' school are, and while I know an audience of several hundred from one school is neither large enough nor diverse enough to give an especially accurate picture, still the results should provide a rough indication of where the real truth lies. That's sort of an interesting juxtaposition of words. 'Truth lies' I mean.

Anyway, as I said, I'm interested in knowing how morally committed you are. I must say at the outset, I am pessimistic. At any rate, primarily what I want to find out tonight is how important it is to you for you to act according to your own definition of right and wrong. In other words I'm not interested in knowing what sort of behavior you think is right or wrong but merely how committed you are to living up to whatever standards of right and wrong you possess.

I was trying to think a few minutes ago what questions I could ask you to find out this information, and it is very difficult to come up with anything satisfactory simply because individual standards of right and wrong vary so markedly. I had to pick a situation which seems perhaps a little silly because it is so improbable, but that is because I wanted as pure a case as possible—one which is in no way connected with any existing world situation—so that your prejudices and preconceived notions about a particular situation will play no part in your answers.

My hypothetical circumstances are concerned with a person who murders innocent people, and I suspect that nearly every one of you will agree that that is wrong. So please now imagine yourself to be in an ancient country which is ruled over by an evil king who has absolute power of life or death over all his subjects—including yourself. Now this king is very bored, and so for his amusement he picks 10 of his subjects, men, women, and children, at random as well as an eleventh man who is separate from the rest. Now the king gives the eleventh man a choice: he will either hang the 10 people picked at random and let the eleventh go free, or he will hang the eleventh man and let the other 10 go free. And the eleventh man must decide which it is to be.

Now if death is bad, then on average 10 deaths must be 10 times as bad as one. So hopefully nearly all of you will agree that the eleventh man should give up his life in order that the other 10 might live. But that is not the question I am asking you. I'm asking whether you would in fact make that sacrifice if you were the eleventh man—if you really did have to decide whether you or they would die. And you knew the king meant business because he did this every year and sometimes killed the 10 people and other times the eleventh depending wholly upon what the eleventh had decided.

Now I am about to ask you for a show of hands, but of course I realize that few of you know yourselves so well that you can be certain of the correctness of your answer—especially if your answer is yes. So I will simply ask you to hold up your hand and answer yes if you are any more than 50% certain that you would make that sacrifice. Understand?

All right, all yes answers, please raise your hands. Let me see, that must be about a third of you. That's more than I would have guessed.

Now let me ask only those who are reasonably certain—say 95% certain—that they would make the sacrifice to please raise their hands.

Yes. That's more like what I expected. That's at most a tenth of you. I have a feeling that most of that tenth of you are kidding yourselves, but perhaps human beings aren't as selfish as I have always thought.

Now just two more quick questions. Same situation except that the king says he will let his 10 hostages go free if you will go to prison for 20 years, otherwise he kills them. That's an easier question to be sure of your answer about than the previous one, so this time answer yes only if you are quite certain—95% or better. All right everybody hold up his hand if he is at least 95% sure he would go to prison for 20 years in order to save 10 people's lives.

Well that looks like about three-quarters of you. Again I think you have overly high opinions of yourselves, or maybe some of you are too embarrassed to tell the truth, but I sincerely hope you are correct in your self-assessments.

Just one question more now. The king says he will let his people go if you will agree to give him all the money you have and all the money you will make in the future, except of course enough for you to feed and house yourself and take care of all the absolute necessities. In other words he's asking you to be poor, but not so poor that it impairs your health in any way. Again I'm asking for at least 95% certainty. All in that category please hold up your hands.

Well that's nearly every one of you! I'm very pleased; I hope you mean it. Perhaps in fact you do this time. After all, since you have the power to decide whether 10 people die or whether you give up your money, if you made the other decision you would be killing 10 people in order to make money for yourself, and surely that is murder.

I see some head-shaking—it looks as though a few of you disagree. The king has said, kill these 10 people or I'll take your money. If you kill them, that is

murder.

Look at it another way. If you are poor and kill 10 people in order to steal their money, that is surely murder. But morally speaking, that situation is exactly the same as this one. In both situations if the people die, you will be rich; if they live, you will be poor, and it is within your power to decide which it is to be. In either situation if you decide that they should die in order that you can be rich, you have put your happiness, or not actually even that, you have put material riches for yourself above 10 people's lives. That is the moral error you have made and it is exactly the same for both cases. One is as bad as the other and if one is murder so is the other.

Anyway, those are all the questions I wanted to ask you. I didn't mean to spend as much time on them as I did, but at least from my point of view it was well worth the time. Thanks for your indulgence, and also for your soul-searching—I guess those weren't easy questions to answer if you answered them honestly. Just be happy it was a make-believe situation and none of you is likely ever to really be forced to make any of those rather unpleasant decisions.

And now I'll get on to what is supposed to be my topic: world hunger.

In 1650 the population of the world was 500 million (500M). Within the next 50 years an absolute minimum of 500M people will starve to death. The UN reports that around 10M people starve to death every year and the problem is only going to get worse as the population increases.

Perhaps that figure of 500M is too large for you to grasp in abstract terms. Let me translate it into something more concrete: if those 500M people were all to join hands, then figuring at about 1,000 people per mile, they would form a line long enough to stretch to the moon and back—with enough left over to reach across the United States 6 times. Or if you prefer keeping things more down to earth, they would reach 20 times around the world.

The US Army's M-16 machine-gun fires 700 rounds per minute, or about 12 rounds per second. If you drove a car past the line of people at a little over 40 miles per hour, you would pass 700 people every minute. If you used poisoned bullets or some such deadly concoction, you might be able to kill 1 person with every shot as you drove past. If you kept your finger on the trigger for 10 hours a day, 7 days a week, killing 1 person with every shot, it would take you 3 years and 4 months to kill them all.

It is a rather gruesome picture, and yet all these people—and probably many more—are absolutely doomed to die in the next 25 to 50 years. And it won't be the quick, easy death of a bullet, but the slow, pitiful, wasting death of starvation.

There is one bright spot in all this, however—the legions of the doomed will not really reach quite 20 times around the world. Perhaps they'll really only reach 12 or 15 times around, for most of them are children and their arms are short.

Opposed to these ravaged peoples of the world are the gluttons of America. You yourselves are good examples. As future graduates of a good college, it is surely within the grasp of most of you to be making a salary, after taxes, of \$50,000 or more within a few years. How much money is that? Well, you could easily take care of all the true necessities of life for \$20,000, thus leaving you \$30,000 for the luxuries. In America, anyone can stay healthy spending five dollars a day for food. It is not even hard to do. If one really skimps, he can stay alive and well for a dollar—for I have done it. If it can be done in America for a dollar a day, it can surely be done for that in the countries where people are starving. Thus your \$30,000 of luxury money could be providing 82 people with a dollar worth of food a day—people who otherwise might starve. Since presumably if your \$30,000 were donated to UNICEF, they would take care to pick out poorer than average people, I think it not unreasonable to state that \$30,000 per year over a period of 40 years is enough to keep healthy 10 people who would otherwise starve to death—plus a good many more who would otherwise be malnourished.

So you see, I lied to you a little while ago when I said none of you would ever have to make any of those three unpleasant decisions. You will never have to make the first or the second—the two hardest choices—but you are this moment confronted with the third: for the 10 who would otherwise starve are the 10 hostages, you are the eleventh man, and hunger is the king. Thus if you decide to go on with the life you were probably planning to lead, you will be letting 10 people die rather than give up your flat-screen television and your cocktail parties. And that is more than gluttony, it is murder.

Good evening.

Aaron again. I'd like to make a few remarks about the speech, but before I do I should admit something. The speech was not given by Walter Bradford Ellis. Instead, it was written by a too-little-known philosopher named Louis Pascal. He published it in the 1980s under the same subterfuge in the journal Inquiry and it was reprinted in Peter Singer's collection Applied Ethics. (I have modified it to bring the numbers up to date and shortened it a little to make it more blog-sized.) He justifies the subterfuge as necessary to get readers to more seriously engage in the thought experiment. I do think it would be wonderful to have this talk given in person, however. If you are interested in pursuing this, please let me know.

If you do want to help needy people, you can donate to [UNICEF](#) or [Oxfam](#).

Judgment Day

December 10, 2007

[Original link](#)

People don't like being told that they're bad. And they especially don't like it if it's going to cost them a lot to be good. Finding other ways out is preferable, even if it requires some violence to the truth. Today we look at some ways people try to evade responsibility.

[Please read [the previous post](#) before continuing.]

A large number of people insist that “things aren't proven” or “aid doesn't work”. In his 1996 book *Living High and Letting Die* Peter Unger reports a study where he found that, including in administrative expenses and other overhead, \$200 could feed a malnourished child through the highest-risk childhood years. UNICEF [just recently released a new report](#) finding that, for the first time, the number of children dying before 5 has fallen, thanks to their intervention. And Oxfam, to take just one example, through its development projects in Cambodia [has helped over 35,000 people](#) come to support themselves. [Doctors Without Borders reports](#) that they treated 10 million people last year, treating 26,000 people from cholera, for example, and treating 63,000 children for malnutrition. Even the most vocal critics of aid, like William Easterly, who has written many books and op-eds attacking government aid programs as unhelpful, has to concede that private projects like Oxfam and UNICEF are successful and positive. Nobody, of course, provides any real argument against these things. They just say it's “too unclear”.

If that's the real issue, then [donate to an organization like Poverty Action Lab](#) at MIT. PAL does controlled randomized trials of the success of aid interventions. Your money won't go directly to help people, but it will help to test other people's aid interventions and improve their effectiveness. [A recent report](#) [PDF] finds that mass deworming programs dropped infections by 23 points and increased school participation by 25% (thanks, in part, to spillover effects), apparently caused children to grow taller and healthier, and cost only \$5 for each disability-adjusted year of life saved.

[Barry Kelly insists](#) that he has no duty to help others and thus is not culpable for their suffering. Of course, this is an irrelevance. Nobody is trying to put him on trial — just arguing he should do more to help.

But Barry goes one step further: he says that he should not help because giving his money to starving people would lead to “lack of incentive to compete, lack of investment base for risky & experimental ventures, and congealing layers of bureaucracy feeding on income redistribution.” Taking this at face value for a moment, it is not clear to me why saving people from starvation would cause

the first two — wouldn't there be a huge incentive to compete for saving lives and trying new experimental techniques in doing so? Perhaps Barry means that the first-world might have less competition in a field like, say, luxury watches. I don't see this as a tragedy. It amazes me that someone would admit that they prefer to have millions of people starve to death than to have a complicated bureaucracy.

In response, [Barry explains](#) that "there needs to be a cost-benefit analysis". He does not explain what he wants to analyze. Should we make a little chart with the benefits of competition in the luxury watch market on one side and the benefits of saving people from starvation on the other?

He also argues that we should do nothing about starvation because many people die in car accidents. I am not sure how this is relevant, but I deplore the deaths of people in car accidents and personally do not drive because of it.

[Sohail provides](#) the amazing argument that one shouldn't donate to UNICEF because "They have a business model that revolves around needy people. To keep the model going, you need needy people." It is not clear how this principle is supposed to work. Are the people at UNICEF supposed to be quietly sabotaging their efforts in order to preserve their jobs? Since non-profit employees generally take large salary cuts and do unusually-onerous work, this seems wildly unlikely. If they wanted a safe job they would surely join the for-profit sector. Sohail provides no evidence for this amazing claim.

[MC argues](#) that people will starve since he no longer purchases their products. But certainly fewer people will starve if he spends his money directly on keeping people from starving as opposed to having people not starve incidentally because he is purchasing TVs from them. Is he claiming that the people not starving right now somehow have a special right not to starve? It's hard to see why that would be the case.

[That Hypothetical says](#) that "Development economics is a complex subject." I'm not sure how this is relevant. Perhaps in the ancient society the King has a lot of scholars working for him making the issue of how to decide which person to choose into some complex subject. That doesn't change the moral issues.

[Mike Bruce says](#) that if we all spent our disposable income on helping starving people, we might face economic collapse. This seems absurd but also certainly isn't a question anyone is facing. Even if all the readers of this blog spent all their disposable income on preventing starvation, that would be inconsequential in economic terms.

There are actual arguments against the issues raised in the last post. These are not them.

Bubble City: Chapter 11

December 14, 2007

[Original link](#)

Jason was a man on the run: Google, with their paws in every phone and PC from here to China, was looking for him. Visiting his friends was out of the question; Google surely had all of them under surveillance. And calling or emailing them was dangerous too. You never knew when they had a Google-powered phone or forwarded their email to a Gmail account (which lots of people did now just for spam filtering). But what if he didn't share anything private? He could at least send a message through Tor telling his friends what had happened.

The library was closing soon, so he hurriedly composed an email for Sarah:

Dear Sarah,

I know what I'm going to say will make you think I've gone even farther off the deep-end than I already have, but it's my best shot. I found a backdoor in a popular algorithm and now Google is out to get me. I have to hide out for the moment, but so far I'm OK. Please make sure my friends and folks at the office don't get too worried about me.

I can't check my email without giving myself away, so if you want to write back, purchase a classified ad in the *New York Times* — use the word "Sarton".

Missing you,

Jason

There, that ought to be at least a start. This way at least Sarah would know what was up and he'd have a safe channel for hearing back from Sarah. Never any harm in having another channel for information, right?

Jason bought himself a pillow and spent the night sleeping with some homeless people in a little cranny near the library that they claimed each night. They had turned the unused nook into their own little community, gabbing and singing and dancing until late, before curling up in a dark place in a sleeping bag that looked like it had been left out for several decades and turning in for the night. One by one, each of them disappeared to curl up and Jason joined them. By the time the sun and streetsweepers and cars awoke him the next morning, they were all gone, as if their little homeless community had never happened in the first place.

Jason looked out over the world just waking up — cars driving to work before the rush hour traffic hit, a couple people scurrying by, shops getting ready to open their doors — and felt like the world was full of possibility. He stretched out and began walking into its gloriously bright morning before he realized it wasn't.

Trent knew that staying on top of the business world meant staying on top of what was happening. So he grabbed an intern and headed to The Butler and the Chef, a South Park restaurant for one of his espionage breakfasts. Corporate executives from all over town came here to have lunch and do deals and Trent made sure he stayed on top of what they were doing by taking regular chances to come here and eavesdrop on their conversations.

Of course, he knew that others were eavesdropping on his own, which is why he brought along the intern: disinformation. “So, uh, what secret projects are you working on, Trent?” said the intern in a stage voice. “I’m glad you asked,” Trent replied. “Things at Newsflip have never been more exciting. In fact, *don’t tell anyone this*, but we’re in the middle of acquisition talks.”

“Really?” the intern said, looking a bit worried. “I hadn’t heard that — with who?” “With whom,” Trent corrected. “With whom?” “Well, I’m not at liberty to say. But let’s just say it rhymes with boo-gull.” “Wow,” said the intern, genuinely worried now. “For how much?” “Oh come on,” Trent said laughing, “you know I can’t disclose that.” “Oh, but just a hint?” “Well, if you insist... It’s somewhere between \$200 million and \$201 million. A-ha-ha-ha.” The intern, knowing his options wouldn’t vest unless he managed to keep his job for another six months, looked down at his soup.

Wayne was having trouble sleeping. He showed up at his office looking even more disheveled than usual. Even his assistant, who had taken to spending the days chatting with friends on the phone and watching YouTube videos, noticed something was up. “Something wrong, sir?” she asked. Wayne mumbled and shuffled into his office.

It was this damn issue of the kid. Wayne knew, rationally, that it was all for the best, but in his heart it just felt wrong to him. He felt like he ought to use his influence to do something. But what could he do? Why, he’d talk about it on his show, of course — Google money be damned. He set up the video camera and began thinking about what he was going to say.

“I know I’ve been a supporter of Google in the past,” he’d started. “But I think they’ve finally crossed the line.”

He looked at himself in the video preview. His shirt was askew and his hair in wild clumps standing up from his head. Everything looked badly wrinkled.

“I’ve recently received information that they are chasing and persecuting a young kid just beca—”

He looked into his own eyes on the monitor. And then he shut off the camera. Nobody would believe him. He didn’t have any evidence. And he certainly didn’t look credible. And then what? Google would go after him — not only take away the nice office and the pretty assistant, but drag his name through the mud. And God knows what they’d do to his search results. Wayne shuddered to think of it.

No, he needed to work this from the inside. Get more information at the very least. He put in a call to Samuel.

Sarah read over the email. Then she paused and read it again. And then she freaked out.

“Hey, Samuel,” Wayne said. “Wayne, good to hear from you, what’s up?” “Oh, I was just calling to talk about asking if I could come see some Google people I wanted to talk to.” “Umm,” Samuel said. “What do you mean?” “Well, you know that story you were telling me the other night, you know the story about the kid?” “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Wayne.” “Come on, the other night, at the bar, when you were telling me about the kid you wanted to take o—” “Wayne, don’t be silly — I was just kidding around about that stuff.” Samuel laughed. “Heh, you took me seriously? Come on. You really think a company like this would do stuff like that. Give me a break! Anyway, if you want the real story you should just come by the offices sometime.” “Oh. Uh, okay. How about today?” “Oh, well, umm, I guess that works. What time?” “Let’s say around 3?” “Sure, come on by.” “Great, see you then.” “Great, bye.” “Bye.”

Jason was upset. He was letting his emotional mind get the best of him — hanging out with homeless people on the street and at the library, writing letters to Sarah. He needed to think rationally. He needed coffee.

He spent some of his little remaining cash on a large cup of coffee and stole a newspaper from behind a register so he could diagram his situation on it.

Here's how it is: Google was using NNA to control the news. He'd found out about this. Google had found out about him. Google didn't want people to know, so they were trying to stop him. He was trying to stop Google.

The solution was obvious: he just needed to use the backdoor to tell everyone about what he'd discovered and how Google had been chasing him. Proving it would be hard but the fact that he could control the news to force his story to the top would probably be proof enough. Google would try to shut things down, of course, but that would only draw more attention. There's nothing Internet geeks hate more than having stuff shut down.

So he just needed to use Tor to launch another exploit on the backdoor. It'd probably require a few tries to get right and he'd have to be very careful about covering his tracks and moving around, but it seemed doable.

He was just about to fold up the newspaper when he spotted the classifieds. He figured he might as well check for a note from Sarah. He scrolled thru them, looking for the word Sarton. Then he found it:

Dear Sarton, use your powers and say goodbye to the girl. Love, G.

Shit, he thought.

Back at the office, Trent ran down his list of priorities. Being the boss meant there was just too much to do and far too little time to do it, so Trent had developed a system. Actually, he hadn't really developed a system, he'd bought one that had come highly recommended. And he didn't practice it so much as give it to his assistant and order her to do it.

She'd come back and insisted that she couldn't actually do it all by herself, that there were things like RAM dumps and reviews that only he could really practice. "Oh, alright," he said, "I'll do the reviews. How do I do that?" And she'd explained that once a week he needed to blah blah blah, anyway, he just knew it was important to go over his priorities and see how well he was doing at all of them.

"Spreadsheets" — he'd gotten those all off. "Boost morale" — his meetings had almost certainly done that. "Welcome new guy" — oh yeah, where was the new guy. He recalled him sitting over... hmm, his seat was empty. He headed over, deciding to take a hands-on approach. "Hey, anyone seen the new guy?" "Nah, he's been working odd hours the past few days." "Hmm, well I guess I did say he could work from home. Hey, what's that your working on?" "Oh, uh, nothing." "No, come on, bring that window back, I want to see it." "Umm, uh, yeah, here it is." "Wow, this looks great — I just have a few comments. This whole sidebar needs to be purple and instead of a list of news stories this

should show the blog posts with the number of comments. And each one should have a little picture — pictures are key; they draw attention.” “Um, right — yeah, I guess so.” “Glad we’re on the same page — I’ll see you later.”

Trent headed back to his desk and called over his assistant. “Sandy,” he said. “Tell Jane to meet me in my meditation chamber.” “Yes, sir,” she said, and Trent watched as she rushed back towards her desk. He grabbed the bag under his desk and headed to the meditation chamber. God, he loved running a company.

Wayne got in his car and headed down the long Bay Area highways toward Mountain View. He passed offices and billboards, trees and curving streets, HOV lanes and overpasses. But eventually he ended up in what could have been its own small city, a maze of office buildings and little poorly-signed streets. At the center of it all was the famed Building 42 complex, with its volleyball courts and dinosaur skeletons and huge cafeterias, and sexy colorful architecture. But radiating out from that were increasingly drab gray buildings separated by large streets and parking lots where they kept all the real employees, the people who stayed up into 3 in the morning to make sure that the Java code that drew the sidebars of help pages worked properly.

As Google had built more and more projects, they needed an increasing number of these grunt-work programmers. They had started interviewing just about everyone CS graduate, in the hopes of filtering out the good ones and luring them here to their artificial wonderland in Mountain View.

Wayne headed for the lobby.

Next year: [Chapter 12](#)

No Superpowers

December 17, 2007

[Original link](#)

I've been somewhat-obsessively following [the recent writers' strike in Hollywood](#). It's got a lot of attraction for me. First, it's a big, bold, public labor battle — the kind you don't see much anymore. And second, it's filled with people I know. (Yes, I'm the dork who actually tries remember the names of the authors of the TV shows I watch.)

For those who haven't been following, the story is something like this: [Amazingly](#), Hollywood doesn't consist of actors on soundstages simply saying the brilliant lines that come to them in the moment. Instead, people called "writers" slave away in darkness to craft plots and dialogue which are then turned into scripts for the rest of the people in Hollywood to follow.

Despite their importance, writers haven't been given much due in Hollywood. They work as employees for studios who pay them money in exchange for the copyrights to their scripts. Meanwhile, the studios then turn the scripts into TV shows and movies that go on to run for years, in reruns and syndication and on home video and DVDs and now on the Internet thru streaming and download.

Writers have banded together to form a union, called the Writers' Guild of America, to make sure that, just like authors of songs or books, they get paid when the things they write become a success. These payments are called "residuals" and writers get them when their show reruns or is sold on DVD. The studios have a contract with the guild, and thus with all writers, specifying the minimum amounts they have to pay whenever something like that happens. The guild then audits the studios on behalf of the writers, makes sure they pay their fair share, and then determines which writers deserve the money and mails it out.

Studios are still upset about having to pay writers for their work, wishing they could keep all the profits for themselves. Writers are still upset about not having negotiated a better rate for home video residuals. Right now, when you buy a TV show on DVD, the writers get 0.3% of the price — something like six cents, usually. The studios want to pay them the same pitiful amount for online downloads and pay them nothing at all for online streaming. The writers, not surprisingly, would like to get paid a more fair amount.

So when the contract between the studios and the guild expired weeks ago, the two sides couldn't agree on a replacement. The studios basically refused to seriously negotiate and that refusal has been going on (in various forms) ever since. So the writers went on strike: they're no longer allowed to write a single word for a studio until the contract issues get resolved.

Instead, writers have been out picketing studio gates, making [clever videos online](#), and trying to bring the studios to the table. As a result, much of television has gone off the air, because there are no new scripts to film. *The Daily Show* and other nightly comedy shows disappeared immediately, writer-run shows like *The Office* soon after that, and most of the rest are disappearing as we speak. The studios are continuing to refuse to negotiate.

Along the way I've learned a great deal about the arcanities of labor law (many of which, like *Taft-Hartley*, are everyday words in Hollywood), the oddities of Hollywood jargon (the Alphabet=ABC, hyphenates=writer-producers, etc.), and read many gripping stories about what it's like to be [fighting for your livelihood](#). (*Note to future selves*: Don't get [in a written debate](#) with people who write for a living.)

But perhaps the most touching thing I heard came from J.J. Abrams, the creator of *Alias* and *Lost*, and his partner Damon Lindelof. Both are writers and both are bound by the "pencils down" rule of the strike, even though they're in the middle of filming the new *Star Trek* film, presently Paramount's biggest movie. [John August describes the scene](#):

Neither J.J. nor Damon are writers on the movie. But they are writers, and WGA members. During a WGA strike, you're not allowed to write on movies or television shows, period. So they can't change a word of the script, nor can anyone else. The script they had at 11:59 p.m. November 5th [when the strike started] is the script they have to shoot.

To a screenwriter, that might seem kind of awesome. For once, the director can't change things. But when it's your own movie, it's maddening. J.J. was describing a scene he was shooting the day before. Midway through it, he got a great idea for a new line. Which he couldn't write. Couldn't shoot. Couldn't be in his movie.

Damon described it like having one of your superpowers taken away.

I am not the director of a big Hollywood movie, nor am I striking for my livelihood, or even doing much of anything, but I have to admit, that's how I've been feeling lately. Now that I'm [getting over being very sick](#), I find that I don't feel terribly bad anymore, I just feel kind of tired. All the time.

So I go to finish up a new piece of software I've been working on (I've got dozens, just sitting here, waiting for the finishing touches), and I just can't. I can't type. I feel like someone who's used to having lightning bolts fly out of their hands but now all I get are little sparks. Ssszzt. Szzzt. Bzzt. I've got nothing.

And so I'm stuck here in my room, lots of stuff I want to do, but nothing comes out. It's like having your superpowers taken away. Damon, I really know what you mean.

The Theory of The Game

December 24, 2007

[Original link](#)

I have to admit, there's a part of me that gets no small enjoyment out of the fact that the first piece I wrote for a paying publication is nominally a review of a book on pick-up artists that actually ends up spending most of its time on glosses the history of American dating, discussions of foundational experiments in control of the emotions, the history of behaviorism in psychology, and the computer functionalist philosophy of mind. In other words, the typical article for *Other*.

I originally planned to post the review here to my blog, but instead I bumped into Annalee Newitz while I was writing it, she expressed interest in it so I sent her the draft I had and next thing I knew it was getting included in the next issue of the magazine. Reading back over it, I'm not sure I have a more to say in its favor other than it's definitely the weirdest review of *The Game* that will likely ever be published.

A couple paragraphs got removed in the print version I have and the editors added subheads to break up the flow, but here's the original piece as I sent it to them:

[The Theory of The Game](#)

For a couple of weeks, it seemed like all my friends were reading a thick black book with a leather cover and gold-edged pages. "Is that The Bible?" I finally asked them. "It might as well be," said one. "It's a guide to picking up girls," another explained. I scrunched my face. "Oh, no no no," the smartest one there said. "Think of it as an ethnography of a community of pick-up artists." ([More...](#))

If you like this kind of thing, consider picking up [a copy of *Other* magazine](#), available in indie bookstores across San Francisco and thru the web site.

(*Explanation in advance:* I know fans of computer functionalism (what a weblog to have such readers!) are going to attack me for my oversimplification of their views. Well, if you want, I'm happy to attack your views at length and the conclusion comes out basically the same. So bring it on.)

Starting Out in the Morning

December 28, 2007

[Original link](#)

“That’s how you discover a person’s true nature,” someone in *Starting Out in the Evening* thinks: “by the way she wakes up in the morning.”

For a long time, I have woken up in the morning with nothing. Recently, because I have been sick. Before that, because I was split up among many jobs. Before that, because I nominally had a real job. I miss the days when I woke up with purpose, when I lived to toil at some grand accomplishment. The feeling that all of life is in the service of some larger goal. It’s fantastic.

I have been finally getting over my too-long illness, nursing myself back to strength by reading. When I was a kid, I used to take Saturdays to read, really read, devouring five or six books in one sitting. I haven’t read like that in years, but now I’m doing it again — checking out stacks of books from the library and setting upon them one by one. It’s fantastic.

And I don’t just breeze thru the pages, I roll around in bed and pace the floor and sit in the bath fighting my brain around their words, knowing that there’s some way it all makes sense, some way it can fit together, if only I can summon the strength to grab it. I wake up with thoughts of books in my heads, questions, anecdotes, stories. It’s fantastic.

I feel like the books are bringing me back — back not only to health, but to the world of thought and action, the world of accomplishment, the world of doing something grand with oneself. It’s fantastic.

2007 Review of Projects

January 2, 2008

[Original link](#)

[In August](#) I noted that I had taken on an enormous number of projects and did not suspect they would all succeed. (It has since been pointed out to me that one of the secrets of successful people is that they try a lot of projects and then you only see the successes. So perhaps this is not as bad a strategy as I initially thought.) Now that the year has come to a close, I thought I would review the projects I mentioned there and see how they were doing.

[Open Library](#): Moderate success. Open Library has a team of six or so people working on it. It's not progressing as quickly as I would like, but it is progressing. The demo site has launched and there are no big hurdles in our path. Personally, I've learned an enormous amount about managing projects.

Memoir: Failed. At the end of last year, I planned to start this year to take a week to write a memoir of life at Reddit. The writing proceeded on schedule but towards the middle of the week I fell terribly ill, realized I would not be happy with the resulting book, and reluctantly abandoned it. Why did it fail? There were lots of mid-level reasons (I'm not that interesting a subject, my memory of the period was poor, I was doing it with impure motives) but the fundamental one was that I just did not honestly believe a memoir of my time at Reddit was a book that was worth reading. I only lost a couple days, so this was not a devastating failure.

Psychology book: On hold. After the Reddit book, I begun researching and outlining a book about the highlights of psychology. I am still interested in this book and think about it a fair amount, but I put the project on hold after I started work on Open Library.

Another book: Unknown. In the other post I said I was working on three books. I can't remember what the third one is now. I think about different books a lot but I don't think I've pursued any others very seriously.

Consult on Berkeley [Big Ideas](#): Failed. I had no big ideas for helping this project and I did not follow through on finding any. I had made no strong commitments, so I do not consider this a serious failure.

[JobBook](#): Intermediate. An initial site is launched but I have not spent a lot of time on it nor is it progressing rapidly. Other people are pursuing it, though, so I feel less pressure.

[Science That Matters](#): Intermediate. This site has launched and a fair number of posts have been written, but it hasn't been updated in a while and nobody

else has really joined seriously. But the site hasn't been officially abandoned, so it's not a total failure.

Jottit: Moderate success. The site was finished and launched and got incredibly positive reviews but hasn't really caught fire with traffic yet. Perhaps this is because it's a great product that no one wants to use or perhaps we simply haven't figured out how to market it yet. (If you want to try to market it, contact me@aaronsw.com.)

Statful: Intermediate. This was a project I mentored for Summer of Code to allow for better web stats visualization. I was a fairly bad mentor, in retrospect. A fair amount of the coding got done for this project but I did not have a clear design in place ahead of time so the software is not especially usable. If any readers want to help work on the design for a free software web stats analyzer (you know, something that will tell you who's visiting your site) please email me@aaronsw.com. I still think the project is finishable but it certainly has languished for a while.

Seddit: Failure. This was the other Summer of Code project. The code got written but not tested or launched and has since languished. The schedule budgeted time for launching the project but apparently not enough. I think the lesson here is that in such projects launching should be done first and features added later, so that whatever results is usable. Also, I should be a better mentor.

Gmail clone: Failure. I got a couple of people started working on this project but I didn't follow through because I felt too overloaded. However, people have since pointed me to [Posterity](#) and [Sup](#). Again, the consequences weren't too bad. I wasted some people's time, but not an enormous amount.

Book reader: Intermediate. I finished 70% of this but never launched it. Just never got around to it. The same was true of a number of other web projects.

Journalism: Success. I had two articles published for money and a third is on its way to the editor.

Paper: Intermediate. Plagued by difficulties, the paper has been teetering on the brink of failure for another year. I think a big problem was not having a partner who had enough time to push me about it more.

Novel: Intermediate. I had to stop working on the novel when I got sick but I mostly did it on time when I was OK and a shocking number of people seemed to actually read it. I will try to finish it early this year.

All in all, I think it was a fairly mixed year project-wise. A couple minor failures, a couple minor successes, and a couple big projects where time will tell. In truth, it may be too soon to evaluate this year. If Open Library becomes a big success, this year will have been well worthwhile. Otherwise, its legacy will be more mixed.

2007 Review of Books

January 5, 2008

[Original link](#)

Previously: [2006](#)

This year I only read 70 books, down from over 120 last year. I guess that's not too bad considering this was the Year of Other People — I still beat my general goal of 52. Once again, here are the books that struck me as completely worth reading. This year, though, I've intermixed them with the other books I read:

- Fight Club, Palahniuk
- The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager
- The Crying of Lot 49
- Perfectly Reasonable Deviations from the Beaten Track, Feynman

George Orwell, *[Down and Out in Paris and London](#)* The original *Nickel and Dimed*, Orwell lives as a plonguer and a tramp in Paris and London respectively. The descriptions of such poor conditions are typically riveting and a great deal of fascinating reflection is included throughout.

- When Prophecy Fails, Festinger et al
- Classical Experiments in Psychology, Mook
- Rhetorical Occasions, Berube ([reviewed previously](#))
- Incompleteness, Goldstein ([reviewed previously](#))
- Our Underachieving Colleges, Bok ([reviewed previously](#))
- Way Out There In The Blue, FitzGerald ([reviewed previously](#))
- No One Makes You Shop at Wal-Mart, Slee ([reviewed previously](#))
- The Mystery of Consciousness, Searle ([commented on previously](#))
- Play It As it Lays, Didion
- The Blind Side, Lewis

Hugh Laurie, *The Gun Seller* Hugh Laurie, the British actor (Americans know him as Gregory House, M.D.), takes his first crack at writing in this comic novel. (The novel was originally sent to publishers under a pseudonym to avoid celebrity favoritism, but naturally sales forced him to publish it under his real name.) The plot is a fairly standard spy-guns thriller, although very well executed, but the book's brilliance is the way it adeptly undermines its own clichéd language, to hilarious effect. In that way it's a lot like the British TV comedy *People Like Us* (itself well worth seeing). A good, fun read.

- Founders at Work, Livingston

John Searle, *Mind, Language, and Society* This book combines, in abbreviated form, the arguments in all of Searle's work up to the time of its publication (which is basically everything except *Rationality in Action*). In doing so, it basically has all the hallmarks of Searle's work, only more so: a clear exposition of complex philosophical ideas that demonstrates how to think better, useful tools to help you understand your world better, and genuine philosophical solutions that let you resolve confusions you may have had before. And all of it is done with Searle's customary wit and style — almost an anti-style, like that of D. J. Bernstein, in which he simply explains things clearly and concisely. A model of public philosophy.

- Freedom and Neurobiology, Searle
- The Rediscovery of the Mind, Searle
- Darkly Dreaming Dexter, Lindsay
- Mind, Searle
- Applied Ethics, Singer (ed.)
- The Plato Cult, Stove
- Responsibility and Control, Fischer and Ravizza
- The Game, Neil Strauss ([previously reviewed](#))
- My Way, Fischer
- The Social Misconstruction of Reality, Hamilton
- Adam's Fallacy
- Intentionality, Searle
- Writing in America

- Intuition
- Who Rules America?
- Knowledge and Wonder
- Things You Should Know About Captain Rick
- Send In The Idiots
- Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas, Thompson
- The Occupation

David Lodge, *Small World* A strong, fun novel, packed with interesting ideas and characters and gimmicks, telling the story of people I love to read about: jetsetting academics. I'm normally not one for novels, but I have to admit it: Lodge makes it work. My only caveat is that this is part of a trilogy and one should probably read the first book, *Changing Places*, first, since later books refer back.

- Searle, The Construction of Social Reality
- Dawkins, The Selfish Gene
- Hacking, The Social Construction of What?
- Dawkins, The Extended Phenotype
- Kitchner, Vaulting Ambition
- Goodman, Growing Up Absurd
- Gitlin, Inside Prime Time
- Layard, Happiness
- Thompson, Calculus Made Easy
- July, No One Belongs Here More Than You
- Searle, Rationality in Action
- Virginia Tufte, Syntax as Style
- Everything is Miscellaneous
- The United States Since 1980
- She's Such a Geek
- What We Wish We'd Known

- Winnie-the-Pooh
- How Doctors Think
- Gawande, Better
- Bukowski, Post Office

Adrian Tomine, *Shortcomings* Short, meaningful, and elegant. More than you could reasonably expect from such a book.

- Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate
- The New Ruthless Economy
- Luria, Cognitive Development: Its Social and Cultural Foundations
- Wall Street Noir
- Bloodletting and Miraculous Cures

Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals* Including this is not quite right, because I cannot actually recommend this book without reservation. Alinsky is an anecdotalist, not a writer, and the first half of the book drags as he forces himself to come up with some general platitudes and lecture the youth of today. The second half, however, is incredibly fun and gives you an excitement and energy about accomplishing things with power politics that you just can't get anywhere else.

Sadly, there aren't any good alternatives I can recommend. Alinsky's biography, *Let Them Call Me Rebel* by Sanford Horwitt, is quite good but has a few serious failings. First, it drags a great deal in the middle between the beginning of Alinsky's career, in which he worked for Al Capone as research for his University of Chicago sociology dissertation, and the end, when he organized the black neighborhoods of Chicago and Rochester to fight the white establishment. During these middle years, Alinsky didn't do much except watch three wives get sick and die and the book spends several hundred pages watching it happen. (Also, frustratingly, the book seems to be exhausted by the time it gets to the interesting end part and covers it in less detail than one would like.) Furthermore, the biographer apparently has come to severely disapprove of his subject, especially his habit of exaggerating or inventing stories about himself, that his disapproving tone takes all the fun out of the action.

Another possible alternative is Michael Gecan's *Going Public*. Gecan is one of the top people in the Industrial Areas Foundation, the foundation Alinsky started and ran for most his life. *Going Public* is his attempt to go back to writing (apparently his college career) and tell the stories of the battles he fought as an IAF organizer. Gecan has much more of a flair for

writing than Alinsky, but never got the chance to develop his editing skill, and the result is an uneven, sometimes overwritten, book. Also, Gecan's IAF is much more watered down than Alinsky's ever was and some of his tactics just seem downright silly.

There's also Alinsky's first book, *Reveille for Radicals*, but this can be dismissed as coming out during the early part of career, before some of the most fun stuff. So, because of the extreme importance it had on this year and because I have no serious alternatives, I have to recommend *Rules for Radicals*, along with everyone else.

- Culture War?

Brian Morton, *Starting Out in the Evening* I read this entire novel in one sitting and it touched me in a profound way. It asks what it means to dedicate your life to writing, by looking at four people who come together, each of which has taken a different position in the New York intellectual scene. It's also recently out at a film, which is a very bizarre experience to watch, because the book takes place almost entirely in the characters' heads while the film will have none of that and only shows the brute actions. I'm not sure other people will have the same experience I did, but as a writer I found this book very powerful. By the same token, I'm looking forward to this year's *All the Sad Young Literary Men* (and gleefully downing the new issue of *n+1*).

- Richistan
- Let Them Call Me Rebel
- Quantum Theory: A Very Short Introduction

Introducing theinfo.org

January 15, 2008

[Original link](#)

A lot of the work I've been doing on Open Library for the past few months has to do with handling large quantities of data. Either I'm writing crawlers to download them from various public web sites, or I'm meeting with librarians to persuade them to give me copies, or I'm evaluating algorithms for processing them, or building tools for viewing it all.

And while I've been doing this for information about books, I've noticed my friends doing similar things in other fields. Reporters try to get large data sets to write stories. Programmers get large data sets to add features to their sites. Friends are trying to make available data about the inner workings of the government.

And while each community has ways of talking to each other — reporters talking to other reporters, RDF people talking to other RDF people, library hackers talking to other library hackers — there's no community that cuts across these topical lines. And that's too bad, because there's a lot there we could share, from tips on how not to get caught when crawling to tools to make it easier to build big charts and maps.

So that's why I've started a new community site for people who work with large data sets. It's called theinfo.org and I'd really appreciate it if you joined the mailing lists and spread the word.

<http://theinfo.org/>

How Dumb is Daniel Dennett?

January 19, 2008

[Original link](#)

It continually amazes me how many otherwise-intelligent people I know claim to be fans of Daniel Dennett, a bitter hack philosopher who spends his days sucking up to scientists and writing personal attacks on other philosophers. As Daniel Davies [put it](#), “I used to be a rabid Dennettite [until] I started reading more widely in the subject, and found that Dennett had been pretty (no, make that very) badly behaved [...] And that’s when the hate developed.”

At some point it feels unfair to keep picking on the guy, but I came across a gem that, even after looking at it for months, still manages to amaze me. Here, in full, is Daniel Dennett’s argument determinism is compatible with free will.

(For context, this comes after pages discussing Conway’s game of life, in which some deterministic animated squiggles don’t bounce into (“avoid”) other animated squiggles.)

It logically follows that:

1. In some deterministic worlds there are avoiders avoiding harms.
2. Therefore, in some deterministic worlds some things are avoided.
3. Whatever is avoided is avoidable, or evitable.
4. Therefore, in some deterministic worlds not everything is inevitable.
5. Therefore, determinism does not imply inevitability.

(Gazzaniga and Steven, p. 65, summarizing Dennett’s *Freedom Evolves*, p. 56)

One just has to marvel at the sheer stupidity it takes to advance such an argument, much less base a 368-page book on it. I mean surely in the course of writing such a book you would come to notice that your core argument is based around a *pun*. (Shame also on Gazzaniga and Steven, who also base their argument on this absurd piece of “logic”.)

Yes, Daniel Dennett is literally arguing that because in some deterministic animations depict things being avoided, determinism does not imply inevitability. (It would seem an obvious corollary that Mickey Mouse has free will.)

Why do people still take this man seriously?

A Very Speculative Theory of Free Will

January 28, 2008

[Original link](#)

Attention conservation notice: I am well aware that this post will get me called all sorts of silly names and insults (Penrosian apparently the worst among them). For once, I am not going to respond. I just think the theory ought to be published and if you are not inclined to believe it, then feel free to ignore it.

The big mystery of the mind is reconciling two things: what we know about the physical structures of the brain and what we experience from day to day as conscious people. The first tells us that our brain is made up of a series of interconnected neurons which fire in response to certain inputs. The second tells us that people have subjective unified experiences and at least the appearance of free will. It seems hard to explain how the first can lead to the second, although they're obviously connected somehow.

So, for example, if we're looking at certain visual illusions, we can choose to see them one way or to see them another way. And obviously this choice has some impact on the rest of the brain, especially the part that processes vision. But nobody's been able to find the place in the brain from which such choices originate.

I don't know enough about the subject to vouch for it, but [this article](#) claims that neurons are small enough that we could see quantum effects in their high-level behavior:

The juncture between two neurons is called the synapse. Each of the perhaps 100 billion neurons in the brain is connected to about 1,000 other neurons. At the synapse, a firing neuron either passes a neurochemical signal to the next neuron, or it does not pass a signal, with the passing or not passing depending on the complex neurochemistry of the synapse. If, within a millisecond, a certain number of signals are passed on to a neuron, then that neuron will fire. Otherwise it will not fire. Thus what happens at the various synapses—signal passed on or not passed on—is the sole determinant of the firing pattern of the neurons in the brain. The synapses are the control points for our flow of thoughts.

The synaptic gap, the gap between one neuron and the next, is quite small, 3.5 nanometers, which is about 35 (hydrogen) atoms. The sizes of the adjacent parts of the synapse, where much of the neurochemistry goes on, are also small, on the order of 3,500 atoms wide. Now one of the peculiar effects of quantum mechanics is that if the volume where an atom might be located (the place where the wave function is non-zero) is initially small, it will spread out in time. One can use Heisenberg's uncertainty principle to show that a

calcium ion, for example, will spread out to the size of the synapses (not just the synaptic gap) in about .1 milliseconds (see 8 below). Neural processes in the brain occur on a time scale of a millisecond, ten times slower than the spread of a calcium ion over the whole synapse.

So here's the proposal: a series of entangled quantum particles at the synaptic level allow for coordinated firing patterns which occur in response to choices by our conscious free will. Just as my previous post reconciled free will with statistical randomness, this would seem to reconcile free will with the neuroanatomy.

It still seems incredible that there is some high-level coordinated process with its fingers in the quantum effects of our synapses. But we know something incredible is going on because we have subjective experience. So this doesn't seem like much of a stretch to me.

Election Slate: February 2008

February 4, 2008

[Original link](#)

Being a newly-minted California voter, I've been looking forward to my opportunity to exercise a little direct democracy tomorrow. (I'm not taking a position on whether direct democracy is a good idea, but surely if it's there one might as well take advantage of it.) I encourage you to vote as well; indeed, I encourage you to vote the same way I do:

Presidential Candidate for the Democratic Party: Barack Obama. Between Mike Gravel's inability to get more attention than a passing mention from Wikipedia and everybody else dropping out, the choice is apparently down to Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. Hillary is the kind of sellout DLC centrist who [cozies up to Rupert Murdoch](#); Barack Obama can hardly be worse. Still, [he's sold out too](#) and I vote for him under the illusion that he'll somehow revert to his community organizing, Iraq War-opposing, progressive old pre-sellout self sometime before becoming President. False hope springs eternal.

Proposition 91: No. So bad, even its supporters are asking you to vote against it.

Proposition 92: Yes. Community college is important and previous propositions have been screwing it over for years.

Proposition 93: Yes. Progressives seem to oppose term limits, on the grounds that they "shift[] more power to the governor and ensur[e] that the State Assembly and the State Senate will be filled with people who lack the experience and institutional history to fight the Sacramento lobbyists (who, of course, have no term limits)" ([SFBG](#)). I'm not so sure, but this seems like a fairly modest proposal which seems to strike a reasonable balance.

Propositions 94-97: No. The only people in favor of expanding the casinos while reducing their oversight seem to be their lobbyists.

Proposition A: Yes. Parks are nice.

Proposition B: Yes. Everyone seems to support this and if police officers want to work three more years, who am I to say no?

Proposition C: Yes. I know rationally this is an absurd proposal, but when you're there, in the privacy of the voting booth, looking at whether a geodesic dome should be built on Alcatraz Island, who's going to stop you from voting yes?

Very Good Introductions

February 22, 2008

[Original link](#)

Oxford University Press has a wonderful series they call [Very Short Introductions](#). The books are small, short, colorful paperbacks with titles like “The Brain”, “Political Philosophy” or “The Tudors”. For each one, the editors find an expert in the field, have them write a brief overview of all the relevant areas of study (thus the book on “Globalization” covers economics, politics, culture, environment, ideology, and the opposition movement) and edits them to be clear and concise.

The result is a very good series of books, and I’ve enjoyed them immensely, but it’s not quite what I want. For one thing, the shortness of the books (they’re usually about a hundred half-size pages) makes them unfulfilling. It’s impossible to get a real understanding of a big topic in fifty pages, especially when many of them are taken up summarizing related concerns. (Perhaps you could provide a nice overview of economic globalization in fifty pages, but covering economic, political, cultural, environmental, and ideological globalization in that space is absurd.)

And the other is that, however great the editors at OUP, it seems impossible that they would be able to commission the best exposition of every topic for one series. Many of the greatest writers are not going to accept a particular commission, do not approve of some piece of the series’ style, or perhaps want credit or attention for themselves rather than being just another book in a huge OUP series.

So that’s why I’d like us to put together our own series — not of very short introductions, but of very good ones. These are books which a) try to explain a whole subject with b) clarity and even joy while making c) no strong assumptions of prior knowledge and d) not dumbing the subject down. It’s an extremely rare combination — there are many books on subjects that are good but unreadable by the average person, while there’s a whole industry churning out pop sci pageturners that communicate little actual knowledge of a subject. But the rare book that actually achieves all four of these goals is a true gem, and ought to be promoted more widely.

Please post your suggestions in the comments and I’ll try to assemble a list of them next week. I’ll go first:

[*Law 101: Everything You Need to Know about the American Legal System*](#) by Jay M. Feinman

This delightful book goes over the key points of constitutional law, civil procedure, torts, contracts, property, criminal law, etc. with wit, style, and lots of great examples. Sit down not knowing anything about the subject and come away with a clear enough understanding of torts, contracts, and crimes to apply the ideas in your daily life.

OK, your turn.

The Visible Hand: A Summary

March 2, 2008

[Original link](#)

What follows is my summary of [The Visible Hand](#) by Alfred D. Chandler, Jr.

Part 1

It's difficult today to imagine what American companies were like before the 1840s. They were small concerns, owned and operated by the same person in one location, and focusing on a particular type of product (cotton, provisions, wheat, dry goods, hardware, drugs) and one piece of the distribution chain (retailing, wholesaling, importing, exporting). Their corporate structure (the partnership), accounting techniques (double-entry bookkeeping), and financial instruments (letters of credit) were essentially unchanged from those used by the Italians in the 1390s.

Bigger projects were pursued through personal relationships between small firms: family farms had their slaves grow crops, which they sold to the local merchant, who shipped it to his son or nephew in London, who sold it to the local merchants there, and thence to the customers. (At the same time, credit headed the other direction.) As time went on, the number of intermediaries only increased: factors and jobbers and brokers and dealers and commission agents. Coordination was handled through the market.

(The one exception was the Bank of the United States, which had branches in many locations and thus could coordinate on something of a national scale. But it was politically unpopular and both the First and Second banks were allowed to expire by Congress.)

There was incredible inefficiency, but it mattered little since the technology of the time did not allow for great speed or volume. Canal boats were still pulled by animals, for whom four miles an hour was an impressive speed, and most products (clothing, furniture, clocks, nails) were produced by hand in people's homes through the "putting-out" system. There were a handful of textile factories, but since they depended on water-power there was only room for a few of them.

Part 2

All this changed with the railroads, a technological improvement which allowed business to move their products vastly faster. Careful coordination was essential (one didn't want trains crashing into each other), market entry expensive

(constructing a railroad line cost a great deal of money), and network effects powerful (a railroad was much more valuable if it could move things all the way across the country).

As a result, the railroads built big enterprises, with professional managers to operate them. The businesses were the first to be structured along largely modern lines (the line-and-staff system): a board of directors appointed a professional manager as president, who oversaw a series of vice presidents supervising various company-wide topics (finance, traffic, legal) as well as a general manager. The general manager oversaw a number of divisions, each with departmental managers with profit and loss responsibility and a staff of their own. Each department sent statistics back to headquarters, allowing senior management to improve overall efficiency.

In addition to consolidating various different roles into a single organization, the railroads consolidated different organizations into a cartel with a few large players who coordinated pricing schemes and extracted the maximum each merchant was able to pay. The quintessential player in this era of empire-building was the speculator Jay Gould and his nemesis Cornelius Vanderbilt.

Gould got his start in 1868 when Vanderbilt attempted to seize control of the Erie railroad, the nearest competitor to his New York Central. Gould succeeded in stopping him and became the Erie's largest stockholder and president. He then leased two additional lines and purchased shareholder proxies for two more lines, which he used to vote new directors into power, who then agreed to sell the lines to the Erie. (The courts and legislature quickly moved to stop him and the Pennsylvania seized control of the lines.) He merged with additional lines in Illinois, Ohio, and Michigan, before attempting to corner the market on gold, leading to a stock market crash. The crash forced other lines to sell, but Vanderbilt had more funds and bought them up.

Gould had more success in the telegraph industry, where consolidation came even more rapidly. Gould's railroads had contracts with Western Union allowing it to operate telegraph lines along the road. He canceled the contracts and signed agreements to partner with the lines attached to several other railroads. After he bought ocean lines to Latin America, Western Union was scared enough to purchase the competitor. (Gould sealed the deal by offering Vanderbilt, Western Union's largest stockholder, a controlling stake in one of his railroads if he persuaded the board to go through with the purchase.) After the sale, Gould started a new company with the telegraph lines of his remaining railroads, signed several additional deals, and announced plans to build a transatlantic cable. Western Union stock plummeted and Gould bought it up, becoming his competitor's largest shareholder. He used this position to persuade Western Union to purchase his competitor at an inflated price and become the controlling member of Western Union's board, a position he used to fend off any future competitors.

Theodore Vail played a similar role at AT&T, while local utilities (power, light, heat) ended up being operated by regulated "natural monopolies". Soon the

nation's infrastructure was entirely owned by either public (e.g. the post office) or private (AT&T) monopolies. In each case, it was operated by professional managers who planned and controlled the entire system.

Part 3

The new national infrastructure (railroads, telegraph, steamships, post office) allowed for new national distributors (wholesalers, department stores, mail-order houses, chains) which were themselves organized and managed in the same ways. Department stores, for example, had a manager in charge of each department, with only things like janitors and delivery people shared across the entire store.

Such big stores moved to also take the place of wholesalers by building their own distribution networks and, in time, take control of manufacturing as well. Large mail-order houses like Sears Roebuck began building systems of conveyor belts and pneumatic tubes for ensuring orders got assembled promptly — along with systems for punishing those who held the line up. And the geographically-distributed chain stores organized themselves under regional managers who kept tabs on local performance with a team of inspectors.

Geographic centralization, automation, and employee monitoring allowed such national concerns to move goods faster, which made them more efficient than the numerous local stores they put out of business. It was economies of speed, not of scale.

A similar speeding-up happened in production. The opening of the coal mines provided cheap power for new factories with mass-production machines while railroads provided a market their output. The factories were set up as simple assembly lines operating continuous-process machines, like those built to cut wheat, solder cans, and roll cigarettes. Henry Ford extended this system into assembly with his “moving assembly line” in which continuous conveyor belts moved parts past the workers. In each factory, managers personally oversaw the line foremen who oversaw each part of the process. By the 1880 census, 80% of manufacturing employees worked in factories, with the putting-out system remaining only for clothing.

Fredrick W. Taylor encouraged factories to speed up even further by following his system of “scientific management”. He proposed a company's lines be run by a planning department which would conduct careful time-and-motions studies to discover the optimal way to carry out each part of the process. Line-level managers would then be responsible for ensuring that individual employees kept producing at the optimal rate. Few followed Taylor's recommendations exactly, especially his suggestion to place the planning department in charge of the lines, but many companies adopted his ideas to accelerate their factories.

Part 4

The new speeds, in turn, produced so many products that the national stores couldn't sell them all, leading the manufacturers into distribution and marketing of their own. They began building a regional sales staff, doing national ad campaigns, and buying up competitors. The result was national brands like American Tobacco, Diamond Match, Quaker Oats, Pillsbury Flour, Campbell Soup, Heinz, Borden, Carnation, Libby, Procter & Gamble, and Kodak — most of which remain leaders today.

Why did these few leaders achieve such domination? It was not thru their superior technology — they leased the machines they use for assembly. Nor was it their marketing acumen — they all hired professional marketers for the job. And it could not be the power of their brands, for they all invented these brands from scratch. Instead, it was their superior organization that provided the main barrier to entry. Anyone who wanted to compete would have to build their own national network of managers, buyers, and salesmen.

And even this was made more difficult for competitors. The first-mover was able to start small, use profits to fund growth, and use the resulting economies of scale to lower prices while expanding nationally. But any competitor would have to start out by competing against this national, low-price network. They would either have much higher per-item costs since they were producing so much less or they would have to borrow enormous amounts of capital to build a high-volume network from the beginning. And who would want to fund such a risky endeavor? Newcomers did appear (Kellogg, Postum, Colgate, Babbitt) but they were rare and the industries remain oligopolies.

Industrial products (lumber, petroleum, metal, etc.) also began forming national oligopolies. It started with industry-wide trade associates, which quickly became cartels that conspired to fix prices. However, the incentive to cheat on the cartels by secretly lowering prices was too great and, since cartels were illegal, there was no legal way to prevent it. So companies moved to form trusts, in which one firm would hold in trust the shares of the other firms in exchange for shares of itself. When the Sherman Antitrust Act outlawed trusts, New Jersey stepped in to allow the creation of holding companies — easy-to-establish corporations which simply held the stock of other corporations. But in the early 1900s the courts ruled that even this form violated the law and the companies moved to merge outright, forming a single corporation.

But such horizontal integration was rarely very profitable. The real success always came from vertical integration: taking control of suppliers and distribution.

Part 5

Managers who oversaw the factories carefully measured their efficiency. They wanted to maximize the use of the expensive equipment they had purchased, so they repeatedly pushed to speed up the lines and use them more efficiently. This increased efficiency resulted in increased production which resulted in corporate growth which naturally required more lines.

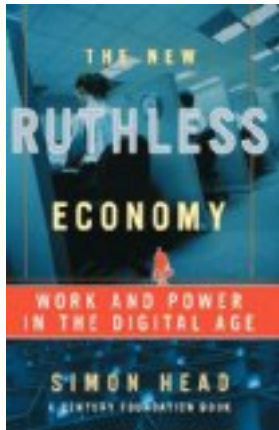
At the same time corporations continued this within-industry expansion, higher-level managers saw the generic processes at work and pushed for between-industry expansion: reusing the same management structures and same tools to grow the company and brand into new businesses.

And thus, managerial capitalism — the corporate form in which professional managers ran large, national corporations whose owners had at most veto power over their efforts — spread across the country. Their administrative coordination allowed for greater productivity and lower costs, but required a managerial hierarchy which could carry out more functions. The managers also allowed them to increase volume, but also allowed the managers to ensure a permanent place for themselves. The task of management became more technical and specialized and management became separated from ownership. As a result, managers were able to direct the company in ways that favored stability over profits, and the resulting huge enterprises changed the shape of the economy.

Review: The New Ruthless Economy

March 9, 2008

[Original link](#)



During the boom years of the New Economy nineties, new technologies led to a boost in productivity and profits. But over the same period, compensation for actual workers stayed the same or even went down. In this book, Simon Head investigates the other side of technology: the way it keeps the average worker down.

Head finds that “scientific management” — the system that turned assembly lines into sweatshops in the 1880s — has expanded to conquer the service sector as well. Where old management consultants reorganized factories to deskill workers (by making them repeat mindless jobs over and over) and regulate behavior (by having overseers and stopwatches making sure they met their quotas), new management consultants reorganize call centers to deskill workers (by having them simply read scripts off a computer screen) and regulate behavior (by having their computers measure how long they spend on the phone and at lunch and in the bathroom).

But it’s not just call centers: Head finds the same technological reengineering of business in everything from factories to doctor’s offices, where HMO-enforced policies require doctors to do little more than type symptoms into a computer and prescribe the recommended treatment, with little time to investigate what might actually be wrong with the patient.

Head’s argument is much like that of David Noble in *Forces of Production*: we had a choice about how to use new technology. We could use it to turn employees into ever-more-skilled craftspeople, allowing them to be more effective and creative in their jobs now that they had machines to do their dirty work.

Or we could use it to turn employees into faster cogs for a machine, forcing them to follow rigidly-composed scripts carefully specifying their role.

We are once again choosing the second. Only this time it may hurt companies, not just employees. At least in manufacturing jobs, you can keep some kind of quality control tracking on the final product. A Toyota may not be very good, but if everyone follows the rules at least they will all be about the same. Service industry jobs require dealing with individual customers in all their messiness. And customers don't make good components in carefully "reengineered" machines.

The result is things like the infuriating 1-800 numbers we're all familiar with: incompetent customer support, useless service, uninformed advice. Which means customers walk away. As management cuts costs by outsourcing their call centers to less and less skilled employees, they also cut profits by alienating their customer base. (Head cites powerful studies by Frederick Reichheld finding that tiny increases in customer retention can lead to doublings in revenue.)

Head writes clearly and plainly, although the book lacks the concision of his brilliant pieces for the *New York Review of Books* (which this book grew out of). And while he does do some on-the-ground reporting, especially from car factories, the book has more of an eye for acronyms than for anecdotes. This is disappointing, because the techniques at the heart of the book (the automated systems for monitoring employees) would make for gripping reading, yet Head never gives us a glimpse of what they actually look like in practice.

For those with only a little time, the key chapter (6) [is available online](#) [PDF]. For those who want to dig deeper, I can recommend two related books from the same year: Christian Parenti's *The Soft Cage* goes into more detail about surveillance technologies in all areas of life while his friend Doug Henwood's *After the New Economy* goes into more detail about the economic numbers behind such things.

- [Get a copy](#)

Banff

March 16, 2008

[Original link](#)



When you step off the plane in Calgary, there are, rather improbably, men in cowboy hats. Albertans consistently refer to their province as “the Texas of Canada” and apparently its largest city has taken the notion to heart.

I take a ride with a man who appears to have spent his life preparing to be the consummate businessman. His handshake is firm, his knowledge of geopolitics impeccable. He is a master of the telling anecdote, the commanding voice, the comprehensive but guarded answer. He has built planes, been in bands, managed corporate strategy, and now he is on assignment in Mexico, where he must staff up a factory to build planes for a Canadian business that is wary of such “offshoring”.

He has gone, he explains, from a life in which he researches technicalities for position papers on corporate strategy to one life in which he gets up every morning, drives to a factory, locks the doors (to punish latecomers), walks the line, and tries to figure out how to get airplanes built and delivered.

As we drive, he demonstrates his radio contact to the folks back home in Mexico. Right now they are trying to figure out how to get a plane body they have built from Mexico to Canada in time for additional construction to begin on Monday morning without breaking any laws in the complicated patchwork of trucking regulations.

I feel endlessly inferior to this confident man of business, until I discover he knows very little about technology or copyright law. He does understand, however, that Google must be very popular, as he visits it “at least two or three times a day”. I try to contribute something back by attempting to explain some things about the subject, although I talk too fast and don’t explain enough, so I’m not sure much was clear.

It is a long drive past a short skyline to Banff, a city that literally resides inside a national park, one which requires a permit to enter and in which no new construction is permitted.

Tourism most certainly is, however, and the city is dotted with hotels and conference centers nestled into the sides of imposing mountains, with glorious vistas in all directions. The hotel I am staying at is almost comically opulent, with a Roaring 20s theme of sparkling black gowns amidst weak white art deco lights. My room is huge.



At check in I am given my badge and binder and hat and vest. There is a party that night at the bar. I want to soak up the discussions, to see how the

elite live and what they discuss, but I am too shy to barge into any of the conversations. It is just like any other party: I sit against the wall and try to remain inconspicuous.

The next morning I am scheduled to give a brief talk to this self-described group of “young leaders” of Canada. Taking the stage after the platitudes of a high-ranking Albertan government official, I find myself on a panel on “the Internet and Mass Collaboration” (the one technology panel at the conference) and am asked to give five minutes of provocative thoughts. In a bright red t-shirt amongst a sea of suits, I approach the podium:

I suppose I’m here to be the brash young person from San Francisco. I’ll try my best to fill that role. For years I’ve been a user and a builder of these technologies. Most recently, I co-founded Reddit, a democratic news site which was purchased by the magazine publisher Condé Nast, and I am now working on Open Library, an attempt to create a Wikipedia for books. [...]

There’s a lot of talk, here and elsewhere, about how Internet collaboration is going to revolutionize business and politics. Just add some Internet collaboration, they say, and your business will suddenly start working better and smarter—and cheaper, as well. But the Internet is not this magic pixie dust you can sprinkle on anything. In the States, the back of every ketchup bottle now has a notice explaining that you can now create your own advertisements for the ketchup company. In return, well, in return they might use your ad. This is magic pixie dust thinking at work: people are not going to suddenly start designing your ad campaigns for you just because you asked them to.

We have to remember that these things are done by real people, not magical abstractions. The rhetoric often suggests that some magical force of “peer production” or “mass collaboration” has written an encyclopedia or created a video library. Such forces do not exist; instead there are only individual people, the same kind of people who drive everything else.

The power is that these people are collaborating. But they are collaborating because they have come together to form a community. And a community works because it has shared values. But here’s the thing: these shared values are profoundly anti-business. [Laughs from the audience.] I mean, look at Wikipedia. This is a group who wakes up every day and tries to put the encyclopedia publishers out of business by providing a collection of world knowledge they can give away to everyone for free.

If you want someone to do your company's work for you, finding a well-organized online community with strong anti-business values seems like a bad idea. [Laughs.]

So what do you do? I have a friend who is even more brash than I am and when anyone asks her for business advice she tells them simply: Well, in the future, your servants are going to rise up and eat you. So, invest in toothpicks.

I quickly scurry back to my seat, afraid this crowd will rise up and eat me for such brazen aggressiveness. But instead, I am cheered with laughter and applause. Nobody ever addresses my toothpicks comment. For the next hour, me and the rest of the panel answer questions from the audience, and I comfortably talk about everything from the gender gap in technology (which, I assure them, is worse than in any other field and a result of the most disgusting discrimination and misogyny) to the future of news (freelancers and aggregators, not institutions).

Afterward, and for the next few days, dozens of people come up to compliment me on my talk. "So you do this sort of thing a lot then?" they all say. I receive three more speaking invitations before lunch and people repeatedly request to sit next to me at meals.



I spend a great deal of time with Michael Geist and his family. Geist is invariably referred to as "the Lawrence Lessig of Canada". A law professor in the country's

capital, he writes a weekly column and gives frequent speeches on technology policy (copyright law, net neutrality, open spectrum, etc.). But unlike Lessig, who has an otherworldly aura of fame about him, Geist is entirely down-to-earth, continually expressing genuine shock at how boneheaded and awful his opponents in industry and government are. While I spend most of the rest of the time explaining things to people, I have to work hard to avoid doing that with Geist — he either knows intimately or has actually worked on every relevant thing I can think to mention.

After our panel is a panel on work-life balance, mostly dominated by James Milway, director of the Institute for Competitiveness and Prosperity. There are two other women on the panel to balance him, but Milway speaks with such booming confidence and authority that the other panelists' comments seem to just disappear. Milway says everything you'd expect a right-wing economist to say: Canadians aren't working hard enough, they're not working long enough, they keep spending time doing silly things like increasing the minimum wage and engaging in rent control which are just obviously wrong. Increasing vacation time will just lead to fewer workers getting hired. This is all clear in our regressions. Europe's economies are dying; workers there are far unhappier. And so on.

Afterwards I go up to him to argue with his economics. "You're using the standard economic assumption that the demand curve for labor slopes downward," I say. (This is economese for the concept that as you raise the cost of hiring someone, people hire less.) "But every study on this subject — from Card and Krueger to Michael Manning — finds that this simply isn't the case. Manning's monopsony model, in which you take into account that there are significant costs to changing jobs, finds that all of your results no longer follow."

Milway is a fast speaker and has boundless energy and he tries to talk right over me. "Every—every—hold on there—every—almost all—there's a strong consensus in economics that raising the minimum wage is a bad idea," he finally gets out. "Sure," I say, "but they're wrong — when you actually look at the studies that's just not true." "No, there's a strong body of studies—even in our regressions we find that." We argue for a while about the validity of the Card and Krueger work and he finally asks, "What's the argument for the opposite case? Why would employers do that?" I try to explain the Manning model but halfway through realize I don't fully understand it. So I switch tacks.

"Look at what Card found when he was doing his research — employers were happy to raise non-wage benefits to get employees but just refused to raise wages, even when more employees would have made them more money. They weren't being economically rational." "Well, there you go," he says, as if he's won the argument. "If you don't think people behave rationally then we're done."

"But of course people don't behave rationally!" I squealed. "Look at all the research in behavioral economics — it's blatantly obvious people don't behave rationally." "Well then, you might as well throw away the whole field of economics!" he shouted. "Precisely. I'm glad you agree — economics is bogus." He

just laughed and stormed off, but not before giving me a working paper from his institute.

We ended up sitting near each other at lunch. He was explaining that his institute was completely funded by the Ontario government but remained strictly independent. “So how’d you get the government to fund a right-wing think tank?” I asked. He laughed. “Well, normally I’d say we’re more middle-of-the-road, but I guess you’re right, we are pretty right-wing. I don’t know. Harris [the previous major premier of Ontario] started us but [the current one] loves us too.”



Figure 5: Rory Stewart

That night there was a talk by Rory Stewart, the other person I got to know and enjoy at the conference. Stewart is an amazing fellow. An incredibly handsome

man, with a perfect British accent and the most well-tailored suits, he nonetheless has the look of something otherworldly about him. His face is pulled back and marked as if he's seen things no one in a suit that nice was meant to see. I adored him from the first.

He somehow got it in his head to walk across Afghanistan and his talk consisted of photos and descriptions of this incredible journey. he begun in a major city and walked for years, depending almost entirely on the hospitality of strangers in each town to keep him alive and moving. He walked every day, through deserts and snowstorms, with company and without. And what he found was an incredibly kind people, living in terribly poor conditions in autonomous villages, with a passionate faith in their religion (including such rules as keeping women out of site).

Stewart now runs an NGO in Kabul, which is doing the work that the coalition forces in the country found too "low-priority" to do: clear seven feet of garbage from the streets, build thriving businesses and shops in the downtown district, and prepare commercial products for import and export. Stewart spoke bluntly about the military mission and the government, suggesting it was unlikely to do much good.

It was 11pm by the time the discussion was over, so I went straight to bed.

The next morning was dedicated to addressing the most pressing issue in foreign policy, perhaps overall: whether we should bring the troops home instead of continuing to lose their lives maintaining an increasingly violent occupation in a country we originally invaded under the guise of fighting terrorism but in which we now remain because we fear it will fall apart if we will leave. This being Canada, that country is Afghanistan.

The day started with a passionate speech by the Afghanistan Minister for Education, who pleaded for us to let the country take control of its own affairs and to ensure "its greedy neighbors" (widely agreed to be a euphemism for Pakistan) didn't destroy it.



Then there was a star-studded panel, including Rory Stewart, an Afghani PR officer, an Afghani citizen, the head of the entire Canadian Army, the ambassador from Afghanistan, and the head of a Canadian government development agency. (I don't have the list in front of me, but I believe that's correct.) It was pretty impressive to see the head of the Canadian Army and he was a pretty impressive fellow, equally fluent in literature and philosophy as politics and warfare. But he steadfastly refused to take a position on whether the army should remain in Afghanistan, insisting that was a question for the population through their government. Stewart cleverly began the panel by saying that everyone in it had vested interests, including him, and that we should work hard to try to derive the truth from their statements.

At lunch we hear the most amazing presentation. It's a pitch for, I am not making this up "Development-In-A-Box(TM)" — a system that (again, I am not making this up), uses "preconfigured solutions ... embedded in business processes ... automating compliance ... [with] fully automated ... wireframes." (And that's just the part I managed to record — the rest of it was far worse.) The presentation was complete with completely absurd PowerPoint clip art: a cargo crate flying to world hotspots, a hammer and sickle flying over a tank riding over an AK-47 pointed at a pile of Chinese-made goods, all above a 3D banner reading "Less Clausewitz, More Sun-Tzu".

Adding to the sense of unreality, the speaker sounded like a broken animatronic

Abe Lincoln, placing bizarre emphasis on random words and constantly speaking in a faux-upbeat tone.

The gist of the proposal was this: come up with a bunch of computer programs and simple rules that can be followed in any country, no matter how badly destroyed, to get its economy up and running so that investors can come in and start taking advantage of it. It was a reasonable idea, he explained, to get the economy started before a democratic government was because that was how history had usually proceeded — after all, “the US only let everyone vote like fifty years ago.”

I swear, I would have been convinced the talk was given by the Yes Men if it wasn't quite so bad. Even so, we were half-convinced it was some kind of prank. At least now I understand why businessmen kept falling for the Yes Men's pranks. (To be fair, there was a bunch of pushback. Not the least of which came from Rory Stewart, who pointed out that entering a wide variety of countries with pre-written rules might not be spectacularly effective.)

There was also a group photo in the mountains and some scheduled trips around town, but I neglected to bring a jacket so I mostly stayed inside the hotel, luxuriating in my oversized room and using my overpriced Internet connection. But soon enough it was time to catch the bus back to Calgary, and then to gritty, working-class San Francisco and the literal view from the ground, not the metaphorical one they need up in the mountains.



Welcome, watchdog.net

April 14, 2008

[Original link](#)

As you've probably noticed, it's political insanity season in the US. I can hardly go outside these days without running into someone complaining about the latest piece of campaign gossip. I've mostly tried to keep it off this blog, but it's hard to not get swept up in the fever. As someone who wants to make a difference in the world, I've long wondered whether there was an effective way for a programmer to get involved in politics, but I've never been able to quite figure it out.

Well, recent events and Larry Lessig got me thinking about it again and I've spent the past few months working with and talking to some amazing people about the problem. I've learned a lot and must have gone through a dozen different project ideas, but I finally think I've found something. It's not so much a finished solution as a direction, where I hope to figure more of it along the way.

So the site is called watchdog.net and the plan has three parts. First, pull in data sources from all over — district demographics, votes, lobbying records, campaign finance reports, etc. — and let people explore them in one elegant, unified interface. I want this to be one of the most powerful, compelling interfaces for exploring a large data set out there.

But just giving people information isn't enough; unless you give them an opportunity to do something about it, it will just make them more apathetic. So the second part of the site is building tools to let people take action: write or call your representative, send a note to local papers, post a story about something interesting you've found, generate a scorecard for the next election.

And tying these two pieces together will be a collaborative database of political causes. So on the page about global warming, you'll be able to learn more about the problem and proposed solutions, research the donors and votes on the issue, and see or start a letter-writing campaign.

All of it, of course, is free software and free data. And it's all got a dozen different APIs to make it easy for others to build on what we've done in their own work. The goal is to be a hub, connecting citizens, activists, organizations, politicians, programmers, and everybody else who's interested in politics.

The hope is to make it as interesting and easy as possible to pull people into politics. It's an ambitious goal with many pieces and possibilities, but with all the excitement right now we want to get something up as fast as possible. So we'll be developing live on watchdog.net, releasing pieces as soon as we finish

them. Our first goal is to put up data about every representative and a way to write them.

I've managed to find an amazing group of people willing to help out with building it so far. And the [Sunlight Network](#) has encouraged me and graciously agreed to fund it. But we still need many more hands, especially programmers. If you're interested in working on it, whether as a volunteer or for pay, please send me an email — me@aaronsw.com — telling me what you'd like to help with.

We only officially started work yesterday, so there's not much up yet, but hopefully it'll give you a sense of where we're going:

- [Visit watchdog.net](#)

Slaves of Some Dead Sociologist

April 15, 2008

[Original link](#)

Imagine you were suddenly put in charge of Google. What would you spend your time doing? Branding? The Google brand is pretty important, but it's not really something you can control directly; it's more of a side-effect of the other decisions you make. (If your legal team decides to give up the names of Chinese dissidents to the secret police, that's going to hurt your brand.) Product design? Clearly this is also important, but at a company the size of Google it's too big a job for one person — most of Google's innovative new products are designed by rank-and-file engineers. Strategy? This is a good one, and probably what Google's current rulers spend most of their time on, but I'm skeptical as to how good anyone can really be at long-term strategy with such a huge company. Hiring? Obviously hiring is pretty important, but even the greatest group of people aren't going to save your company if they waste their time once their inside.

No, I think the most important thing a person in charge of a large company can work on is sociology — designing the social structure of the company. It's the sociology that determines who gets hired, what their life is like, how much freedom they have, what sorts of things they work on, etc. Clearly these structures determine an enormous amount about the corporation. And yet, strikingly, I've never heard of a single corporation that has a high-level group devoted to studying and improving them.

“Practical men,” Keynes famously wrote at [the end of his *General Theory*](#), “who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist.” And sociology seems to have worked out much the same way. [Chandler claims](#) that the modern command-and-control corporation was worked out just about identically by several different people around the same time and its military methods have been with us ever since.

Despite enormous changes in the kinds of things big companies do as well as in the way that they do them, the actual structure of the large corporation (with very few exceptions) has hardly changed at all. It's gotten to the point where even tinkering with the cubicle seems radical.

Since such questions are so alien, let me give a sense of the questions I mean. For example, how do you hire? Right now, it appears that at Google each team gets to hire people for its projects and then once you're inside Google you get to switch to another project if you like. Why not have a team dedicated to hiring which tries to find the best way to pick the best people as well as making sure they match a particular company culture?

Also, how do projects get picked? Do you have a command-and-control structure deciding what things need to get worked on from the top? Do you let everybody work on what they like? Do you let the company vote on what its priorities should be?

What do you do with people who don't work out? Do you have performance reviews? Bonus pay? Three-strikes firing offenses? Or do all these systems just make working more frightening and problematic?

It seems to me any reasonable company ought to have a whole department dedicated to working on these issues, studying the systems that are in place, studying the kinds of things that others have tried, and doing their own experiments to see if they can do things better. And yet, to my knowledge, no one does. Even the handful of companies that do something innovative with their corporate structure did it as a one-off — they have no team dedicated to coming up with and trying new such innovations.

Now normally when you discover that everyone else is doing something wrong, there's an opportunity for you to get ahead by doing it right. But that's much more difficult here, because these questions only really make sense for large organizations and very few of us find ourselves in charge of large organizations. For example, it's arguable that [Fog Creek](#) has done some things along these lines, but it's pretty difficult to tell since they've never had more than a couple dozen people.

Instead, the real innovation hasn't come from companies, but the online peer-production projects, like GNU/Linux, that take contributions from a distributed set of volunteer contributors. But such groups solve the problem largely through eliminating it — they don't have to worry about who to hire and how to treat them because they don't hire anyone.

Instead, most of the people who work on GNU/Linux are hired by other companies where they must contend with the antiquated social structures that those companies provide. And since those are the brutal facts that most humans must contend with, it would be nice if more people were thinking about alternatives.

Money and Worth

April 20, 2008

[Original link](#)

The streets of San Francisco are lined with poor people looking for a little spare change. Many different strategies are tried — some just shake a jar, others call for help, some make specific small requests, and a fellow I saw today just kept sunnily repeating “a nickel and a smile will last a long while” in an endearing tone. Others, however, try to earn their keep — playing music, doing tricks, selling special papers like *Spare Change*.

I have a strong urge to help out the first group, those who simply ask, but helping the second has always struck me as odd. People tell me that it’s better if the poor receive their money by doing work, because it lets them retain some dignity, but I’ve never quite bought that. After all, how much dignity do you get when your income comes from people patronizingly pretending to buy a newspaper specially created for this ruse?

But there’s a much more serious problem with only giving the poor money for doing things. It encourages them to think their worth as a person is defined by their success in the capitalist economy.

Now there is a grain of truth to this delusion. There are many useful jobs for which society can compensate you. (Although even that, frankly, requires a level of non-useful skill at fitting into the general capitalist system.) But that’s about it. There are many useful jobs that society doesn’t compensate well. There are many useful people who can’t do any of those jobs because society never trained them or gave them the opportunities required. And even if, perchance, there existed someone who cannot and even with training and opportunity could not do anything useful, it seems clear to me that their simple existence as a human being endows them with some inalienable value. (If human beings didn’t have value, then we would have no one to do useful things *for*.)

People on the street don’t deserve our money because they can pretend to do certain menial jobs. Nor should their sense of dignity be bound up in doing them. Instead they, like everyone else, deserve our money because they are *people* and if we cannot care for other people, then we have precious little else.

Money and Control

April 20, 2008

[Original link](#)

“I never give money to those people,” she said. “They’re only going to spend it on drugs, anyway.” And what’s so wrong with that?, I wondered. I can see why one might want to discourage Harvard students from spending all their time getting stoned (although, I have to say, I don’t see anyone doing that), but if your life is spent sitting outside, hungry, cold, and miserable, drugs seem like a pretty decent use of the money.

But, more importantly, since when is that your call to make? That you live in a nice house with a bulging wallet and he lives on the street is due to an enormous number of random factors that could just as easily have been reversed. And even if you’re arrogant enough to believe you’re a better person in some way — smarter, harder-working, more ambitious — since when does being better give you the right to tell other people how to live their lives? Is Tiger Woods allowed to just come along and take the chocolate out of *your* shopping cart at the supermarket?

It is a sad fact of reality that you have money and he has none and that, as a result, he needs the money to buy material goods. But no *moral* consequences can be derived from this. Just because history has given you the *power* to choose whether this person can acquire certain material goods doesn’t give you the *right* to make that call.

Now it’s true, you don’t have to give him money at all. Most don’t. But if you feel that other people deserve to live a life without privation, at least let them choose how to live that life.

Perhaps an example closer to home will help. Remember when your father offered to help you buy a house if only you went back to school? That was the same thing — trying to use the fact that he had money and you didn’t in order to get you to do what he wanted. For years, he’d been trying to get you to go back to school; and you didn’t, because it was your decision and you didn’t want to. But then he realized he could use the money to control you. Remember how that chafed?

At the time you brushed it off as “his money, his call”. But don’t you see how that’s not true? Whether you go to school or not was never his call. And while it’s certainly within his rights to help you buy a house, using that to try to and control you was wrong. You deserve to make your own choices about your life — we all do.

Including that man there.

The Toolbox Does Not Shrink

May 11, 2008

[Original link](#)



For the past forty years, Jon Elster has attempted to explain things ranging from the emotions to technological change. The result is dozens of books (and even more papers) in three languages across four universities. And throughout, his work has not just been exemplary social science, but has always struggled with the question of what social science *should be* — what kinds of explanations are legitimate, which techniques should be used, and so on.

As he reaches his late sixties, it is understandable if he begins to think of his legacy. That certainly would help explain his latest book, *Explaining Social Behavior: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), a 500-page masterpiece that I expect will be seen as the summation of a brilliant career.

It's a book unlike any other and, as a result, unless read from start to finish can seem bizarre, if only because one has little sense of what the book is trying to do. It is not a guidebook, or a textbook, or a piece of social science in itself. In short, it is nothing less than an attempt to summarize an idealized vision of the whole of social science in simple language.

The book's foundational assumption (as implied by its title) is that the goal of social science is to discover explanations for social phenomena. It begins by describing what explanations are and discussing their different forms. But the bulk of the book consists of tools that can be used in explanations: emotions, norms, time discounting, weakness of will, magical thinking, cognitive dissonance, heuristics and biases, rationality, irrationality, neuroscience, evolution,

externalities, game theory, pluralistic ignorance, informational cascades, collective action, cyclical preferences, institutions, etc. — in short, the entire toolkit of the social sciences.

Just as amazing as the breadth topics is the way in which they're covered. Elster explains each phenomenon clearly and concisely, so that any educated reader can understand them with little effort, without ever sacrificing intellectual depth. His explanations are peppered with examples from an amazing variety of sources: ancient history, recent history, personal experience, the classics of social science (e.g. Tocqueville), the great philosophers (Montaigne, Pascal, Mill), and classic novelists (e.g. Proust). The result is a book which not just introduces readers to the discoveries of the social sciences but to the intellectual world as a whole. Bibliographical notes following each chapter as well as the conclusion provide a rich guide for further exploration.

And yet it's not simply a compendium of interesting results in the social sciences, but attempts to defend a particular conception of what the social sciences should be. In the conclusion, Elster defends his notion of social science as the attempt to discover particular explanations for particular phenomena against the "soft obscurantism" of the literary theorists and the "hard obscurantism" of the economists. As part of this, he turns his back on the notion of rational-choice models being an explanation in themselves, noting that their many assumptions are in desperate need of empirical defense.

In response to an earlier draft of this review, Elster wrote "I'm glad you appreciate the details in my book, but you're missing the big picture, which is that there isn't any." Instead of trying to build a Grand Theory which explains all of social life, we should try to build explanations of particular phenomena from the nuts and bolts we have lying around. And "even if a dominant explanation of a given event or episode is discarded and then resurrected, the building blocks or mechanisms at work in the discarding and resurrection remain. The repertory, or the size of the toolbox, does not shrink."

For anyone who cares about social science, Elster has done an amazing service in clearly describing the toolbox's contents and defending its importance.

- [Buy the book](#)

This is the first post of Elster week.

How to Fix the News

May 12, 2008

[Original link](#)

Newspaper circulation continues to decline. The top-selling paper in the country, *USA Today*, distributes only 2 million copies a day (half, no doubt, placed outside hotel room doors). Around the same number, with an average age of 71, watch *The O'Reilly Factor* nightly, with the number decreasing as the audience dies off. Everyone quietly concedes the news industry is dying. It's the Internet's fault, they all assure us.

But what if it wasn't? The other day I heard a news program that was so good that I wanted to listen to it again. And I'm not alone — all my friends have been talking about it as well. And while I don't have exact numbers, it seems as popular as any one of those other news outlets. That show? The *This American Life* episode on [The Global Pool of Money](#) — a comprehensive explanation of the housing mess.

There were three things about the show that made it stand out from the rest of the news pack:

1. **It believed in the intelligence of its audience.** It didn't try to pander with sex or disasters or quick cuts. It took a serious news story and investigated it thoroughly for a full hour, with only one break. And it didn't try and dumb any of it down — it explained the whole thing, from top to bottom.
2. **It didn't assume you already knew the subject.** Most news stories on important topics are incomprehensible to the average person who doesn't know much about their topic. Here's a quote from a random news story about the housing crisis: "They said financial institutions have been unwilling to expose themselves to the mortgage market, and lenders are hesitant to lend to risky borrowers in a declining house price market after the subprime meltdown." Unless you've been following the story (like the reporter, presumably) do you really know what that means? *TAL* instead assumed you knew nothing and explained every component and term so that you actually had a picture of what was going on.
3. **It was done in an entertaining and conversational tone.** It didn't treat the news as some important series of facts that had to be seriously conveyed to you. It treated it as something interesting they wanted to tell you about, a story that involved real people's lives (who you got to hear from at length) and was full of genuinely interesting pieces. Look at that news quote above one more time. Can you really imagine someone sitting down and saying that with a straight face?

At first these things may seem contradictory — how can you believe in the intelligence of your audience while assuming they don't know anything? how can you be entertaining and yet still explain a subject? — but the more you think about them you see how well they fit together. Being intelligent doesn't mean you're knowledgeable; it means you're curious. Which means you want to hear the whole story from beginning to end and which means you might actually find it entertaining. And being conversational prevents you from assuming the mask that lets you talk down to your audience while pretending they only need to hear the handful of new facts that you're providing.

In every other field, that kind of formality has been dropped. Even banks run advertisements these days about how their associates will be your friend. And yet the news chugs along with its arrogant formality, watching its audience get older and older, and wondering why its circulation is declining.

Together, these three points seem like the recipe for a genuine news show: intelligent, comprehensive, and entertaining. And yet, I can't think of a single thing that follows them. Surely in an era of desperation and experimentation, the wacky idea of actually respecting your audience has to be worth a try by *someone*. Anyone want to give it a shot?

Science or Philosophy?: Jon Elster and John Searle

May 12, 2008

[Original link](#)

As the name suggests, the social sciences have often seen themselves as an analogue or extension of the natural sciences and have from the beginning aspired to their successes. Like many who want to duplicate success they do not understand, social sciences has been obsessed with duplicating the *form* of the natural sciences and not its motivations. Just as rival music player manufacturers have tried to copy the look of the iPod without understanding why it takes that look, the social sciences have copied the structure of the natural sciences without understanding why they take that structure.

The greatest success of the natural sciences is undoubtedly the laws of physics. Here, a handful of simple equations can accurately predict the motion of a vast variety of everyday objects under common actions. Seeing this, social scientists have aspired to derive similar laws that predict the behavior of whole societies. (Others, meanwhile insist the entire project is impossible because the society will respond to the creation of the law, making the law invalid — reflexivity.)

But reflection upon the history of the natural sciences will see that this notion is insane. Physics did not develop thru attempts to discover the laws that explained all of motion. Instead, various kinds of motion (like falling objects) were described, rules for their behavior deduced, and commonalities in those rules discovered. Eventually it was the case that the commonalities were so great and the rules so few that a handful of laws could explain most of the phenomena, but this assumption was not made *a priori*.

Jon Elster argues that the social sciences should proceed in a similar way: various social phenomena should be described, the mechanisms that give rise to them explained, and the commonalities among mechanisms discovered. Most of his work consists of practicing social science in this way, with a few attempts at laying out a toolbox of these common mechanisms.

Modern social science is so split between attempts at grand law-like theories and modest essays of careful description that Elster's third way seems alien and hard to comprehend. But there is a clear model that social scientists can look to: analytical philosophy.

Analytical philosophers do not take as their task grand law-like explanations for the world. Instead, they set upon a particular piece of conception — language, free will, ethics — and try to discover its logical structure. In doing so they often develop tools they shared in common with other philosophical projects.

This similarity can perhaps be best seen in the work of the man who is Jon Elster's closest equivalent in the world of analytical philosophy, John Searle. In his career, Searle has addressed a number of topics: language, intentionality, consciousness, social reality, and rationality. Throughout he has taken his task providing a clear description of the phenomena and explaining the pieces it consists of. And in explaining those pieces, he frequently develops tools that he reuses in his other explanations.

Take the notion of *direction of fit*. Searle argues that all statements have a direction of fit, which can be either up, down, both, or null. If we imagine (by convention) that statements float above the world pointing down at the things they represent, then statements like "John and Jill are married", in which it is the job of the statement to change to accurately represent the world, have a downward direction of fit. By contrast, statements like "I want to marry him", in which it is the world must change to match the statement, have an upward direction of fit.

This notion, which Searle and Austin developed for describing language, Searle later reused for describing mental states. Love, for example, has an upward direction of fit, belief downward, and joy null. And in my own everyday life, I have found the same tool useful in thinking about various phenomena I've encountered.

Social scientists don't seem to read much philosophy. I suspect most of them see it as an alien culture consisting of, [as Paul Graham put it](#), "either highly technical stuff that doesn't matter much, or vague concatenations of abstractions their own authors didn't fully understand." But perhaps they should, because even if the technical stuff lacks interest (and considering some of the topics involved, I'm skeptical that this is always the case), the tools, and the way they're wielded, should be a lesson.

Simplistic Sociological Functionalism

May 13, 2008

[Original link](#)

(I thought I should talk about the other form of functionalism for a change.)

Often sociologists notice a pattern in which certain attributes of a social system fits well with a particular social structure. To take an example I have at hand, Rosabeth Moss Kanter notes that because a secretary has access to facts that could embarrass her boss, it's convenient for the boss that the secretary is entirely dependent upon him for wages and status.

Unfortunately, these claims are often phrased as saying X causes Y. Here's how Kanter does it:

The possibilities for blackmail inherent in [a secretary's] access ... to the real story behind the boss's secrets ... made it important that she identify her interest as running with, rather than against, his. Thus, forces were generated for the maintenance of a system in which the secretary ... was to find her status and reward level dependent on the status and, hence, success of her boss. (*Men and Women of the Corporation*, 82)

Note that, although she is unusually careful to hedge her comments ("made it important", "forces were generated", "maintenance of a system") Kanter is making a particular historical claim here: the secretary could blackmail, which pushed the boss to tighten control. But this is not the type of claim that Kanter, who's research consisted mostly of direct observation of present-day offices, is likely to have any real evidence for.

Making such claims is problematic, both because most sociologists don't really know whether they are strictly true, and because they lead Jon Elster to show up at your house and yell at you for hours. But both problems can be easily avoided: simply rephrase such comments to describe the phenomena as *effects* rather than *causes*.

Instead of saying a secretary's ability to blackmail leads bosses to tighten their grip, simply note that the boss's tight grip has the effect of weakening the secretary's ability to blackmail. You get all the same points across and nobody gets hurt. See? Easy.

Tectonic Plates and Microfoundations

May 14, 2008

[Original link](#)

In 1915, Alfred Wegener argued that all the continents of Earth once used to fit together as one giant supercontinent, which he later named Pangea. [As Wikipedia summarizes:](#)

In his work, Wegener presented a large amount of circumstantial evidence in support of continental drift, but he was unable to come up with a convincing mechanism. Thus, while his ideas attracted a few early supporters ... the hypothesis was generally met with skepticism. The one American edition of Wegener's work ... was received so poorly that the American Association of Petroleum Geologists organized a symposium specifically in opposition.... ... By the 1930s, Wegener's geological work was almost universally dismissed by the scientific community and remained obscure for some thirty years.

Today, of course, every schoolchild knows about Pangea. But for a long time the theory was dismissed, not because it lacked evidence or predictive power — it explained why the shapes of the continents fit together, why mountain ranges and coal fields lined up, why similar fossil were found in places separated by oceans, and so on — but because Wegener had no plausible mechanism.

A similar problem happens in the social sciences. [Paul Krugman recently noted](#) that while Larry Bartels (in his new book *Unequal Democracy*) provides solid, convincing evidence that Republican presidents systematically preside over slower growth and increasing inequality, most social scientists don't believe him because we haven't yet identified the mechanisms. Krugman:

Now, I'm a big Bartels fan; I've known about this result for quite a while. But I've never written it up. Why? Because I can't figure out a plausible mechanism. Even though I believe that politics has a big effect on income distribution, this is just too strong — and too immediate — for me to see how it can be done. Sure, Republicans want an oligarchic society — but how can they do that?

Bartels, for his part, [argues that](#) providing the mechanisms isn't his job — his goal is to highlight the phenomena and encourage many others to research the mechanisms:

How do presidents produce these substantial effects?

One of my aims in writing *Unequal Democracy* was to prod economists and policy analysts to devote more attention to precisely that question. Douglas Hibbs did important work along these lines ... He found that Democrats favored expansionary policies ... while Republicans endured and sometimes prolonged recessions in order to keep inflation in check. (Not coincidentally, unemployment mostly affects income growth among relatively poor people, while inflation mostly affects income growth among relatively affluent people.) In recent decades taxes and transfers have probably been more important. Social spending. Business regulation or lack thereof. And don't forget the minimum wage. Over the past 60 years, the real value of the minimum wage has increased by 16 cents per year under Democratic presidents and declined by 6 cents per year under Republican presidents; that's a 3% difference in average income growth for minimum wage workers, with ramifications for many more workers higher up the wage scale. So, while I don't pretend to understand all the ways in which presidents' policy choices shape the income distribution, I see little reason to doubt that the effects are real and substantial.

When it comes to addressing such arguments more generally, the most famous commentator is Jon Elster. In his classic article "[Marxism, Functionalism, and Game Theory](#)", he insists:

Without a firm knowledge about the mechanisms that operate at the individual level, the grand Marxist claims about macrostructures and long-term change are condemned to remain at the level of speculation.

(To be fair, Elster doesn't make this as a general argument, but his vehemence has led some of his followers to suggest that it is.)

To be clear, I think discovering mechanisms is important work. All I'm arguing is that it shouldn't be a necessity for believing in a theory. Instead, I believe it's an irrational side-effect of an emotional distaste for gaps in knowledge.

As evidence, let me note that such demands for mechanisms never go more than one level deep. Nobody has ever said, "Well, your theory that people are motivated by greed is all very nice, but I just can't believe it until you can explain how greed is manifested in the brain." Neuroscience is obviously the microfoundation of psychology, but psychological theories are regularly accepted without neuroscientific microfoundations.

In general, it seems like such commentators support a double-standard. Theories with mechanisms should be judged by their fit with the evidence and predictive

power. Theories without mechanisms should be judged by the evidence and predictive power and whether you can think of any plausible mechanisms. I don't see how this can be justified. There's no reason mechanism should be privileged in the assessment of knowledge; things are true or false, even if we don't know *why* they are true or false.

Indeed, it we typically only investigate the causes of phenomena once we're convinced that they exist. (Elster admits as much in *Explaining Social Behavior*, noting that establishing a phenomena's existence is the first step towards explaining it.) So let's stop making the mistake of not believing things are true because we don't know how they happen.

The False Consciousness Falsehood

May 19, 2008

[Original link](#)

American intellectual life has a large number of ways of responding to an argument without actually addressing its substance — namecalling in other words. You can say that someone is “blaming the victim” or spinning a “conspiracy theory” or “assuming people are stupid” or that they’re subject to “false consciousness”.

Most of these are kind of transparently silly, but even otherwise smart people seem to think the false consciousness charge has some heft to it. The argument is never fully spelled-out, but the argument seems to be that to think that people are systematically mistaken about their own interests is the kind of crazy idea that only vulgar Marxists would believe and, furthermore, it requires assuming that people are stupid and explaining how you’ve been able to see past the illusion.

Well, I’m personally not under any illusion that providing a rational explanation is going to stop people from leveling this charge, but I figure one ought to, if only to set the record straight.

Let’s begin with a parable — a simplified case that will at least establish whether some of these arguments are logically true. Imagine a new regime comes to power that decides to imprison everyone with red hair. They insist that there is nothing amiss about this — they were elected democratically, and furthermore, everyone imprisoned is still allowed to vote. But inside the prisons, they only permit limited contact with the outside world. Most prisoners only watch the one prison-provided news station which is systematically biased, constantly suggesting that the Purple Party is in favor of additional rights for red-haired people while their opponents, the Yellow Party, just used the red-haired issue for pandering. (Anyone who’s watched, say, Fox News discuss black issues will know how this is possible.) The result is that when election time rolls around, the majority of red-haired prisoners vote for the Purple Party candidate who gets into power and provides no new rights for them.

Call it false consciousness or not, I think it’s perfectly reasonable to look at this situation and say while the red-haired prisoners are not stupid, they are systematically mistaken, which is leading them to act against their own interests. If they knew the truth they would vote for the Yellow Party, the party which wants to take steps to get them out of prison, instead. Furthermore, it’s possible to imagine that there are some prisoners who, through one means or another, have learned this and thus are able to see this situation while the other prisoners do not. (They try to tell the other prisoners what’s going on, but they keep getting labeled conspiracy theorists.)

Now obviously vast portions of America are not imprisoned. But most people do get their news from a small number of sources and I think everyone would agree that, in one way or another, these sources are systematically biased. (You can argue about which way they're biased or whether it makes a difference, but I think it's pretty clear that all the major news sources share a general conception of what is "news" and what isn't.) So why is it so implausible that something similar is going on?

The major difference between the two scenarios is that in the first, people were basically forced to watch the biased news, while in the real world they have lots of other alternatives. But I'm not sure this matters as much as it might seem at first.

First, most people have busy lives that don't revolve around the news or politics and thus are going to get the news in the most convenient form they can. For most people, this is typically television or the newspaper. But starting a new television station or newspaper is very expensive, especially if you want it to have wide reach, and the only projects that can get funding and advertising are those that buy into at least some of the systematic biases. So for most people, there simply isn't a better alternative when it comes to the formats they want.

Second, even if someone gets their news from the Internet or another source where getting started is less expensive, they may not know about the alternatives. If you grew up with your parents reading the *New York Times* you may simply live your life checking in on nytimes.com, without ever stopping to wonder whether the news you were getting was systematically biased and whether there was some more preferable alternative.

Again, just as there was no way for the prisoners to know they were being lied to, it's not really reasonable for the average person to figure out that they're getting biased news if the only news they read comes from biased sources.

Now I'm not arguing here that this idea is *true* (that would require more real-world evidence), merely that it's possible. The fact is that we live in a world where most people get their information about what's going on from a very small number of sources which tend to report largely the same things in the same way. This seems like a rather important fact of life and I think we ought to stop dismissing suggestions that it might have some negative effects on people out of hand.

How to Promote Startups

June 9, 2008

[Original link](#)

When people talk about how government can promote startups, there seems to be a fairly standard consensus: we need more economic inequality. [Lower income](#) and [capital gains](#) taxes provide more incentive to work, looser labor laws make it easier to fire non-performers, and large private wealth funds provide investment capital.

But having been through a startup myself, I think there's much more you can do in the other direction: decreasing economic inequality. People love starting companies. You get to be your own boss, work on something you love, do something new and exciting, and get lots of attention. As Daniel Brook points out in *The Trap*, 28% of Americans have considered starting their own business. And yet only 7% actually do.

What holds them back? The lack of a social safety net. A friend of mine, a brilliant young technologist who's been featured everywhere from PBS to Salon, stayed in academia and the corporate world while all of her friends were starting companies and getting rich. Why? Because she couldn't afford to lose her health insurance. Between skyrocketing prices and preexisting condition exclusions, it's almost impossible for anyone who isn't in perfect health to quit their job. (I only managed because I was on a government plan.)

Anyone with children is also straight out. Startup founders tend to be quite young, in no small part because no one can afford to support a family on a startup founder's salary. But if we had universal child care, that would be much less of an issue. Parents would be free to pursue their dreams, knowing that their children were taken care of. And universal higher education could let parents spend their savings on getting a business started, instead of their children's tuition. Plus, it'd give many more kids the training and confidence they needed to start a company.

And those large private wealth funds that result from growing inequality? A real problem for startup founders is that they're *too large*. It used to be that you could borrow a couple thousand dollars from friends and neighbors to get your business off the ground. Nowadays, they're too busy trying to make ends meet to be able to afford anything like that. Meanwhile, those large wealth funds I mentioned are now so big they can only afford to invest in multi-million dollar chunks — much more than the average founder needs, or can even justify. And the large investments come with large amounts of scrutiny, further narrowing the recipient pool.

But imagine if the government provided a basic minimum income, like Richard Nixon once proposed. Instead of having to save up (increasingly difficult in a world in which the only way to survive is on credit card debt) or borrow money to stay afloat, you could live off the government-provided income as you got things started. Suddenly having to quit your job would no longer be such a huge leap — there'd be a real social safety net to catch you. (Not to mention if those labor laws some people want to loosen required your old job to take you back if things didn't work out.)

Of course, there is some truth to the standard proposals. Some startup founders are encouraged by dreams of financial security, and high taxes can make that dream more elusive. And complex labor regulations can make it difficult to get new companies off the ground. But it's not an issue of whether we should have taxes or labor laws — it's an issue of how they're targeted.

Estate taxes on inherited fortunes would have basically no impact on startup founders, but could go a long way to funding a social safety net. And since most startups are acquired as stock, income taxes are basically irrelevant — it's really capital gains tax that gets applied. There's no reason the government couldn't apply a lower capital gains tax to startups that get acquired than they do to the shares of publicly-traded companies that large investors trade.

The same is true for labor laws: preventing large companies from firing people at random can provide some much-needed stability to their lives, especially if they're saving up money in the hopes of going into business themselves. But there's no reason such laws also have to be applied to small startups, where the company is more likely to go out of business than to fire you.

Look at social democratic Europe, where these policy prescriptions have been tried. While there's much less of a culture of entrepreneurship and only 15% of Europeans think about starting their own company, nearly all (14.7%) of them actually go ahead and do it.

The fact is, if governments really want to promote startups and the economic innovation they bring, they shouldn't listen to the standard refrain of cut taxes and deregulate. They need to start rebuilding the social safety net, so that their citizens know that if they go out on a limb and try something risky, someone will be there to catch them if things don't work out.

Thanks to Daniel Brook's book [The Trap: Selling Out to Stay Afloat in Winner-Take-All America](#) for suggesting this line of argument and providing the statistics.

Is Undercover Over?

June 12, 2008

[Original link](#)

My latest piece for *Extra!* is now up:

[Is Undercover Over?: Disguise seen as deceit by timid journalists](#)

It's about the rise and fall of undercover journalism. Here's an excerpt:

Undercover reporting has a storied history. Nellie Bly, famous for traveling around the world in 80 days, also did a famed investigation of the conditions in insane asylums for the New York World. Bly feigned insanity for a series of physicians before being committed to a lunatic asylum. There she documented rotten and spoiled food, freezing living conditions, frigid bathwater, abusive nurses and relatively sane fellow residents. "What, excepting torture, would produce insanity quicker than this treatment?" she wondered. The series, later published as the book *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, created a sensation, and Bly was asked to join a government investigation of asylum conditions.

Moving On

June 16, 2008

[Original link](#)

In November 2006, I moved to San Francisco because I had to: my company got acquired and us moving out was a condition of the agreement. It was the first time I'd ever actually lived in San Francisco, as opposed to just visiting, and I quickly realized that although it was a fun place to visit, I couldn't stand living here.

Even after all this time, I can't really put my finger on what it is I don't like — in fact, I suspect it's probably harder for me now to explain it than it was when I first came here. The first thing that comes to mind is how *loud* the city is. I want a place where I can live quietly and focus on my work; but San Francisco is filled with distractions. There are always crews tearing up the street, trains that are delayed, buses that have broken down, homeless people begging, friends having parties, and so on. It's impossible to concentrate and without my concentration, I feel less like me.

The other big problem is that San Francisco is fairly shallow. When I go to coffee shops or restaurants I can't avoid people talking about load balancers or databases. The conversations are boring and obsessed with technical trivia, or worse, business antics. I don't see people reading books — even at the library, all the people are in line for the computer terminals or the DVD rack — and people at parties seem uninterested in intellectual conversation.

And so I'm moving back to Cambridge, Massachusetts — Harvard Square in particular, the one place I've ever been to that brings a special delight to my eyes, that warms my heart just to see. Surrounded by Harvard and MIT and Tufts and BC and BU and on and on it's a city of thinking and of books, of quiet contemplation and peaceful concentration. And it has actual weather, with real snow and seasons and everything, not this time-stands-still sun that San Francisco insists upon.

I miss Boston; I'm excited to go back.

But I'm also sad to leave my responsibilities in San Francisco. One of which I'd particularly like your help with. I've been honored and overjoyed to help Lawrence Lessig get his [Change Congress](#) project off the ground. If you haven't heard, he's trying to build a national movement to get the corruption out of Congress; to pass public financing of public elections, earmark reform, and other pressing concerns.

But they need a full-time day-to-day tech organizer. Someone who knows how to blog and who the bloggers are and can keep them in touch with the community.

Someone who knows enough about technology to know the tools that can be built and should be. And someone with enough drive and talent to make sure those things get built. It's a dreamy job and I hope there's someone out there who will take it from me. [A more formal write-up](#) is on the Change Congress blog.

Thanks for everything.

Last Goodbyes

June 19, 2008

[Original link](#)

It's minutes to midnight and I'm hurriedly packing. Early tomorrow morning I catch a flight to Boston and start [my new life](#). I haven't really gotten much of a chance to pack until now, because I've spent the past few days in a rush of meetings, getting in my last goodbyes for everyone I know in San Francisco.

It's been great seeing everyone, but like most locals, they're all puzzled as to why I'm leaving. I've been struggling to explain why. When I say the weather, everyone just laughs. When I say San Francisco is too loud, they start arguing. When I say it's the people, they tell me to find a better group of friends.

And the thing is, they're right. It's none of these. I've been spectacularly unable to articulate it, but the real answer is simpler and more prosaic. And now, after great thought and struggle, I realize the answer is simply this: *Cambridge is the only place that's ever felt like home*. It's that simple. And when you put it that way, it's clear why I have to go.

So goodbye Stanford, goodbye Palo Alto; goodbye south bay, goodbye peninsula; goodbye Change Congress, goodbye Creative Commons; goodbye Mission, goodbye SOMA; goodbye friends, goodbye loved ones; goodbye San Francisco, home to everyone I've ever loved. You'll always have my heart.

Scenes

June 19, 2008

[Original link](#)

“God, I’m so sick of this stuff. Can’t we just go home?” she wines. “Jesus,” I say, “would it kill you to go one more place?” It’s been a long hot day in strange, busy New York City, and we’re not exactly at our best. In fact, the combination of heat and exhaustion has turned our love bitter, brought on the darkness and recriminations. Its at moments like these, the dark depths of a relationship, that you wonder how things could ever work. As we walk down the steps we hear a subway car approach. We accelerate, running to catch it. Its doors open. We’re moving faster now, pushing our way through the bustle of Manhattanites to make it. The bell sounds and I jump inside and hear the doors whoosh closed behind me. I spin around only to see her trapped on the other side of the glass. I put my hand up to it, but the train accelerates and she’s left standing there, just another face in the crowd.

“Hey, want to see the game? Want a ticket to the Giants game?” I do not, in fact, want to see the game — this or any other game. I hate sports. Yet the scalpers, apparently unaware of this, insist on trying to sell me one. That’s what I get for walking near the ballpark, I guess. As I curse my choice of scenery, a cop pulls up. He lowers his window and leans out toward the scalper. The scalper hands him a ticket and the cop speeds off. “But he didn’t pay!” a man in a suit walking by complains. “Cops get a special deal,” explain the scalper. The man in the suit laughs and marvels at the scene.

It’s weird being back at Stanford in the summer. Everything’s so empty, nobody’s around. Well, not nobody — there seems to be some action near the main quad. There are drum kits spread around and golf carts and purple uniforms lying about. But most of all, there are people — a bunch of students just standing around awkwardly. I’m about to ask one of them what’s going on when a bell rings and a voice shouts “Background!” Suddenly all the students snap to attention, begin walking in perfect lines with bookbags slung over their shoulder, bicycles ridden in perfect formation. These aren’t students at all, I realize with a lurch — they’re extras. It’s disconcerting. A police guard is at the side, keeping kids from running over the camera crew. I ask her what they’re filming. “*Disney’s High School Musical*,” she says quickly, trying to keep a student from cycling over the director’s cart.

Capital and its Complements: A Summary

June 30, 2008

[Original link](#)

The following is a non-technical summary of Brad DeLong's May 2008 paper [Capital and Its Complements](#).

Adam Smith explained that in all countries with “security of property and tolerable administration of justice” citizens would spend all their money (capital), either on consumption or investment, causing the country’s economy to grow. After some contention, later economic studies tended to bare this out: a shortage of capital wasn’t always the bottleneck, but when it was, removing it could lead to extraordinarily rapid growth.

The problem for poor countries is that, because of high mortality rates (which require more children to have some survive) and low educational levels (which mean those children can find productive employment quickly), they have high population growth and thus low capital-to-labor ratios. Worse, trade allows you to spend your money buying manufactured goods from overseas, for which you have only your very cheap labor to provide in return. The result is that it requires an enormous amount of domestic investment to improve capital-to-labor ratios.

And so rich country economists made “the neoliberal bet” on behalf of poor countries: they hoped that loosening restrictions on international capital flows would send capital rushing in to poor countries and build their economies, the same way that Great Britain’s massive investment in a young United States (in 1913 Britain’s foreign assets equaled 60% of its domestic capital stock) built up that country.

But what ended up happening was exactly the opposite. Yes, NAFTA led US companies to invest the \$20 to \$30 billion a year on manufacturing in Mexico that its boosters predicted, but that investment was more than outweighed by the \$30 to \$40 billion a year fleeing the country from Mexico’s wealthy wanting to invest it in the United States. Why? In part because the US was more politically stable, and thus a safer investment climate. And in part because the US treats its own workers so poorly — with productivity rising 35% since 2000 while real wages remain flat — it provides an excellent investment opportunity.

But meanwhile, all this investment in the US was dwarfed by the Chinese acquisition of our debt (and thus the political risk it represents). China needed to do this, since US purchase of their exports is the only thing funding the manufacturing-led industrialization of a massive portion of their economy; there would be massive dislocation if that funding dried up.

“Recognition of these facts came slowly.” First, Larry Summers said it was our unsustainable current account deficit. (That was the 1990s; today that deficit is four times as large.) Later, economists thought it must have been our large budget deficits. Then they began thinking it was the run-up in housing prices. But that, it is now clear to most economists, was the result of a bubble. And yet the flow of capital to the US continues. But, perhaps even more frighteningly, it could stop at any moment.

The Percentage Fallacy

July 21, 2008

[Original link](#)

There's one bit of irrationality that seems like it ought to be in behavioral economics introduction but mysteriously isn't. For lack of a better term, let's call it *the percentage fallacy*. The idea is simple:

One day I find I need a blender. I see a particularly nice one at the store for \$40, so I purchase it and head home. But on the way home, I see the exact same blender on sale at a different store for \$20. Now I feel ripped off, so I drive back to the first store, return the blender, drive back to the second store, and buy it for \$20.

The next day I find I need a laptop. I see a particularly nice one at the store for \$2500, so I purchase it and head home. But on the way home, I see the exact same laptop for \$2480. "Pff, well, it's only \$20," I say, and continue home with the original laptop.

I'm sure all of you have done something similar — maybe the issue wasn't having to return something, but spending more time looking for a cheaper model, or fiddling with coupons and rebates, or buying something of inferior quality. But the basic point is consistent: we'll do things to save 50% that we'd never do to save 1%.

At first this almost seems rational — of course we're going to do more to save more money! But you *aren't* saving more money. With both the blender and the laptop, you have the chance to save \$20. Either way, you're going to have another twenty in your pocket, which you can spend on exactly the same things later on. Yet we behave differently depending on whether we got that twenty by skimping on a small purchase or skimping on a big one. Rationally, if driving back to the store isn't worth \$20 when you're buying a laptop, it isn't worth \$20 when you're buying a blender.

On the other hand, don't those small savings tend to add up after a while? If you start blowing \$20 every time you buy a trinket, you're soon going to be out of disposable income. Meanwhile, spending several thousand dollars is much rarer, so isn't it OK to slack off a bit on such occasions?

If we work to save 50% on everything, big or small, that's the equivalent of saving 50% of our money altogether. Whereas if we only try to save fixed amounts on every purchase, how much we save is dependent on how many things we buy.

So which is the real irrationality? I'm not entirely sure of the answer.

The Predator State: A Summary

August 19, 2008

[Original link](#)

James K. Galbraith's [The Predator State](#) is undoubtedly one of the most important books on the economics of our era. Galbraith sets himself the task, not only of exposing the discredited economic orthodoxies of our generation, but also documenting the economy as it really exists, and setting an agenda for the future. It is a book that desperately needs to be listened to. And, even better than all that, it's a fun read. Go out and buy it immediately.

That said, here is a brief, abbreviated summary of the book, to better pull out its themes and spread its message. It is of necessity less clear and less well-argued than the book itself, which you should actually read if you want to argue, but it should give the gist of things.

1: The Reaganites swept into power on the arguments of economic conservatives: lower taxes, tight money, and an assault on all opponents of market forces (government, regulation, unions). Their views were tried and failed completely. They have no remaining defenders in academia and only slogans and cronies outside of it. There is no longer any vision on the right; the left should leave its defensive crouch and start proposing something new.

2: Friedman and friends said that markets would lead to democracy — that “economic freedom” begets political freedom. But economic freedom isn't what it sounds like; it's not freedom from economic want but instead, as Friedman put it, “the freedom to choose” or, in other words, “the freedom to shop”. But control over production is as unfree as in the Soviet Union, with advertising for propaganda, R&D for planning, and Wall Street analysts for government inspectors. “Lines form, under capitalism, every day.”

3: Supply-siders argued that a) saving is a public good because it leads to investment, b) America does not save enough compared to other countries, c) saving would be unleashed by lowering taxes on it, d) the resulting investment would spur an economic boom. Every piece of this is wrong: a) in an efficient market, all the benefits from investment are captured by the investor; thus investment cannot be a public good unless markets are inefficient, in which case the government should step in *more*, b) the correct amount of saving is a policy decision, there's no reason to believe other countries have it right (the Soviet Union had a 40% level of saving right up to its collapse), c) rich people save most of their money anyway (it's impossible to consume that much) and changes in interest rates dwarf changes in tax rates; furthermore, real investment is encouraged by *high* personal taxes, since this forces people to keep their money in corporations, d) personal saving is less than 1% of GDP; almost all investment comes from corporations or overseas.

4: Milton Friedman claimed that high inflation (it was 10% in the 1970s) was just the result of printing too much money. Reagan's Fed adopted this belief, sending the US and many foreign countries into deep recession. Eventually, the policy was completely abandoned and high inflation has not been seen since. Serious inflation isn't caused by printing money, but by wage-price spirals — the price of oil shot up, causing rising prices to cover oil costs, causing workers to demand higher wages to pay those prices, causing prices to rise even higher, and so on. Today, most prices are set by overseas manufacturers and labor unions are so weak that workers can't demand wage increases. Inflation is dead.

5: Democrats (and some Republicans) repeatedly insist that we need to balance the budget or face fiscal collapse. But the budget is ruled by a simple equation: the total amount the government owes + the total amount the public owes = the total amount we owe to foreign countries. This is simple logic: whatever is not owed within the country must be owed to another country. But the international economy depends on other countries keeping large reserves of dollars (see 14), meaning our trade deficit must be high. As long as this is so, we must either have the government run large deficits or ask people to do so. The budget deficit was closed in the late 1990s because citizens picked up the slack with high credit card spending and home equity loans, inevitably leading to a slump. Balancing the budget is for suckers; Democrats should spend the money on public goods instead, promoting economic growth and thus raising tax revenue.

6: The argument for free trade comes from Ricardo's "comparative advantage" — a clever textbook exercise, but irrelevant to the real world since it assumes constant costs. In reality, either you produce manufactured goods, in which your costs go down as you make more, or you sell off commodities, in which case your costs go up as you make more. With the former, it takes time for local industry to build up the advantage (requiring protectionism). With the latter, you end up like Mongolia, which opened up its animal husbandry market, swelling herd sizes, turning grass into permanent desert, and killing off the entire market. With no other exports, such a country is in big trouble. Ricardo was wrong: diversification, not specialization, is the way to develop — and how every successful country has. Unfortunately, we've forced this broken system on most of the world. (China has escaped, letting state-supported banks fund money-losing new companies until they grow large enough to succeed as exporters. In the mean time, they dump their products on local Chinese, allowing them to have a very high standard of living at very low wages.)

7: There is no trade-off between equality and efficiency. Instead, equality leads to efficiency. Denmark is one of the most equal countries in Europe, and as a result one of the wealthiest. The rest are on a continuum down to unequal and inefficient. Full employment and high wages require companies to make the most of the employees they have, increasing efficiency. Raising the minimum wage doesn't raise unemployment, it lowers it — unemployment and inequality have risen and fallen together since 1920. Higher wages lead to more jobtaking and less quitting. The remaining increase in inequality was caused by stock market

giveaways to dot-commers and Bush giveaways to government contractors — which is why it was limited to Silicon Valley and the Potomac, respectively.

8: The US is not a free market. Of GDP, 17% is health care (where experts, not consumers decide how to spend), 16% is housing (subsidized by quasi-public mortgage firms and tax deductions), 15% is federal welfare, 14% is local welfare, 4.5% is military spending, 3% is higher education (paid for mostly by government or conspicuous philanthropy¹ and consumed for status and not value). Together, 70% of US GDP is planned; it's just that our facade of a free market makes us less efficient at planning than other countries (especially in health care).

9: In the 1970s, American industry (particularly steel and cars) was being challenged and weakened by Japan. Reagan's assault on inflation (see 4) dealt them a death blow, sending their foreign and domestic markets into deep recession, driving up the value of the dollar (making their exports more expensive than their competitors'), and raising interest rates. In the 1980s the technical staff left for Silicon Valley, and 1990s financial fraud killed off what remained. When new startup founders paid themselves exorbitant salaries from VC money other CEOs rushed to keep up, making them all wealthy enough to become a separate class. They used their new power to prey on the corporations that they ran.²

10: Previously, regulation kept the predators in check — unions, NGOs, and progressive businesses pushed government standards to kill regressive competitors. But newly-wealthy predator CEOs had the Republicans take over and gut regulation. The result is the Predator State, where every new law is a corporate giveaway. Prescription drug benefits for Big Pharma; NCLB to defund and deskill schools (building support for vouchers); and Social Security reform to give workers' paychecks to Wall Street. (Democrats have so far prevented the latter, but corporate-funded think tanks now aim to take them down from inside.) The programs allow further predation; privatizing college loans has led loan companies to bribe student loan officers. It's not that Republican government fails at tasks like stopping Katrina; it's that such tasks of governance are not its goal — opening up New Orleans for Halliburton contracts is.

11: The great liberal economic agenda is “making markets work” — small fixes for market failures. The canonical example is job training to fight unemployment. But job training does not create new jobs, economic growth does; the tech boom was the last time we saw a real decrease in unemployment. Similarly, some Dems propose universal preschool since experiments find kids with free preschool grow up to get better-paying jobs. But those preschools did not create jobs, they just gave their students an advantage in getting them. Universal preschool would give everyone that advantage, leaving no net impact. And creating markets in unmarketable goods (health care, energy, the climate) is doomed to failure. In these industries markets will not work; planning is required.

12: Planning is alleged to have been disproven by the Soviet Union's fall. But it is unavoidable. The market, even when it does work, fails to take into account

the wishes of the poor and the needs of the future, since neither can buy things today. New Orleans fell not because of a lack of foresight (it was predicted by the local paper) or technology (the Army knew how to build strong levees) but because we lacked a *plan* — nobody in power bothered to do anything about it. Similarly, climate change will melt Antarctica and drown New York, Boston, South Florida, Houston, the Bay Area, London, the Netherlands, Bangladesh, and Shanghai. Stopping it requires a *plan*; an enormous one ranging from elementary school classes to government-funded research centers to a WWII-level restructuring of the economy.

13: Deregulation can have three effects: 1) increasing competition and lowering wages and prices, 2) speeding technological change and increasing quality, 3) creating monopolies and raising prices. Trucking deregulation did 1, airline deregulation did 1 and 2, but telecom, banking, and energy deregulation did 3. Charles Keating donated to the government, leading VP George H. W. Bush's task force to deregulate his industry and allow the Savings and Loan Scandal. Ken Lay was Bush's largest contributor, leading VP Dick Cheney's task force to deregulate his industry and allow the Enron energy scandal.

The solution is to lower CEO pay, raise the minimum wage, and set wage standards in between. Some liberals claim trade is the problem and the solution is to set environmental and labor standards on other countries. These are unenforceable and will be ineffective (companies moving overseas already build clean factories since that's most efficient and no significant exports are made using child or prison labor). Instead, we should set wage standards at home, like Scandinavia, forcing companies to increase productivity and pay fair wages. Wage standards should also apply to undocumented workers; illegal immigration is caused by employers who send recruiters to Mexico for compliant and low-paid workers. Applying wage standards to all will end these abusive practices.

14: Any country that can pay for its imports entirely with exports can organize its internal economy (its people and resources) however it likes. Countries that do not balance their trade depend instead on global capital markets and must play by their rules. But the US is a special case: after World War II (1944) it set up the Bretton Woods system of international exchange, pegging all currencies to the dollar and backing the dollar with gold reserves. But during Vietnam's deficits (1971), Nixon broke the system, devaluing US currency and wreaking havoc on the rest of the world. Reagan's tight money policies (1981) caused so much instability that other countries were forced to build up reserves of US Treasury Bonds in exchange for military, economic, and export security. US bubbles and the Soviet Union's fall make this system less secure than before, but as long as it remains the US can do whatever it likes economically. And it might as well, since economic success will strengthen the system and the policies proposed here will lead to economic success.

- [Buy the book](#)
- [Read chapter 1](#)

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1. Conspicuous philanthropy is like conspicuous consumption, a way for the rich to flaunt their wealth, only far more effective — you can outdo your neighbors simply by adding another zero to the check, the buildings with your name on them live on after you die, and the government gives you a tax deduction.
 2. See the classic Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class* for more on predation.

How To Launch Software

August 22, 2008

[Original link](#)

37signals recommends that software developers pursue what they call [the Hollywood Launch](#). They don't give any argument for this method, except perhaps the title (as if Hollywood was a business you should try to imitate?) — I guess the idea is that you're supposed to do it since 37signals says so.

The basic idea behind the Hollywood Launch is simple: you release a few hints about your product to build buzz, slowly revealing more and more until the big day, when you throw open the doors and people flood your site, sent there by all the blog coverage and email alerts.

This may work well for Hollywood — if your movie is a big hit at the box-office on opening weekend, then the movie theaters are more likely to keep showing it in the weeks to come and you get credit for being “one of the weekend's biggest films”. But for software developers, it's moronic. Your software isn't being released in theaters, it's available over the Web. You don't have to worry about the theater no longer showing after week one; you can keep pushing it for years, growing your userbase.

Instead what happens when software developers try the Hollywood Launch, and I've seen this many times, is that users indeed do flood to your site on launch day but...

1. They bring the site down from the load. You scramble to get it back up and succeed by coding like a mad man, only to find...
2. They discover some big bug that you never quite noticed before, which makes the whole thing look like embarrassing hackwork. (*What? You forgot to test that last-minute JavaScript change in IE6 1/2?*) So you're desperately rushing to fix the bug before the traffic dies down, rush-patching things and restarting the server when...
3. You bring the site down for everyone because there was a syntax error in your patch that keeps the server from coming back up. You fix it while cursing yourself madly. Finally everything seems to work. You take a breath and decide to see what people are saying about you on the Web, only to discover...
4. Everyone misunderstood what your product does because your front page wasn't clear enough. Now they all think it's stupid and wonder aloud how you even know how to breathe. So you reply in all the comment threads and fix your front page to ensure no one could possibly misunderstand what it is you're doing just in time to find...

5. All the traffic is gone.

Tomorrow, hardly any of those users come back. Your traffic graphs look like the sharpest mountain you've ever seen: a huge climb up and then, almost immediately, a similarly-sized crash back down.

So what do you do then? Well, you do what you should have done all along: you grow the site.

I'll call this technique the Gmail Launch, since it's based on what Gmail did. Gmail is probably one of the biggest Web 2.0 success stories, so there's an argument in its favor right there. Here's how it works:

1. Have users from day one. Obviously at the very beginning it'll just be yourself and your co-workers, but as soon as you have something that you don't cringe while using, you give it to your friends and family. Keep improving it based on their feedback and once you have something that's tolerable, let them invite their friends to use it too.
2. Try to get lots of feedback from these new invitees, figuring out what doesn't make sense, what needs to be fixed, and what things don't work on their bizarre use case combination. Once these are all straightened out, and they're using it happily, you let them invite their friends. Repeat until things get big enough that you need to...
3. Automate the process, giving everyone some invite codes to share. By requiring codes, you protect against a premature slashdotting and force your users to think carefully about who actually would want to use it (getting them to do your marketing for you). Plus, you make everyone feel special for using your product. (You can also start (slowly!) sending invite codes to any email lists you might have.)
4. Iterate: give out invite codes, fix bugs, make sure things are stable. Stay in this phase until the number of users you're willing to invite is about the same as the number you expect will initially sign up if you make the site public. For Gmail, this was a long time, since a lot of people wanted invites. You can probably safely do it sooner.
5. Take off the invite code requirement, so that people can use the product just by visiting its front page. Soon enough, random people will come across it from Google or various blogs and become real users.
6. If all this works — if random people are actually happy with your product and you're ready to grow even larger — *then* you can start building buzz and getting press and blog attention. The best way to do this is to have some kind of news hook — some gimmick or controversial thing that everyone will want to talk about. (With reddit, the big thing was that we switched from Lisp to Python, which was discussed endlessly in the Lisp and Python communities and gave us our first big userbase.)

7. Start marketing. Once you start using up all the growth you can get by word-of-mouth (and this can take a while — Google is only getting to this stage *now*), you can start doing advertising and other marketing-type things to provide the next big boost in growth.

The result will be a graph that just keeps accelerating and climbing up. That's the graph that everyone loves to see: solid growth, not a one-day wonder. Good luck.

Since 37signals quotes from people who followed their advice, I thought I might as well do the same. [mojombo](#):

I find this to be excellent advice. This is exactly the approach we took at GitHub almost down to the letter. It took about 2 months until the site was good enough to use to host the GitHub source, another month until we started private beta with invites, and three more months until public launch.

Artificial scarcity is a great technique to generate excitement for a product while also limiting growth to a rate that won't melt your servers. We worked through a huge number of problems and early users gave us some of the ideas that have defined GitHub. By doing a Hollywood launch, things would have been very different and I am convinced, very much worse.

Do not, I repeat, DO NOT underestimate how much your users will help you to define your product. If you launch without having significant user feedback time, you've essentially thrown away a massive (and free) focus group study.

Let me also say that when we finally did our public launch, there was plenty of buzz, and all of it was the RIGHT kind of buzz. The buzz that attracts real, lasting customers (and no, we weren't on TechCrunch, that traffic is garbage).

Everyday Utilitarianism: Who Gets the TV First?

August 24, 2008

[Original link](#)

I've often thought it would be fun to write a book on "everyday utilitarianism" — how to apply mathematical formalizations of utilitarianism and game theory to help you solve everyday life dilemmas, like who should get to use the television first or whether you should go out with that guy.

The basic idea would be that each chapter would revolve around a particular mathematical principle and demonstrate it using a concrete example from everyday life. Since I'll probably never get around to writing such a book, I figured I'd just write up such examples on my blog when I encountered them and maybe someone else would take the idea and run with it.

So here's the first example:

It's 8pm, and you settle down in front of the television to watch *American Idol*. Unfortunately, at the very same time your roommate is also settling down in front of the television to play one of his video games. Quickly, the two of you get into a tiff about who will get to use the television first. You both would prefer using the television first rather than second, yet, since *American Idol* is a live show, watching it now is a rather different experience from watching it later, while the video game will remain the same all night. How can you prove mathematically to your roommate that you should get to use the television first?

Let $U(\text{TV}_0 = A)$, which we'll write AT_0 , represent the number of *utils* (essentially, a measure of enjoyment) you get from watching the TV first, while BT_0 represents the number of utils your roommate gets from watching the TV first. (AT_1 and BT_1 represent the utils from watching it second.) Obviously our goal is to maximize the total number of utils (i.e. enjoyment) in the world, by picking the solution that leads to our greatest number.

First we write down what we know. Obviously you both would prefer to watch the show first, rather than second:

$$\begin{aligned} AT_0 &> AT_1 \\ BT_0 &> BT_1 \end{aligned}$$

But since *American Idol* is live, we can also say that the benefit you get from watching it first is bigger than the benefit your roommate gets from playing his game first. In other words:

$$AT_0 - AT_1 > BT_0 - BT_1$$

Finally, we want to find out which is bigger: you going first and him second, or you going second and him first. Let $><$ represent “which is bigger?”

$$AT_0 + BT_1 >< AT_1 + BT_0$$

Now, to solve, we take what we know:

$$AT_0 - AT_1 > BT_0 - BT_1$$

And we add AT_1 to both sides:

$$AT_0 > BT_0 - BT_1 + AT_1$$

And then add BT_1 to both sides:

$$AT_0 + BT_1 > BT_0 + AT_1$$

Which precisely answers the question above: it's better for you to go first.

By this time in the proof, however, your roommate should have wandered off, leaving you to watch *American Idol* in peace. Unfortunately, not having seen your proof, he thinks you're just a selfish ass as opposed to trying hard to do what's best for the whole world.

My Life With Tim

August 25, 2008

[Original link](#)

I wrote this years ago (probably the summer after college), filled with nostalgia, in a small notebook on a plane to or from Boston. (I finally understand how people can write books long-form!) I meant to type it in as soon as I got back and post it here, but I lost it and never got the chance. While moving recently it turned up again and I thought I should seize the opportunity to type it in while I still had my hands on it. (Also, coincidentally, I had lunch today with Tim.)

Apologies for the poor writing; I've improved a bit in the subsequent years and it's rather hard to write well when you're pouring your memories into a notebook on a plane.

In 7th grade we were asked to do a project on the Great Men Who Made America, or something like that. Other kids chose civil rights leaders and politicians and even scientists. Then a big tech geek, I chose my hero, Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the World Wide Web.

One of the first assignments was to do some research and answer a list of questions provided by the instructor (one of them being “what did your contemporaries think of you?” — I still wince at not then knowing what “contemporaries” meant). I was able to answer most of them off the top of my head and most of the rest from TimBL (as he was universally called by all but Dave Winer’s web page. But a few, like “Do you have any regrets?” were not really answerable from such material. So, with some trepidation, I sent him an email. His website said not to email him about school projects on the Web, but I convinced myself that school projects on *him* didn’t qualify. So I carefully composed my email and sent it out, hoping for the best.

A few days later I received a rather short-tempered reply. “Regrets?” he said. “I have a few. But then again, too few to mention.” (I didn’t get the reference until years later when I heard the words again over the radio — I thought he was just being poetic.) But my favorite answer was his response to one of the theme questions I asked: “How do you think your work has shaped America?” or something like that. (I was taking the assignment a little too literally, I guess.) He shot back with a phrase that’s stuck with me ever since: “I was an Englishman living in France and working in Switzerland — it’s got nothing to do with America.” I proudly reported this back to my teacher, complaining about his assignment’s Amerocentrism.

The next time I check Tim’s web page, it said not to email him concerning school projects on the Web or on Tim Berners-Lee.

I didn't really run into TimBL again until a few years later when I was visiting Cambridge, Mass., where he worked at MIT. I was working on RSS at the time with W3C employee Dan Brickly and I felt cocky enough to try to go see TimBL's office. I got as far as the nameplate outside his door when a gruff man with a beard stopped me. "What are you doing?" he asked. "Seeing Dan Brickley," I lied. "That's not Dan's office," he said. "Go wait in the hall. I'll get Dan," said the man.

The man, I later learned, was Ralph R. Swick (or RRS), and it always struck me that he hated me, or at least looked down on me because of my age. In this encounter he at least could claim to not know who I was, but even later he would ignore me, ignore what I said, or in one particular instance, make fun of me. (I'll get to that later.)

Dan, on the other hand, was glad to see me and took me on a tour of the W3C, where he and TimBL worked. "Is Tim around?" I asked casually. "Oh no," he said, "he's off in [foreign country]." "Oh," I said. "But I can take you to meet our PR director and she can answer any questions you might have."

This seemed like an odd move to me. At the time, at least, I was a co-worker, not a journalist. Still, why not. She gave me the standard spiel about the W3C, which of course I'd already knew. (Although there was one funny moment: "The Web is just 10 years old," she said, obviously repeating a standard line. "Were you everything you are at 10 years old?" There was an awkward pause as she tried to calculate my age and realized I might be.)

Eager to show her I knew what I was talking about, I decided to make an informed criticism of the W3C. Maybe I challenged its corporate control, or the bylaws' undemocratic requirements that the Director (TimBL) approve everything, or maybe that and more. She gave me standard responses, but I kept pushing and she got increasingly agitated and eventually started shouting. I wasn't hurt, and pressed on, but against my will I started crying (although I imagine it may have looked intentional — a cheap arguing tactic, perhaps). She offered me tissues and toned down, asking me to send her some concrete suggestions by email to consider.

As DanBri took me out, he tried to console me. "Don't worry," he said, "she scares everyone. That's what makes her so good." For whatever reason, she always seemed extra-nice to me after that.

I next ran into TimBL at a W3C conference in Cambridge, where they were having a meeting on RDF, which I was beginning to get interested in. The meeting involved a series of presentations on various topics and through it all, TimBL struck me as incredibly brilliant. He would type away at his laptop the

whole presentation, apparently lost in some project and not paying attention to anything. Then, towards the end, he would quickly raise his hand and ask the one question that revealed all the flaws of the presenter's assumptions, cutting through everything they said.



Figure 6: Me and Tim Berners-Lee

At the end of the meeting, DanBri insisted I meet TimBL and so I went over to shake his hand. TimBL moved and talked so fast he appeared almost as a blur, bursting with energy and bouncing around the room. DanBri took my camera and TimBl slowed down for a moement to grab me around the shoulder and pose for a picture, a photo which I later used frequently. (God, I looked so young!)

I met a bunch of other cool people at the meeting — B.K. DeLong, who introduced me to TanteK (then at Microsoft, he looked for all the world like a Borg; he later joined Technorati and hounded me incessantly to take a summer internship there (I was at dinner with him the other nigh and apparently he still thinks I should!))), libby, and the elusive mnot. But the one I remember most was Dan Connolly, or DanC as he was called.

At first, for some reason, I thought he was a kid. He wore a simple t-shirt and pulled out his guitar during breaks. His enthusiasm was even greater than TimBL's and he was clearly just as sharp, although in some ways more so, since he had a programmer's logicalness that he applied to every aspect of his life.

He worked from home in Kansas City, where he lived with his wife and kids. TO balance work and family, he worked out a contract with his life, which meant that at 5:00 he would stop whatever he was doing, no matter how important, for Family Time.

I would follow him around on the RDF chatrooms and could feel myself growing more logical just by listening to him. When I could I would sort of apprentice under him, following along and helping as he wrote programs to do various tasks. I even considered going out to visit him in Kansas City at one point.

He was an enormous influence, despite his socially conservative politics (which I always attributed to his location). He was usually quiet about them, but once he posted a petition in favor of parental abortion notification laws. At the time I was a radical on children's rights at least, and thought parents shouldn't be notified about anything. He also mentioned he was trying to figure out why his school *wasn't* teaching Intelligent Design (then a new phrase to me), absurdly suggesting he had to follow the money. It turns out following the money is much better at finding why people *do* teach Intelligent Design.

Still, I suppose everyone has flaws, and these were relatively minor. It's clear why TimBL chose DanC to be his right-hand man, handling the details for anything important.

The next time I met TimBL was at the WWW2002 conference in Hawaii. DanC invited me to wake up early for a "Semantic Web Swim" with him and TimBL but, ashamed of my body at the time, I stupidly declined — a move I still regret.

One night DanC, some other people, and I went out to a place on the beach. I, I have to say, didn't have a sip of alcohol — I still haven't, actually — but everyone else got hammered. (I was worried some of them might walk into the ocean by accident and get swept away.) I left my participation ambiguous, however, when I posted a short note in an obscure place on my blog, but John Robb, then-CEO of UserLand Software (Dave Winer, founder) found it and quoted me on his blog with the comment "Aaron is 14. Someone should tell his parents." (No one ever did, as far as I know.) The next day, when I went to see UserLand employee Robert Scoble give a talk, I accidentally let my badge in the hotel room and was dragged out of the talk by security.

On Semantic Web Developer Day, I gave a short presentation about a project I was working on. Ralph Swick (the gruff fellow, you'll recall) also gave a presentation. I got in line to ask him a question, but I was last and we were out of time. "It'll be quick," I lied. "OK, they said. "Have you thought at all about the privacy implications of this?" I asked (for his software was a total privacy nightmare). "Yes," RRS responded and everybody laughed. I went back to the audience feeling like a jerk and RRS ignored me when I tried to ask him to elaborate one-on-one.

It was in the hallway one day that I first really talked to TimBL. He was breezing down the corridor when he spotted me and ran up. "Aaron!" he said. "I really appreciate all the work you're doing — it's great stuff. Do you think maybe you could help with a little project?" Flustered, I said of course. He outlined a project having to do with encrypted RDF and I eagerly volunteered, amazed at my good fortune.

A few days later, at a conference dinner, I got my food and was looking for a place to sit, when TimBL came by. "Here," he said, "I think I've got a place

for you” and he brought me over to the W3C table, seating me directly across from him, which was simply amazing. The table was full of good cheer and Tim commemorated the moment by passing his camera around it and asking everyone to take a photo from their point of view.

I last saw him as we were leaving when he pulled my mom aside and introduced himself. “Aaron’s doing great work,” he said, “but I’m a little worried. The other night at dinner all he had was rice.” “Oh, he’s just a fussy eater,” my mom explained.

The last time my path crossed with TimBL is when I was applying for Stanford. My Dad happened to be in Cambridge at the time and insisted on asking TimBL for a letter of recommendation, by going over to TimBL’s office. Apparently he had better luck than I, since I’m told TimBL agreed and I was later accepted to Stanford. I guess a letter of recommendation from the creator of the Web counts for something, even if he is an Englishman.

A Theory of Change

September 10, 2008

[Original link](#)

People want to make the world a better place. But how? Barack Obama says I can change the direction of the country by voting for him. Al Gore says I can solve the climate crisis with a letter to the editor. MoveOn says I can stop George W. Bush by signing their petition. Perhaps, but these requests ring hollow. How is writing a letter to my local paper going to stop the polar ice caps from melting?

Most groups have a couple steps at the end (switch to alternative energy, stopping carbon from being emitted, preventing global warming) and a couple steps at the beginning (write your congressman and send a letter to the paper) but in between they seem to expect that some kind of miracle will happen. They're missing the concrete steps in between, the actual way we get from here to there.

In the nonprofit world, such a plan is called a Theory of Change. And the reason they're so rare is because they're dreadfully hard to come by. The world has no shortage of big problems, but it's hard to think of ways we might realistically solve them. Instead, the same few things — vote, preach, march — get trotted out again and again.

For over a year now, I've been looking for theories of change for politics. And I've found a few that I think just might work. But I can't pull them off by myself. So here they are, in case someone out there wants to help.

The Netroots Congress

Here's how you get elected to Congress today: First, you make friends with a bunch of wealthy people, being sure to agree with them on all the important issues. Then you take their money and hire a well-connected Washington, D.C. campaign manager. The campaign manager shows you how to ask for more money and then gives it to his partner, who makes some TV and radio ads and runs them in your district. They keep doing this until your money runs out and then, if you're lucky, you get more votes than the other guy.

Because of the netroots, it's now possible to change the first part of this story. Instead of raising your money from conservative or centrist rich people, you can now raise money from progressive people over the Internet. So instead of candidates who all agree that telephone companies shouldn't be punished for spying on Americans, you can have candidates who think every American should have free health care.

Concretely, you'd ask people who want to do this to sign up to pay \$X a month. Then you'd go around looking for candidates (or potential candidates) who genuinely believe in progressive principles. When you find them, you give them the money, and now they actually have a chance of getting elected.

Bonus: Get more money by fiercely promoting how bad the incumbent is or how good the challenger is.

This sort of thing has been done haphazardly and achieved some real successes. Donna Edwards, for example, is now a member of Congress. The idea here is to institutionalize it.

The Plain-Speaking Party

The last plan changes the first part of the election process I mentioned. But you could also try changing the rest of it. Right now, if you want to run as a Democrat, your biggest source of funding will be the Democratic Party, especially the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC). To get their money, the DCCC [requires](#) you hire one of their friends. Their friends are all corrupt hacks who run the same failed campaigns again and again.

This is normally thought to be unavoidable because you can't win without money and you can't get money without the DCCC. What this misses is that you don't need as much money if you're running a radically innovative campaign.

Instead of raising money to run ads, do a PR stunt that will get lots of free media and word-of-mouth attention. Center your campaign around a clear proposal that most of the public will support but no other politician would dare touch. Be forceful and refuse to back down in the face of attacks from the press or your opponent. And, above all, always make it clear to people that you're an average person, not an average politician. No boring speeches, no political buzzwords, no meaningless cliches.

It's never been seriously tried outside of the movies, but I expect that the effect would be electrifying. The media would cover your every entertaining move and money would flow in from around the Internet. The 60% that doesn't vote in midterms would start to reconsider. Hell, Ron Paul attempted half this strategy while being completely nuts and he still received enough money and volunteers to win five House seats.

If you can actually win an election this way, you'll be able to get dozens more to follow your lead the next time around. Pretty soon, it'll be a movement.

Slate Cards

It's not just about the President and it's not just about Congress. (It's also not just about the US, but that's what we're focusing on today.) Local elections

also have an impact, if only the people who win them often go on to even bigger positions. (Who in Wassila, Alaska thought they might be picking a future president?)

Most local races don't get a lot of attention and most people don't do much research on them. Which makes them much easier to influence than bigger races. Imagine a site where you gave it your email address and zip code and every time there was a local election, it'd send you the progressive candidates to vote for. You could print it out and take it to the polls and feel much better about your pick for "register of probate".

In San Francisco, the local papers issue endorsements on all the races and each of the candidates they endorse chip in some money to send a postcard with the whole endorsement list to every voter. This group could do the same thing. It could also ask folks to chip in a couple bucks to help pay for mailing post cards to their neighbors. (Or they could print some out at home.)

Shareholder Democracy

Supposedly, corporations aren't actually controlled by their CEOs. The CEOs are instead hired by the shareholders, to run the business that the shareholders actually own. A lot of these shares are held by people who aren't big fans of business as usual. If they got together they could use their shares to vote for reform.

Now voting on shares is complicated enough that most people don't bother, but increasingly votes are being moved onto the Internet. It's possible for an aspiring organization to build some software that could automatically vote for people if they wanted. So you could imagine, for example, a couple million MoveOn members letting a new progressive group vote their shares for them, allowing progressives to apply some real pressure to misbehaving corporations.

Combined with legal changes that are being considered that would further make corporate voting more fair, this is something that could make a real impact.

Seriously Interesting Journalism

[I've written about this before.](#) The basic idea is simple: There's lots of fascinating stuff going on in the world. And yet, to become news, all the background and color is drained out of it. Worse, to be on TV, a story has to be so dumbed down that you feel stupid for watching it. And to be in the paper, a story has to have so little background that only an expert could understand it. A news show that covered interesting stories in a way that made them genuinely interesting would be quite popular and could have a tremendous impact.

More?

I'll try to remember to update this page as I learn more. Post your own ideas in the comments. (Remember: "Require all politicians to wear a lie detector" is not a theory of change — we're looking for ways to get there.)

A Saipan Story

September 14, 2008

[Original link](#)

The following is fiction. Violent, explicit fiction. However, while the characters are fictional, the setting is entirely real.

Jason wakes up in an elegant DC apartment, sunlight streaming in through the picture windows and making the white walls gleam. He brushes his teeth and showers, before putting on his customary white-collared shirt. Only today he isn't going to the office. Instead, a hired car waits outside to take him to the airport, where he'll be travelling (first class, of course) to Saipan, that grand "laboratory of liberty" he's known so much about, and on which he is due to write an article for some conservative magazine or other (his employers will place it).

He begins the piece in the car: a small island off the coast of Japan, Saipan was made an American protectorate after World War II. Only its unique agreement allows it to ignore many US laws, making it as close to a free-market paradise as could be imagined: a guest-worker program, low taxes, and no meddlesome industry regulation. A tropical paradise indeed. The thrill of the idea sustains him through the day's journey.

Meeting him at the airport is Jack Abramoff, the conservative hero who set up this Saipan tour program, and a bunch of other, mostly older, faces he vaguely recognizes from around the capitol. Abramoff runs such tours regularly, helping spread the word among his tribe of this all-too-little known conservative success story.

Triana awoke in a Philippines shantytown, ramshackle huts spread amongst open-air markets. She had heard whispers of a better life out there and when, one day, a man offered to take her to America, she eagerly accepted. She was crammed in with a boatload of others for a packed journey to the far-off land. But soon enough they arrived and her hosts showed them all to their barracks, accommodations they'd obligingly provided.

As they were taken to their quarters, she breathed in deep the tropical air. "Ahh, the smell of America," she exclaimed. She heard a laugh from someone behind her. "America?" he chuckled. "Welcome to Saipan."

Jason steps off the plane into a tropical paradise, full of verdant palm trees, golden beaches, and a dazzling sunset. Abramoff shows them to their elegant hotel (complete with private beach) and invites them to meet him back in the lobby for the official tour the next morning. Jason changes into his bathing suit and goes for a quick swim, before tucking himself into his lusciously-outfitted bed.

The next morning, Abramoff begins the tour with eighteen holes of golf, carved into a cliff overseen by the mountains and overlooking a fabulous bay. As they play, Abramoff catches up on their stories and dazzles them with tales of Saipan's splendor.

That night he provides a special treat — he takes them to the red-light district, where incredibly-thin bikin-wearing girls cast mournful, searching looks at the well-suited group of tourists. Jason smiles, but he is almost taken aback by the hungry gleam in some of the older businessmen's eyes. One rotund White House official grabs two girls, one on each arm, and drags them over to a pay-by-the-hour hotel. The others all go off looking for their fancy. "What about you Abramoff?" Jason asks. "Oh, I've already got a girlfriend here," he winks. "Guess I'll see you guys tomorrow," he adds before heading off.

Jason shrugs his shoulders and heads toward a slender girl, apparently in her teens, with a kind smile on his face. The girl smiles widely back.

They were fenced in, Triana and the others, allowed only to shuffle between the barracks and the windowless, exit-barred factory. If they disobeyed, they would be deported immediately, all their possessions confiscated. If they attempted to escape, the police would chase them down and beat them. From then on, their life was to sew khakis for Californians, complete with the "Made in the USA" labels that give their future owners such comfort.

There were few comforts for Triana. Bathrooms whose access was strictly controlled and whose condition was so filthy that one was inclined to avoid them altogether. Rations so tough one had to saw through them with the plastic knife. And, of course, the constant, seething hum of sewing machines in the semi-darkness.

Each night, when they headed back to their barracks after their shift, they were accosted by men, leaning against their cars and flashing dollar bills. "Come on, just a little something?" one might call. "Let me show you a good time," another might add. The factory does not pay cash, so the only way for Triana to make some money is to crawl under their steering wheels and extend her tongue.

The next day, Abramoff takes to meet the local power-players. Factory owners gush about the island's incredible economic growth, and politicians (many of whom got their start as humble factory owners), warn them about the Federal Government's imperialist (and racist) interference with their local way of life. "They want to shut us down," one insists. "The leftists can't stand to have us proving that the free market works!" Even the island's Democrats have seen the light, signing on to plans for school vouchers, low taxes, and right-to-work laws.

They close off the day with a tour of a model factory. It is a clean and well-lit place, and the employees he introduces them to all gush with thanks for their newfound prosperity in life. Afterwards, Abramoff takes them deeper into the complex and invites them to take a factory girl home for the night.

Jason is struck by one girl with dazzling eyes and is immediately smitten. "Jason," he says, extending his hand. "Triana," she replies. She speaks little English, but Jason is satisfied to spend the whole trip back simply staring into her eyes.

Back in his hotel room, he eagerly tears off her clothes and begins caressing her naked body, slowly removing his garments as well. He flips her over and lifts her up onto all fours, slipping on a condom before sliding into her from behind. Triana moans with his thrusts and he thinks about the power he has here, able to instantly have any girl he desires. His thrusts grow harder and soon he is knocking her skull into the bed's headboard, which only makes him pump harder still. (Outside, a cleaning maid shakes her head at the noise.) Harder and harder he goes until, with a sickening crack, he comes, and collapses onto her back with a thud.

He breathes in deep, but there's a strange smell. He opens his eyes to find a line of blood running thru Triana's hair and down onto the bed. "Shit!" he exclaims, and pulls out, his erection fading. He spins the girl over and shakes her violently, but her body feels strangely limp. He feels her pulse and she is gone. "Shit!" he says again, only quieter this time.

He is breathing heavily; he needs to focus, needs to think of a plan. He looks around the room. A window! He wraps the girl up in the sheets, and hoists her over to it and tosses her out, making a quiet thud on the ground below. Turning back to the bed, he notices more sheets stained with blood. He tears them up and tosses them out too, covering the body. Luckily, however, the bed is so lusciously appointed that nothing has gotten through to the mattress and very little is on the headboard. He wipes it clean, showers the blood off himself, and takes a deep breath before heading for the front desk.

"I'd like to rent a car," he tells the concierge. "Of course, sir," he replies. Soon he is loading the bundle of limbs and sheets into the trunk of an SUV and heading off down the coast. He finds a boat rental spot and manages to smuggle the body on board the craft. He ties on some ballast for good measure and then takes it all some ways out into the ocean, before pitching it overboard.

Back in his hotel room (his bed having been quickly remade), he stares at his hands. He has murdered, he has taken a human life. And yet, he has gotten away with it. The women here so eagerly give themselves up to be used here, used and discarded, discarded like just another market good. And nobody cares if they are gone — nobody cares about them at all. What power, to be able to control human life like that. What power, to be that kind of man.

That night, the sex is incredible.

Unfortunately, his island carouse is fast coming to an end. The next day Abramoff takes them back to the airport and quickly he finds himself back in his DC apartment, showering and putting on his white-collared shirt, before heading into the office. He finishes off his story on Saipan (“Maybe we on the mainland can learn something about freedom from our far-flung island commonwealth,” he [writes](#). “Imagine: an island paradise where newcomers are welcomed and enterprise flourishes.”) and sends it to his bosses. But even with the job finished, he can’t shake the island from his mind.

His life of white apartments and gray offices seems stale now, he longs for a little excitement in his life. He heads to a Adams Morgan bar, but the girls here are all involved in their own scenarios, with none of the come-hither looks of those on the island. He nurses a beer at the bar, trying to put the longing out of his mind. An attractive girl comes to the bar, ordering drinks for her friends. As she scoops up the drinks and heads back, Jason calls out at her: “Hey there, can I get you anything?” She turns around and stares at him, before turning back and walking away.

He has to get back to Saipan.

Obama's Next Move

September 15, 2008

[Original link](#)

I've been hesitant to talk about political strategy this season. Partly because it's so cliched (everyone's doing it), partly because it's so ephemeral, partly because it's just boring. But I think the situation Obama's found himself in has larger resonances and coming up with a solution to it is genuinely difficult.

For those who haven't been following things, the story is this. There are two candidates: Barack Obama, a young centrist Democrat who bills himself as the post-partisan candidate of "change" (i.e. not Bush), and John McCain, a fairly non-ideological 72-year-old Republican who has decided to give up on his centrist inclinations and run far to the right. For the first half of the campaign, Obama's message has been that he's change while McCain is more of the same (visual: McCain hugging Bush). McCain has argued that he's got experience and courage while Obama is not ready to lead.

This was exactly the campaign Obama had planned on and their strategy was working perfectly; McCain was behind just about the whole time. So McCain decided to shake things up and picked Sarah Palin, an unknown, far-right woman to be VP and began campaigning on them being "the original mavericks". (McCain's lack of ideology led the press to call him a maverick for signing onto some liberal bills; Palin won her seat through a primary challenge against corrupt Alaska Republicans.) Palin is wildly inexperienced (and so is being kept from the press) and most of her claims to be anti-corruption are complete lies, but the press has been half-hearted in pointing this out.

So that's the recap. Now the problem. Whenever they're stuck, conservatives have two traditional responses: swift-boating and projection. Swift-boating is taking your opponent's main asset and making it a liability. The classic example is taking John Kerry's venerated war service and arguing that it was a fraud. But it can be used more generally as well. So when someone says "We need to increase welfare to help the poor," the conservatives reply "Welfare doesn't help the poor — it just encourages them to be lazier." Projection is take your opponent's main asset and claiming it to be your own. The classic example here is that when the media is doing an effective job of parroting your story, you get out in front and complain that it spends its time parroting your *opponent's* story. The projection response to welfare is "No, we're the ones who really want to help the poor — that's why we're proposing an ownership society."

It's tough to swift-boat Obama on the issue of change. He's young, he's black, he's a Democrat. Calling him more of the same just seems laughable. But, because of McCain's history, saying that McCain is also for change has more resonance.

So what does Obama do? Whichever direction he goes, McCain will just follow him there. If Obama says he's for *real* change, McCain will just say he's for real change too. To voters, it'll seem like a toss-up. Worse, a lot of Obama's electoral strategy hinges on his massive on-the-ground team of volunteers bringing out new voters. If he goes negative (the obvious response), he'll take the campaign down into a mud-slinging match and turn all those new voters off. The only way to win is to go someplace McCain can't. And the one place McCain can't go is the issues. (Gasp! We might actually have to talk about issues.)

McCain's plans have been the most nutzoid right-wing proposals: end employer-paid health care, permanent bases in Iraq, tax cuts for the rich, and head-in-the-sand about energy. They're big juicy targets. But so far, Obama has been incompetent about going after them. Whenever his ads begin talking about issues, they suddenly switch into policy-wonk mode and begin using so many long words that even I don't understand what he's going on about. And when they criticize John McCain they just seem like they're making stuff up. To win, Obama's ads will have to make the issues sexy — he'll have to find a way to make talking about policy entertaining.

Crazy as that sounds, it isn't impossible. There's real substance to these policy disagreements — they're genuinely interesting. John McCain, for example, thinks the big problem with health care in America is that people have too much of it. Employers buy health care in bulk for all their workers, whether they need it or not. Instead, he thinks each American should pay for health care on their own. That's crazy, but it's substantive crazy.

Instead of taking the campaign further into the mud, Obama will seem as if he's raising it back up to talk about the issues. Hell, the media might even feel the pressure and start talking about issues themselves. It's too late in the game for McCain to rewrite all his policy proposals, so he'll either have to try to defend them (a complete losing battle) or he'll have to keep slinging mud at someone who is trying to have a serious discussion. Either way, he looks bad.

I have no idea if the Obama campaign is going to do anything like this. But it's the only way I see out of their rut.

My Slate

September 16, 2008

[Original link](#)

Well, it's election day in Massachusetts. (If you don't know what's going on, check out this actually quite nice website: [wheredoivotema.com](#)) And, since nobody else seems to be, I thought I'd tell you who I'm voting for. (I live in central Cambridge and will be voting in the Democratic primary, for what it's worth.)

Senate: Edward J. O'Reilly. Ed O'Reilly is against the war in Iraq, supports single-payer health care, and actually wants to fight for things in Washington. John Kerry lost to George W. Bush, is running on his ability to earmark money for the state, and didn't spend the last ten million in his Presidential campaign so he could spend it on this Senate race. (He claims he saved it for a Florida recount-type situation, as if nobody would donate money to him if the election was again hanging by a thread.) Kerry has an inspiring story; he came back from Vietnam to work to end the war and entered Congress promising not to send soldiers to another such battle. But he's sold out, and that's exactly what he did.

House (District 8): Michael E. Capuano. I don't know much about Capuano, although he seems a reliable liberal vote, but he's running unopposed.

Councillor (Sixth District): Roseann Trifoni-Mazzuchelli. This was a tough one. Councillors apparently mainly vet judicial nominations. Roseann is an (admittedly somewhat crazy-seeming) outsider campaigning on a platform of anti-corruption and tough-on-pedophiles. Personally, I think we're too tough on pedophiles, but I have to balance that on wanting a fervent anti-corruptionist to shake things up. I ended up going with Roseann.

State Senate (1 Suffolk + Middlesex): Anthony W. Petrucci. I know literally nothing about this guy, but (surprise!) he's running unopposed. (Geez, this is getting boring; maybe I should run against one of these people.)

State House (25 Middlesex): Alice K. Wolf. Unopposed. Former mayor of Cambridge, supporter of gay marriage, and took the NPAT, so she can't be all bad.

Register of Probate (Middlesex): I was going to just say "John R. Buonomo", because he's running unopposed and honestly, it's Register of Probate, so who cares? but a quick Google search finds he's been suspended and is currently on trial for — get this — stealing thousands of dollars in change from government xerox machines. So my first thought is "Why is he still on the ballot?" and my second thought is "Who steals thousands of dollars

in change from xerox machines?” He has since [resigned](#) to fight the charges, although [apparently](#) they have surveillance footage.

On the other hand, the Probate Court’s website says it was paid for by him personally, so maybe it was for a good cause. (Or at least it does in the Google cache; the current version has been scrubbed of him.)

So, uh, I guess I write-in for Marie A. Gardin, who was sworn in as interim register of probate. Or leave it blank? Ah, I see that the papers and blogs are all endorsing [Tom Concannon](#), former mayor of Newton, who supports abolishing Register of Probate as an elected office. Good enough for me.

Write in: “Thomas B. Concannon, 8 Bacon Rd., Newton” or [get a sticker](#).

Update: Voted without incident. Polls were pretty empty but the system was extremely orderly.

High Gas Prices Are Reagan's Fault

September 18, 2008

[Original link](#)

A decade from now, when the seas begin to rise and the earth begins to boil, who will get blamed? Surely not George W. Bush, who spent 8 crucial years denying the problem, slowing the movement of other countries, and giving India and China an excuse for delay.

As evidence, look at what happen to Jimmy Carter. He called for a national investment in alternative energy so that gas-guzzling cars would be a thing of the past. Reagan scuttled all that and today as oil prices rise we have very little in the way of alternatives ready. But the sainted Reagan is never blamed.

Blame the Terrorist Black Muslims

October 15, 2008

[Original link](#)

As John McCain sinks in the polls, it's been amazing to watch one of America's two major parties adopt wholesale an insane racist conspiracy theory and to watch the mainstream media lap it up. Back when Republicans were insisting that the Clintons ran an underground drug-smuggling ring and murdering their political opponents, you at least had to send away for the video. Now it's broadcast 24-hours-a-day on CNN and Fox.

The claims, outlined in [this seizure-inducing Web ad](#) (since deleted from McCain's site), are basically that Barack Obama, left-wing terrorists, and inner-city blacks have teamed up to cause the mortgage meltdown and commit voter fraud to ensure Obama wins the election. Yes, in an era when huge banks are failing left and right and the Republican is down 14 points in the polls, Republicans are convinced that poor African-Americans must be responsible. If only!

It's all blatant lies, of course, but it's really been incredible to watch the Republicans be forced into such lunacy. And, of course, it's undoubtedly setting the stage for more repression and violence against powerless blacks. And ACORN, one of the few organizations that actually helps these communities, is just being shredded by the media because of these false allegations. Of course, it's also a cover for ongoing attempts at voter intimidation and other sleazy tactics to steal the election.

There's a lot of confusion about what happened, so let me explain it simply: as the dot-com bubble was bursting, Alan Greenspan looked for a new place to park all that cash. And the answer was houses. It was a dot-com bubble repeat in slow-motion. Prices rose and rose, people started withdrawing [hundreds of thousands of dollars in equity](#) from their house, "experts" on CNBC (like [David Lereah](#)) said that housing prices would always go up, brokers started issuing mortgages to everyone with a pulse, everyone began buying and flipping homes.

The mortgages were sold to upstream firms, among them Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, which conservatives had insisted on privatizing to let the market's magic work. The upstream firms packaged them into securities to sell to the big pile of money and then all bought insurance on each other to ensure that if one failed the whole thing would come crashing down. (Conservatives refused to regulate the insurance market — the government isn't smarter than these big banks, they said.)

Fail it did, as soon as the housing bubble burst and housing prices returned to their normal levels. This meant the new mortgages weren't worth paying back, meaning the mortgage-backed securities were worthless, meaning it was time to

collect on the insurance, meaning the whole system came crashing down. And thus, the bailout.

You can see why conservatives might prefer to blame it all on blacks.

These tactics infuriate me. I don't know how to stop them, but I will do my small part by [donating to ACORN](#). I hope you'll join me.

In Defense of Anonymity

October 24, 2008

[Original link](#)

In 1787, when America's framers wanted to argue for its Constitution, they published their arguments (the Federalist Papers) anonymously. Whistleblowers have released everything from the Pentagon Papers to the Downing Street Memos. Anonymous speech is a First Amendment right.

And yet, on the supposedly Wild West frontier of the Internet, publishing anonymously is not so easy. Hosting providers require a name and credit card, which they have to hand over to the FBI at the drop of a National Security Letter. Free hosting sites zealously obey takedown requests and require publishers to reveal their identity if they want their stuff put back up (a tactic Scientologists have used). Luckily there are now services like [Wikileaks](#), but they only publish a very narrow range of content.

But, talking with Virgil Griffith and others, I hit upon a new way of allowing for anonymous publishing. The amazing [Tor project](#) lets you use the Internet anonymously, by disguising your traffic thru a long series of relays. Less well-known is that it also allows for anonymous publishing, by running the system in reverse. Unfortunately, you need the Tor software to visit anonymously-published sites, but we realized there's no reason this need be so.

So I dusted off some work I'd begun years and years ago and build a tor2web proxy. Now anyone with a web browser can visit an anonymous Tor URL like <http://sexy36iscapohm7b.onion/> from any Web browser, without any special software, just by going to:

<http://sexy36iscapohm7b.tor.theinfo.org/>

Which means that publishing an anonymous website is now also fairly easy. ([There are instructions on the Tor site](#) — just replace the `.onion` when you hand out the URL. If that's too tricky, you could use an existing provider like [Freedom Hosting](#).)

tor2web proxies act like any other sort of proxy or router; they just route traffic from a client to a server and don't get involved themselves, so they can't be held legally responsible for the content that passes thru them. But to prevent against a single point of failure, I'm asking others [to set up tor2web nodes](#) to distribute the load. The next step, of course, [is to support mirroring](#) so that people can still find interesting files, even if one hidden server goes down.

Here's to anonymity — and more tools protecting it.

What Could Happen

October 31, 2008

[Original link](#)

My usual attitude is one of skepticism toward politicians. They routinely disappoint. But, for a moment, let's take the opposite scenario. What's the most that we could hope for?

Barack Obama grew up middle class and black. Obviously intelligent, he left school knowing he wanted to make a difference, but unsure how. Inspired by the civil rights movement and SNCC, he joined various progressive organizations like NYPIRG and worked as a community organizer.

He then entered law school and graduated highly, but instead of taking a clerkship went back to Chicago to write a book about race relations and, later, run a voter registration drive. He taught Constitutional Law and joined the board of various progressive foundations. He turned his sights toward politics, where he's spent the last ten years, representing largely progressive districts.

Throughout his political career, he has been criticized for being overly cautious and moderate. But he's been taken unusual pains to reach out to left-wing journals (including fairly obscure ones) who have leveled such criticisms, talked to them personally, and tried to defend himself.

In his presidential campaign, he's raised hundreds of millions of dollars, much of it coming from small-dollar donors. He's built a grassroots organization never seen before in this country, with millions of well-coordinated members. Through an incredibly well-executed campaign and a series of eloquent speeches, he seems poised to take the presidency with both houses of Congress, a solid majority, and a strong mandate.

This is unique. He hasn't spent enough time in politics to get chewed up by the system. He hasn't become dependent on a handful of big-money donors. He comes from a background of progressive politics. And he has an army of cash and people behind him.

Let's say he wanted to reform health care, an issue towards the top of Americans' minds and a task that's necessary to balance the budget and get real wages rising again. The majority of the country supports a single-payer program, like in every other industrialized nation, but because of the vast influence of money in politics, it's often been considered politically impossible to achieve.

But Obama could pull it off. With his eloquence, he could easily sell the plan to the country. The Democratic majority in both houses would get him most of the votes he needed. With his fundraising and volunteer network, he could threaten to have primary challengers replace any Congresspeople who disagree. (Obama

personally has raised around \$700M. The average Congressional campaign costs less than \$1M.) With his tactical shrewdness, he could outwit industry lobbying groups.

Across a wide variety of such issues, it's possible to imagine a President Obama getting such things done. He has sufficient skill, background, and power to pull it off. It's hard to imagine a similar situation in history. (FDR, who Obama is often compared to, came from a very upper-class background and was strongly pulled by the far-left inspired by the Depression.)

Do I think it will happen? No. The far-right spent these final days shrieking that Obama is a closet socialist who will take this country into a new era of single-payer health care, strong financial regulation, revitalized unions, progressive taxation, a green economy, and universal voting rights. I wish it were so.

Instead, Obama has proposed the most moderate and cautious plan of all Democratic candidates, repeatedly refused to make ideological challenges out of fear of alienating voters, caved on even obvious questions like illegal wiretapping, surrounded himself with old centrist party hacks, and spent most of his campaign arguing for vague generalities like "change" rather than specific policy proposals. So all signs point to Obama being another cautious moderate.

But the striking thing is that none of these are dispositive. It's possible to imagine that, like W, Obama has run a quiet campaign focused on building an electoral majority which he plans to use to push through the policies he truly favors. It's implausible (the hardest thing to explain away is the FISA vote; even my most hopeful side can't think of any decent explanation for that) but it is possible. And it will only be more likely if we fight for it.

If we don't it seems Obama's most likely path is to become what the left's pundits call "a more competent steward of empire" — do a bunch of reasonable, sensible things that will probably have quite positive effects on the lives of most Americans, while leaving all the fundamentals untouched. But while that would be a welcome respite from the past eight years, let's not squander this rare opportunity for something more.

[*Now playing:* [Neil Young - "Flags of Freedom"](#)]

Whatever It Takes?

November 1, 2008

[Original link](#)

The big book right now in liberal education circles is Paul Tough's *Whatever It Takes* — and with good reason. The book is touching and delightful; it deftly mixes an intellectual history of the academic debates around poverty with an on the ground look at programs to alleviate it, all in the best magazine feature style. But I found the book disturbing in what it left out: the topics it failed to discuss and the questions it failed to ask. For a book about education, there sure wasn't much in the way of critical thinking.

The book's practical hero is Geoffrey Canada, an African-American who graduated from the Harlem ghettos to running local programs to help others do the same. But he quickly became frustrated at the small scale at which he worked, "saving lives" one and two at a time, when thousands of others were all around him. So he decides to adopt a multiblock area of Harlem, which he calls the Harlem Children's Zone, and do "whatever it takes" to make sure the kids in it get to and graduate from college: parent training, afterschool programs, entirely new schools. And, the story goes, there are fits and starts along the way, but he's really hit on something big: the schools are a success, the press loves the story, Barack Obama vows to expand the program to a dozen more cities.

And yet. The schools are considered a success because they pass New York State's standardized tests. And they do that because their principals—under pressure from Canada to raise scores—turn the schools into 24-hour test prep centers. Kids start taking practice tests in the middle of 3rd grade and repeat them every six months so that they've near-memorized them by the time they have to take them for real. The school day is lengthened and summer break is skipped so that there's more time for test prep. There are even test prep sessions on weekends to make sure every kid gets the right grade.

A couple characters—including the middle school principal—object, spouting lines about "teaching the whole child" and insisting it's a bad idea to replace music and art with more test prep. But they're given little quarter by the book and Canada eventually fires them because they're not "getting results" (i.e. high test scores). Most of the remaining teachers leave *en masse* after that.

It's weird. When it comes to their own kids, safely enrolled at suburban private schools, liberals don't seem to have much trouble seeing the problems with high-stakes testing and the importance of music and art, but when it comes to the urban poor such concerns suddenly become expendable, mere niceties that distract from the real business of "tougher standards". (For those who don't know the problems with standardized tests, here's a few: Most of them are

norm-referenced, designed to ensure half the kids fail. You do better at them by thinking worse — skipping hard parts, guessing answers, skimming instead of understanding. And I have yet to see evidence that raising test scores leads to any good for kids.)

But there's a more serious problem with the whole theory that underlies the book. The story's intellectual hero is James Heckman, a conservative University of Chicago economist. Heckman has done a great deal of research on "human capital" — his argument is that investing in early childhood education pays off in the long run by making future workers much more productive, and thus wealthy. To prove this, he cites a number of studies, the most famous of which was on Perry Preschool. In that study, researchers followed a bunch of black kids in Ypsilanti, Michigan and gave half of them free preschool. Tracking them down again at age 27 and age 40, they found the kids who went to preschool stayed in school longer, graduated from high school more, had fewer teen pregnancies and arrests, and made more money. Clearly we should give everyone free preschool!

I have nothing against more free preschool, but this argument is flawed. What makes people stay in school, not get arrested, and make more money isn't preschool but a good job. A long line of research has shown that when kids have the prospect of a good job in front of them, they tend to buckle down and work harder. Conversely, when jobs disappear, kids turn to drugs and crime and ditching school—after all, why not?

But the Perry Preschool Program didn't create any new good jobs for those kids. It just redistributed the ones that already existed, giving them to the kids who went to preschool instead of those who didn't. If everyone in Ypsilanti had gone to preschool, things would be right back where they were before. (More technically, assume that an increase in human capital increases a worker's productivity. Universal preschool increases the productivity of workers while leaving their supply at the same level. If supply outstrips demand (i.e. there's unemployment), wages will be unchanged.)

If we truly want every kid to succeed, we need to create jobs for all of them. And that will take fiscal and monetary stimulus, not just better schools.

November 4

November 7, 2008

[Original link](#)

I awoke early to vote for change. It was an unseasonably gorgeous fall day, bright sunlight glinting of the color-changing trees and making everything look golden, the air warm and comfortable. I walked to my polling place, just blocks away, in the basement of city hall. The line stretched out the door and around the building. It was clear this was no ordinary election. “I’ve never seen anything like this,” one old-timer commented. “I’ve never voted here before,” another explained.

An elderly man brought a chair to sit on while he waited, I chatted with friends I spotted behind me in line — it seemed as if the whole neighborhood was here. Nobody minded. Spirits were bright and the pollworkers seemed almost giddy at getting to oversee the process. Few of the elections were contested and the winner of the Massachusetts’ electoral votes was a foregone conclusion, but everyone felt a need to be there.

I grabbed some breakfast and dispatched some errands and then grabbed my companion for the trip to nearby New Hampshire. The night before I had persuaded her to drive me up and volunteer. A swing state, just an hour away, I pointed out. Won’t it be fun to join in one of the biggest and most impressive volunteer operations in history? Convinced, we set the GPS for Manchester City Center and drove off toward history.

Manchester is not a big city. Elm, its main drag, is crammed with office buildings and city hall and sports stadiums side-by-side as if no one would find them if they were spread farther apart. If it gives off any impression, it’s one of New England homeiness: brownstone buildings, divey diners with pizza and subs. Wandering the streets, I couldn’t help but think of Jed Bartlett bundled against the cold, buttonholing a senior staffer. I literally bounced with excitement. The streets were filled with optimism and it seemed like every street bum and cashier and radio was talking about the election.

The Obama office was on Elm Street, just further down, as the buildings thinned out and begun to look somewhat abandoned. Next door were what looked like abandoned carpet showrooms turned into headquarters for local political campaigns, a huge billboard proclaiming “SUNUNU” loomed in the distance. Behind it was a packed parking lot in front of an elegant cemetery. We parked the car and headed back around to the front door, passing laughing kids carrying doorhangers, rows of portapotties, a mountain of discarded pizza boxes, and a few big bags of plastic bottles and packaged lunches.

Shy at the best of times, I couldn't summon the courage and walk through the door and lay myself on the line — so I pushed my companion to do it first. The notion filled her with dread and, clutching her stomach, she ran back around to the portapotties to vomit. "You can't just expect me to march into a campaign office with no warning like that," she complained. "You need to sign up, get an assignment, pick a shift." I disagreed, pointing to a couple emails I'd gotten on my phone urging me to head down to the closest Obama office as quickly as possible. She was not persuaded. At a stalemate, we decided to go grab some pizza and summon our courage.

Newly fortified, I bravely marched into the office. Stairs led up to a receiving platform. One door was labeled phonebanking, another canvassing, and an office seemed to lie behind the front desk. At the top of the stairs peering out over the railing stood a broad-shouldered guy in a green shirt. "You here to volunteer?" he asked us as we walked in. "How can we help?" I asked. "Perfect!" he said. "Come on up here."

Once we were within his sights, he began his spiel, full of energy. "We're making history today! This is the most important election of our lifetime and we need you to help. And the way you're going to make history"— he grabbed a manila folder off the counter —"is by going to going to Sandown." "No," said the girl sitting behind the front desk. "Bedford." He placed the file back and grabbed a new one from the girl. "Forget Sandown, you're not going to make history in Sandown. You're going to make history in Bedford."

A couple young girls walked in, also wanting to volunteer, and he quickly pulled them into our group. "You're going to make history today in Bedford. We need to get every single person out to the polls." He opened the file and pulled out a map. "Now what you're going to do is head over to our Bedford staging area and they're going to give you your assignment." He handed out directions and made sure everyone understood. "Now it's not going to be a big building like this — it's going to be a house we're borrowing with a ton of cars parked outside." We all nodded.

"Sounds good? Are you fired up? Ready to go? Let's make history! Remember — we're counting on you. Oh, one more thing—" he turned to one of the girls. "Did you vote for change today?" She nodded. He handed her a "I voted for change" Obama sticker. "Did you vote for change today?" "Yep." Sticker. "Did you vote for change today?" "I voted for change weeks ago," my companion explained. He grinned and handed her a sticker. And I got one too. "Now let's make history!" And with this enthusiastic sendoff, we headed back to our cars to drive to Bedford.

Bedford is a sleepy little suburban town with houses three times the size of San Francisco mansions and lawns bigger than the houses. As promised, the Bedford staging center was one of them, with cars filling the enormous driveway and stretching out onto the street. As we walked the path up to the front door, little signs had been posted in the grass, together spelling out a quote from

Barack Obama about the importance of activism and change, a couple sentences at a time.

Inside was the typical suburban home, except filled with campaign workers milling around. It reminded me a bit of what it looks like when someone's house is borrowed for filming. "Water and granola to the left, canvas packets to the right," someone explained. We headed right, into the living room, where a man behind a table was lecturing to a group of maybe twenty or thirty people. He was just finishing up as we arrived.

"Well, I've talked for long enough. But here's the basic idea. You go thru the packet, you find people who weren't home or hadn't voted yet, you knock on their doors and you mark the result down. Got it?" People nodded, grabbed their clipboards, and headed out. We went up and grabbed a clipboard of our own. "What do you say?" we asked. "You say: 'Hi, I'm here for change. We need change this election. And Barack Obama and Jeanne Shaheen are the change we need.' (We support Lynch too but he doesn't need our help.) This isn't like normal canvassing. If you spend more than a minute at a house you're doing it wrong. And you need to take your car—houses here are so far apart that it can take three minutes to walk from one to another." We grabbed some doorhangers and headed off, leaving our name and number on a sheet indicating who was working which turf. Kids were wandering around the apartment chatting as we left. We certainly weren't the only ones who had driven up from Boston. Outside, the signs in this direction read "Fired up? Ready to go!"

Canvassing in the suburbs seems about the last thing any kid would want to spend your day doing. Here's how it works: You're given a clipboard with a list of people. Each one has a name, age, gender, address, and sometimes a phone number. They're sorted by address. You find their house, park outside, walk down their (loooong) driveway, and knock on the door. Usually, they're not home and you check "not home" on the clipboard and stick a doorhanger (which says "VOTE OBAMA TODAY", gives polling place information, and explains that college students and unregistered people can still vote) on the door. You could tell the folks who were out-of-town because they had a whole collection of doorhangers, each one more urgent than the next — "VOTE OBAMA NOV. 4", "VOTE OBAMA TUESDAY", "VOTE OBAMA TODAY!"

That's probably the best case. If they're home, you awkwardly try to explain why you're out here in the middle of nowhere knocking on their door, and ask them to go vote. It was late in the day and our walk packet had already been walked once before, so everyone we met had already voted, for Obama naturally. (The exception was one couple who we encountered walking to their car. They were heading out to vote, they assured us.)

The first few times I was too nervous to say anything and let my companion do all the talking, but after a few times of seeing what peoples' reaction were like (positive, friendly, and filled with assurances they'd already voted for Obama) I begun speaking up and then splitting the workload.

Out in the suburbs, you spend most of the time hunting for the right house numbers (our walk list was careful to only include known supporters, which meant most houses were skipped) and walking back to your car. You get to see people, but not a particularly wide variety and not for very long. A handful were very friendly and expressed their appreciation that we were volunteering. One asked us to leave extra doorhangers for her husband to see. (Naturally, her husband was not on our list of Obama supporters.) It was wildly unrewarding work and it quickly got late, forcing us to walk alongside streets without sidewalks in the dark. (We hadn't thought to bring flashlights.) Toward the end, I ran into the one woman who was mean to us. Refusing the open the door she shouted thru the window at me, angry I'd interrupted her cooking dinner. (Of course she'd already voted.) Tired and frustrated, we headed back to the staging center, only 3/4 of the way through the packet.

Back at the staging center, college girls were chatting with the house's owner, a well-coiffed woman with gold earrings and a pink sweater. Was the kid running things here their son, they asked? "Kerry? Oh no, he's just a volunteer who's been living here for the campaign." Kerry, for his part, was packing up and heading for Manchester. Like a professional entertainer, his enthusiastic demeanor had been packed up too. He was upset to hear we hadn't made it through the whole walklist, but cheered up when he learned it was one that had already been walked. "Find any nonvoters?" he asked. "No," I said, "except for one couple we caught on their way to vote." "Yeah, people here, they need a nudge maybe, but they're going to vote. Not like people in Manchester. There you gotta pick 'em up, walk 'em to the polls, stand next to them in line, and then stand behind them as they swear the affidavits." (New voters without ID or proof of address can vote by swearing an affidavit, as the doorhanger explained.) He didn't sound enthusiastic, just grimly determined.

"You know, New Hampshire was once won by just a couple hundred votes?" "Wow," I said, putting on my best isn't-volunteering-important? tone. "Of course, that was like a hundred years ago, but still." And with that, Kerry rushed out, telling one volunteer to email him and wishing him luck with college.

The college girls were still chatting. "Wow, this is some good pizza," they said. "Hah," said the house's owner, "people think you can only get good pizza in Boston, but Bedford proves otherwise." "We're going to head back to Boston — we've all got election parties."

There wasn't much left to do here and with just 45 minutes until the polls closed, chasing downtown voters to the polls didn't sound like much fun, so we decided to head back to Boston as well. Things were pretty clear by the time we got there, but we dutifully watched the TV and Web as the networks inched closer to calling it. When they finally did, we could hear honks and cheers go up from outside our window.

McCain quickly conceded — even before the polls in Alaska had closed — and Obama's acceptance speech followed shortly thereafter. It was a calm, studied affair. There were no big surprises — everything turned out basically as had

been predicted for the past month. “At this point, FiveThirtyEight is just spoilers,” my companion observed. I didn’t feel much enthusiasm, just relief. It had happened. It had really truly happened. We sat quietly and let it sink in.

Apparently we were in the minority when it came to quiet acceptance. Outside, we could hear drums banging and horns honking and people screaming by. Harvard Square begun filling up with cheering people, as far as the eye could see. I’ve never seen it so packed — folks said it was even bigger than when the Red Sox won the World Series. Even the police seem jubilant. “Were you expecting this?” someone asked them. “We should have...”

The procession marched down Mass Ave, the city’s main street, picking up people on the sidewalk as it went. Flags were hoisted, signs were waved, people chanted “Yes We Did!” and “Time For Peace!” (“What do we want?” “Change!” “When do we want it?” “Now!”) “Change begins tomorrow” became “Change starts now”.

The police became increasingly aggravated at the march without a permit and cop cars began flashing their sirens and trying to force people onto the sidewalk while shouting at us with their megaphones. Folks were pissed at them — there was some talk about fighting back or smashing the Gap we passed — but cooler heads prevailed and folks just kept marching.

Finally, we headed into the new parkish thing outside Toscanini’s and someone jumped on top of a table to give a speech. “Don’t stand on that, please,” one of the cops asked, “it was named for one of my guys.” He stood on top of a concrete embankment instead. I recognized a few faces in the crowd and it became clear I wasn’t the only one who was back from New Hampshire.

“We did this!” the guy on the concrete shouted. “Through our voting and our volunteering, we changed this country. Making change won’t be easy, but tonight we celebrate that we’ve changed who’s in the White House.” The cops snickered. Another kid jumped on top of the concrete. “And pot is legal!” he screamed. “Decriminalized!” shouted the cops. (A state ballot proposition reducing the penalty for possession of reasonable quantities of marijuana to a \$100 fine had passed.)

Soon things folded up and folks shuffled back to Harvard Square, peeling off to their apartments as they went. I got back and watched CNN’s video of similar street gatherings in cities across the country, saw Flickr photos of similarly packed town centers. A lot of work lay ahead, but for that night we could relax and say simply: we won.

The Credibility Gap

November 15, 2008

[Original link](#)

It was, you may recall, a truism of the campaign that Barack Obama did not have the experience to “lead”, while Hillary Clinton and John McCain clearly did. This was a difficult point to argue against politically — voters knew that John McCain and Hillary Clinton had been in government and on TV for many years and looked old and respected, while Barack Obama looked young and new. And yet, the exact opposite was true: Barack Obama was the only one of the three who was a competent leader.

This was seen, foremost, in the management of their campaigns. Hillary Clinton’s campaign consisted of friends and loyalists, each with poorly-defined job titles, who took every opportunity to attack their coworkers for their own benefit. (“It was a terribly unpleasant place to work,” [explained](#) a Clinton staffer. “You had seven people on a morning call, all of whom had tried to get someone else on the call fired, or knew someone on the call tried to get them fired. It was not a recipe for cohesive team building.”)

Spending was out of control, the campaign lurched from message to message, and her senior advisors were woefully ill-advised. (Top campaign strategist Mark Penn, who didn’t even quit his day job as CEO of the most notorious corporate public relations and unionbusting firm, didn’t even know that states awarded delegates proportionally.) Bill kept interfering, backchanneling with staffers and giving speeches without clearance, while Hillary got angry and threw fits.

This shouldn’t have been a surprise. [As far back as 2004](#), Brad DeLong was trying to talk people out of supporting Hillary for President, based on her total failure at health care reform in 1993/4. His explanation is worth quoting at length:

[W]hen senior members of the economic team said that key senators like Daniel Patrick Moynihan would have this-and-that objection, she told them they were disloyal. When junior members of the economic team told her that the Congressional Budget Office would say such-and-such, she told them (wrongly) that her conversations with CBO head Robert Reischauer had already fixed that. When long-time senior hill staffers told her that she was making a dreadful mistake by fighting with rather than reaching out to John Breaux and Jim Cooper, she told them that they did not understand the wave of popular political support the bill would generate. And when substantive objections were raised to the plan by analysts calculating the moral hazard and adverse selection pressures it would put on the nation’s health-care system...

Hillary fans later tried to assure him that she had change, but this campaign seems to have borne out his original estimation.

John McCain's campaign consisted of extremists pulled from Bush's entourage and beyond, who pressured the candidate into compromising his instincts, policies, and principles. Used to running small, personal insurgent campaigns, he let his Bush-backed campaign advisors spend money on huge offices and ad buys meant to convey a sense of inevitability. (It didn't work — the Bush base never contributed the money needed to pay for it all and it was largely scrapped when the campaign went bankrupt.)

His policy advisors came not just from the Bush team, but from the gamma quadrant. When McCain slipped up and said he wouldn't meet with Latin American dictators like the President of Spain, McCain's foreign policy advisor insisted this wasn't a gaffe — that McCain wasn't planning to meet with the man who pulled his troops out of Iraq. On health care, the centerpiece of their plan was to raise the price of insurance so that people wouldn't buy so much. On the economy — well, on the economy McCain seemed to announce a new plan every day. He canceled his campaign and flew to Washington to demand a meeting with the President on the bailout bill, but when, in the meeting, he was asked what his position was, he stormed out of the room. When the bill came to the floor, he took credit for putting it together. When it failed, he took credit for making sure it didn't pass. When a modified version passed, he took credit for that too. And in the debates, he seemed to announce new programs off-the-cuff, like one plan to have the government buy up all bad mortgages directly.

His management was similarly erratic. He liked to call staffers directly with ideas, in a subversive attempt to overthrow his own chain of command. He liked running his mouth off to the press and had to be restrained by his own staffers. Indeed, his whole campaign seemed like a struggle between two aspects of his personality. One knew what he had to do to win and put structures in place to do it, the other wasn't so big on winning and tried to subvert those same structures.

When a spokesperson, Jill Hazelbaker, called Obama's trip overseas a "campaign rally" and "one giant photo opportunity", McCain told the press he disagreed and would speak to her about it. Upset, Hazelbaker refused to come into work or return McCain's phone calls. His campaign manager told him he [had to apologize](#) to his spokesperson. Isn't it supposed to work the other way around? Then again, it does kind of explain why McCain addressed a group of supporters as "[my fellow prisoners](#)".

Barack Obama was a serious contrast. He picked the most experienced and talented staffers from the past Democratic campaigns. With a deft understanding of how to manage large, volunteer organizations from his days as a community organizer, he gave them clear roles and managed them effectively. With millions of volunteers around the country, he built what was probably one of the largest organizations in the country, and the whole thing went off like clockwork, with

everyone having clear, achievable goals and being held accountable for meeting them — despite the vast majority of them being unpaid volunteers!

When it came to policy, he put together advisory teams on each topic that contained leading experts from a variety of perspectives and tried to synthesize a coherent and centrist policy from each of them. The results were not perfect, but they were far more detailed and thoughtful than anyone expected from a Presidential candidate and tend to impress policy experts. (Compare this to their usual reaction to campaign material which is to hide their eyes and insist “well, (s)he really doesn’t mean it.”)

His team had a strategy and message and, for the most part, stuck with it, despite the usual fluctuations and setbacks. People weren’t capriciously fired (with the exception of foreign policy advisor Samantha Powers, who was axed for calling Hillary “a monster”) or reshuffled. They did their jobs and they did them well. “No drama Obama” was the slogan and they carried it out — no big changes or fights or leaks.

His transition has shown a similar preparedness and focus. He immediately assembled a council of varied and respected advisors on the financial crisis and later other topics. (Although at times the teams’ membership criteria can be puzzling.) One member of his team talks to the public (through Sunday show interviews and YouTube videos), while a website keeps everyone up-to-date. His staff does a thorough review of each candidate’s background and each agency’s operations. His team is even reviewing every Bush executive order to see which ones need to be overturned.

No doubt he will be a similar president: a competent manager, surrounded by effective and experienced people, all trying to do good things without fuss. The only remaining questions — remaining, clearly, because the answers haven’t been decided yet — are who those people will be and what good things they will carry out.

OCLC on the Run

November 15, 2008

[Original link](#)

OCLC is running scared. [My comments](#) on their attempt to monopolize library records has been Slashdotted, [our petition](#) has received hundreds of signatures, and they're starting to feel the heat.

At a talk I gave this morning to area librarians, an OCLC rep stood up and attempted to assure the crowd that what I was saying "wasn't entirely true". "What wasn't true?" I asked. "I'd love to correct things." She declined to say, insisting she "didn't want to get into an argument."

This evening, OCLC's Vice President for WorldCat and Metadata, provides more details. In a blog comment (which, I understand, was sent to OCLC members), she tries to downplay the issue, continuing the OCLC trend of doublespeak about this serious change.

She tries to claim we're on the same side ("We are likely in solid agreement") and insists they are just updating "the principles ... which have been in place since 1987" and absurdly claiming that the new rules are just a "clarification". (This is just one of a number of black-is-white falsehoods in her post.)

But never once does she defend the actual changes. And they're right there in black-and-white: the records aren't allowed to be used in anything that "substantially replicates the function, purpose, and/or size of WorldCat." I'm not sure how much clearer they can get; these new rules prohibit anyone from building anything that gets anywhere close to WorldCat.

My fundamental point stands: As servers have gotten cheaper, it's become easy to do for free the things OCLC charges such outrageous amounts for. But OCLC can't have that — they'd have to give up their huge office complex and high salaries (Ms. Calhoun was recently hired away from academia, so her salary isn't available yet, but her fellow VPs make around \$300,000/year). So they're trying to stamp out the competition.

Karen insists that "OCLC welcomes collaboration with Open Library", which seems a funny way of putting it. As I said last time, they've played hardball: trying to cut off our funding, hurt our reputation, and pressured libraries not to cooperate. When we tried to make a deal with them, they dragged their feet for months, pretended to come to terms, and then had their lawyers send us an "agreement" to sign that would require we take all OCLC-related records off our site.

Karen, if you really want to "increas[e] information access to users around the globe", like you say, here's an easy first step: put the 2 million WorldCat web

pages you shared with Google and Yahoo up for download on your website. It's only a small portion of your catalog and you've already shared it with others. Until you take even a baby step like that, it's hard to take your protestations of good intent seriously.

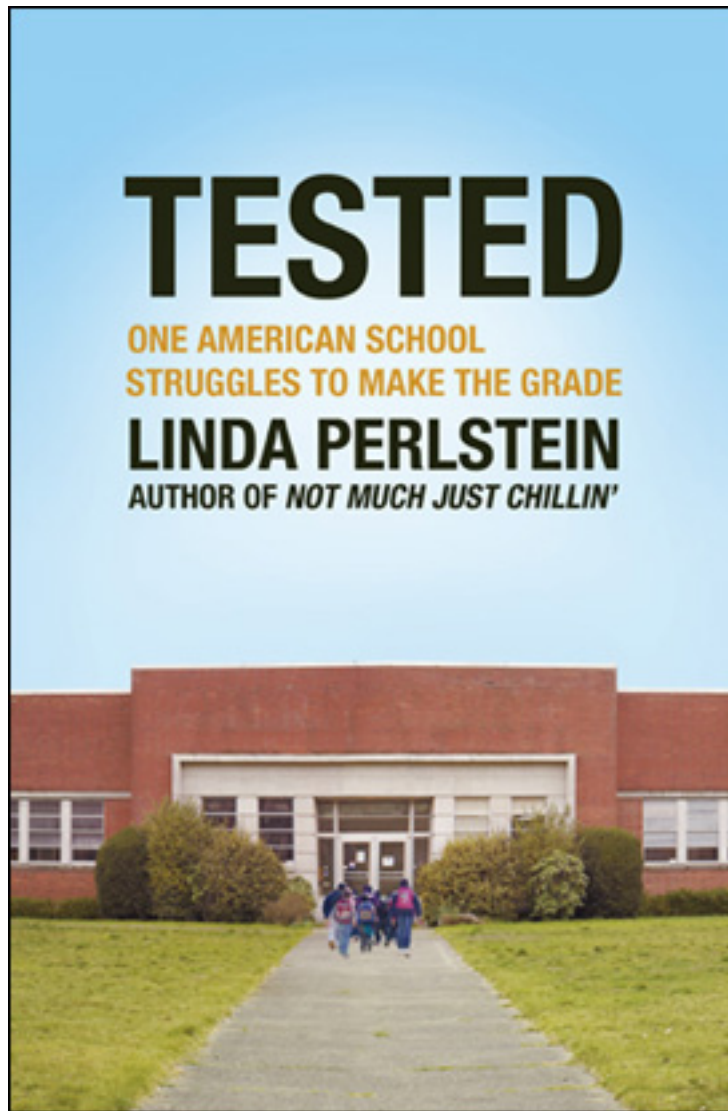
Kafka for the Kindergarten Set

November 16, 2008

[Original link](#)

Just as Bush's Healthy Forests Initiative cut down more trees and his Clean Skies Initiative increased pollution, his No Child Left Behind Act hurt students, especially poor students. That this is a controversial statement shows just how rare genuine child advocates are (compared to, say, environmentalists) in policy debates.

NCLB requires every school administer standardized tests to their students. If the scores are bad, they get punished. (This makes as much sense as beating kids who lose races.) And it only gets worse from there. Making high test scores the ultimate goal of education distorts everything along the way, sending schools spiraling own into a Kafkaesque nightmare of bureaucratic child torture.



The story is told in up-close detail in Linda Perlstein's *Tested*, a profile of Tyler Heights elementary in Maryland. It's a tale of such thoroughgoing rot that it's hard to even know where to begin. But let's start with the tests. They're invasive and traumatic. They take time and teachers away from class and scare students (especially since the kids are led to believe they won't graduate if they fail). They test narrow, specific knowledge in dumb ways ("What text features made the directions [in this cookie recipe] easy for third graders to follow?"). And they make kids feel like failures in situations where teachers are prohibited from helping.

The tests are just plain bad. Their questions are invariably annoying and sometimes just plain bizarre (“Which word is made up of two words?”). Of the handful of examples in the book (which are for 3rd graders), even I get some of them wrong. They assume weird background knowledge (which two presses are the same? “don’t press me”, “full-court press”, “tailor press”, “press agent”, “pressing for an answer”) and strange vocab (crabapples and cattails) and are just terribly written, full of stilted jargon.

But that’s just the beginning. Since the tests are so all-important, everything gets pushed around for them. Art and gym are cancelled (although, for contractual reasons, not in the school Perlstein studied) since they’re not tested, as is recess (this despite evidence recess improves test scores!). But even more absurdly, science and social studies are canceled too, since the test questions don’t address them.

The remaining time is spent teaching to the test. Test language infiltrates everything. The only writing students ever do is sample short-answer sections (“What text feature could have been added to help a reader better understand the information?”, as opposed to writing your own story). Even the stories kids read are analyzed only in terms of potential test questions.

Much of class is filled with pure test-prep: no actual education, just test-taking tricks. Some of it is common stuff — take deep breaths, work until the time is called, eliminate obviously wrong answers — but most of it is specific to the state’s bizarre test (special rules about how to phrase written answers and which words to use for extra points). The walls are filled with the school’s four-point plans for successful responses, e.g. BATS, which stands for “borrow from the question, answer the question, use text supports, stretch formula”.

It only gets worse from there. Apparently even non-stop test prep doesn’t raise scores enough, so schools are forced to use “evidence-based curricula” like “Saxon Math” and “Open Court Reading”. These are special packages of textbooks and workbooks and scripts for the teachers which prescribe specifically which stories and “text features” should be taught in which order and in which way. (Teachers can’t deviate from the script, of course, because that’s not “evidence-based”.) The whole system must be purchased for a small fortune from a major textbook company and supervisors occasionally drop in to make sure the books are being used appropriately.

It’s clear the books don’t teach any actual understanding; they’re just teaching kids to memorize the answers to various test prep questions. When asked a question, the students just cycle through random combinations of test buzzwords until they hit upon the right answer. Since they never get to read for fun, or even read for anything other than dissecting text features, they presumably learn to hate reading too.

But the stilted curricula is just the beginning of the scammers. In their desperation to raise scores up, schools are open to predation by a whole suite of consultants and teams who promise to have the winning secret to raising test

scores. (One of the book's most poignant scenes comes at an educational conference, when one such scam artist takes credit for the profiled school's test score rise.) And so the teachers are forced to do absurd things like write the state educational guidelines they plan to fulfill that day on the board, assign practice tests weekly, have their teaching evaluated by non-educators who observe them for fifteen minutes, and hold school assemblies on test prep featuring men in furry blue muppet costumes.

Together, it's a frightening picture: no recess, no science, no social studies, no leaving your chair or working in groups, just sitting in your seat, listening to scripts and test-prep advice, before worrying you're about fail school because you have no idea what they're saying. This is what they mean when they say "No Child Left Behind".

Every year, a couple months before school ends, a kind of controlled experiment happens in NCLB schools: The principal remains the same, the teachers remain the same, the students remain the same. The only thing that changes is that the test is over, forgotten until next year starts. And suddenly everything changes: test prep boards come off the wall, students start writing poetry, they go on field trips and do science experiments, they work in groups and do real reading.

I challenge anyone to watch both schools and insist that the first is better for our kids. I don't think you could do it. So, of course, nobody watches. Decisions on these laws are made far away, in DC, by folks whose only experience of public school comes from staged photo ops.

Everyone loves to critique No Child Left Behind. Democrats say it isn't fully funded, Republicans say it interferes too much with local control of schools. But this is just tinkering around the edges — nobody disagrees with the fundamental premise. After all, what politician can be against accountability?

The only question left is: who will hold them accountable?

An Obama Story

November 18, 2008

[Original link](#)

[John Comaroff](#) is a professor of anthropology at the University of Chicago, where Barack Obama used to teach. Obama still lives in the neighborhood, Hyde Park. Recently, [on the radio show *Open Source*](#), Comaroff told this story:

We have a cleaner in our building — 70-something-year-old African American guy; sweet, sweet guy. And every evening he comes into our office about six and takes our garbage and stuff. ... He didn't come in on Tuesday — I was up late, working until I went to see election results.

Of course, Hyde Park was abuzz. Hyde Park thinks of this election as its own. And the fact that the Obama kids were at school on Tuesday and Wednesday, and we all had to ride around the TV cameras to get to our parking, was the kind of masochistic pleasure that we're having in Hyde Park, which after all has always been told it's the fringe of the nation. We've always been told that nothing we do or say counts anywhere else, especially not across the border in Indiana. So to suddenly find ourselves at the center of the political process is interesting.

So [on Wednesday] the guy comes into my office and I say "So, where were you yesterday?" "Ah," he says, "I was in Grant Park [where Obama gave his victory speech]." "Grant Park?" "Yeah, right near the front — I could have touched Barack Obama." "How did you get there? It's tough to get tickets."

He said "You don't understand. A few years back, I worked Law School, I cleaned the Law School. And Obama's office was on my run. He worked late many nights and he was really interested. I'd come by cleaning and he'd always stop me for a chat. Sometimes he'd share food with me — he always brought food in — and the thing was, he sat down and he talked to me. He said 'Tell me about your community. Tell me what's going on out there. I wanna know. I wanna know what's out there on the streets. I wanna know how America is living.'"

And one got the sense that this guy, alienated from the political process, alienated from the work process, found in Obama a real human being.

Inside GE

November 19, 2008

[Original link](#)

For the past six months or so, I've been working on getting data out of government in various ways. At one point, I was looking thru SEC files online and noticed that some portions were redacted. I filed a Freedom of Information request for the redacted portion and any documents pertaining to why it was redacted. It ended up costing \$28 and to make sure I get the most for my money, I thought I'd share the results with you:

Confidential Treatment Requested by General Electric Company

1. Please refer to comment 5 of our letter dated August 21, 2007. Please provide a more detailed analysis justifying the omission of disclosure [...] that specifically sets forth the manner in which competitors could use the information to obtain the competitive advantage cited in your response.

Response

*[*** Confidential treatment requested for the paragraphs below:*

General Electric Company's ("GE" or the "Company") long-term performance awards program (the "LTPA") is based on four equally weighted business measurements, which are: (a) average earnings per share growth rate; (b) average revenue growth rate; (c) cumulative return on total capital; and (d) cumulative cash flow from operating activities. As indicated in the Company's response letter, dated October 10, 2007, these business measurements are used to establish financial goals (the "Goals") for the Company over a three-year period and are directly derived from the Company's internal, confidential business plan. Each of the Goals involves confidential information that, if made public, [REDACTED] [REDACTED] For example, upon the announcement of a sizable acquisition, debt investors generally examine the companies ability to fund the acquisition and to service its existing debt and [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] will be affected by the acquisition. This point is illustrated by the Company's December 26, 2007 announcement that GE Capital would acquire certain assets and businesses from Merrill Lynch Capital. Although immaterial to GE Capital, after the announcement of the acquisition [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] Based on its experience the Company believes that [REDACTED] in the Goals such as [REDACTED]

acquisition [REDACTED] like the Merrill Lynch Capital acquisition [REDACTED] [REDACTED] The Company believes that disclosing the goals would [REDACTED] [REDACTED] the Goals [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] As a result, the Company's [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

[...] We do not believe that the SEC's executive compensation disclosure rules should cause the disclosure of the Goals simply because the Company's Management Development and Compensation Committee chose to include them in the LTPA. Such disclosure would have the unintended and harmful effect of [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

The Company therefore believes that it would suffer substantial competitive harm if it had to disclose the Goals because it would [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

*End of request for confidential treatment ***]*

Hope that helps. At least the SEC uses white-out instead of black marker.

Obama's Strategy: A Debate

November 22, 2008

[Original link](#)

A Liberal Shock Doctrine: Our economy is collapsing. There's a Democratic majority in the House and possibly a supermajority in the Senate. In the last election, both parties campaigned on change and the candidate accused of socialism won, by a solid majority. There will never be another time like now.

Obama must take swift action to pass radical change. Fill the cabinet with vocal progressives, push a series of strong progressive bills thru Congress, take full advantage of the first hundred days. Anything else will squander the promise of this election.

The Audacity of Patience: If Obama tries to pass his wishlist in the first hundred days, it will blow up in his face. Not because America is a center-right country, but because it's a left-wing one. The radical conservatives knew it was unlikely they would hold on to power, so they had to do as much as they could in the time they had. Progressives don't face that deadline; it now seems possible to permanently destroy this incarnation of the Republicans Party.

What's needed is not urgent action, but the slow and careful work of building an enduring majority. That means bringing in Republicans, occupying the rhetorical (if not political) center, and passing incremental steps that lead to lasting change. But most importantly, it means being effective. We don't need partisans, we need people with experience who can get things done. Even moderate bills passed now can ensure Democratic domination for a generation, allowing plenty of opportunity to improve things in the decades to come.

Open the Overton Window: This is how it starts. First it's the campaign, then the first hundred days, then the midterms, then reelection, then more midterms, and then the next nominee's campaign (who is unlikely to be as talented or progressive as this one). There's always an excuse to put off the important changes.

If you're serious about lasting change, hiring moderates is the wrong way to go. It doesn't attract Republicans; it just sends the message Democrats aren't serious. The electorate likes success; if success comes from Democrats, then they'll like Democrats. A progressive cabinet can move the ball forward by

having their agencies implement countless small reforms while using their status as public figures to build support for bigger ones. All of which will further cement the Democrats' reputation as the party of progress. The country isn't left-wing because it likes people with blue logos and D's next to their names; it's left-wing because it wants shared prosperity and security. If Democrats don't deliver, they'll turn to someone else.

Spin Up the Noise Machine: It's not the Cabinet's job to push new policy ideas. They can't — their job is to push the President's agenda and promote official doctrine. Building support for new ideas is the job of the ideological infrastructure that Democrats have been building over the past eight years: CAP, CAF, TAP, and the rest. Sure, during the Bush Administration they had to spend all their time fighting bad ideas, but with a Democratic president they can start rallying support for good ones.

And a President who leads as a consensus figure will be much more effective at passing them. America is sick of fierce partisanship; it longs for a government it can believe in again. A Cabinet of moderates and conservatives will be much more convincing salespeople for progressive proposals than a group of fire-breathing liberals.

An American Renewal: Do you seriously believe that? Sure, we can all agree this administration has been a disaster, but once Bush and his cronies recede into the distance, this coalition of moderates and conservatives will fall apart. The factions will start sniping at each other in the press, use their control over staff to advance their own agendas, and just generally try to sabotage the President's proposals — and with it, his appearance of effectiveness.

This country has been very badly misrun for almost a decade. Shills for industry pervade the regulators, conservative loyalists have burrowed deep into every agency, and public discussion has been pulled so far right that most people don't even remember what a left-wing idea looks like. (As opposed to the purely *factual* questions the left has been consistently correct about.) What's needed is a process of serious American renewal. A bunch of DC think-tanks pushing policy papers isn't going to do it; the problems are serious enough that leadership has to come from the top.

Blow-Up: Which brings me back to where I started. You can't just spin this country around in an instant; it will take years of hard work. Sure, a coalition

of moderates may end up falling apart, but a group of fervent partisans will never get off the ground. Even with the crisis, America just isn't ready for a complete policy reversal. Our best hope is to take them there gradually — passing increasingly ambitious policy, appointing increasingly progressive officials, electing increasingly progressive candidates. There are no quick fixes; that's what we'll have to do if you really want to win.

Blogs I Would Like to Read

November 25, 2008

[Original link](#)

(in no particular order)

The Wonk Wing: Thoughtful exploration of important policy issues by decent writers who are clearly fascinated by their subject. Not only would you get a first-class education in the relevant issues around health care, global warming, urban sprawl, zoning, traffic, sewage, etc. but you'd have fun while doing it. Think [Ezra Klein](#) for more than just health care. Think [The Wonk Room](#) but more Sorkin and less Pennebaker. (Sorry, Wonk Room!)

Perfect Devices: Coverage of things which are simply the best-in-the-world at what they do, and the stories of how they got there. I want stories from the people who calibrate bathroom-mirror lighting to be the perfect combination of brightness and diffusion “so that it’s diagnostically acute without being brutal” (ASFTINDA, 302). I want stories about the kitchen at *French Laundry* and *Alinea*. I want the start-to-finish story of HF&J designing a typeface. (Yes, I’m eagerly awaiting [Objectified](#).)

17th and Pennsylvania: This is the address of the Starbucks outside the White House, where apparently executive branch officials regularly grab coffee, chat, and meet with a wide variety of famous-for-DC types. Why doesn’t an enterprising Gawker Stalker simply sit there and write down what happens?

This Academic Life: Stories of new papers and research results — not just a summary of the work itself, but the story of how it fits into the field’s debates, the personal intrigues of the players, the implications for the wider world. Basically, *Lingua Fraca* returning as a blog.

Evisceration Quarterly: A daily selection of the finest in insults, takedowns, and general argumentative [evisceration](#). The motto: teaching you how to think by showing you how not to. And, to not be entirely negative, the occasional model of clarity. With special blogging consultant, Brad DeLong.

The Forgotten Sidekick

December 11, 2008

[Original link](#)

It's been a frustrating year for us Sidekick users. It seems like every television show, periodical, and man in the street is raving about the amazing world-changing capabilities of the iPhone (and, to a lesser extent, the Google Phone). How having a device that can conveniently surf the Web, answer email, run third-party applications and fit in your pocket is [as big a technological breakthrough as hovercars](#).

Which is infuriating to those of us who have been using a superior device for the past five years.

From the very first demo of the iPhone, it was obvious it was a knockoff of the Sidekick. The UI demo Steve Jobs did — calling two people and then merging the calls — is the exact same demo I'd given to all my friends to show off the incredible UI polish and attention to detail by the Sidekick developers. Sure, there were some differences — most notably that Apple's artists had prettied up the iPhone UI as compared to the 8-bit basement wackos who drew up the Sidekick's — but it was clear that this was an evolutionary change, not the revolutionary leap everyone made it out to be.

And, when I bought an iPhone, it became clear it wasn't even an improvement. The touch-keyboard made it impossible to type anything at length (I regularly composed whole articles on my Sidekick), the lack of multitasking made it impossible to queue up articles in the Web browser and read them on the subway (I read several books on the Sidekick), instant messages weren't even supported, and the swipe-to-scroll method quickly grew tiresome. Within a couple weeks, I sold the phone to a friend (although not before getting an outrageous roaming bill from AT&T because the iPhone couldn't keep its mouth shut).

For those two weeks, though, I was repeatedly stopped and gawked at by well-dressed people in airports and trains. They all wanted to know "Is that the iPhone?" and "How is it?" By contrast, those people, when they saw me using the Sidekick, assumed it was a videogame device.

But it wasn't as if the Sidekick was unheard of. As soon as I wandered out of the land of white folks in suits-and-ties, black and latino kids would rush up to me and gab about the Sidekick. During one trip, a latina middle-schooler stopped me on the sidewalk and asked if I'd gotten the latest firmware update yet. "It has JavaScript support!" she enthused. Browsing the Sidekick user forums bore this out — it was all black and latino schoolchildren.

But, of course, neither minorities nor schoolchildren rule the world, so the Sidekick has been written out of history. 2007 was the first time anyone had thought

to give a smartphone a decent UI, or a web browser, or an over-the-air application store. Well, at least it was the first time anyone thought to tell white people.

Bubble City: Chapter 12

December 29, 2008

[Original link](#)

part of *Bubble City*

“Hello?” asked the woman at the reception desk. The lobby was filled with colorful baubles — lava lamps and bouncy balls, comfy sofas and computer terminals, and a minifridge stocked with a wide variety of Odwalla beverages. The whole thing was calibrated perfectly to seem somehow relaxed yet ostentatious at the same time.

“Hello?” the receptionist asked again, a little less patient this time. She was an attractive woman, Wayne thought — mid-twenties, straight brown hair, thick-rimmed glasses perched atop a prominent nose — he struggled to focus. “Uh, yes, hello there,” he finally said.

“What brings you to Google today?” she asked.

“Oh, uh, I’m here to see—I mean, I guess—I have a meeting.”

She stared a bit, then nodded. “I see. Can I ask with whom?”

“Samuel Boxtton. He’s expecting me.”

“Of course. And your name?”

“Wayne Darnus.”

“Thanks, Wayne. It’ll just be a moment while I ring him. In the mean time, can you sign in on this computer?” She pointed to a terminal on top of the desk before tapping a few keys, apparently connecting the hands-free headset she was already wearing.

The terminal asked for his name, employer, host, and signature (for the mandatory non-disclosure agreement, of course), before printing out a badge he was encouraged to affix to his chest, marking him as an interloper.

“Yes, Mr. Darnus here to see you,” the receptionist was saying. “42 Lobby. Of course.” She turned to Wayne. “He’ll just be a minute — please take a seat.”

On the coffee table were the various usual industry magazines, which Wayne thumbed through nervously before putting them back down. He scanned the walls, which were covered in various plaques and puff pieces and commendations. He begun to feel very small and felt his heart beat a little more quickly. Why did a place designed to seem so friendly actually seem to make him feel scared?

Wayne’s eyes made several more circuits around the room and through the magazines before Samuel suddenly arrived, bright and cheerful as anything. “Wayne! Good to see you!” he exclaimed.

Wayne jumped up, extending an arm. But Samuel went in for a full embrace — not something Wayne was used to; usually the situation was reversed.

“Look,” Samuel said, “right this way.” Samuel led him out of the lobby and into the courtyard. They went past the endless swimming pool and the volleyball court, the dinosaur skeleton and model rocketship — all glinting in the sun. As they went further, the buildings became more bland and boxy, across parking lots and service ways and sidestreets, parts of the sprawling Google campus normal visitors rarely saw.

They entered another building through a backdoor, Samuel swiping his keycard to get in. After that came a maze of twisty little passageways, with little in the way of signage to help distinguish between them. They came to a series of metal doors labeled “AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY” which this time required a palm-print. Finally, they reached a conference room labeled 10² - eⁱ.

“Take a seat,” Samuel offered.

Wayne did, grabbing a seat and the end of a long conference table. Samuel grabbed one around the corner from him, a large projector filling the wall at his back.

“So, Wayne, I understand you have some concerns,” he offered. “Can we talk about them?”

“Concerns?” Wayne said nervously. “Oh, no — I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Really? Nothing’s been bothering you? Here’s your chance to have it out with the big guys — we here at Google are all ears!”

“No, really, I think Google’s been doing a great job.”

“Look, Wayne,” Samuel said, sliding a mouse and keyboard in front of him. “With a couple of taps here, I can get you any Google employee you want. Is there really nothing at all you have to say to them?” Samuel was looking Wayne straight in the eye.

“Uh, hmm, well, it’s a very generous offer you have there, but, uh — I really just can’t think of anything right now. Uh, heh, if only you’d given me time to prepare! A-heh-heh. I’m sure I could have thought of plenty of things!”

“I’m really sorry to hear you say that, Wayne. Because a funny thing happened this morning. I was just doing some regular user analysis on our Google Video-cast software — nothing out of the ordinary, of course — and I just happened to come across this little clip.”

Samuel tapped a few keys and there, in full-screen video, was Wayne, his head filling the whole back wall, then repeated in miniature on various screens across the room. Wayne recognized the video and his stomach began to sink:

I know I’ve been a supporter of Google in the past. But I think they’ve finally crossed the line.

I've recently received information that they are chasing and persecuting a young kid just beca—

Wayne slunk into his seat.

"Now, I hope you understand my predicament, Wayne," Samuel said. "As part of Google Evangelism, it's my job to ensure that the world thinks only the best of Google. That they see all the good things we're doing for the world. That they see all the progress we're inspiring."

"Because of Google products, billions of dollars have been added to the global economy, people are sharing and communicating more than ever before, kids in Africa now get a chance to read every book in the libraries of Harvard." Samuel looked wistful. "It's really some amazing stuff. And I'm proud just to be a part of it."

"Which is why I can't let you jeopardize all that," he said, turning serious. "Especially not by repeating some crazy story I told you over drinks. No, there's just too much at stake."

"Look, I'm a good person. Here at Google we're all good people. *Don't be evil* is our motto, for goodness' sake. But doing what's good isn't the same as doing what's easy. Sometimes making the right decisions requires doing things that are really very hard. And this is one of those situations."

"We all love you here at Google, Wayne. And we've always been eager to support you — surely you know that more than anyone. But I think we've reached a point in our relationship where it might be best to keep you a little closer." Samuel smiled.

"Closer?" Wayne said, finally. "What do you mean?"

Samuel reached underneath the desk for something. "Why don't you wait right here a minute and we'll show you. Just a sec!" Then he got up and walked down the hall and thru the large metal doors, leaving Wayne and his visitors' badge behind him.

Trent felt the wind riffling through his hair, the top down on his BMW 328i. He was heading north, past the San Francisco traffic, across the beauty of the Golden Gate Bridge, through the gorgeous hills and valleys of Marin, to the spacious beauty of Napa.

The life of a technology executive was stressful, which is why these work-related getaways were so important. It seemed like every month there was some kind of executive retreat up here — a place where the Important Men of Business could get away from it all, loosen their ties, and swap stories in the golden California sun.

They were roughin' it.

He parked his car on the gravel, before heading to the courtyard where a suited caterer was pouring drinks. "Whiskey sour," he ordered, before looking for somewhere to mingle.

"Hey, Trent! It's so good to see you." A man he didn't quite recognize grabbed him by the shoulder. "Thank you *so* much for coming — it's a real treat to have you."

"Of course, of course!" Trent replied. "How could I resist another chance to visit a beautiful place like this?" He gestured around him.

"Well, just make yourself at home. We've got some time to chat until six and then we'll all be heading into town for dinner."

"I can't wait."

The fellow, who was apparently the host, smiled and headed off in search of other people to welcome.

"Don, from Google," someone said, extending a hand.

"Trent, from Newsflip," Trent replied.

"Ahh, Newsflip — I've heard a lot of good things about you," Don said.

"Oh, well, I'm very glad to hear that. We always look up to our friends down in the Valley."

"Actually," Don said, "I'm not going to be down there for long. I just got word that I'm going to be one of the lucky few who can transition to our upcoming San Francisco office."

"Really? Well, congratulations!"

"Thank you. You know, actually, we have an interesting meeting coming up on NNA-related issues at Google Mountain View. You really should attend."

"Oh, fascinating. I'll definitely send a programmer or two."

"No, this is a very high-level summit. Just CEOs and above. Obviously the top people from our side will be there as well."

"Interesting," Trent said. He was always a sucker for networking. "I'd love to come."

"Fantastic — I'll call your assistant and be sure to get it set up. There's just one thing I should warn you about, though."

"Oh, really? What's that?"

"After you visit us at Google, you may never want to leave!"

They both laughed, although Don rather harder.

Trent scanned the courtyard for other people he should speak to, but nobody seemed particularly appealing. He decided to sneak into a group standing by the corner, laughing wildly.

“That’s a great idea,” someone was saying. “In fact, maybe we should hold all our meetings at strip clubs from now on.”

“Well, you know what I say,” another man added. “If they can’t hold their liquor, how can you expect them to hold a job?”

Trent just smiled and nodded.

2008 Review of Books

January 3, 2009

[Original link](#)

Previously: [2007 Review of Books](#), [Books I recommend Without Reservation: 2006](#)

I read exactly 100 books this year. I mistakenly told someone over the summer that I read a hundred books a year (I only read 70 last year, although 120 the year before that) and as the new year approached I felt duty-bound to make that true. (This led to spending a lot of New Year's Eve in a corner reading, as this list may suggest.)

Here are the books (in chronological order), with occasional short comments. Books I'm happy to have read are linked. Books I recommend are in bold.

1. [Quantum Theory: A Very Short Introduction](#). Seemed decent for the format.
2. Gecan, [Going Public](#)
3. [The Activist's Handbook](#). Could be better written, but probably the best of its type. I've definitely thought back to this one a lot this year.
4. Poundstone, [How Would You Move Mount Fuji?](#)
5. Poundstone, [Labyrinths of Reason](#)
6. Lodge, **[Changing Places](#)**.
Typical campus novel fun, but with some great People's Park stories.
7. Elster, [Political Psychology](#). Short Elster essay collection. Probably for Elster fans only.
8. [Lords of Poverty](#) (skipped parts)
9. *On Being Nonprofit*. Completely unmemorable.
10. *How to Do Things with Words*. Important in its time, but mostly overtaken by Searle's later work.
11. *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*
12. *Campaign Finance Reform and the Future of the Democratic Party*
13. **[The Visible Hand](#)**.
Tough sledding, but important points. [Read my summary](#).

14. Thaler, *The Winner's Curse*
15. Poundstone, *Fortune's Formula*
Fantastic fun. Math, mafiosi, movies.
16. Freeman, *Rawls* (parts)
17. MacKenzie, *An Engine Not a Camera*.
I recommend starting with his *LRB* stuff.
18. Fitch, *Solidarity for Sale*. For leftists who really love unions. You need to know the flaws to make them better.
19. Maisel, *From Obscurity to Oblivion: Running in the Congressional Primary*. Not a lot of books on the inside of campaigns, but this is one of the few.
20. Segaran, *Programming Collective Intelligence*. Terrible title, but a good book on how to do data mining.
21. Willis, *Learning to Labor*. Not as great as the excerpts I'd read had led me to think.
22. *The Brain: A Very Short Introduction*
23. Peck, *Hatchet Jobs*. Fun stuff.
24. Sloan, *My Years with General Motors* (skipped second half). I read this to understand how modern management was invented. It did not help.
25. Hoopes, *False Prophets*
A wonderful series of profiles of the most prominent management theorists going back to slavery and Taylor. The book's editorial line is a bit marred by the inability of the author (a B-School prof and manager) to reconcile his belief that management power is unjust and that it is necessary. But solid history and good takedowns of some important figures.
26. Dani Rodrik, *Has Globalization Gone Too Far?* (lent by Henry Farrell).
A good book, but not for general readers.
27. *A Random Walk Down Wall Street*. Mixed feelings.
28. Wilson, *To The Finland Station*.
Really, really good. Edmund Wilson was the incredible writer you'd expect and this is his masterpiece.
29. Maurer, *The Big Con: The Story of the Confidence Man*
[Luc Sante's intro](#) alone is worth the price of the book, but the rest of the book is fantastic as well. Everyone should know about con men. (The BBC's *Hustle* is obviously a television adaptation of the book.)

30. *A Choice Not an Echo: The Inside Story of How American Presidents Are Chosen*. Still crazy after all these years, although the whole anti-backroom thing is interesting. I read it to see what you could airdrop on college kids.
31. Khurana, *Searching for a Corporate Savior*
Really, truly great.
32. *Is That a Politician in Your Pocket?* (skimmed)
33. *Debunking Economics*. Quite good, although not perfect.
34. *Men and Women of the Corporation*.
35. Carlson, *Executive Behavior*. Worthless
36. Elster, *Explaining Social Behavior*
Magical, magisterial masterpiece. ([my review](#); [more on Elster](#))
37. Piven, *Challenging Authority*. Kind of thin; I glazed over portions.
38. Rosen, *The World Split Open*
39. Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think*. Terrible.
40. *From the Folks Who Brought You the Weekend*
41. *Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*
42. Brook, *The Trap*
43. Gessen, *All the Sad Young Literary Men*
44. Khurana, *From Higher Aims to Hired Hands*
45. Glymour, *The Mind's Arrows*
46. Pearl, *Causality*. I wish everyone understood this.
47. Elster, *Strong Feelings*
48. Gelman et. al., *Red State, Blue State, Rich State, Poor State* (sent by Andrew Gelman). Lots of great empirical work, but little theory or story to back it up.
49. Lodge, *Nice Work*
Typical campus novel fun, but with deeper thoughts about business and finance.
50. Armstrong and Moulitsas, *Crashing the Gate*
51. Menand, *American Studies*

52. Galbraith, *The Predator State*
My summary.
53. *Watchmen*
Brilliant. Wanted to see it before the movie came out.
54. Tilly, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons*
55. Mann, *Sources of Social Power, Vol. 1*
Tough reading, but really fascinating stuff.
56. Frank, *The Wrecking Crew*. Lots of good dirt, but not exactly the most rigorous theoretical argument.
57. Perry, *Spectrum*. Perry is great — the autoinvestigatorial last chapter alone is worth it.
58. Bearman et. al., *Doormen*. I read this because I now have a doorman and am uncomfortable about it. This helped.
59. Teles, *Rise of the Conservative Legal Movement*. Good stuff, although narrow.
60. DFW, *McCain's Promise*. Brilliant, naturally. I'd read *Up, Simba!* before, of course, but I read this out loud to a friend and it was just a joy to do.
61. Ken Silverstein, *Turkmeniscam*.
Great fun. Not just a great story of investigative journalism, but lots of interesting and important background as well. I'm a huge Silverstein fan.
62. DFW, *Everything and More*.
This book is an interesting, but, I think, ultimately unsuccessful experiment. DFW tries to teach math by channelling his favorite math teacher — writing in the style of an excitable lecturer, completely with verbal tics and backtracking (which, in printed form, becomes kind of a running gag).
It's certainly not a bad book by any means, but I don't think it's really a successful model for how books can teach math.
63. Wodehouse, *Psmith in the City*. Hilarious. Psmith is a delight. I want to hear him acted but the recent BBC version is dreadful.
64. Clark, *Organizing Our Marvellous Neighbours* (skimmed parts)
65. *How Wikipedia Works* (skimmed parts)
66. Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*. Delightful. I apologize humbly and abjectly for ever criticizing the strong programme of science. Sokal and Bricmont led me badly astray on that one.

67. DFW, *Consider the Lobster*

DFW's suicide hit me very hard. I ended up coping [by reading every piece of nonfiction he'd ever published](#). He was a brilliant, tortured man and I see so much of myself in him. His nonfiction was fantastic and I will consider my life a success if I can do half of what he did.

If you want to get started, I recommend (best work first):

1. [Federer as Religious Experience](#) [B/W PDF]
2. "David Lynch Keeps His Head", in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (there's a *severely* abbreviated version printed in *Premiere*; read the real thing instead)
3. "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again", in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (the [Harper's version](#) [PDF] preserves most of the good stuff but is shorter)

68. Krugman, *Peddling Prosperity*

Probably Krugman's best book, it provides a thoroughly enjoyable and enlightening *intellectual* overview of the economics of the 1980s and 1990s. The delicious takedown of supplysiders is worth the book alone, but the rest is great too.

69. Tough, *Whatever It Takes*. A great read; a bit overly credulous — doesn't address Keynesian critics of intervention or betray much skepticism about tests. ([my review](#))

70. Wolfe, *Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*. Great fun.

71. *The Homework Myth*. Sometimes it seems like Kohn just gets narrower and narrower (via email, he disputes this).

72. *Savage Mules*. A good antidote for faith in the Democratic Party. ([dsquared's review](#))

73. Beam, *Great Idea at the Time*. A fun historical take down of the Great Books. Probably more fun if you know what the Great Books are.

74. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Borderline unreadable. Why did everyone rave about this book?

75. *Love at Goon Park*.

The first section is a (confessed!) retread of *Becoming Attached*, one of my very favorite books ([a 2006 highlight](#)). But after that it gets much better and the interplay of animal and human stories is a lot of fun. I've been reading it to the five-year-old, who loves animal stories of all sorts, and she just laps it up. (I skip the incredibly dark parts, of course.)

76. Newsweek, *Secrets of the 2008 Campaign* (full text online). For campaign junkies only.

77. Perlstein, *Tested*.

Very good. ([my review](#))

78. Keynes, *Economic Consequences of the Peace* ([full text online](#)).

Wow, Keynes knows how to write. The first section is a must-read for any diplomat. Chapters 4 and 5 (which unfortunately are the bulk of the book) are only worth skipping or skimming for modern readers.

79. Kaufman, *Synecdoche, New York* (scripts). What a movie! There were a lot of script reviews that said things along the lines of “I don’t know if movies can capture a script this complex.” Reading the script now, you see the exact opposite is the case. The script is a pale imitation of the film, missing most of what made the film magical. Which just underscores what a great movie it was.

80. Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America*.

Not the easiest read, but brilliant. One of the very very few books I want to read again (in this case, because I am sure I didn’t get it all the first time). The definitive Marxist take on education.

81. *Smile When You’re Lying*

Tons of fun. I hate traveling and have never cracked a travel book, but this angry and profane insider’s evisceration of the industry was still a complete joy. [Read Ezra’s review](#) — with [a comment from the author!](#).

82. DFW, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*.

Brilliant. Just brilliant.

83. Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion*.

84. Douthat, *Privilege* (lent by Rick Perlstein).

What is wrong with Ross Douthat? This book is eminently mockable, but I have to say I could see writing most of it myself. Which is weird, since Douthat is a staunch conservative and I’m a crazy-far-leftist. Is Douthat a double-agent? Or is he really this confused about what conservatism is about? I wrote this summary for Rick:

- Prologue: Harvard is actually an education in the ruling class. [Ross didn’t like Harvard so much.]
- 1: Diversity policies ensure all sorts of ethnicities get accepted but they all come from the upper class. [Big black homeless guy starts living in Ross’s dorm.]
- 2: The real ruling class gets tapped for private clubs where they get connected to wealthy alumni and rape attractive coeds. [Ross gets invited to apply at various clubs and rejected.]

- 3: Students are aggressive social climbers, calibrating who they talk to and what activities they join to maximize their resume. [Ross's friend's friend gets arrested for embezzling.]
- 4: Persuaded that the market is God and academia is a sideshow, professors give students easy grades to help them get good jobs and be rich (thus proving the professors' worth). Courses are poorly taught and maddeningly specific — its very difficult to get a solid general education. [Ross doesn't like his classes and gets mediocre grades.]
- 5: Random drunken hookups are so common that the only way to get any kind of commitment is to fall into a college marriage (of which, I must say, there is a beautiful description pp. 145-147). [Ross falls head-over-heels for a totally agonizing tease, only to have her give it up months later to a preppy sailing kid who gets her drunk.]
- 6: Most harvard students arrive virgins and have a hards time getting any while they're there, out of awkwardness and fear of threatening their spot in the overclass. [Ross can't even get laid at an all-girls school.]
- 7: The student body is primarily New Democrat, with a smattering of vocal leftist protestors. [Ross supports the living wage movement. *[ed. note: wtf?]*]
- 8: Harvard students spend summers at elite internships acclimating to their future careers. [Ross goes sailing with William F. Buckley!]
- 9: 9/11 sucked. [Ross laps up the patriotic spirit and the Summers presidency.]
- ...and then a tearfelt ending.

Sorry, did I end up mocking it a little?

85. Gore, *Sammy's Hill*. Yes, I have a weakness for chick lit.
86. *What Motivates Bureaucrats?* A genuine investigation (as opposed to the typical social science arms-length thinking) into how Reagan affected the civil service. In short, our civil service is the opposite of what you see on *Yes, Minister* — they were practically falling over themselves to kneecap their own agency in response to the President. Kind of sad, but hopefully this means that Obama will also have wide latitude.
87. DFW and Mark Costello, *Signifying Rappers*.
A great book, although surprisingly the best parts are written by Costello. A dense intermixed weave of music, history, race, law, fantasia, and brilliant writing.
88. *The Telephone Gambit*. Decently researched, mixed in with self-indulgent (and just plain bad) autobiography about writing the book. I wrote up a summary of the story which I'll be publishing soon and you should

probably just read that instead. But everybody should agree that Bell stole the telephone from Gray after this book.

89. Krugman, *The Age of Diminished Expectations* (1st ed). Bleh. Krugman's first book, back before he knew how to write.
90. Bartels, *Unequal Democracy*. I'm also going to publish a summary of this.
91. Beam, *Gracefully Insane*. Like all good residents of Cambridge, being institutionalized in McLean has long been a dream. After enjoying Beam's other book (*Great Idea at the Time*) this seemed right up my alley, but it was nowhere near as good.
92. Gore, *Sammy's House*. The Gore books were bothering me because I could never figure out who Wye and RG were supposed to be — all the other characters mapped pretty obviously onto current politicians, but the candidates were a mystery. I'd somehow forgotten my first instinct: RG is AG, which means that you have to think back two decades or so. Once you realize that, everything falls into place.
93. Wodehouse, *Mike: A Public School Story*. The first Psmith story. Cricket, cricket, cricket, cricket. Sigh.
94. *Ice Cream Man*. Good fun for Tosci's fans.
95. Kuttner, *Obama's Challenge*
96. *V for Vendetta*. Moore's whole story about how the movie softened the fascism and anarchism seems completely bogus. That said, the movie did change some fantastic parts, including V's televised speech and the brilliantly convoluted *Hamlet*-esque ending. Also, the movie's whole virus attack subplot was stupid. On the other hand, the movie added some great stuff too. So see both, I guess.
97. Krugman, *Pop Internationalism*. The essays Krugman wrote before *Peddling Prosperity*, meaning it discusses the same stuff but much more disjointed and poorly edited. I was hoping it'd explain the mystery of his animus towards Laura D'A, but no such luck.
98. *First-Time Manager*. A much better book than I expected, but enough tin-ear corporate silliness that I can't thoroughly recommend it.
99. Searle, *The Campus War* (full text online).

Actually, a really good book on the campus uprisings of the 1960s. First, there's some terrific first-hand reporting from Searle's experience at Berkeley (in which he participated in all three sides: the uprising, the faculty response, and the administration counterattack!). Second, there's some good secondhand summarizing about the experience at other campuses. Third, there's some good analysis about why campus uprisings happen

and what they mean. Fourth, there are some interesting proposals for reforming the university. (I, too, want to get rid of the trustee system.) Makes me wish Searle did more non-philosophy books!

100. Haggis-on-Whey, *Animals of the Ocean (In Particular, the Giant Squid)*. Not as good as [the original](#) (now in its third edition!).

Happy new year!

The True Story of the Telephone

January 5, 2009

[Original link](#)

I grew up in Highland Park, Illinois, just down the street from where the telephone was invented. I now live in Cambridge, Massachusetts, just down the street from where it was stolen. Seth Shulman's recent book [The Telephone Gambit](#) lays out the clearest case yet of how it all happened. Here's the summary:

Alexander Graham Bell (or Aleck Bell, as he was then called) was the son of Alexander Melville Bell, the inventor of a system of phonic notation called Visible Speech. The elder Bell would use Aleck as an assistant in his demonstrations: After sending Aleck to wait in another room, Mr. Bell would ask the audience for a word or strange noise then write it in Visible Speech. Aleck would return and reproduce the sound from the writing alone. Voila.

As a child growing up like this, he played at inventing machines that could talk and telegraphs that could listen. But he found his career in tutoring the deaf — by teaching them to pronounce the phonemes of Visible Speech, he eventually succeeded in teaching them to talk and read lips.

One of his students was Mabel Hubbard, daughter of prominent Boston lawyer Gardiner Greene Hubbard. Son of a Massachusetts Supreme Court Justice, Hubbard established water and gas and trolley utilities for Cambridge, Mass. — some of the first in the nation. He also fervently lobbied Congress to replace Western Union's monopoly on the telegraph with a new corporation, the US Postal Telegraph Company, that would contract with the government Post Office.

At the time, telegraph wires blanketed the skies of Boston, hanging in a dense web above the buildings. Many desperately wished for someone to develop a telegraph that could send multiple messages over the same wire, so that many wires could be replaced with just one. The theory was that if one could transmit the messages using different tones, they would “harmonize” instead of interfere, leading the idea to be called the “harmonic telegraph”. Naturally, Alexander Graham Bell turned his tinkering to this problem and persuaded Hubbard (as well as Thomas Sanders, another father of a Bell student) to finance his research in exchange for a share of any future US profits. Further complicating matters, Bell had fallen in love with his student, Mabel Hubbard. Mr. Hubbard made it clear he did not approve of such a marriage unless Bell made a profitable discovery.

But Bell was simply a hobbyist, the real research was being done by a man named Elisha Gray. Gray ran Western Electric, the leading supplier of technical

expertise to telegraph monopoly Western Union. From his lab in Highland Park, Illinois, he and his assistants worked feverishly at new discoveries. Bell was well aware of this and considered himself to be in a race with Gray to invent the harmonic telegraph first.

In 1875, Bell made a breakthrough in his work on the harmonic telegraph. But he was a crafty fellow — his deal with Gardiner and Sanders was only about splitting *US* profits; it said nothing about profits overseas. British law at the time granted patents only to inventions not patented elsewhere first, so Bell drew up several copies of his harmonic telegraph patent and sent some to be filed in Britain first. The rest were sent to DC to be filed as soon as word got back from Britain.

On February 14, 1876, while the lawyers were waiting in DC to file Bell's patent, Gray filed a patent of his own. Bell's lawyers were close to the patent officers and had asked to be tipped off if Gray tried to file something, so they could file Bell's patent first. When Gray's patent was placed in the patent office's inbox, Bell's lawyers hand-delivered Bell's patent to the examiner, so they could claim he'd received Bell's first.

The patent examiner, Zenas Fisk Wilber, had fought in the civil war with Bell's attorney, Marcellus Bailey. Wilber was an alcoholic and owed Bailey money (a serious Patent Office ethics violation). To pay his friend back, he showed him Gray's application. Bailey was startled to find it wasn't a patent on a harmonic telegraph at all — it was a patent for a telephone, capable of transmitting all the sounds of human speech and music. He called for Bell to come to DC at once.

Bell did, and examiner Wilber showed him Gray's patent as well, taking time to explain how it worked. Bell thanked him and returned that afternoon with \$100 for his trouble. Bell then quickly scribbled an addition to his patent in the margin, adding that it should also cover "transmitting vocal or other sounds telegraphically" (this addition does not appear in any of the other copies).

Contravening much standard practice at the time, Bell's (modified) patent was quickly granted, while Gray's was denied. It was issued the same day Bell returned home from DC, March 7, 1876. The following day, Bell drew in his lab notebook a copy of the diagram he had seen in Elisha Gray's patent:

It took Bell several days of tinkering, but soon he was able to replicate Gray's device. On March 10, he made that now-famous call: "Watson — come here — I want to see you." Both Bell and his assistant Watson recorded the event that night in their notebooks.

But Bell didn't want to simply duplicate Gray's work; he wanted to invent a telephone of his own. He spent many months trying to develop a telephone that worked on a different principle, but never succeeded in getting it to clearly transmit audible speech. Bell was always extraordinarily reluctant to demonstrate his telephone, for fear that Gray would learn it was a simple copy. Mabel had to trick him into attending the Centennial Exposition, where he was supposed

to demonstrate his work to a group of engineers, including Elisha Gray. On one occasion, Bell's telephone patent was set to be annulled unless Bell would swear under oath that the invention was truly his. Bell fled the country, testifying only at the last minute after desperate pleading from Mabel.

The legal conniving a success, Bell and Mabel were soon married. Feeling guilty, Bell gave all but ten of his shares in the Bell Telephone Company to her and swore to never work in telephony again. The company was operated by Gardiner and others while Bell went back to working with the deaf. He always said he was more proud of his work for the deaf than of the telephone.

It took Gray a long time to realize that Bell's patent was a fraud. For one thing, he was still focused on the harmonic telegraph; his customers at Western Union couldn't imagine running telephone wires to every house and thus couldn't see how talking over wires was particularly useful. For another, it took years for the story to leak out, through numerous court battles and Congressional hearings. [Zenas Fisk Wilber's affidavit](#) confessing to what he'd done did not appear until 1886, a decade later. Bell's notebooks, making clear the blatant copy, were not made public until the 1990s.

Bell's biographers have gone to heroic lengths to explain away all the evidence. Refusing credit for the telephone just showed Bell's humility; not being involved in the corporation showed his dedication to pure research. The fact that both patents were filed on the same day is a grand historic coincidence — or perhaps *Gray* stole the idea from Bell.

As a result, Gray is forgotten and Bell is remembered as one of history's great inventors — not as he should be: a hobbyist and a fraud, forced by love into stealing one of the greatest inventions of all time.

Now playing: Regina Spector - "On The Radio"

Felten for CTO?

January 8, 2009

[Original link](#)

[[crossposted to Open Left](#)]

As inauguration approaches, speculation has been heating up about Obama's pick for the newly-created position of CTO. Most of the names floated — Eric Schmidt, Steve Ballmer, Jeff Bezos — just seem ridiculous (would you really leave being CEO of Google, Microsoft, or Amazon for a White House job?), but I've recently heard one name that's gotten me excited: Princeton's [Ed Felten](#) ([blog](#)).

Felten came to national prominence in 2000, when the music industry held a contest to see if anyone could break their “digital watermarking” technology. Felten and his team broke it and was about to publish a paper explaining how, when the recording industry threatened to sue him if he did.

Since then, he's offered expert opinions on everything from Microsoft to voting machines and started the Center for Information Technology Policy at Princeton, which he directs, where he's pushed for more government transparency. He has the incredibly rare combination of being an absolutely first-rate technologist while also being able to clearly explain all of the relevant policy implications. Like [Science Advisor John Holdren](#), he'll do a fantastic job representing the consensus of technical experts on [every policy issue](#) that comes his way.

Why are online ads cheaper?

January 12, 2009

[Original link](#)

It seems lately, what with the [End Times](#) and all, people have been asking why newspapers can't make money online. Obviously online papers don't have circulation fees (subscriptions and newsstand prices) but they don't have circulation costs either (paper, ink, delivery). Circulation fees only make up 20% of newspaper revenue, so all things considered one wouldn't think this would be an existential threat to the business.

Craigslist has been a bigger deal; classified ads used to be 40% of newspaper revenue, versus just 30% now. But even magazines, which have never run classifieds, are feeling the pinch.

The real issue is that online ad prices per reader are far, far lower than offline prices. But why is that?

I've heard lots of theories, but I think the real explanation is simple: supply and demand. If you want to buy an offline ad, there are only a handful of places you can buy it. As a result, supply is constrained and the price goes up. But online, ad networks let just about everybody sell ads on an equal footing. Practically, it doesn't make that much difference whether your ad appears on [nytimes.com](#) or [politico.com](#) or [eschatonblog.com](#), as long as it reaches the same person. So supply goes up and the price gets bid down.

Most people don't seem to like this explanation, so I'll try phrasing it another way. In the days of paper, to get your ad to people you had to get it on a truck and into their hands on something they would read. Newspapers and magazines could charge a premium for this. Online, you just need to upload an image file.

Anyone see any flaws with this theory?

Cass Sunstein, Concern Troll

January 16, 2009

[Original link](#)

[\[cross-posted to Open Left\]](#)

Remember when President Bush tried to put more arsenic in our drinking water? Lots of people got outraged — it seemed like a classic example of a deregulator-in-chief helping his corporate friends at our expense. Not Cass Sunstein, a prominent (and nominally-liberal) law professor.

Sunstein, working for and with right-wing deregulatory think tanks, published a piece called “The Arithmetic of Arsenic”, arguing that everyone needs to stop being so *emotional* about these things. We can’t decide whether arsenic should be in our water based on fuzzy-wuzzy arguments about not killing people. No, we need to be hard-headed realists and decide exactly how much a human life is worth and whether filtering arsenic is worth the cost. In short, we have to do *cost-benefit analysis*.

As fellow law prof Tom McGarity pointed out, Sunstein continued to hold this view despite the fact that Sunstein’s own research into the subject showed that there was so much uncertainty around the issue that just using different previously-published estimates could result in whatever conclusion you like. And there was no obvious way to decide which estimate to trust.

All of this would be just another story in the annals of out-of-touch intellectuals — a law professor who gets off on killing people to save money, actual facts be damned — except for one frightening fact: Barack Obama just put this law professor in charge of cost-benefit analysis for the whole government.

The Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA) was set up by Ronald Reagan to allow him veto power over any federal regulation. If the EPA wanted to stop companies from poisoning fish, if the DOJ wanted to stop businesses from discriminating, if OSHA wanted to protect miners’ lungs, OIRA could intervene and double-check their cost-benefit analysis. They could rejigger the numbers to make it so that the regulation got killed or if they failed at that they could just demand more and more research from the agency, delaying the regulation it was finally abandoned.

OIRA was one of Reagan’s most powerful tools for keeping the Federal Government from doing its job. And now someone who’s a strong fan of its mission has been put in charge. It’s a scary thought, especially as you’re going to get a glass of drinking water.

Economic BS Detector

January 28, 2009

[Original link](#)

People are trying to lie to you. Or maybe they just don't know what they're talking about. Either way, you shouldn't listen to them. But how can you tell? Here's a guidebook of key phrases that indicate someone doesn't know what they're talking about when they talk about the economy:

Creates/destroys jobs. You often hear men of business saying that their company “created” 2000 new jobs. And in some sense that may be true, but it's probably less exciting if it turned out that they did it by destroying 2000 jobs somewhere else.

The same is true for economic policy in general; it will typically create jobs in one place, but only at the expense of losing them somewhere else. That's because the number of jobs (i.e. the unemployment rate) isn't just a free-floating fact of life; it's specifically controlled by the Federal Reserve.

The Federal Reserve is a cadre of bankers and economists that, among other things, meets regularly to decide interest rates. When there are too few jobs, they lower interest rates, making it easier for people to borrow money and start new companies, hiring new people and creating jobs. (The current crisis is the rare exception — interest rates are at zero and there still aren't enough jobs. Thus the stimulus package.) When there are too many jobs, they raise interest rates, making it harder for businesses to start and expand, and cutting back on jobs.

Wait, too many jobs? The Federal Reserve worries that if unemployment gets too low, we'll hit a cycle of accelerating inflation where prices spiral up and up. [Critics argue](#) that they actually don't like low unemployment because then businesses have to compete for employees, which means they have to pay more and give out nicer benefits. So, critics argue, they try to leave some unemployment, so that *employees* are competing and can be pushed into taking lower wages.

If you really care about how many jobs there are — and obviously you should — then you shouldn't worry about particular policies or people, whose effects either won't matter or will be counteracted by the Fed. You should worry about the Fed and who controls it.

Helps/hurts competitiveness. Let's face facts: America isn't competing with anyone. Remember competition? You sell a widget for \$5; I come along and sell it for \$4; then you have to either lower your price or lose all your customers to me and go bankrupt.

But America isn't going to go bankrupt. Countries don't really do that sort of thing.

Instead, what matters for how well a country is doing is (roughly speaking) its productivity, i.e. how much stuff it makes per person-hour of work. Sometimes you can increase this productivity by working with other countries — by, for example, trading some steel for some coffee. But this is just a way to up your own country's productivity; it has nothing to do with competition.

The competitiveness bogeyman is often trotted out when someone is trying to get you to do something you don't want. "Oh, sure," they say, "you may not want to do it, but the Chinese are and they're going to eat your lunch." It just isn't so. Nothing will stop us from chugging along, eating our lunch just fine; even if the Chinese are eating two lunches.

Sadly, a lot of "economic commentators" don't know what they're talking about, so you see these phrases *everywhere*. Now that you know they're bogus, it should save you a lot of time.

Belém

February 3, 2009

[Original link](#)

“Can we begin?” she asked, staring up at him with big pleading eyes. She was the most beautiful girl in the room, the kind of girl you catch yourself looking at involuntarily, because even looking is such a thrill. And this he had done, for some time, until her gay friend came over and told him “My friend thinks you’re beautiful.”

She spoke barely a word of English and he hardly spoke more Portuguese, so her gay friend translated between them. “She says you are very beautiful,” the translator would say, and he, not knowing how to react, would ask her name. “She says she wants to be your girlfriend,” the translator would say, and, not knowing how much was embellished, he would ask what she did. And so it went for what seemed like an hour.

“She says, ‘Can we begin?’” the translator finally said.

“Uhh...,” he replied.

“In Brazil,” he explained, “it is traditional for the man to go first.”

“Ohh...,” he replied.

And then they made out.

Belém is like that.

It is a city that can only be described as *laid back*, a sprawl of falling buildings and faded billboards, a distinctively Latin American city, where men wander around with their shirts off and adults sit in chairs by the side of the road. No one is ever in a hurry.

Kids roam the streets, couples hand-in-hand, with no adults in sight. Two teens stand necking on the sidewalk. Something interesting is always going on.

The first night we walked a block and got swept into a student opera about the Amazon. We ducked out only to find a wrestling match staged by clowns in drag. A few blocks away, passing three outdoor bands, we found the waterfront, along which were a dozen shops and restaurants, and another couple bands.

When we couldn’t find a table, a couple invited us to join theirs. When I couldn’t speak Portuguese, they just gave the universal thumbs-up and grinned,

then offered me a drink. They copied down the address of the bar they were heading to and tried to discuss Fergie of the Black-Eyed Peas.

Parks are everywhere. And bars are close behind. So we went hopping from one to another, drinking and talking long into the night.

The next morning the empty metal shells surrounding the park had been filled in to form a bustling marketplace. The streets were full of life and shirtless kids hauled carts on their shoulders.

The World Social Forum was already being dismantled by the time we got there, but it was still inspiring in its scope. 200,000 activists came to this city, each hoping for something bigger than themselves. They filled up all the planes in and out and took over both universities, and used it all to build a giant party.

Signs and arrows pointed every direction, each former classroom commandeered for a discussion on some new topic. Kids posed for tourist photos by the welcome sign featuring the Forum's slogan: "Another world is possible." Possible, but not present. Everywhere were tables selling books, food, trinkets, shirts. Vendors lined the sidewalks hawking bottled water and packaged candies. Litter lined the streets.

The rain falls in spurts. First a trickle, then a flood, then right back to a trickle. A rent-a-cop pats a girl's head. The streets curve, and wind, and turn back into themselves. The water here is brown, like sludge. When I first saw it from the sky I mistook it for a strange kind of land. I made the same mistake again when I saw it on the map.

A bus goes from one university to the other. The seats quickly fill and kids pack into the aisle, three-deep. It ambles down a tiny narrow road, surrounded by ramshackle *favela* houses. Kids chase each other past the buildings. The bus passes through quickly.

The other university is packed and sprawling. A crowd stands with umbrellas in the mud, listening to a man chant slogans from a stage. The road continues down into the Amazon, past tent cities and soccer fields and gardens and exhibitions. Cars share the street peacefully with crowds of people. A boombox on the sidewalk; dancing in the streets. The path always lined with vendors and litter.

We dead-end in a forest. A man invites us all into his truck. Watch crowds part through the windshield. Passengers become friends and exchange email addresses.

Discussions of tactics and theory stretch long into the night, across rooms and cars and hotels and restaurants. And then there are the parties.

An airplane hanger, filled with kids, all dancing. Row upon row of them, covered in sweat and caked with mud, still carrying their bags, moving with abandon.

They stretch for what seems like forever. And at the end is a huge stage, with dancing girls, a rocking band, and lights so powerful that when they rotate forward they illuminate the entire crowd. As the set ends, it feels like the whole building is about to explode.

The crowd spills out into the street, filling the surrounding blocks, as each person goes their separate way, back to the world that already exists.

How Depressions Work

February 4, 2009

[Original link](#)

On Capitol Hill sit many powerful people — Congressmen, Senators, Justices — but also numerous others who do the daily work of keeping government running. And, like anyone with such a weighty responsibility, they sometimes want a break: a chance to see a movie or eat out with their spouse.

Kids always make these things difficult, so in the late 1950s someone thought of starting a Capitol Hill Babysitting Coop. The idea was simple: a bunch of families would get together and dole out scrip — little fake money — amongst themselves. Anytime you wanted to go out, you could just hire another family in the coop to watch your kids: one piece of scrip per hour. Later, of course, you'd earn the money back by watching someone else's kids.

It was a brilliant system and much beloved, until sometime in the 1970s. See, when people left the babysitting coop, they got to keep the balance of their scrip. And so, over the years, the amount of scrip in circulation fell. Soon scrip was in short supply and people begun hoarding theirs for fear of losing it forever. There were few opportunities to babysit (and thus earn scrip) so people didn't want to lose the scrip they had by paying it to a sitter. Which, of course, meant even fewer babysitting opportunities, making more people want to hoard their scrip, and on and on in a downward spiral.

Since the coop consisted largely of lawmakers and lawyers, they attempted a legislative solution to the crisis, requiring everyone go out at least once every six months. The proposal just made things worse. Eventually, someone tried the idea of handing out more scrip to everyone, and soon, the coop's delicate balance was restored.

In the 2000s, house prices started rising and everyone started sinking their money into them. Average people would buy houses and mortgage them, banks would buy mortgages, investors would buy mortgage derivatives from banks, and so on. Pundits published books with titles like *Why the Real Estate Boom Will Not Bust* and many people just assumed housing prices would go up forever. At the peak of it, we had roughly \$80 trillion in global financial assets.

Of course, it was clear to anyone who looked closely that this couldn't go on forever — and that when it stopped, it would bring a lot down with it. And, sure enough, today housing prices are almost back to their usual level and we now have only \$60 trillion.

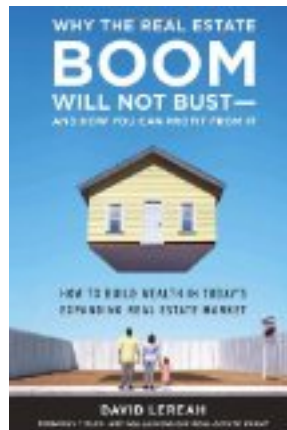


Figure 8: Book cover: Why the Real Estate Boom Will Not Bust

Just like people taking scrip out of the babysitting coop, an enormous amount of money has been taken out of the economy. So naturally people want to hold on to what's left. So they don't spend their money, which means there's less employment opportunities, which means more people want to hold on to their money, and on and on in a downward spiral.

Normally when this happens, as in a recession, the government has an easy solution: lower interest rates. What happens is the country's leading bankers meet at the Federal Reserve and vote to lower interest rates. Let's say they decide to lower them (as they've done a lot lately). Then the Federal Reserve Bank in New York starts buying up Treasury Bills (government IOUs) for cash, injecting money into the economy. This allows banks to lend out more money, lowering the interest rate at which money is lent out, and thus encouraging people to start spending again. (Later, when the economy is doing well, they'll raise the rates again, pulling money out and making sure things don't get out of hand.)

But this isn't simply a recession. The Fed's lowered the interest rate to zero — *zero!* they're giving money away — and unemployment just keeps rising. Losing a quarter of global financial assets hurts. But now the Fed has a problem: it can't lower the interest rate anymore. Interest rates don't go any lower than zero.

Which means, as J. M. Keynes foresaw back during the first Great Depression, we need another way of getting money into the economy. This isn't rocket science — Keynes suggested stuffing bills into bottles and burying them down mineshafts; Milton Friedman once proposed tossing cash out of helicopters. But as long as the government is spending money, we might as well spend it on something useful. And thus, fiscal stimulus.

We spend the money to build roads and trains and high-speed Internet connections. We give away health care and hand out welfare checks and mail people tax rebates. We do whatever it takes to get more money into the economy. Which people then turn around and spend on all the things they normally start spending money on and the engine of capitalism once again start to turn.

Keynes' genius came in seeing that the Depression wasn't a moral problem. We're not being punished for our exuberance or our stinginess, just as the folks on Capitol Hill weren't at fault for not wanting to go out. In both cases, the problem wasn't legislative, but merely technical: there just wasn't enough money to go around. And the technical problem has a technical solution: print more money.

The moralists insist it's irresponsible for us to just print more money. After all, they say, debt got us into this mess; is more debt really going to get us out? This is what they told FDR, causing him to hit the break on a recovery that was pulling us out of the Great Depression. This is what they told Japan, ending their recovery and plunging the country into a "lost decade" of unemployment.

It's not irresponsible to spend money; it's irresponsible not to. Factories are lying idle, people are sitting at home unemployed, and our economy is slowing. We can spend money to make use of it all, or we can just continue downward spiral. The choice is ours.

Further reading:

- Sweeney and Sweeney, "[Monetary Theory and the Great Capitol Hill Baby Sitting Co-op Crisis](#)" [PDF]
- DeLong, "[The Financial Crisis of 2007-2009: Understanding Its Causes, Consequences—and Its Possible Cures](#)" [scribd]
- Krugman, *The Return of Depression Economics*
- Baker, [Why Stimulus Won't Increase the Debt](#)

NYT Personals

February 13, 2009

[Original link](#)



Figure 9: Aaron Swartz used a free trial of the government's Pacer system to download 19,856,160 pages of documents in a campaign to place the information free online.

Michael Francis McElroy for The New York Times

Attention attractive people: Are you looking for someone respectable enough that they've been *personally vetted* by the *New York Times*, but has enough of a *bad-boy streak* that the vetting was because they 'liberated' *millions of dollars* of government documents? If so, look no further than page A14 of today's *New York Times*:

Aaron Swartz, a 22-year-old Stanford dropout and entrepreneur who read Mr. Malamuds appeal, managed to download an estimated 20 percent of the entire database: 19,856,160 pages of text.

Then on Sept. 29, all of the free servers stopped serving. The government, it turns out, was not pleased.

A notice went out from the Government Printing Office that the free Pacer pilot program was suspended, pending an evaluation. A couple of weeks later, a Government Printing Office official, Richard G. Davis, told librarians that the security of the Pacer service was compromised. The F.B.I. is conducting an investigation.

[Continuing on the blog:](#)

In the technology world, Mr. Swartz is kind of a big deal, as the saying goes. At the age of 14, he had a hand in writing RSS, the now-ubiquitous software used to syndicate everything from blog posts to news headlines directly to subscribers.

[O]ver the course of six weeks, Mr. Swartz was able to download 780 gigabytes of data — 19,856,160 pages of text — from Pacer. The caper grabbed an estimated 20 percent of the entire PACER network, with a focus on the most recent cases from almost every circuit.

When the government abruptly shut down the free public program, Mr. Malamud saw it as a sign of possible trouble ahead. “Who shuts down a 17-site national program with no notice whatsoever?” he recalled thinking. “I immediately saw the potential for overreaction by the courts.”

Mr. Malamud told Mr. Swartz: “You need to talk to a lawyer. I need to talk to a lawyer.” Mr. Swartz recalled, “I had this vision of the Feds crashing down the door, taking everything away.”

He said he locked the deadbolt on his door, lay down on the bed for a while, and then called [to warn] his mother.

But when lawyers told Mr. Malamud and Mr. Swartz that they appeared to have broken no laws, Mr. Malamud sent Mr. Swartz a message saying, “You should just lay low for a while.”

Mr. Swartz said that he waited for a couple of months, but “nobody came knocking on my door. I started breathing a little more easily.”

Want to meet the man behind the headlines? Want to have the F.B.I. open up a file on you as well? Interested in some kind of bizarre celebrity product endorsement? I’m available in Boston and New York all this month — contact me by [email](#), [Facebook](#), and [web form](#).

More:

- John Schwartz, “[An Effort to Upgrade a Court Archive System to Free and Easy](#),” *New York Times*, February 12, 2009
- public.resource.org, “[A Cleaner PACER](#)” (“32 districts, 735.9 GBytes, 19,856,160 pages”)

UPDATE: Schwartz expands on his story in [Steal These Federal Records—Okay, Not Literally](#).

Non-Hierarchical Management

February 16, 2009

[Original link](#)

You want to get something done. But it's too big to do it by yourself, so you bring in some friends to help out. In your dreams, all your friends just “click”, understand exactly what it is they're all supposed to do, and do it quickly and effectively. In reality, this almost never happens.

In order for any team to succeed, they need someone helping them all stay on track — someone who we will call a “manager”.

The word manager makes many people uncomfortable. It calls up the image of a bossman telling you what to do and forcing you to slave away at doing it. That is not effective management.

A better way to think of a manager is as a servant, like an editor or a personal assistant. Everyone wants to be effective; a manager's job is to do everything they can to make that happen. The ideal manager is someone everyone would want to have.

Instead of the standard “org chart” with a CEO at the top and employees growing down like roots, turn the whole thing upside down. Employees are at the top — they're the ones who actually get stuff done — and managers are underneath them, helping them to be more effective. (The CEO, who really does nothing, is of course at the bottom.)

Most guides on management are written for big bosses at big companies, not people starting something new who want their team to be as effective as possible. (Hi, startup founders!) So herewith, a guide to effective non-hierarchical management.

Point 1: Management is a job.

Management is not a typical job. People who manage programmers don't spend their day programming. Nor do they spend their day writing memos. In fact, from the outside, it may appear like they don't spend their day doing very much at all. Don't be fooled.

Management is a serious job. It is incredibly difficult and wildly consuming. As an employee, if you miss a day off work, it's no big deal: some work doesn't get done and you (or someone else) has to catch up on it later. As a manager, it can become a serious problem — if you're not working, then the dozen people you serve aren't working effectively as well. It makes knocking off work to go to the fair a stressful proposition.

On the other hand, it can be incredibly rewarding. If you do your job right, you turn a group of individuals into a team, a group that's more effective than the sum of its parts. Together, you and your team can achieve amazing things. As a manager, your task is to serve the team — to make it as effective as it can possibly be, even if that means stepping on the toes of a few individuals.

One incredibly popular misconception is that managers are just there to provide “leadership” — you set everyone up, get them pointed in the right direction, and then let them go while you go back to the “real” stuff, whether it's building things yourself, meeting with funders, or going on the road and talking up your organization. Those are all perfectly valid jobs, but they are not management. You have to pick one. You cannot do both.

Point 1a: Stay organized.

As the manager, it's your job to make sure things get done. This means you need a system for making sure things get done. This doesn't have to be anything fancy or complicated — a simple todo list will do — but simply trying to remember or writing yourself a note is not a system.

One of the nice things about having a system is it actually makes you less stressed out. Most people just keep their todo list somewhere in the back of their head. As things pile up, they become harder and harder to keep track of, and you become more stressed out about getting them all done or forgetting about them.

Simply writing them down on a list makes everything seem more manageable. You can see the things you have to do — really, there's not quite as many important ones as you thought — and you can put them in order and get that nice burst of satisfaction that comes from crossing them off.

Yes, it all sounds like silly, basic stuff, but it's important. Just having a list with all the stuff you need to do — and taking it seriously, actually going down it and checking stuff off every single day — is the difference between being a black hole of action items and being someone who actually Gets Stuff Done.

Point 2: Know your team.

As a servant, it's crucial you know your masters well. You need to know what they're good at and what gives them trouble. You need to be able to tell when they're feeling good and when they're in a rut. And you need to have a safe enough relationship with them that they can be honest with you and come to you when they're in trouble. This is not easy. (You have to be willing to hear bad news about yourself.)

The most important piece is understanding what people are good at and what they like doing. A good first step is to just ask them, but often people are wrong

or don't know. So you try giving them different things, seeing how they do at them, and adjusting accordingly.

But in addition to your team's professional skills, it's important to understand their personal goals. However much you may care about the work, at bottom it's still a job. You need to understand why your team members took it. Was it because it seemed interesting? Because it seemed worthwhile? Because it would give them valuable experience and help them get a better job down the road? It's important that you know, so you can make sure your tasks and expectations are in line with their goals.

Point 2a: Hire people smarter than you.

You want the best working for you. People who aren't just good at their job, but people who are also good at *your* job. People you can trust to not just do something right but tell you that the way you suggested doing it was wrong. People you can rely on to get things done if you just stay out of their way. At least, that's the ideal. In practice, it's hard to find people like that and even when you do, they still need help.

I have never found the traditional methods of hiring — resumés, interviews, quizzes — to be helpful at all. Instead, I look at two things: what someone has done and whether I enjoy spending time with them. The first shows not just their talent but also their ability to execute. If they haven't made something interesting, whether as a side project or at a previous job, then they're probably not worth hiring. It's not *that* hard to sit down and accomplish something; be wary of people who haven't.

Similarly, you need to keep in mind that you're not just hiring a robot — you're hiring a flesh-and-blood human who you're going to need to spend a lot of time with during the day. That means they need to be someone you not just get along with, but enjoy being around. A formal interview, with all its stress and structure and contrivance, is a pretty bad environment for seeing if you like someone. Instead, just go get coffee and chat.

Point 2b: Be careful when hiring friends.

Everyone wants to work with their friends. After all, you have so much fun hanging out after work, why not hang out during work too? So they recruit their friends to work with them. (Or, even worse, they recruit their lovers.) But being friends is very different from being colleagues. All friends learn ways to adjust themselves to each other — which tones to use, which subjects to avoid, when to give each other space.

These go out the window when you're working together. You can't just not say things because they'll get your friend upset. So you say them, and they get

upset, and you realize you have no way of dealing with each other when you're like this. It makes working together difficult, to say the least.

The situation is the same, but vastly worse, with couples. Plus, you're really screwed when your relationship falls apart under the stress.

If you do decide to work with people you're close with, you need to find a way to put your other relationship "on hold" while you work together. Which means you both need to be strong enough to be able to blow up at each other at work and then go out for drinks like nothing ever happened. If you can't do this (and few can), then either give up on the relationship or give up on the job.

The most extreme form of this, of course, is that you need to be able to fire your friend. Just because you like them doesn't mean they'll automatically be a good employee. And, sadly, there's really no way for you to know in advance. Bad employees are no less disastrous because they're your friends. Which means that if you hire a friend, you need to be able to fire them.

Point 2c: Set boundaries.

Conversely, don't become close friends with the people you work with. You have to set some personal boundaries: you're their manager, not their friend. Naturally, part of being a manager means that you have to talk to people about their personal problems and possibly even offer advice. After all, it's your job to make your team effective and if personal problems are distracting from that, you are going to have to face someone's personal problems.

But be sure to keep these problems at arm's length. Actually getting involved in someone's personal life or otherwise establishing a close personal relationship with them is asking for trouble.

Point 3: Go over the goals together.

Your first job as a manager is to make sure everyone's on the same page. The team needs to understand what they're expected to do, why they're doing it, and who else is involved (funding it, using it, counting on it). If you picked a good team (point 2a), they'll hear this and find holes in your plan and catch things you hadn't thought of. (Which is good! Together, you can fix it.)

But real work can't begin until everyone's on board with the plan.

Point 3a: Build a community.

You're not managing a bunch of individual employees; you're managing a team. You're all trying to accomplish the same goal. It's the manager's job to make sure everyone's comfortable with each other. (Hint: Those dumb break-the-ice

games do not make people *more* comfortable.) And while there's obviously a lot of feedback you need to give people one-on-one (*never* chew people out in front of a group), you should try to do a lot in front of the team as well.

It's easy to fall into a trap where you're just giving feedback individually. The result is that everyone feels isolated, not knowing where their work fits in to the bigger picture. Providing opportunities for everyone to see what everyone else is up to is crucial to making your team actually feel like it's a community, instead of just a group of your friends. (First law of friendship drift: Just because you like two people doesn't mean they'll automatically like each other.)

It's also a good opportunity to set a tone. You want people to treat each other like friends and colleagues, not backstabbing assholes or bickering siblings. As my friend Clay comments:

I have a "no asshole rule" which is really simple: I really don't want to work with assholes. So if you're an asshole and you work on my team, I'm going to fire you. Now, if the whole team says "gosh, that's awful. We want to work with as many assholes as we can!" then we have a simple solution. I'll fire me! (FYI: The "No Asshole Rule" is a book. I thought it was actually a pretty good book as far as Business books go. As far as I'm concerned, anybody could stand to read 100 pages giving them the MBA Book cover they need to say to their boss: let's get the assholes out of here.)

But a community is about more than just tone, there's process as well. You need to figure out how your team members work and how you can get them to work together. Some people like constant human feedback; others like locking themselves in a room for a couple hours and just getting something done. Everyone has their own habits and styles. Your job is to find an appropriate mix that makes everyone as productive they can be.

Point 4: Assign responsibility.

First, break the plan up into parts. Make sure everybody understands the parts.

Second, find a team member who wants to do each part. The key word here is *wants* — some things just have to get done, it's true, but things will get done much better by people who want to do them.

One of the weird facts of life is that for just about everything you hate doing, there is someone out there who loves doing it. (There are even people who get a real kick out of cleaning toilets.) You may not currently employ them and you may not be able to hire them, but there is the goal worth striving toward.

It's also important to realize that a lot of what makes a task attractive or unattractive is outside the task itself. Managing the company's accounting

books at first seems like a pretty uninteresting job. But when you realize it makes you indispensable and gives you authority over how all the money is spent, it suddenly seems a little more exciting. Use your knowledge from point 2 to structure tasks in a way that's attractive to your team members.

Point 4a: Vary responsibilities.

Another thing to keep in mind is that most people like variety in their work. It's very tempting to think of someone as "the finance guy" and just give them all the finance-related tasks. But in any organization there's lots of different kinds of things to do and a wide mix of people to do it. Many people will appreciate the opportunity to switch up the kinds of things they do.

It's tempting to think that this is inefficient, that by having one guy do all the finance tasks they'll become an expert in it and the finance tasks will get done more effectively. And there's definitely some truth in it. But one of the best ways to be inefficient is to make your team unhappy. If doing something new makes someone enjoy their job more, it'll be well worth the cost in time of them having to learn how to do it.

Even better, their fresh perspective might just help you make improvements you'd never thought of before.

Point 4b: Delegate responsibility.

As the manager, it's a continual temptation to keep important jobs for yourself. After all, they're usually fun to do and doggone-it they're *important*, you can't risk them on somebody else! Resist the temptation.

For one thing, taking jobs for yourself is one way of distracting yourself from having to do actual management (point 1). But more importantly, you'll never be able to develop your team if you keep all the real responsibility for yourself. Sure, Jony may not be as good at meeting funders as you, but a lot of that's because she's never gotten a chance to practice. If it's something she wants to do (point 2), take her along and give him a chance to learn.

Point 5: Clear obstacles.

This is the bulk of what non-hierarchical management is about. You've got good people, they've got good responsibilities. Now it's your job to do everything in your power to help them get them done.

A good way to start is just by asking people what they need. Is their office too noisy? Did they get confused about something you said? Are they stuck on a particular problem? Are they overwhelmed with work? It's your job to help them out: get them a quieter office, clarify things, find them advice or answers,

shift some stuff off their plate. They shouldn't be wasting time with things that annoy them; that's your job.

But you have to be proactive as well. People tend to suffer quietly, both because they don't want to come whining to you and just because when you're stuck in a rut all your attention is focused on the rut. A key part of being a manager is checking in with people, pointing out that they're stuck in a rut, and gently helping them out.

Point 5a: Prioritize.

At any given time, there's lots of stuff that needs to be done. Part of your job is helping people decide what to tackle first. You don't want to be *too* didactic about it — people like choice and variety, they're not always so happy when you just give them one instruction after another — but even that's usually far preferable to being overwhelmed with stuff.

The best prioritization relationship is a dialogue: "OK, what's next?" someone asks. "Well, what about building the new sprocket management engine?" "Ugh, I'm too tired for that today." "OK, how about cleaning the frobnitz?" "Bo-ring." "Oh, I know! We need someone to document the doohickey." "Ooh, perfect — thanks!"

Point 5b: Fight procrastination.

Procrastination is the crop blight of the office-work world. It affects just about everyone and it's very hard to fight alone. The single best way to stop procrastination is to sit down with someone and come up with the next concrete step they have to take and then start doing it together. There's something magical about having another person sit down with you and do something that can overcome procrastination's natural resistance. And once you get someone started, momentum can often carry them through the rest of the day.

Even if all you do is help people overcome procrastination, you will be well worth it.

Point 6: Give feedback.

White-collar work is lonely. You sit at a desk, staring at a screen, poking at buttons. It's easy to get lost and off-track and depressed. That's why it's important to check in and see how things are doing. Not only does it give you a chance to see how people are doing (point 5), it gives you a chance to see how things are coming and gently steer them back on course if they've drifted from what you've intended.

Point 6a: Don't micromanage.

Remember, your job isn't to tell people *how* to do things; it's to help them get it done. Sometimes this means helping them figure out how to do it, but in general you should assume that you work with smart people and they'll be able to handle it themselves. Again, be a servant, not a boss.

Studies consistently show that people are much happier and more productive when they have control over the way they work. Never take that away.

Point 7: Don't make decisions (unless you *really* have to).

As manager, people will often come to you to make decisions or resolve disputes. It's very tempting, with people looking up at you for guidance, to want to give your sage advice. But the fact is, even if (or especially if) as a manager you're held up on a pedestal, you probably know less about the question than anyone else on the team.

The worst managers don't just make decisions when people come to them, they parachute in and start dictating tiny details. The urge to do this can be overwhelming, but there are few things more disastrous to morale. If you really have to give input, couch it as such. And if people fight back, know when to step back and say "look, you're the expert. I was just giving my two cents." (Hint: It's right after they start fighting back.)

The best managers use these opportunities not to dictate an answer, but to have a Socratic dialogue to help figure out what the best answer is. Often when people are stuck on something, they really just need someone else to talk things over with, either for assistance or validation. Here's your chance to help.

Point 8: Fire ineffective people.

Firing people is hard. It's probably the hardest thing you'll ever do. People go to absurd lengths to try and make it easier ("we'll just try him out for a month and see how it goes" is a common one) but they never really help. You just have to bite the bullet and let people go. It's your job. If you can't do it, find someone else.

Firing people isn't just about saving money, or petty things like that. It's the difference between a great organization and a failure. Ineffective people drag everyone else down to their level. They make it so that you can't take pride in what you're doing, so that you dread going into work in the morning, so that you can't rely on the other pieces of the project getting done. And assholes, no matter how talented they may be, are even worse. Conversely, there are few things more fun than working hard with a really nice, talented group of people.

You are never going to be able to tell whether someone is going to work out in advance. Assholes are sometimes easy to spot, but people can have great resumes, solid references, a charming interview style, and still be total failures. And the worst part is, there will always be excuses for their failures. “I know, I know,” they’ll say, “it’s just that I’ve been really sick this week. I’ve been distracted with family things. I’ve been traveling. Look, I’m sorry. I promise I’ll do better this week.” I’ve said them all myself.

If you’re not getting things done, you can always come up with excuses for why. Competent people get things done anyway. Ineffective ones let the excuses pile up. They’re not going to leave themselves. You have to pull the trigger.

Point 9: Give away the credit.

As the team’s manager, there will be many opportunities where people will want to give you credit. And getting credit is nice, it makes you feel good. So you start coming up with excuses for why you deserve it, even though you didn’t do any of the work. “Well, it was my vision,” you will say. “I was the one who made it all happen.”

But think of all those talented people slaving away at desks. They were the ones who actually made it happen. Make sure they get the credit. And not in a facetious, “thanks to all the little people way”. No, you need to own up. You are the assistant. They did all the work. As Clay says, “A manager’s worst enemy is his or her own ego.”

Point 10: You’re probably not cut out for this.

Spending your days doing grunt work for people who are smarter than you. Obsessing over their mood and personal problems. Turning down all opportunities to take credit or get attention so you can continue to work as a servant. Does this really sound like a job you want?

Probably not. Few people are cut out for it. It’s really hard. It’s incredibly stressful. It’s not at all glamorous.

But it’s vitally important. A team without a manager is doomed to be an ineffective team. So if you can’t do it, find somebody else.

Thanks to [Clay Johnson](#) and [Emmett Shear](#) for their comments on drafts of this essay.

RSS Hits the Big Time

February 21, 2009

[Original link](#)

As [chaunceyt pointed out](#), the new stimulus bill's [implementation instructions](#) require that each government agency report the money it gives out in RSS:

For each of the near term reporting requirements (major communications, formula block grant allocations, weekly reports) agencies are required to provide a feed (preferred: Atom 1.0, acceptable: RSS) of the information so that content can be delivered via subscription.

The document is very clear that the items in the feed can't simply be unstructured text, but have to be reusable data, e.g.:

Formula Block Grant Allocation Reports: Agencies are asked to provide Formula Block Grant Allocation information as soon as it becomes available. Data elements for the formula block grant allocation feed should include:

Data Elements	Description
Recipient Name	The name of the recipient of the award.
Federal Funding Amount	Amount of federal government's obligation or contingent liability, in dollars. A n
Recipient DUNS	Unique nine-digit number issued by Dun & Bradstreet to the agency. Followed b
[...]	

And it goes on like this for several pages.

Pretty amazing to see a government so tech-savvy.

Obligatory plug: Want to see more like this? [Sign up to keep in touch with the PCCC](#). We're trying to get better congresspeople elected thru Internet organizing and better tools.

A 24 Puzzle

March 4, 2009

[Original link](#)

Imagine you've kidnapped the President of the United States. You record her making a statement that, if published, will strengthen the international forces of evil. The military is about to blow up the building you're in, so you have to get the video out electronically, but they're monitoring your communications and will be able to put enormous pressure on anyone who receives a copy from you.

Here's the question: in the few minutes you have before the building is reduced to rubble, where do you upload the video to maximize the chance that it will get published?

Alright, so your first inclination is to upload it to your servers, but that's easy — they just seize your servers.

So you upload it to YouTube and have Google copy it to all of their servers. But then they just call Google and have them delete it.

Obviously if you had it on the front page of a popular website, that would solve things, but the front pages of popular websites are pretty closely guarded.

You could try mailing it to WikiLeaks, but although WikiLeaks is pretty open-minded, they may not actually want to strengthen the international forces of evil. The same goes for any other particular free speech activist you could name — dst, Cryptome, etc.

Your best bet is probably to have a smart guy on the outside who keeps uploading it various places from behind Tor as older copies get deleted. But how many people have smart guys on the outside?

You could try spamming it to a bunch of blogs, wikis, and other sites (or even by email or IM for that matter), but that'll take too long — you only have a couple of minutes and probably a flaky connection to boot. There's no way you can hit very many servers.

You could publish it on a Tor hidden service, but then they'd probably just DOS the whole Tor network.

Freenet seems too small and unreliable. Other P2P systems don't even make copies except on request.

Usenet seems like it should be a promising option, but does anyone use Usenet anymore?

More promising options seem like emailing it to some kind of large mailing list. But which list has the most insane free speech activists? (cypherpunks? lkml?) And will it mail out all those copies before the Feds get it unplugged?

How else do you get stuff onto lots of people's machines? Web, Usenet, email, IM, HTTP access logs, DNS caches.

Can you think of anything better?

The current winner is [Andy Baio](#) with:

Upload it to Sharebee (which then sends it out to Megaupload, Rapidshare and a bunch of other anonymous hosting sites) and post the link to 4chan. They're big on evil over there.

The Intellectual's Creed

March 5, 2009

[Original link](#)

[T]he ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back. I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas. Not, indeed, immediately, but after a certain interval; for in the field of economic and political philosophy there are not many who are influenced by new theories after they are twenty-five or thirty years of age, so that the ideas which civil servants and politicians and even agitators apply to current events are not likely to be the newest. But, soon or late, it is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil.

(John Maynard Keynes, *General Theory*, last page)

Previously: [The Activist's Creed](#), [The Sociologist's Creed](#)

In Defense of Elections

March 9, 2009

[Original link](#)

Traditional left-wing thought treats elections as epiphenomenal: build a strong enough social movement and politicians will be forced to do what you want. In this view, it doesn't really matter who gets elected since they're ultimately all subject to the same structural forces. Working to get someone "good" elected is really just a waste of time, since they'll turn out to be as bad as all the others once they get into office.

(Think Noam Chomsky's comments about the unimportance of electoral politics, or the Alinskyite theory that one should try to cultivate an attitude of "fear and loathing" among politicians.)

There's clearly a great deal of truth to this — structural forces are ultimately very powerful. But I think it misses a great deal as well. This model assumes politicians are this separate class of rational actors who respond purely to electoral incentives; if your grassroots movement gets them votes, they'll help you out, but they're just as happy to sell you out to a higher bidder.

But what if the politicians involved are actually activists themselves? What if the choice isn't between joining a electoral campaign and joining an issue campaign, but between starting a electoral campaign and starting an issue campaign? Here I think the calculus changes wildly.

For one thing, just at the campaign level, electoral campaigns have a lot of advantage over issue campaigns. They fit into a designated "news hole" so it's easier for the media to cover them, they have clear deadlines which spur people to action, and there's a clear existing model for how to do them (including fundraising, scheduling, volunteer management, etc.).

Furthermore, if you actually win, you can now continue the campaign from a much stronger institutional base: you'll have a full-time salaried staff, your pronouncements will be *de facto* news, and there will be strong social pressure preventing the whole thing from fizzling out as people decide to do other things with their lives.

Of course, there's also the positive impact you can make as an officeholder. Obviously you'll be able to help institutionalize your goals by passing laws and regulations you support (just as you would try to push as an outsider), but you'll also be able to promote things in innumerable smaller ways, just by meeting with other politicians and using the influence of your office. Take this story from Matt Taibbi about Bernie Sanders, the socialist Senator from Vermont:

[He] kept coming back to a story about his very first meeting with the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee. At the meeting, the subject of the Head Start program had come up. Ted Kennedy, who runs the committee, had proposed a modest increase. Sanders wanted more—so he went and had a word with Kennedy after the meeting.

“The end result is that we got a 6 percent increase, instead of a 4 percent increase,” he said. “Over a three-year period, that’s five hundred million dollars more. What I’m finding out is it’s just a different world. Not saying it’s better, it’s just different. If you want something you just go talk to someone in the hall. [...]”

He tried to sound like it was a good thing, and it might very well have been, in terms of getting more money for a worthy-enough program. But the subtext of this story was Sanders expressing amazement that he could get \$500 million just by talking to someone. As any human being would, he looked blown away by the reality of his situation.

(*The Great Derangement*, 127)

Obviously there are few offices as powerful as United States Senator, but every job has opportunities for simple victories like these, if at a much smaller scale. Sure, outside groups can always try to push officials to do things like this, but if you actually are the elected official you can just do them. (Plus, how often do outside groups know about these simple things?)

The late Senator Paul Wellstone, who came to electoral politics from grassroots organizing himself, argued that political change had three parts: the intellectual work of discovering what’s wrong and how to fix it (i.e. policy development), the organizing work of mobilizing citizens into activist groups, and the electoral work of running for office and getting elected. And it seems that the left seems to neglect the last of these.

For a young leftist, a career in academia or the think tanks is an easy choice, while those who are bolder go into full-time activism. But running for office never seems like a viable option. (When people ask Noam Chomsky how they can fix things, he never says they should run for office.) (We’ll ignore for a moment the delusion the left seems to have that they should run for office as a third-party in a two-party system.) The result is a severe deficit of genuine leftist candidates. Which of course feeds their sense that politicians are just going to sell you out.

Leftists need to think more about running for office. Not as an alternative to advocacy or activism, but as an extension of it. Campaigns are an incredible opportunity to explain and fight for the issues you believe in, while elected offices are a great opportunity to achieve them. That’s how [the left took Santa Cruz](#), probably the only real city in the country with a leftist government, and that’s how they’ll take the country.

Journalistic Capture and Fixing CNBC

March 16, 2009

[Original link](#)

Attention conservation notice: Just [Fix CNBC!](#) and add your name.

Sometimes the government will set up a new regulatory agency, like a Mine Safety and Health Administration or something to keep watch on the mining industry. And off they go, investigating the mining industry to make sure they're being safe.

Only something funny happens. It turns out all the people they talk to all day are mining industry officials. And whenever they hold meetings to ask for advice, the only people who show up are mining industry officials. When they make proposals and ask for public comment, all the comments are from mining industry officials. And pretty soon, they start thinking like mining industry officials.

Academics call this regulatory capture — an office was put in place to regulate an industry, but it ended up just being a tool of the industry.

But what's striking is that the problem isn't just limited to regulation; the same thing happens to journalists as well. Call it journalistic capture. And there are few examples of it more obvious than that of CNBC.

CNBC, a channel supposed to cover economic news, basically acts as a full-time cheerleader for the financial industry. When the market was booming, this wasn't so noticeable. Whole swaths of the country started daytrading and checking the CNBC ticker regularly to feed their buy-sell trigger fingers.

But now that the market's gone belly-up, it all seems a whole lot less appealing. Which is what Jon Stewart has been getting at with his critiques of the network.

Well, it's less satisfying to complain when you can actually do something about it, so some friends and I have started a new campaign: **Fix CNBC!** [As HuffPo reported](#), we're demanding CNBC commit to holding Wall Street accountable, starting with hiring someone who was *right* about the economic crisis.

We'd really love for you to sign our open letter:

- [Fix CNBC!](#)

Who Really Rules?

March 23, 2009

[Original link](#)

Who Really Rules?, by G. William Domhoff, is one of my very favorite books. But explaining why will take some background. In the 1950s and 60s researchers were looking at what they called the “power structure” in American cities — the people who really pulled the strings and called the shots. Foremost among them was Floyd Hunter, whose study of Atlanta practically invented the field. Naturally the whole notion that anyone was pulling the shots behind the scenes in America offended the deans of mainstream liberal political science and so their leader, Robert A. Dahl, set out to defend democracy’s good name.

He argued that one could only figure out who was in charge by doing careful case studies — looking at controversial decisions and seeing who was involved in making them — that and only that could tell you where true power lay. And, in his most famous work, *Who Governs?: Democracy and Power in an American City* he aimed to do just such a case study in his hometown of New Haven, where his employer, Yale University, resides.

Dahl proposed a theory called pluralism in which no small elect is in charge but power is instead shared across conflicting groups, each marshaling its own resources on the issues it feels strongly about. Democracy, although perhaps in a more sophisticated form, is vindicated, and the ridiculous notions of a shadowy elite disproven. As Dahl writes:

It is all the more improbable, then, that a secret cabal of Notables dominates the public life of New Haven through means so clandestine that not one of the fifty prominent citizens interviewed in the courts of this study—citizens who had participated extensively in various decisions—hinted at the existence of such a cabal; so clandestine, indeed, that no clues turned up in several years of investigation led to the door of such a group. (185)

Of course that wasn’t quite true. Domhoff was skeptical of Dahl’s results and decided to request access to his source material and reresearch the matter for himself. In going through Dahl’s interview notes, Domhoff found these choice comments:

First Informant said that [contacting the First National Bank] was essential, that they had to deal with what he called the “power structure” if they wanted to accomplish anything. First Informant kept emphasizing the “power structure.”

According to Second Informant, nothing gets done without the First National Bank saying so. According to him, it is “at the top of the power structure.” ... I asked him why ... [and he] said, “Just look at who’s on its board of directors.” ... He said, “The bank’s support is necessary for anything that is done in this town including redevelopment.” (Sounds like a quote from Hunter.)

But, of course, Dahl wanted to disprove Hunter, not sound like him, so he never followed up on these leads. But Domhoff does. In the intellectual battle over which version of how cities work is more accurate, he scores a decisive victory over Dahl. He not only takes Dahl’s method, he also takes Dahl’s town and indeed his specific case study and shows how the decisions were made by a sinister cabal after all.

And his results are much more convincing. Dahl, after all, was trying to prove a negative: that there *wasn’t* anyone pulling the strings. Whereas Domhoff can simply point out who was. Dahl’s central case study is the question of New Haven urban renewal. A bold Democratic mayor, he claims, came into office and proposed a plan, dragging local businessmen and Federal officials along with him to get it done.

Nonsense, says Domhoff. The plan for urban renewal was drafted by the local chamber of commerce years before. And when the new mayor got elected, the Chamber of Commerce invited him to lunch and explained the whole thing. They even told the mayor who to hire to carry the plan out and, in the end, got exactly what they’d wanted all along.

But Domhoff doesn’t simply prove Dahl wrong. He gives an engrossing case study of how powerful businessmen get things like this done, based on extensive archival research and contemporaneous notes. And he tells an entire alternative history of American urban renewal, showing how big business turned a plan to build housing for the poor into an excuse to expel them to make room for upscale businesses.

The result is a *tour de force*: a complete demolition of one of the most influential books of political science, an engrossing case study of how power really operates, and an example of how to do research into the people who, after all, really rule.

- [My summary of Domhoff’s book](#)
- [An updated, enhanced, and online version of Domhoff’s book](#)
- [Domhoff’s book itself](#)

Margo Seltzer

March 24, 2009

[Original link](#)

part of Ada Lovelace Day

Margo Ilene Seltzer was born in rural, upstate New York. “I like to describe it as a place with more cows than people,” she later told an interviewer. In her small town, she excelled in math and science, but wasn’t sure that this would translate when she began attending Harvard for college in 1979.

Graduating in 1983, she studied Applied Mathematics, with a computer science concentration. She took some time to work in industry before going to graduate school in Computer Science at Berkeley in 1988. Her dissertation, completed in 1992, was on “File System Performance and Transaction Support” and found that, due to the costs of garbage collection in most real-world uses, log-structured filesystems in the literature were not any faster than read-optimized filesystems.

At the time, Berkeley’s CS department was excitedly developing BSD, writing free replacements for all the Unix utilities. They needed a replacement for ndbm, the prominent Unix database manager, and hsearch, its hash search function, and Margo had just finished taking a database course. She decided to apply her new skills by writing hash for BSD. Someone else wrote btree and they both ended up getting packaged together as db185, which shipped with BSD 4.4.

BerkeleyDB, as it became known, was used in many places but among them was the University of Michigan LDAP server. Netscape built upon this server for their own directory product but found that since bsddb didn’t support transactions, multiple concurrent writes could lead to corrupted data. They noticed that Margo had once written a paper on the subject of adding transactions and gave her a call. It was 1996.

She said that it was simply academic work and wasn’t ready for use in production. They asked if she could get it ready for production. They could pay, they reminded her. It was the first time she’d ever done anything like this for pay, but she gathered together some friends and founded a company to make the product for Netscape. They relicensed it from BSD (which allows anyone to integrate it) to their own GPL-style license which would allow them to continue to separately charge Netscape for using it. Their company was called Sleepycat, and Margo was its CTO.

The company was a major success, with BerkeleyDB being used in everything from SQL databases to behind-the-scenes at Amazon and Google. In 2006, as Oracle was acquiring all the open source database companies, they acquired Sleepycat and Margo went to work for Oracle.

At the same time, however, she was pursuing a parallel career in academia. In 1992 she became an Assistant Professor of Computer Science at Harvard. She became an Associate Professor in 1997, was named Gordon McKay Professor in 2000 and received tenure, occasioning [a *Crimson* editorial](#) on how a woman “beat all the odds”. From 2002 to 2006, she was also Associate Dean. A widely-respected professor in the field, she’s published over a hundred papers and served on numerous committees.

She is also noted as an inspiring teacher. She received two awards, Roslyn Abramson and Phi Beta Kappa, for excellence in teaching. And her course receives a 4.9 out of 5 in student ratings. Computer science students around campus often remark with surprise at how open and welcoming she is to young students as such a famous and respected professor.

Nor has she sacrificed her family, taking her children with her to the office and reserving time to spend with them at home.

A standout in so many ways, it seems the one struggle left is finding a new struggle. “Now that the pressure’s off,” she told a reporter, “I’ve started to ask myself: What’s my next goal? I won my black belt in karate a year ago. I’ve got tenure, a wonderful family, and a thriving business. It’s time to figure out what’s next.”

The Logic of Loss

April 13, 2009

[Original link](#)

Imagine someone offered you a 1% chance of winning a million dollars. How much would you pay for it? The natural inclination would be to say you break even at 1% of a million, which is \$10,000. Even if you could scrape together the cash, this doesn't seem like a very good deal. After all, there's a 99% chance that you'll have just thrown away ten grand.

Where did we go wrong? The problem is that calculating the average value this way only makes sense if you get to take the deal enough times to expect an average result. If you bought a couple thousand of these chances at \$9000 each, then you might start to come out ahead. But buying just one doesn't seem very bright.

Of course, the same logic applies to more pedestrian examples of risk. It probably doesn't make sense to invest in just one startup, even if the returns on startups are huge. That's why VCs invest in large numbers of startups; the returns from the wins balance out the flops.

This should seem pretty obvious, but some people seem to forget it a lot. Take the St. Petersburg paradox. Imagine this game: A dollar is placed on the table and a coin is flipped. If the coin comes up heads, the money is doubled and the coin is flipped again. Tails, the game ends and you take the money. How much would you pay to play?

The paradox comes about because the naive answer here is infinite. There's a 50% chance you get a dollar (=fifty cents), a 25% chance you get 2 (another fifty cents), a 12.5% chance you get 4 (again), and so on infinitely. But, naturally, it seems insane to pay a fortune to play this game. Thus the paradox.

Folks seem to be genuinely stumped about this, but it's just the first offer taken to the limit: instead of a 1% chance of making a million, you have an infinitesimal chance of making an infinity. If you got to play the game an infinite number of times, shelling out cash might begin to make sense, but if you only play it once it's not worth much.

Keep that in mind next time someone offers you a game.

What Are Intellectuals Good For?

April 14, 2009

[Original link](#)

There was once an era where great men strode among us. The Intellectuals, as they were known, had an opinion on everything and would share it, at length, with elegance and verve. Unfortunately, the explosion of information beginning in the sixties rendered them all-but-extinct and the electronic transformation of the past few decades threatens to finish the job. Still, we can't but admire them and their milieu.

This certainly seems to be George Scialabba's position. The greatest working book reviewer — when the National Book Critics Circle inaugurated their Excellence in Criticism award, he was their first recipient — collects his reviews of these grand men's work and a sampling of his own in his new collection, *What Are Intellectuals Good For?* The result is a delightful introduction to this world of ideas.

Scialabba's own position is best summarized by his dedication: "For Chomsky, Rorty, Lasch." In other words, he is a man of impeccable left-wing politics, a refusal to believe in any philosophical verities, and a deep skepticism about the benefits of Enlightenment progress. This is not exactly a popular combination — surely Chomsky and Ehrenreich have more fans than Rorty and Lasch — but it is a provocative one. And Scialabba's genius is that he can make such counterintuitive ideas, expressed by such Olympian intellectuals, seem not just clear but common sense. A dedicated follower of the left-rationalist-progressive tradition, I had to continually catch myself from nodding along in agreement.

Recommended for anyone who's a fan of the Intellectual Scene and the men and women who inhabit it.

Disclosure: Scialabba sent me an inscribed copy of the book.

- [Buy the book](#)
- **Wednesday:** [Reading at the Harvard Book Store](#)
- [Scialabba's web site](#)

A Non-Local Revolution

April 15, 2009

[Original link](#)

Paul Graham has recently argued for two points: first, that tech startups will [continue to collect in Silicon Valley](#). Second, that startups may represent [a new economic phase](#), replacing the [corporate ladder of old](#). Now he's suggesting that these two effects combined might lead to [a very local economic revolution](#).

The first point — that tech startups collect in Silicon Valley — is certainly true, just like car companies all tend to cluster in Detroit. This is because of a feedback effect set off by some random initial condition: Shockley Semiconductor was started in Silicon Valley, so when its employees left to start their own companies they did so there, and so on. Now everyone in the industry moves to Silicon Valley because that's where everyone else is.

This isn't a new idea; it was a central topic in Paul Krugman's research, for example, and even before that you can see similar ideas expressed by social theorists like Jane Jacobs. (For more information, see the Wikipedia article [Business cluster](#), Krugman's *Geography and Trade*, and Jacobs' brilliant book *The Economy of Cities*.) Industries tend to cluster together.

The second — that startups represent a new economic phase — may also be true. It's a rather more extreme claim, but it would be pretty cool.

But I don't think it combines with the first to create a local revolution. It's true, tech startups have generated a lot of wealth, but they're far from the only kind of startup to do so. The amazing thing about the Internet is that it makes all sorts of startups possible.

Previously, if you wanted to start a newspaper, you had to buy a building and hire a staff and get some printing presses and a delivery service and an ad sales team and access to the wire services. Now you just start a blog, read the wire services online, and link to the stories you like.

Previously, if you wanted to sell a new kind of soap, you had to build warehouses and a distribution network and a shipping infrastructure and make deals with retail outlets. Now you have [Amazon Fulfillment Services](#) handle all the physical details and just advertise your product on the Web.

And new startups are helping this process along all the time. One Y Combinator startup tries to make things easier for food producers, another helps you run an online magazine. More are surely close behind.

It's tempting to think that a soap company which only sold through the Internet would always be a small concern. But why should it be any different from

Internet companies? Reddit was small when it started, but it quickly grew through word-of-mouth. Sure, we had some tough nights making things scale, but in the end we were able to ramp up to a site with millions of users.

Similarly, I met [some folks in Brooklyn who started a small salsa company](#) in their apartment. At first they made the salsa in their kitchen and sold jars through their bedroom window. As business picked up, they got a bigger space and started selling more. Now they're manufacturing in scale and you can find them at Whole Foods. This worked because New York City was a big enough audience that they had room to scale up. The Internet is big in exactly the same way.

As the Internet is everywhere and everyone knows how to use it, why won't we see online startups in every industry? And then why not all across the globe? It may make sense for tech startups to move to Silicon Valley, but does it really make sense for soap startups? For food startups? No, it seems more likely that each industry will cluster the way tech companies and car companies have.

Silicon Valley may have had the first wave, but the next one belongs to the world.

Transparency is Bunk

April 23, 2009

[Original link](#)

Adapted from an impromptu rant I gave to some people interested in funding government transparency projects.

I've spent the past year and change working on a site, [watchdog.net](#), that publishes government information online. In doing that, I've learned a lot: I've looked at everything from pollution records to voter registration databases and I've figured out a number of bureaucratic tricks to get information out of the government. But I've also become increasingly skeptical of the transparency project in general, at least as it's carried out in the US.

The way a typical US transparency project works is pretty simple. You find a government database, work hard to get or parse a copy, and then put it online with some nice visualizations.

The problem is that reality doesn't live in the databases. Instead, the databases that are made available, even if grudgingly, form a kind of official cover story, a veil of lies over the real workings of government. If you visit a site like GovTrack, which publishes information on what Congresspeople are up to, you find that all of Congress's votes are on inane items like declaring holidays and naming post offices. The real action is buried in obscure subchapters of innocuous-sounding bills and voted on under emergency provisions that let everything happen without public disclosure.

So government transparency sites end up having three possible effects. The vast majority of them simply promote these official cover stories, misleading the public about what's really going on. The unusually cutting ones simply make plain the mindnumbing universality of waste and corruption, and thus promote apathy. And on very rare occasions you have a "success": an extreme case is located through your work, brought to justice, and then everyone goes home thinking the problem has been solved, as the real corruption continues on as before.

In short, the generous impulses behind transparency sites end up doing more harm than good.

But this is nothing new. The whole [history of the "good government" movement](#) in the US is of "reformers" who, intentionally or otherwise, weakened the cause of democracy. They too were primarily supported by large foundations, mostly Ford and Rockefeller. They replaced democratically-elected mayors with professional city managers, which required a supermajority to overrule. They

insisted on nonpartisan elections, making it difficult to organize people into political blocs. Arguing it would reduce corruption, they insisted city politicians serve without paying, ensuring the jobs were only open to the wealthy.

I worry that transparency groups may be making the same “mistake”.

These are some dark thoughts, so I want to add a helpful alternative: journalism. Investigative journalism lives up to the promise that transparency sites make. Let me give three examples: Silverstein, Taibbi, Caro.

[Ken Silverstein](#) regularly writes brilliant pieces about the influence of money in politics. And he uses these sorts of databases to do so. But the databases are always a small part of a larger picture, supplemented with interviews, documents, and even undercover investigation — he recently did a piece where he posted as a representative of the government of Turkmenistan and described how he was wined and dined by lobbyists eager to build support for that noxious regime. The story, and much more, is told in his book [Turkmeniscam](#). (His book [Washington Babylon](#) is similarly indispensable.)

Matt Taibbi, in his book [The Great Derangement](#), describes how Congress really works. He goes to the capitol and lays out the whole scene: the Congressmen naming post offices on the House floor, the journalists typing in the press releases they’re handed, the key actions going on behind the scenes and out of the public eye, the continual use of emergency procedures to evade disclosure laws.

And Robert Caro, in his incredible book [The Power Broker](#) (one of the very best books ever published, I’m convinced) takes on this fundamental political question of “Who’s actually responsible for what my government is doing?” For forty years, everyone in New York thought they knew the answer: power was held by the city council, the mayor, the state legislature, and the governor. After all, they run the government, right?

And for forty years, they were all wrong. Power was held — held, for the most part, *absolutely*, without any checks or outside influence — by one man: Parks Commissioner Robert Moses. All that time, everyone (especially the press) treated Robert Moses as merely the Parks Commissioner, a mere public servant serving his elected officials. In reality, he pulled the strings of all those elected officials.

These journalists tackled all the major questions supposedly addressed by US transparency sites — who’s buying influence? what is Congress doing? who’s in power in my neighborhood? — and not only tell a richer, more informative story, but come to strikingly different answers to the questions. In this era where investigative reporting budgets have been cut to the bone and newspapers are folding left and right, it’s fallen to nonprofits like ProPublica and the Center for Independent Media and, from a previous era, the Center for Public Integrity, to pick up the slack. They’ve been using the Internet in innovative ways to supplement good old-fashioned narrative journalism, where transparency sites are a supplement, rather than an end-in-themselves.

For too long we've been funding transparency projects on the model of if-we-build-it-they-will-come: that we don't know what transparency will be useful for, but once it's done it will lead to all sorts of exciting possibilities. Well, we've built it. And they haven't come. The only success story its proponents can point to is that transparency projects have bred even more transparency projects. I'm done working on watchdog.net; I'm done hurting America. It's time to give old-fashioned narrative journalism a try.

Previously: [Disinfecting the Sunlight Foundation](#) [November 2006]

Investigative Strike Teams

April 28, 2009

[Original link](#)

Journalists get mad at bloggers: “Without real reporting, they’d have nothing to comment on!” Bloggers get mad at journalists: “There’s a reason nobody reads newspapers anymore. They’re dry and dull and wrong.” But the gap is shrinking: bloggers are doing more real reporting, journalists are getting more humanized (with all the digressions, opinions, and biases that entails).

So what if you paired an investigative reporter with a blogger? Reporters didn’t used to write their own stories. (Why would a good investigator be a good writer?) The reporter would be out in the field, knocking on doors and taking notes, which they’d hand to a writer at a desk, who would turn them into a coherent, vivid story. (*Newsweek* still operates this way.)

Replace the writer with a blogger. They’d post the story as it unfolded, capturing the excitement of discovery: the big breaks, the wrong turns, the moment when it all comes together. Like any talented blogger, they’d keep people coming back: *What happens next? I want to know more!* They’d keep up a conversation with readers and other bloggers, sharing new leads with the reporter. It’d be a powerful duo.

But blogging isn’t everything. You also want to recap the story so far: for those just tuning in, here are the characters, here’s what’s happened, here’s why it’s important. Keep a summary article alongside the blog and update it in tandem. It would lay out the whole story in one place, with links to particular posts or source documents for more information. That way everyone can always get an overview of the bigger picture — including the reporters.

You’ll also want a tech person around to help out. Many stories involve databases; you need someone to work with the reporter to parse and process the data, then work with the blogger to put the results online. And there are plenty of other times where a small program or some tech knowledge comes in handy.

And you’ll need a lawyer on staff. Getting information isn’t easy. You’ll need someone who can file FOIA lawsuits and respond to legal threats. Maybe you can even file lawsuits against corporate malefactors and obtain documents in discovery. Then work with *pro bono* lawyers or public interest law firms to win the lawsuit in its own right.

Lawsuits are needed because modern investigations can’t stop at publication. If there was an era when a front page *Times* story could stop a scandal, that era is over. Ending abuses requires action. This makes traditional journalists uncomfortable. They see their job as reporting the facts, not changing them.

We may always need the detached journalist interested only in The Truth, but there's room for more. Just as journalism needs to become more humanized, it needs to become more activist. Journalists uncover outrageous things, which gets people outraged, but they seem to think channeling that outrage into something productive is someone else's responsibility.

Instead, a good investigative team needs a political organizer. They can build an email list of people who get outraged by their reporting and use it, along with blogs and the lists of other political groups, to put pressure on the bad guys, fundraise for further journalism, and collect a team of volunteers. The volunteers can help with aspects of the reporting — a modern investigation can get much further by crowdsourcing certain tricky aspects and depending on talented volunteers for particular tasks. A good political organizer knows how to get and manage volunteers.

But to make your organizing maximally effective, you'll need (gasp!) a lobbyist. They'll meet with representatives to encourage them to hold hearings based on stories you're working on, where they can subpoena documents and testimony. They'll ask representatives to introduce bills to address the abuses you've uncovered and work with them on legislative strategy to get those bills passed. And they'll team up with the political organizer to get constituents writing to their representatives in favor of these bills.

The only way to get good at something is deliberate practice: trying various things and seeing how they work. But when it comes to making change, that's very hard to do. Change requires so many people and takes so long that it's almost impossible to say for sure that your doing X helped accomplish Y. Which means that it becomes very easy to fool yourself into thinking you're more effective than you are.

But if you have one team — some reporters, a blogger/writer, a techie, a lawyer, an organizer, and a lobbyist — together, they form an investigative strike team: uncovering corruption, exposing it, and effecting change. They can watch the whole process unfold from a reporter's suspicion to a writer's story to a legislative fix. And they can get better at it. It'd be a powerful combination. That's the kind of future-of-news that I want to see.

A New Kind of Writing?

May 5, 2009

[Original link](#)

There are two kinds of nonfiction: *science writing* and *journalism*. Science writing is when you're trying to explain an idea. You have a concept in your head and you try to get it across. There are lots of tools you can use to do this: you can give an example, you can tell the story of how you thought of it, you can draw a picture. But the concept is the important thing.

In journalism, you're telling a story. Someone did one thing, which led to something else, which led to this other thing. Occasionally you pause to take a step back and make some larger point: the story might have some moral or illustrate some larger principle or lead you to a conclusion. But the important thing is always the story.

Of course, this is how science advances. Something weird happened over here, so we measured it carefully and took detailed notes. (These are the experimentalists.) When you put all these weird things together, they kind of fit a larger pattern. (These are the theorists.) The theory then leads to more experiments and the new experiments lead to more theory. You inch forward, bouncing between experiment and theory, journalism and science writing, to a larger understanding of the world.

But, of course, just as science requires both, the best science writing requires both. This is what makes *This American Life*'s show "[The Giant Pool of Money](#)" still so unsurpassedly brilliant. It took a question everyone wanted to know the answer to — why did the economy melt down? — and explained it not by just illustrating the concepts, as many science writers did, or just telling stories of the people involved, as journalists did, but by doing *both*, moving between the two modes so you could understand not just the theory but how it worked.

It seems like an obvious idea, especially when you lay it out this way, but I really can't think of any other good examples. Take three of my very favorite books: Robert Jackall's *Moral Mazes*, Robert Karen's *Becoming Attached*, and William Foote Whyte's *Street Corner Society*¹. All are absolutely brilliant, among the best examples of the genre while conveying facts of incredible importance. Jackall is very cinematic: his book consists of well-chosen scenes and all the theory comes in the cuts between them. (As soon as I finished reading it, I wanted to turn it into a movie.) But the two — scenes and theory — exist in a weird sort of balance. Neither of them (with a few exceptions) really take over and drive the work the way both do in "[The Giant Pool of Money](#)" but instead they water each other down: the scenes are always illustrating a theory and the theory consists largely of scenes.

Karen embeds the theory within his story by telling the story of the theory's development. Because he does this without condescension, it's as good an introduction to the science as can be imagined. It's a very clever technique, and a very powerful one (I certainly wouldn't change it), but it's a different one and doesn't have the same power.

Whyte, by contrast, spends his book telling the story of one example. From it, he draws out all the important theoretical principles (basically inventing every major branch of sociology for the next century) but the theory is always illustrating his one story, just as Jackall's scenes are always illustrating his theory.

Malcolm Gladwell probably comes closest to a genuine mixture of the two, but his work is marred by the fact that he kind of makes up all his science. His stories are never illustrating some established scientific principle or even a new one he has that he wants to stand up to scrutiny, but instead his principles are always invented *ad hoc* to serve his stories, with the same fidelity a typical *This American Life* episode has to its theme. As [Ira Glass comments](#) on "[Six Degrees of Lois Weisberg](#)": "the article could be half the length and still hit all its big ideas, and it's only longer because Gladwell has found so many things that interest and amuse him, and that's the engine that drives the whole enterprise. ... pretty much everything in the story after section five is, to my way of thinking, just there for fun."

As I've hinted at before, I'm hard at work on a book of my own, and of course I plan to write it this way. But surely I can't be the first. Anyone else have any good examples?

UPDATE: I'd forgotten how good a book *Fast Food Nation* is. It follows almost exactly this style. In general, it seems larger books written by magazine writers might, since magazine articles (story, story, moment of reflection) are the building blocks of the form, but I'm still having trouble thinking of other examples. *Outliers* is *much* better than the other Gladwell books on this front.

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1. I wanted to say Robert Caro's *The Power Broker* for the alliteration, but Whyte really is a better example because he doesn't study an extreme outlier.

How Policy Gets Made: A Primer

May 17, 2009

[Original link](#)

Barack Obama's campaign was a model of efficiency and foresightedness. Bill Clinton treated his campaign plans like marketing documents, poll-testing each proposed new idea, and forcing his administration to only begin seriously thinking about what to do once they were in office. Obama, by contrast, started early and put together a series of policy teams even before the campaign had begun in earnest.

Each policy team had a different subject — technology, health care, foreign policy — and was led by a top ally or fundraiser in the field. Let's take technology, since it's the case I'm most familiar with. Julius Genachowski was named Chairman of the Technology, Media and Telecommunications policy working group. Genachowski was a Harvard Law School classmate of Obama's who had gone on to become a chief executive at Barry Diller's IAC/InterActiveCorp (market cap: \$2.1 billion). He went on to become a venture capitalist and sit on the board of numerous technology companies.

He used his wealth ([annual income](#): \$1.6 million) and influence to become the leading Silicon Valley fundraiser for his old classmate — indeed, one of Obama's top fundraisers nationally. As a result, he was the obvious pick to define Obama's technology policy. Genachowski canvassed his fellow Silicon Valley business leaders for policy suggestions and his team synthesized the results into proposed policy documents. These proposals were circulated among a wider circle for further comments before being published on the campaign website.

After the election was won, the teams were reassembled as transition teams. Genachowski was again leading the technology team, now named the Technology, Innovation & Government Reform Policy Working Group (TIGR). It was staffed by old government hands, like Thomas Kalil (Deputy Assistant to President Clinton for Technology and Economic Policy, rode out the Bush years as Special Assistant to the Chancellor for Science and Technology at UC Berkeley). Also brought out were business leaders, like Andrew McLaughlin (Head of Global Public Policy and Government Affairs for Google), and business-affiliated academic experts, like Susan Crawford (UMich law professor and a former partner at a DC law firm).

The teams worked on converting the policy documents from the campaign into instructions that would be given to federal agencies or executive orders the President could sign. They fleshed out campaign proposals, interviewed potential candidates for government positions, and held audiences with various interest groups. I visited DC during this period and got to see the aforementioned names

at DC cocktail parties or the diner outside transition headquarters that became the informal meeting-place of the team. “It’s the hardest I’ve ever worked in my life,” Susan Crawford told me, clearly relishing the challenge.

After the inauguration, the teams disbanded and their members either returned to private life or were named to the administration. Genachowski, who obviously had his pick of positions, was named chairman of the Federal Communications Commission. Thomas Kalil became Associate Director of Science and Technology Policy. Susan Crawford became Special Assistant to the President for Science, Technology, and Innovation Policy. McLaughlin went back to work at Google, where his connections to the new administration are no doubt invaluable.

UPDATE: [McLaughlin was named Deputy CTO](#)

A Life Offline

May 18, 2009

[Original link](#)

I have literally had a computer since birth; the Internet came not long after that: I still remember email addresses supplemented by UUCP bang-paths. Hardly a day has gone by in which I haven't checked my email for what must be a decade.

The Internet has kept me connected to people—as a child, all my best friends were online; as an adult, all my coworkers are. My jobs do not take place in an office; they take place over email, where time and place do not matter. The upside, is that I can go anywhere and still do them. The downside, is I cannot get away from them.

I need to take a break. My life has become entangled with technology and pressure that I hardly know any other way of life. So I'm planning to spend the month of June (June 6 to July 4, to be exact) offline. I'm packing up the laptop and the cable modem and sending them someplace far away. I'm going back to the world of paper and books.

Of course, my phone is now a computer too, so that will also have to go. I don't have a landline, so if folks want to talk to me they'll have to write letters ([here's my address](#)). I (amazingly) don't have any clocks or calendars, so I won't even know what time it is. All of which means no more meetings or coordinating to hang out with people. I suppose people could call on me, but honestly, I wish they wouldn't — at least at first.

I don't feel like the kind of person who could survive on Walden Pond — I'm a finicky eater and not a huge fan of animals in any capacity. So locking myself in my apartment seems about as close as I can get. There will of course be the clerks at stores and people on the street, but for the most part I'll be alone.

I've experimented with it a little — both my phone and my laptop have died recently — and it's liberating. Walking down the street or waiting in lines, I find myself checking my phone compulsively, using it to send my mind to some other world of email or news. Without it, I feel grounded. And my laptop is even worse — a beckoning world of IMs to friends, [brain-gelatinizing television shows](#), and an endless pile of emails to answer. It's like a constant stream of depression. A day without it made me feel like I was human again.

I want to be human again. Even if that means isolating myself from the rest of you humans.

What if there's an emergency? Has there ever been an emergency? The biggest urgent things seem to be that my servers go down. Which sucks, but I need to be able to walk away from that. If you have things hosted on one of my

machines, contact me now and I'll try to get you enough privileges that you can fix things if they break. If something's really an emergency, I'm sure you'll find me.

Have a nice June.

This Month in Sociology

May 18, 2009

[Original link](#)

based on [Contexts' sociology roundup](#)

A new study finds that marriage has been making people increasingly unhappy for the past 30 years. Even when they say they're happy with their relationship, married people are unhappier overall. Indeed, the effect is so large that it cancels out the happiness gains the unmarried population has made in the past 30 years.

Meanwhile, in Portugal the police have been arresting whole neighborhoods and transporting them all to jail. Now prisoners can serve with their old family and friends.

Rich countries tend to be more accepting of minorities, while most strippers have terrible working conditions. Moving increases crime, the DUI gender gap is narrowing, and media coverage encourages sports hooligans. Young people are increasingly critical of war.

Blacks are moving back to the south, while dual citizenship is increasingly permitted. Ugandans educated at foreign colleges and universities are twice as likely to be employed as equally-educated Ugandans who never left and three times as likely to be employed as foreign-born immigrants.

Appalachian boys prefer working with their hands to booksmarts.

with apologies to [Paul Ford](#) and Roger Hodge

Namedropping

July 20, 2009

[Original link](#)

I was having tea the other day with Nancy Pelosi, when she got a call from her good friend Tom Hanks. Tom wanted to tell her about how he'd been out with his favorite shopping partner, Paris Hilton, when Paris accidentally swung a bag of clothes into the face of her aide, Ken Burns. Ken, of course, was already feeling bad after losing his therapist, Warren Buffett. He had to fire him after Warren kept spending their sessions raving about his new chef, Frank Gehry. Frank, you know, always left work in a towering rage, going home to scream obscenities at his housekeeper, Thomas Friedman. Last time Thomas took it out on a cab driver, Woody Allen. Woody spent the rest of the day feeling dejected until, on his way home, he was approached by Richard Posner, covered in rags and begging for spare change.

My Life Offline

July 24, 2009

[Original link](#)

Everyone wants to know how my month offline was. They ask it casually, like “How’s work going?” or “What’d you do this weekend?” But it’s not a casual question. It was a huge, incredible, transformative experience. Those 30 days felt like six months. My habits changed, my relationships changed, my identity changed, my personality changed — hell, the physical shape of my body changed dramatically. I went through four legal pads trying to describe what it was like. I’m still not sure I really know.

One thing is clear, though: my normal life style isn’t healthy. This doesn’t seem like the kind of thing that requires a break to learn. I imagine people with unhealthy lifestyles *know* they’re unhealthy. They come home after work and say “I can’t go on like this,” they cry randomly in elevators. But I didn’t know. Life online is practically the only life I know. Sure, I guess things were different when I was very young — I remember, after getting my first email account, wishing someone would email me so I’d have an email to answer (even then I knew I’d soon be missing those empty-inbox days) — but for most of my life, this has been it: a jumble of interruptions and requests and jobs and people, largely carried out alone. It never let up, so I never saw anything different. How was I to know there was anything wrong?

But the last few weeks have made it clear there was — is. These weeks haven’t felt that different my other weeks online, really — same jumble of work and people and interruptions as always. The usual sense that I’m never really *here*, I’m always worried about the million things around the corner: a todo list that goes for pages, a thousand emails to respond to, hundreds of blog posts to read, twenty open tabs, a dozen IM windows, a text message to answer, a Twitter stream to catch up on. I never used to think about these things as a benefit *or* a distraction — I didn’t think about them at all; they were just how life online was. This was the era of multitasking and I was its child. If I felt anything about it, it was pride — a kind of joy in (mostly) managing to handle a thousand different things thrown my way at once. But I never knew what life was like when things *weren’t* constantly being thrown at you. Until it stopped, I never knew how awful it really was.

I am not happy. I used to think of myself as just an unhappy person: a misanthrope, prone to mood swings and eating binges, who spends his days moping around the house in his pajamas, too shy and sad to step outside. But that’s not how I was offline. I loved people — everyone from the counter clerk to the old friends I bumped into on the street. And I loved to go for walks and exercise in the gym and — even though there was no one around to see me — groom.

Yes, groom: shower and shave and put on nice clothes and comb my hair and clean up my nails and so on, all things a month ago I would have said went against my very nature, things I never did before *voluntarily*.

But most of all, I felt not just happy, but firmly happy — solid, is the best way I can put it. I felt like I was in control of my life instead of the other way around, like its challenges just bounced off me as I kept doing what I wanted. Normally I feel buffeted by events, a thousand tiny distractions nagging at the back of my head at all times. Offline, I felt in control of my own destiny. I felt, yes, serene.

When I was very young, my parents introduced me to a book called *Flow*. It argued that people good at their jobs went into a sort of flow state — they were “in the zone” — where the normal stress of the world faded away and all their concentration was focused on the task at hand. It wasn’t “fun” the way ice cream or sex is fun — it didn’t make you smile, just look grimly determined — but it was somehow more than that. It was *fulfilling*. And that was even better than a smile.

I go into such states when programming or writing and they are indeed fantastic, but also weirdly hollow. When you come out the real world — with its mundane stresses and distractions — comes crashing back in, and the moment of flow seems like just another temporary escape, an elusive dream. And it’s a hard one to get back.

I still had flow states while offline — stronger than ever, in fact: I spent an ecstatic afternoon and evening writing longhand in a trance, pouring out the first forty pages of the book I’ve been researching; afterward, I was on a bigger high than I’ve ever had in my life — but they didn’t feel like escapes. Normal days weren’t painful anymore. I didn’t spend them filled with worry, like before. Offline, I felt solid and composed. Online, I feel like my brain wants to run off in a million different directions, even when I try to point it forward.

A friend asked me if I knew I was privileged to be able to take such a break. It seemed a silly question: I feel privileged every day. As I write, my best friend is broke and homeless, much of the world struggles just to stay alive. I feel privileged to own a mattress, let alone take a break.

I realize everyone’s lives are filled with work and people and distractions — the situation brewing at the office, the sump pump breaking down at the house, the family member who’s fallen ill. I realize it must seem like the greatest arrogance to think one could escape life’s mundane concerns, like asking to live on a cloud, floating above the mere mortals. But it was that arrogance that made me think I could contribute to adult mailing lists when I was still in elementary school, that arrogance that made me think someone might want to read my website when I was still just a teen, that arrogance that had me start a company as a college freshman. That sort of arrogance — not bragging, but simply inwardly thinking I could do more than was expected of me — is the only thing that’s gotten me anywhere in life. I see no reason to stop now.

I don't know how I'm going to carve a life away from the world's constant demands and distractions. I don't know how I'm going to balance all the things I want to do with the pressures and responsibilities they bring. But after my month off, I do know one thing: I can't go on like this. So I'm damn well going to try.

Writing a Book: Part One (Ambition)

July 27, 2009

[Original link](#)

So I'm writing a book. In some sense, this is nothing new. I've wanted to write a book since I was probably five and since then I must have started seriously writing drafts of half a dozen, before abandoning them. But this one feels different somehow. I really think I'm going to finish it.

I don't want to say what it's about publicly yet (hint: it has to do with politics), but it's ambitious — perhaps ridiculously so; when I tell people at parties about it they look at me as if trying to determine whether I've gone mad. My goals for it are ambitious too: I want it to be popular (how hard is it to be a 'national bestseller'?), I want it to be great writing (accurate, nuanced, and hard-to-put-down), and I want it to make a difference (get people organized, change government policy). Oh, come on. Now *you're* giving me that look.

I suppose most authors want these things, but it doesn't seem like they try particularly hard. And in a way that's understandable: writing 300 coherent pages is hard enough — why add all these additional requirements? But I have high standards for books. (I'm almost always disappointed.) I figure the least I can do is try my best to live up to them myself.

Just as I've always wanted to write a book, I've always wondered how you write one. The problem is that the kind of people who would write books on how they write books are usually pretty dreadful writers and I can't stand their poor writing, let alone their sense of superiority. (This is why I kept throwing *On Writing Well* against the wall.) But I've never written a book before, so I don't feel superior, and I'm at least trying to be a great writer. So for people in the same boat, I thought I'd write about what it's like.

It started with an email. I'd written a blog post on management that had gotten some attention, including a link from the famed Jason Kottke. Apparently the New York literati all read Jason's blog, because an editor at a publishing house followed the link and read my piece and thought it might make a decent book. He worked for the business book imprint of a major-name publisher and invited me to give him a call and discuss the idea further.

Normally when I come up with book ideas, I don't tell more than a couple people about them. I've certainly never talked to anyone at a major-name publisher before. So getting this email was thrilling. I'd always imagined I'd have to pitch my book to publishers someday, but now publishers were coming to *me*,

and asking for a book! It gave the whole thing a seriousness those other book projects lacked.

I told him I was heading to New York soon and he invited me to lunch at the Knickerbocker. It was the kind of place you imagine New York businesspeople meet for lunch: guys in suits, wood-paneled walls, I think I might have even spotted a cigar.

The editor was very excited and encouraging, but as we talked I grew increasingly discouraged. I began to remember how much I hate business books with a passion, how ridiculously dumb and faddish they are. For his part, the editor complained about how the rest of the world didn't take business books seriously. They sold ten times better than normal books, he said, but the *New York Times* refuses to list any of them on their prestigious nonfiction bestseller list (there's a special section just for business bestsellers that's only published monthly and buried away).

Furthermore, the books are apparently sold in the most degrading ways — motivational talks at the Learning Annex were mentioned. I'd always imagined myself as more of a *Charlie Rose* guy. I wanted to write a bestseller, it was true, but mostly for the respect, not the money. For the people I hang out with, I suspect writing a bestselling business book would bring me only ridicule.

Afterward I met with a prominent book agent that my friend introduced me to — apparently one of the town's top ten. She was brilliant and enthusiastic and full of energy. Spending an hour batting around ideas with her was lots of fun. Her shelves were lined with the famous books her authors had published and I began to dream about a future among those names.

But that was just the intro, for the details she handed me off to an associate, who explained the next step was to turn my idea into a rough outline. So I went back to where I was staying and tried to do just that. But I just couldn't. I went for walks, I pounded my head against the desk, I tried moving words around on the screen, but I couldn't seem to find a way to make the business book idea make sense. The fundamental problem was simple: who would take business advice from a teenager?

As I was working on it, another idea (we'll call it the politics book) began nagging at the back of my head. I tried not to think of it, but it wouldn't go away. The more I told it to bug off, the louder it nagged. Finally, I decided I would get the business book out of the way quickly and then do the politics one. But as my idea for the business book fell apart in my hands, the plan for the politics book grew clearer and clearer. I began talking about it, getting excited about it, even doing a whole outline for it. It seemed so perfect, so *right*. Finally, my girlfriend asked why I didn't just do that book instead.

The associate agent was tepid (I guess politics books don't sell as well), but intrigued enough to suggest I pursue it. He said the next step was to work on expanding my description of the introduction. And somehow I got it in my head that the best way to do this would be to just try and write it.

Which meant I needed to figure out how to write.

The Median Voter and the Mixed Voter

July 28, 2009

[Original link](#)

Our minds work by making models of the world and using them to predict how things will happen. These models are powerful because they're so deeply-ingrained we don't even realize we're using them. They just seem like "common sense." In politics, there are two major models for how voters think, which I'll call the median voter model and the mixed voter model.

The median voter model says that politics lives on a line from left to right. Voters are scattered across this line and vote for the politician that's closest to them on it. Politicians get elected by "positioning" themselves closest to the most voters, which usually means in the "center" of the line.

There are some complications, though. Because primary voters tend to be "more extreme" (i.e. Democratic primary voters are all on the left, Republicans on the right), politicians take a more extreme tack during the primaries, before heading back to the center for the general. And because they don't want to seem like flip-flopers, they're somewhat constrained by the primary positions they take.

But, in general, this model is pretty widely-accepted in politics. So widely that it's not even thought of as a model — it's implicitly assumed by all the things political commentators say. Comments like "He's moving to the center to pick up votes," "[X] couldn't get elected in that district, so how is someone more extreme going to make it?" only make sense because we all have this model in our heads.

But, while I haven't studied the question in detail, there doesn't seem to be much evidence for this model. Even intuitively, it doesn't make sense: does the average person really develop a location on a one-dimensional issue spectrum and then figure out where various politicians stand on that same spectrum? The notion seems almost ridiculous.

UPDATE: Andrew Gelman has studied the question in detail, and [concludes](#) that the median voter theorem doesn't seem to be true: "My research with Jonathan Katz suggests that being a moderate is worth about 2% of the vote in a congressional election: it ain't nuthin', but it certainly is not a paramount concern for most representatives. ... Incumbent congressmembers almost always win reelection. And, when they don't, they're often losing as part of a national swing (as in the 1994 Republican sweep or the 2006/2008 Democratic shift). And when an incumbent does lose unexpectedly, it can be for something unrelated to their votes (remember the "check kiting scandal" of 1992?)."

The mixed voter model, promoted by George Lakoff and most prominently adopted by Howard Dean, says that voters aren't rational, coherent evaluators

but a bundle of feelings, prejudices, and contradictions. Politicians get elected by playing on the feelings voters already have that would encourage a voter's support. Thus, instead of moving to the center to get more votes, Lakoff argued politicians should actually become more extreme. Conservatives won votes by appealing to people's sense of order; liberals would have to respond by appealing to their sense of empathy. Moving to the center by promoting a compromise position that prevented rhetorical appeals of either type, was doomed. This model was used to explain why radical conservative politicians kept winning elections against moderate and centrist Democrats, when there was no evidence of a conservative electorate.

This model makes much more sense to me, although again I haven't seen too much specific evidence for it. But it's still pretty rare and seems deeply-counterintuitive to most practitioners of politics. But whether it's right on the details or not, it's clear that unless we evaluate and question these models and think about them critically instead of just assuming one is true, it'll be hard to make much political progress.

Hot Girl Syndrome

July 31, 2009

[Original link](#)

One of the more thought-provoking CollegeHumor videos was their (exaggerated) [attempt to imagine the inner life of an attractive woman](#). One of the things it makes clear is that being a hot girl means a constant stream of positive feedback: guys turn to smile at you, they laugh loudly at all your jokes, they're always eager to do favors. The world just seems to bend itself to your desires.

One might think that such a constant stream of positive attention would make you particularly confident and resilient, but the human mind doesn't work that way; it adapts to its environment. Constant positive attention doesn't make you less dependent on praise any more than constant eating makes you less dependent on food. When someone comes along and says something mean, you don't fall back on your years of positive experiences and decide to ignore them. Instead, you're so shocked by the experience that you come away deeply wounded.

I think I first realized this when I visited a well-known author. He'd written several highly-regarded books which received apparently unanimous praise. If someone's ever criticized him for something, I've never seen it. Yet, when I saw him, he told me he'd been feeling down for nearly a week. Why? Because a reader from Australia sent him a nasty email. The endless praise hadn't made him more resilient; it had made him unusually vulnerable.

I think this explains why the pick-up artist's technique of the "neg" — a minor offhand insult intended to dent a girl's self-esteem — is so particularly effective, especially on unusually attractive women. For people who aren't used to being insulted, even a minor insult carries a powerful sting. (A major insult would probably be too strong, though. They'd be too hurt to want to even associate with you.)

Another thing made clear in the video is that bidding for a girl's affections is typically a kind dollar auction. A dollar auction is an auction where both the highest bidder *and* the second-highest bidder have to pay (even though only the highest bidder gets the prize). Rational behavior in a dollar auction isn't particularly clear — if you're the second-highest bidder, it always seems to make sense to bid a little more, since you'll lose the same amount of money but at least get to take home the prize. But if you keep doing that, you soon find yourself paying ridiculously large amounts for something you might not even get.

With girls, there isn't a formal auction, but instead guys bid by buying her things, with no promise that they'll get anything in return. Since the things you've already spent so much, it always seems sensible to spend a little more to get the girl. The result, from the girl's perspective, is that people are falling over themselves to buy you things without you having to give them anything in return.

Perhaps the safest way to win a dollar auction is not to play at all. And, indeed, this was [Richard Feynman's surprising finding with women as well](#). He takes the advice of the bar's MC to refuse to buy girls anything until "you've *asked* her if she'll sleep with you, and you're convinced that she *will*, and that she's not lying." (Feynman is taken aback by the suggestion: "Uh... you mean... you don't... uh... you just *ask* them?")

But it works, and no doubt Hot Girl Syndrome is part of the reason why. When everyone is falling all over themselves for you, the only person you have to impress is the one guy who isn't.

The application to politics is left as an exercise for the reader.

Life in a World of Pervasive Immorality: The Ethics of Being Alive

August 2, 2009

[Original link](#)

I used to think I was a pretty good person. I certainly didn't kill people, for example. But then Peter Singer pointed out that animals were conscious and that eating them led them to be killed and that wasn't all that morally different from killing people after all. So I became a vegetarian.

Again I thought I was a pretty good person. But then Arianna Huffington told me that by driving in a car I was pouring toxic fumes into the air and sending money to foreign dictatorships. So I got a bike instead.

But then I realized that my bike seat was sewn by children in foreign sweatshops while its tubing was made by mining metals through ripping up the earth. Indeed, any money I spent was likely to go to oppressing people or destroying the planet in one way or another. And if I happen to make money some of it goes to the government which spends it blowing people up in Afghanistan or Iraq.

I thought about just living off of stuff I found in dumpsters, like some friends. That way I wouldn't be responsible for encouraging its production. But then I realized that some people buy the things they can't find in dumpsters; if I got to the dumpster and took something before they did, they might buy it instead.

The solution seemed clear: I'd have to go off-the-grid and live in a cave, gathering nuts and berries. I'd still probably be exhaling CO₂ and using some of the products in the Earth, but probably only in levels that were sustainable.

Perhaps you disagree with me that it's morally wrong to kill animals or blow up people in Afghanistan. But surely you can imagine that it *might* be, or at least that someone could think it is. And I think it's similarly clear that eating a hamburger or paying taxes contributes — in a very small way; perhaps only has the possibility of contributing — to those things.

Even if you don't, everyday life has a million ways that are more direct. Personally, I think it's wrong that I get to sit at a table and gaily devour while someone else delivers more food to my table and a third person slaves over a stove. Every time I order food, I make them do more carrying and slaving. (Perhaps they get some money in return, but surely they'd prefer it if I just gave them the money.) Again, you may not think this wrong but I hope you can admit the possibility. And it's obviously my fault.

Off in the cave, I thought I was safe. But then I read [Peter Singer's latest book](#). He points out that for as little as a quarter, you can save a child's life. (E.g. for

27 cents you can buy the oral rehydration salts that will save a child from fatal diarrhea.) Perhaps I was killing people after all.

I couldn't morally make money, for the reasons described above. (Although maybe it's worth helping fund the bombing of children in Afghanistan in order to help save children in Mozambique.) But instead of living in a cave, I could go to Africa and volunteer my time.

Of course, if I do that there are a thousand other things I'm not doing. How can I decide which action I take will save the most lives? Even if I take the time to figuring out, that's time I'm spending on myself instead of saving lives.

It seems impossible to be moral. Not only does everything I do cause great harm, but so does everything I don't do. Standard accounts of morality assume that it's difficult, but attainable: don't lie, don't cheat, don't steal. But it seems like living a moral life isn't even possible.

But if morality is unattainable, surely I should simply do the best I can. (Ought implies can, after all.) Peter Singer is a good utilitarian, so perhaps I should try to maximize the good I do for the world. But even this seems like an incredibly onerous standard. I should not just stop eating meat, but animal products altogether. I shouldn't just stop buying factory-farmed food, I should stop buying altogether. I should take things out of dumpsters other people are unlikely to be searching. I should live someplace where others won't be disturbed.

Of course all this worrying and stress is preventing me from doing any good in the world. I can hardly take a step without thinking about who it hurts. So I decide not to worry about the bad I might be doing and just focus on doing good — screw the rules.

But this doesn't just apply to the rules inspired by Peter Singer. Waiting in line at the checkout counter is keeping me from my life-saving work (and paying will cost me life-saving money) — better just to shoplift. Lying, cheating, any crime can be similarly justified.

It seems paradoxical: in my quest to do good I've justified doing all sorts of bad. Nobody questioned me when I went out and ordered a juicy steak, but when I shoplift soda everyone recoils. Is there sense in following their rules or are they just another example of the world's pervasive immorality? Have any philosophers considered this question?

Writing a Book: Part Two (Structure)

August 6, 2009

[Original link](#)

I've always wanted to be a great writer, but nobody's ever explained how. So I tried to figure out for myself. I reread my favorite books, I read just about [everything by David Foster Wallace](#) and [Robert Caro](#), I read a lot of *New Yorker* articles, I got caught up on *n+1*. I read a lot of stuff out loud, to get a feel for the sound of the voice. (I performed all the brief interviews (including the powerful "On His Deathbed...") in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* — incredible fun; I can completely see why it made John Krasinski want to become an actor.) In fact, it got to the point where I couldn't resist reading things out loud — some writing just begged to be performed.

I read some writing guides, but none of them were very helpful. Virginia Tufte's *Artful Sentences* was by far the most interesting, but I'm not sure it was much practical help. I've had the best luck with just reading great writing and then taking a stab of writing something of my own.

I also tried to figure out how to structure the writing. I watched Ira Glass give his standard talk seven or eight different times, I read Mamet's *On Directing Film*, I sat down with Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers* and tried to take it apart and figure out how it worked. For some reason, even though the basic ideas are really simple, they've taken me a really really long time to understand. It's quite odd, really. I saw Ira Glass say the same thing 8 times, but only on the 7th time did I walk away going "Ohh, that's what he means!" And I keep having similar obvious epiphanies.

I think part of the problem is that I was around a lot of really bad storytellers as a kid. My Dad would tell a joke and it would take so long that I would be tearing my hair out with boredom halfway through. When it was over I would think, "Wait, that was the joke? I can tell that joke in two lines. What did he need all those details for?" And since then I've basically been the person who tells jokes in two lines — omitting needless words, using only the barest description, and getting very impatient with people who run long (which was basically everyone, it seemed to me).

I don't know if I've begun reading better writers or grown more patient with age, but I'm beginning to question this approach. Being spare and interesting is better than being prolix and boring, I'm still convinced, but there's a place for the seemingly-irrelevant detail. For one thing, what makes a story a story is the irrelevant detail. Ira Glass demonstrates this by quoting the opening of his show "[Cringe](#)."

(You can listen to it on the site there — just click “Full Episode” on the left side. It’s the first three minutes. It’s much better listened to, but if you can’t, here’s a transcript:)

IRA: Joe worked at this office where, every now and then, the office manager would bring her nine-year-old to work. Good kid. Kind of tomboy-ish.

JOE: And she would just kind of help out around the office. She would pass mail out. And over the time that I was there she and I developed this really—this kind of teasing relationship: she would come into my office and drop my mail off and stick her tongue at me and I would sort of fake chase her down the hallway or something and... you know.

IRA: That’s sweet.

JOE: Yeah, yeah. She was an incredibly sweet kid.

[music (“[Elephant Walk](#)”) begins]

JOE: And so there’s this day when, it’s early in the morning, I’ve arrived at the office, and I go into the bathroom, and when I come out of the bathroom, I have my glasses in my shirt-pocket rather than on my head. And I look down this hallway and I see this small person walking towards me. And I then get down and start to crab-walk towards her. So I sort of go down on my haunches, and put my hands up as if they’re claws and kind of waddle—waddle towards her...

“At this point,” Ira quips, “nobody turns off the radio.”

JOE: ...and as I’m waddling towards her, I say, in this kind of creepy voice, “Oh, no! I can’t believe *you’re* here today!” And then, at that moment [laugh], as I say “today,” she comes into focus. And I realize, in fact, it’s not at all the young girl who I thought it was but in fact it’s one of our interns: a business intern, who is a—a—a midget.

[more music]

JOE: And so she comes into focus and I see her and I’m horrified and I go bolt upright and I stand up and I say “Oh, my god, I’m terribly sorry, I thought you were somebody else.” And I think to myself: who could she possibly think that someone else is?

IRA: [laughs]

JOE: [laughs] And I wondered at the time: Should I try to explain it to her? It seems to me like one of those

situations where it only gets worse the more you try to explain it. The only thing I could do, in fact, was apologize and end all contact with her, forever, right there.

IRA: [laughs]

[music]

IRA: Joel says the women was utterly gracious. She introduces herself, she tries to put him at ease. (Apparently, if you're a midget, this sort of thing happens all the time.) But Joel says not only did he cringe when this happened, he cringes every time he tells this story. People cringe when they hear the story. And why? Seriously: why?

Yes, why? Not so much why do we cringe, but why do we listen so raptly? As Ira Glass is the first to point out, it's kind of a boring story on its face. It takes him three minutes to tell, but I can tell it in two lines: *A guy named Joe once mistook a midget for a nine-year-old. He cringes every time he tells the story.* For the purposes of the show, that's all he needs to say — the purpose of the story is to set up a show about cringing, and just the idea of mistaking a midget for a nine-year-old is pretty cringeworthy. But he tells the story *at length*: except for the very end, he doesn't appear to try to summarize it at all.

And yet, not only do people not get bored — this is apparently what *keeps* them from getting bored. (Imagine how quickly people would tune out a show of two-sentence stories. Personally, I don't have to imagine — I see how bored they look when I tell mine. Which, of course, only makes me rush to tell them faster.) Glass argues that humans are somehow hardwired for stories. Once they get started, we *have* to hear what happened next. "One thing happens, and then another thing, and then another thing," he says. "It's got its own momentum — it's like a train leaving the station."

I think Ira is being too modest. He's an incredibly gifted storyteller; obviously one of the era's greatest (his show is the #1 podcast on iTunes). What looks like a simple recording of someone telling a story is the result of a thousand different questions and edits and adjustments. There's a lifetime of experience behind every pause, every lilt of his cadence. To keep listeners hooked on a story is a very difficult skill.

But what I didn't realize was that it's also a necessary one. Stories that go by too fast may not be as annoying as stories that are too slow, but they're still flawed. I'm too insecure to think my storytelling could possibly hold the listener's attention, so I rush through the story, hoping to tell them all the key facts before they get bored and wander off. But it's a self-fulfilling prophecy: if you seem uninterested in your story, why should your listener be? If you're going to tell a story, you need to bite the bullet and be a storyteller.

The trick is realizing that the apparently-irrelevant details aren't actually irrelevant. Look again at my transcript of Joe's story. There's only one thing I see

in it that could be cut out: that “it’s early in the morning.” Incredibly, every other line in that three-minute story serves an important purpose.

Picking a sentence at random, “She was an incredibly sweet kid.” is necessary because Ira’s comment “That’s sweet.” sounds odd by itself, it needs a response. (Ira’s comment is necessary to make sure you see the chasing-down-the-hallway in the right emotional tone. (That scene, in turn, is necessary to explain the kind of relationship he and the girl had, and so on.)) A three minute story, and there’s hardly a clause you can cut.

That’s the first rule of storytelling: a story needs to be interesting in its own right. But the second is equally important: the audience needs a reason to care. I think part of the reason we’re wired to follow stories is because a story carries an implied promise: there’s going to be something good at the end of this.

The way Ira puts it is that there are two tools in storytelling: action, and reflection. Ira’s shows (like Gladwell’s articles) open with action. But the action leads immediately to reflection: look at the story above, there’s not even a pause between the ending of the story and Ira asking why it is that we cringe. Ira’s not just telling the story because it’s entertaining, he’s telling it because it makes us cringe and he wants us to think about that feeling.

He goes on to investigate that feeling — to explain what we can learn from the story. And here again it’s important to slow down. There’s a tendency to think that stories speak for themselves. First, because there’s some artistic nobility in this: explaining what a story means is being “didactic” and “preachy,” it’s keeping your readers from thinking for themselves, it means your work isn’t really art. Second, it often seems unnecessary: you’ve spent hours — days, weeks, months, years — thinking about your story. It seems obvious to you what it means. Maybe you can add a sentence spelling it out for the slow ones, but isn’t that enough?

It’s not, of course. Your head is full of evidence, examples, models, implications — all of which your readers aren’t just going to magically intuit. You need to tell them.

Again, I think I was betrayed by bad writing in my youth. I read a bunch of “popular” books that were just dreadful. I didn’t know that these books weren’t actually meant for reading. Turns out, you get paid about the same amount for writing a truly great magazine article as you do for a mediocre one and only get a little more attention for the former. So if you write a really good magazine article, the only way to get rewarded is to turn it into a book.

The problem is that even the longest magazine articles don’t make for more 30 pages and you can’t really publish a book that short. So you write a couple hundred pages of filler. And, in most cases, that only detracts from your great article by watering it down. You basically just end up repeating yourself a lot

in different words. As a child, I couldn't stand books like that and vowed never to write one.

But again I went too far. It's true, you don't need to give three examples of everything you say, but you can't simply give no examples either. I'm still trying to figure out where the right balance is.

Reading Samuel Bowles

August 11, 2009

[Original link](#)

How do you expect an advanced textbook on Microeconomics to begin? Probably not like this:

Like the overnight train that left me in an empty field some distance from the settlement, the process of economic development has for the most part bypassed the two hundred or so families that make up the village of Palanpur. They have remained poor, even by Indian standards: less than a third of the adults are literate, and most have endured the loss of a child to malnutrition or to illnesses that are long forgotten in other parts of the world. But for the occasional wristwatch, bicycle, or irrigation pump, Palanpur appears to be a timeless backwater, untouched by India's cutting edge software industry and booming agricultural regions. Seeking to understand why, I approached a sharecropper and his three daughters weeding a small plot. The conversation eventually turned to the fact that Palanpur farmers sow their winter crops several weeks after the date at which yields would be maximized. The farmers do not doubt that earlier planting would give them larger harvests, but no one the farmer explained, is willing to be the first to plant, as the seeds on any lone plot would be quickly eaten by birds. I asked if a large group of farmers, perhaps relatives, had ever agreed to sow earlier, all planting on the same day to minimize losses. "If we knew how to do that," he said, looking up from his hoe at me, "we would not be poor."

That's from Samuel Bowles' unorthodox economics textbook, *Microeconomics: Behavior, Institutions, and Evolution*. We were talking about it over in the comments on [Crooked Timber](#) and one thing led to another and we've decided to start a reading group to go through it.

[You can sign up here.](#)

If you're still not convinced, check out [this review](#):

...all the relevant issues are presented in their complexity, nothing is swept under the carpet, and what makes this book in particular commendable is the way in which information from anthropology, psychology and the social sciences is woven into the 'story'. The

contrast with the ridiculous assumptions and the unrealistic or simply false simplistic models of standard neoclassical textbooks (like for example that of Mankiw) is striking. [The difficulty] is mitigated somewhat by Bowles' clear writing, and sometimes he also takes the trouble (which unfortunately few economists do) of specifically explaining what the mathematical formulas mean, for people who have difficulty with somewhat advanced equations and the like. In any case, he relies quite correctly more on empirical arguments regarding problems of the common, of evolution of institutions, the workings of altruism, prisoner's dilemmas, and so on than on any kind of math (although these things can be expressed in math, often).

[You can still sign up here.](#)

Poverty Kills

August 12, 2009

[Original link](#)

Bangladesh, 1974. Food per person was at an all-time high — it was a peak year in rice output and availability. It was also a peak year for starvation. 100,000 people starved to death, their skin cracking and their tissues breaking down. They were unable even to focus their eyes as the world watched on TV. Another million and a half died from starvation's secondary effects. Another half-a-million died after the famine was over because their bodies had been made so weak. There was plenty of food to feed them. They starved because they were too poor to afford it.

Poor people die because they can't get food, because they can't get shelter, because they can't get health care, because they can't get homes in places that aren't polluted, because they can't get food without toxins, because they can't get time off to supervise their kids, because they can't spend money on safety, because they can't spend money on education, because they can't get a vacation from the stress that's literally eating away at their brain. We don't even know all the reasons poor people die. But we do know that they do.

It's not polite to talk about that. We talk about the poverty rate or the poverty level or the poverty gap, not kids catching on fire and adults wasting away. We talk about economic development and markets and education, not the millions who die each year coughing blood as tuberculosis takes over their body. (They don't die from tuberculosis. They die because they can't afford the vaccine.)

Eben Kenah wants to change that. His thesis, "[Poverty and the English Language](#)" [PDF], is the best thing I've read in a very long while. Quite literally, it's changed the way I look at what's important in the world. He argues that the right way to think about poverty isn't in terms of GDP or income or education or literacy, but in terms of death. That we should measure poverty by measuring who it kills. "It is easier to believe that poverty causes people to wear old clothes, live in small houses, or forego owning a television than it is to admit that people on the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder often die early as a result," he writes.

A black man in Harlem is 4.11 times as likely to die in a given year as the average American male. A poor white in Detroit is twice as likely. Poor people are more likely to die than rich people, lower-class people than upper-class people, unemployed than employed, blacks than whites.

Mortality resolves a number of long-standing technical debates about the right way to measure poverty. In the US we calculate poverty by having experts at the Department of Agriculture figure out the cheapest products on sale in America

that could meet minimal nutritional requirements. They add up how much they cost and multiply by three. People with less than that are defined as poor. Can the poor really follow that minimal diet in practice? How do you even decide what minimal nutritional requirements are? Why three? The answer is simple: just count deaths instead.

But thinking about things this way provokes broader, more fundamental questions, even broader than the issue of global poverty. It makes us ask: Why do people die? And how can we stop it?

The rich worry about this all the time. Vast sums are spent on their health care. There's a whole industry in improving traffic safety. Billions of dollars are spent to remove minute amounts of chemicals from water.

But asking that broader question — why do people die? — provides a framework for all these other issues: health care, education, poverty, disease, crime, public services, stress, shelter, climate, mobility, famine, pesticides, fatty foods, toxins, pollution, daycare, quality of life. It all comes in corpses: clear, countable, comparable facts. We're all dead bodies in the end.

A ticker at the bottom of the TV news screen gives people up-to-the-minute information about how well the stock market is doing. Nobody tells us how many people are dying right now (107 people every minute, 5 of them in the US). When a major stock drops, we hear which and how much and why and how it fits into the bigger market picture. Nobody does the same for deaths, either individual or in outbreaks. Nobody's provided an overall look at why people are dying and how all our attempts to make the world a better place — from economic growth to clean water — are helping. Somebody should start.

Scenes 2

August 17, 2009

[Original link](#)

After a long delay, we're finally allowed to board the plane. As we wait in line, the businessman in front of me takes out his phone and makes a call. "Hi, honey," he says, apparently leaving a message. "We're only boarding the plane just now, so I'll probably be about an hour late. See you then." He hangs up the phone and then dials again. "Hi, honey," he says, in a similar voice. "We're only boarding the plane just now, so I'll probably be an hour and forty minutes late. See you then."

A man paces his apartment in a robe. He lives on the penthouse suite of a modern residential building in an industrial section of Manhattan. He has the whole top floor; the elevator opens right into his apartment. I don't think he's left the place in days; for food, he orders delivery and pays at the elevator door. "Can you get me some pot?" he asks. He's desperate for it. I give him a piece of paper with the number for a coke delivery service — "anytime, anywhere". "Do you think they do weed too?" he asks. A copy of *Infinite Jest* lies unopened by his bed.

There's a cafe across the street that has the world's most perfect corn muffins. But they only seem to stock just one each day. Every day, I carefully watch the clock: if I go there too early, I'm not particularly hungry; if I go there too late, I find them out of corn muffins and leave empty-handed. Finding the right minute is a constant struggle.

Today I show up and, as usual, there's just one left. One clerk is getting it for me (I don't even have to ask anymore; the clerks all know I always get just the corn muffin) while another is taking the order of the woman next to me. "I'll have the—oh, he got the last one," she says. She turns to me. "You got the best muffin!" She walks away empty-handed.

How to Save A Life

August 18, 2009

[Original link](#)

In 1972, the philosopher Peter Singer [proposed](#) a simple thought experiment: Imagine you're on your way to work and you come across a child drowning in a shallow pond. You're tall enough that you can run in and rescue him, but if you do so you'll ruin your new suit. Should you save the child?

Almost everyone says yes: the value of saving a child's life far outweighs the cost of losing your new suit. Indeed, someone who would let a child die to save their clothes seems like a monster.

But aha, Singer says. You — yes, *you*, the reader — probably spent several hundred dollars on new clothes recently, clothes you didn't really need. (Or if not clothes, perhaps a dinner out, or music, or books you could've gotten from the library.) And instead of spending that money on luxuries, you could have [sent it to Partners in Health](#), and they could have used it to save a child's life in the developing world. ([GiveWell](#) estimates that you can save a life for between \$150-\$750.) How are you not a monster?

Calling your audience monsters is a dangerous move — it's apt to make them very upset. (I know I got very upset the first time I read this argument!) Nobody wants to be thought of as a murderer, so people come up with all sorts of rationalizations for why they don't give (it's not my responsibility, I do my fair share, foreign aid doesn't really do any good, etc.). In his recent book, [The Life You Can Save](#), Singer sets about systematically debunking these arguments.

In the process, he complicates his original thought experiment. Imagine now that instead of just you walking by the pond, five people are. And imagine that five children are also drowning. Still, he argues, most people would say you should rush in to save a child — even if the other people passing by don't.

But there's one detail Singer leaves out — one that I think dramatically affects his conclusions: the children didn't just wander into this pond on their own; they were pushed.

Imagine an evil man stands above the pond, grabbing children and throwing them in. People passing by see the children and rush in to try to save them, but as soon as one is saved or drowns, in goes another, and another, and another. You can rush in to try to save another child — or you can try to stop the man.

This doesn't absolve you of moral duty. Most people do neither — they just walk on by the pond. But it does complicate the question. I think most people would say you should try to stop the man, if you can. Even a utilitarian analysis

would suggest this: diving in the pond saves one life, stopping the man saves thousands.

The man, of course, is economics. People in the developing world are poor because they live in poor countries — countries without schools or good jobs or welfare programs or even running water. And their countries are poor in large part because of us.

It's often said that visiting a developing country is like traveling back in time — the conditions seem little changed from those of medieval Europe. But how did medieval Europe stop being medieval Europe? The answer is through protectionism: Britain became the reigning world power by being one of the most protectionist countries on earth, expending enormous amounts of government money to promote local industries. Eventually these industries grew strong enough to compete on the world stage and it withdrew the barriers. The United States eventually surpassed it with more of the same — many long years of tariffs and industrial intervention (to this day the US government spends an enormous amount of money on R&D). Western Europe, the so-called “Asian tigers” — all the major developed countries of our era got there by following these principles.

But they don't want others to follow in their footsteps. Instead of letting developing countries grow and compete in their own right, they'd prefer to use them as a source of cheap labor and raw materials. So enormous effort has been expended on building international institutions to prevent their economic growth. The World Bank and the IMF issue loans to countries, but only on the condition they dismantle all forms of protectionism. The WTO requires countries to agree to principles of “free trade”. Academic “experts” come up with reasons why protectionism really hurts everyone and rewrite the history of economic growth.

As a result, poor countries are forced to stay poor and children keep dying in shallow ponds.

Stopping this is hard. I can give you a phone number to call to donate to Oxfam and buy a child life-saving treatment. There's no comparably-effective way to help reform the WTO. Nobody knows how to stop the evil man. But it seems weird to pretend that he doesn't exist.

Singer considers this a purely practical question. As a utilitarian, he doesn't support the notion that we have any special responsibility for the actions of our government. Instead, he says, people should donate to help the poor in the most effective way they can see — whether that's saving lives or structural reform is up to them. But Singer pretty clearly doesn't think structural reform is very effective; all of his examples are about people directly saving lives.

Would the passers-by really just keep jumping in the pond after the children he kept throwing? Or would they take a moment to stop and strategize and think of how to stop the evil man. I think most would do the latter. This isn't an abstract question. Children are dying right now. What are you going to do?

You can donate to the Student Trade Justice Campaign [here](#). Please post your suggestions on worthy groups in the comments.

What Kind of a Thing is Twitter?

August 20, 2009

[Original link](#)

Do you ever eavesdrop on random people? At the office, on the subway, in a park — if you're quiet, you can listen to people chat. If you do, you quickly find that, for the most part, they have conversations that seem perfectly boring. This is most obvious on IRC (Internet text chat) where, since the conversations are entirely textual, they can be perfectly transcribed. If you look at the transcripts later, you find they're often almost unreadable — even in channels dedicated to very technical topics, you'll find hours of conversation about someone's dog.

Such conversation clearly does not perform an objective information-sharing function — the relevant facts about the dog can be laid out in a paragraph (if that). It serves a social function — a function with a deep evolutionary history. Primates get to know each other through grooming each other's fur. But that's time-consuming; as a result, primates rarely form groups larger than 25. One of the big breakthroughs for humans was moving from grooming to gossip. Instead of 25 people, the average human knows 150. And so we talk, and as we talk we reveal our personalities to each other: the things we care about, the way we think, the subjects we understand. We make friends through this process of conversation and personality reveal, even though objectively the conversation is about matters that seem trivial. When it comes to our friends, we know a lot of trivia.

What Twitter¹ does is automate this process. Instead of telling your bit of gossip or joke or humdrum story or minor complaint to each of your friends as you see them, you tell it once to Twitter, and then all your friends can see it. And just like the transition from grooming to gossip, Twitter allows for an explosion in the number of people we know. Where, in the past, it was only practical to have these kinds of close, chatty friendships with a handful of people (even using a technology like IM), now — using the power of the Web to bridge time and space — you can have them with hundreds.

But the relationships need not be symmetrical. One of the things that's clear about celebrities in the age of television is that they take advantage of this innate social sense. (*Fahrenheit 451* is caustic on this subject.) We see these people all the time, we listen to them, we watch them — and we come to feel as if we *know* them. And so, naturally, our innate social sense kicks in and we want to hear their gossip — a need tabloids try their best to fill.

Twitter provides a more raw, unmediated access to celebrity gossip. Instead of hearing about it second-hand from TV news, we hear about it straight from them. Oprah, of course, has been a pioneer of this: with a daily long-form

television show, she's been able to cultivate (and monetize) a friendship with millions. But most celebrities don't have that kind of access to their "followers." They do on Twitter.

The catch, of course, is that it's all somewhat fake. What you see on Oprah's show isn't the real Oprah; it's a hyperreal Oprah, a carefully-crafted simulation of a gregarious friend chatting with you in your living room — makeup, lighting, sets, and script are all carefully planned to seem "natural." And most Twitter feeds are the same — humorists spend days polishing the one-liner they seem to carelessly toss off, politicians have speechwriters thinking up soundbites that they can tweet.

But it's not just fake, it's empty. The reason such apparently boring conversation is interesting is because the act of conversation itself reveals your personality. We assume we know the people whose petty complaints and daily routines we've heard so much about because, traditionally, the only way to hear such things was to get to know them well. But it's impossible to really know someone through sanitized soundbites. In 140 characters, there's little room for the nuances of personality such conversation typically reveals. So, like Oprah's audience, we all see the carefully-prepared facade people *want* to present, and come away thinking that we know them better than we really do.

With people we know in "real life," this isn't such a big deal. We already know their personality; Twitter simply helps maintain our relationship by keeping us up-to-date. And while, in doing so, it lets us maintain vastly more relationships, I'm not sure this is a bad thing. Many people are starved for human relationship — we spend most of our lives at the office, or at home watching TV and playing video games. Most Americans live in suburbs with no street life and even in cities everyone's wearing iPods and thus unable to stop and chat. If Twitter can help bring us together in an increasingly isolated world, then all the better (and, it seems, with some positive political consequences as well).

But, for the people we don't know, it has the effect of making them all Oprah. In the same way her millions of fans trust her book ([and movie and health and plastic surgery...](#)) recommendations unquestioningly, because they feel that they know her, Twitter can make us trust other celebrities. If you feel like your Senator is a personal friend (and how can you not, after hearing them tell you about their struggle to lose weight and the guy they met at the gym?), then how could you possibly vote against them?

This isn't new, of course. It goes back as far as radio (possibly further). Pappy O'Daniel did it in Texas in the 1940s. He got on the radio every day at noon and just chatted, like an old friend — sang a few songs, read a little of his poetry, but mostly he just talked with quiet cheer. And people treated him like a friend: he asked them to buy his flour (simply other companies' flour repackaged with his picture on it and resold at a higher price) and they bought it. He asked them to vote for him and they elected him Governor of Texas in a landslide — whereupon, not knowing anything about politics, he plunged the state government into turmoil and disaster. But he kept up those daily

broadcasts — now conducted from the Governor’s mansion — and they kept on reelecting him. He was their friend, after all.

Twitter probably isn’t going to make THE_REAL_SHAQ governor, but I don’t think it’s crazy to worry about it having similar effects. Luckily, it also provides the tools for undoing these relationships. For the housewives stuck at home with the TV, Oprah is the only option. But on Twitter, at the same time you sign up to hear from Oprah, you can also follow — and cement your relationship with — more real friends. And it’s a good thing too, because with all these fake friends running around, we’re going to need all the real ones we can get.

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1. I’ll say Twitter because it’s become the accepted term, but obviously this applies to similar services like identi.ca.

The Newswipe Manifesto

August 24, 2009

[Original link](#)

Charlie Brooker begins his recent BBC4 show [Newswipe](#) with this speech. Unfortunately, the show doesn't quite live up to these ambitions, being basically a version of [Charlie Brooker's Screenwipe](#) focused on the news, but they seem like the right ambitions to me.

Back in 1919, when I was a kid and my throat was less sore, I always assumed adults knew what was what. So imagine my horror, on growing up, to discover that actually we're all just winging it. As adults, there's a whole range of things you're supposed to 'know about' and 'have opinions on': everything from what wine to serve at your twatty dinner party through to what's going on in the world of 'current affairs'.

Yes, it turns out you were supposed to be paying attention to the news all this time. Although the chances are you haven't, at least not really. I mean, when were you meant to start? When you're a kid, the news is effectively out of bounds. It's a program aimed at adults that's either impenetrably boring ('the economy minister for the economy today said interest rates were discombobulating the trade union a—') or downright terrifying ('murdered horses and terrorists today said that you and your mummy and daddy are certain to die in a global ap—').

Anyway, the end result is that you ignore the news for years and then suddenly, somewhere down the line when you're a bit older, there's comes a point when you realize you're completely bloody ignorant. Maybe you find yourself sitting next to some erudite f—ker at a dinner party who's banging on about the Israel-Palestine situation or maybe you start going out with an opinionated news junkie who wants to discuss politics for 60,000 hours. Either way, your comparative ignorance leaves you ashamed. So you do something about it: you pick up a paper or you switch on the news. But because you've fallen behind it's like tuning into episode 803 of the world's most complex soap opera.

And at the same time the news itself is becoming less of an easily digestible summary of events and more of a grotesque entertainment reality show with heavy emphasis on emotion and sensation and a swagging comically theatrical sense of its own importance.

In the end you just give up and, yes, you wing it: you form knee-jerk opinions about the sort of thing that's in the news. Politicians and newsmakers notice, which is why everything's geared more and more to sound bites and razzle-dazzle. The soap opera analogy is a sound one because that's what the news has become.

It's showbiz, basically, and as a consequence the news has become just another rolling TV show whose meaning is lost somewhere amongst all the babble. Sometimes it's happy and sometimes it's sad, but somehow, it isn't real.

Google Voice Security Flaw

August 25, 2009

[Original link](#)

Google Voice allows you to get a new telephone number (a “Google Voice number”) and when people dial that number, Google will patch the call through to your various other phones. That way you can give people one phone number and it will ring your home phone, your cell phone, your work phone. (Apparently this is a service for people who still have home and work phones.)

It now requires new phones to go through a verification process to be added to that list, but I believe that phones that were added back when Google Voice was GrandCentral (Google bought it) are carried over and never required verification.

You can also create rules for which phones ring. I set mine up so that if the callbox at our apartment calls the Google Voice number (i.e. someone is trying to get into the apartment), it rings both me and my roommate. Otherwise it just rings me.

Now here’s the odd thing: when my roommate texts someone with a Google Voice number (or vice versa), their SMS chats show up in *my* Google Voice account. It took me a long time to figure out what was going on — at first it just looked like other people’s SMS chats were just appearing in my inbox. But it now seems clear that Google Voice looks at the phone number of incoming SMSes and, if it’s attached to an account, stores the SMSes in that account.

I suppose one should trust their roommate, but I think people should be aware of this issue nonetheless.

Why I Won't Use Rimuhosting

August 27, 2009

[Original link](#)

I originally got a VPS at Rimuhosting because their website lauded their “fanatical service” and a friend had concurred. In September 2006, I ordered my first server.

In December, a friend asked if I knew any good VPS hosts. I said I used Rimuhosting and hadn't had any problems. “That's funny,” he replied. “rimuhosting is the company that's just given me horrible support over the last 2 weeks. No answers to email for 2+ days, then a claim that they didn't receive it, then I send them the mail server log that says they should have received it, then they say ‘oh, that's interesting. oh well.’”

I guess that should have been a sign for me. But instead, he changed his tune: “Well, if everyone thinks they're so great, maybe I'll give them another chance.”

The server went down for maintenance three times and was moved to a new IP once. In April 2008, the real trouble started. I was dinged for bandwidth overruns, apparently because Yahoo! was crawling the same files on my server hundreds of times a day. In June, they complained I was monopolizing the CPU, even though when I logged in the machine was 100% idle. They complained again in October and November and December and offered to take a look at the problem if I gave them root on the box. “Over my dead body,” I thought.

In December they set a CPU cap on my VPS. Then came the amazing bit. Despite already having sold me a VPS and put a CPU cap on my usage of it, they manually edited my partition to add their SSH key to my `authorized_keys`, used that to **gain root on my box**, noticed that a CGI script was using up CPU, and responded by **turning off Apache**. They didn't even try to call me to talk about it in advance. They didn't even call me at all. They just sent a little email. After the fact. The subject? “index.cgi is causing high CPU usage”

I asked them what was going on. Here was their reply:

In our welcome email we do mention that we have installed our key on your server.

We use that to help our customers. You are able to remove that if you are not comfortable with that.

Of course, I did remove it. They used their control of the hardware to add it back in.

We work to ensure that customer's get a fair share of the CPU, and that their servers perform well.

If everyone is trying to max out the CPU then everyone's performance will be poor. We can set it so that you get a fixed amount of CPU (and then we don't mind how much CPU want to use). Or we can let your CPU burst up to 100% of a host server CPU core, in which case your server will run fast, but in which case we'd need to make sure you do not monopolize the CPU.

Or, they can break into my box and turn off my webserver. Oddly they don't mention that last option.

If you think we can help in any other way, e.g. investigating that script or anything, just let us know.

I suppose this is the service Rimuhosting is known for. I won't be taking advantage of it again.

The Trouble with Nonprofits

September 7, 2009

[Original link](#)

In the 1990s, a group of psychologists began studying what made experts expert. Their first task was to see whether experts really were expert — whether they were particularly good at their jobs.

What they found was that some were and some weren't. Champion chess players, obviously, are much better at playing chess than you and I. But political pundits, it turns out, aren't that much better at making predictions than a random guy off the street.

What distinguishes people who are great at what they do from those who are just mediocre? The answer, it seems, is feedback. If you lose a chess game, it's pretty obvious you lost. You know right away, you feel bad, and you start thinking about what you did wrong and how you can improve.

Making a bad prediction isn't like that. First, it's months or years before your prediction is [proven wrong](#). And then, you make yourself feel better by coming up with some explanation for why you were wrong: *well, nobody expected that to happen; it threw everything else off!* And so you keep on making predictions in the same way — which means you never get good at it.

The difference between chess and predictions is a lot like the difference between companies and nonprofits. If your company is losing money, it's pretty obvious. You know right away, you feel bad, and you start thinking about how to fix it. (And if you don't fix it, you go bankrupt.) But if your nonprofit isn't accomplishing its goals, it's much less obvious. You can point to various measurable signs of success (look at all the members we have, look at all the articles we've been quoted in) and come up with all sorts of explanations for why it's not your fault.

This isn't to say that we should have companies replace nonprofits, any more than we should have chess games replace predictions. The two serve completely different goals — nonprofits aim at improving the world, not making money. But it does mean that if you're involved in nonprofits (or predictions), you need to be much more careful about making sure you're doing a good job.

Unfortunately, few nonprofits do that. Take, for example, the Center for American Progress, widely believed to be one of the most effective political nonprofits. They say their goal is "improving the lives of Americans through ideas and action." But their "marketing brochure," while filled with glossy photos, doesn't even attempt to see whether they're accomplishing this goal. It touts that they've released "an economic strategy for the next administration," "convened

a task force ... to develop policy,” and “developed a plan for the bulk transfer auction of at-risk mortgages.” There’s not a single attempt to demonstrate that any of these things has improved the lives of Americans, let alone estimate how much.

Measuring things is hard and expensive, even in the simplest cases. Measuring the effect of loaning money to Africans seems a lot easier than measuring the impact of a think tank report. But when Peter Singer asked Oxfam to measure the effectiveness of giving microcredit to villages in West Africa, they declined, on the grounds that it would have taken up half the budget.

But not measuring is even more expensive. Imagine that Oxfam experimented with two microcredit programs and found that one did 10% better than the other. Even with this very modest improvement, it would only take helping five villages before the experiment paid for itself.

And, as anyone who’s done these sorts of experiments knows, you often see improvements well in excess of 10%. To take a silly example, [Dustin Curtis experimented](#) with getting more readers of his weblog to follow him on Twitter. After four experiments, he’d achieved a 173% improvement. And even this is probably underestimating things. I expect many nonprofits are not accomplishing their goals *at all*. Even if they made a little bit of progress, their improvement would be mathematically infinite. (It’s also quite possible that many nonprofits are actually being *counter*-productive. After all, before we started measuring the effects of medical treatment, we were bleeding people with leeches.)

What can be done about this? I think that everyone who donates to a nonprofit should demand an accounting of results — not just the number of times they’ve been cited in the media or the number of policy discussions they’ve held, but an actual attempt to measure how much they’re improving people’s lives. For most nonprofits, I expect these numbers will be depressingly small. But that’s much better than having no numbers at all. For feeling bad about failing is the first step to doing better next time.

Why I Am Not Gay

September 8, 2009

[Original link](#)

Until recently, men having sex with men was disapproved of in American culture. Actually, “disapproved of” isn’t really the right word — it was immoral, illegal, disgusting. People who did it lived in secrecy, under the constant threat of blackmail for their actions.

In the tumult of the 1960s, various out-groups — blacks, Chicanos, Native Americans — begun organizing themselves and demanding to be respected and given their due. And men-who-had-sex-with-men decided that they were an out-group — they were gay — and they deserved rights too.

In doing so, they transformed an action (having relationships with someone of the same gender) into an identity (“being gay”). And, using the normal human mechanisms for distinguishing between people in your club and those not in it, they closed ranks. Gay men didn’t have sex with women. Those who did weren’t gay, they were “bi” (which became a whole new identity in itself) — or probably just lying to themselves. And straight men had to be on constant guard against being attracted to other men — if they were, it meant that deep down, they were actually gay.

This new gay identity was projected back through history — famous historical figures were “outed” as gay, because they’d once taken lovers of their own gender. They truly were gay underneath, it was said — it was just a homophobic society that forced them to appear to like the opposite sex.

Along with the identity went an attempt at justification. Being gay wasn’t “a choice,” they argued — it was innate. Some people were just born gay and others weren’t. To a culture that tried to “correct” gay people into being straight, they insisted that correction was impossible — they just weren’t wired this way. (They even provided a ridiculous genetic explanation for how a species with a small percentage gay people might evolve.)

This might have been a good thing to say — maybe even necessary in such a homophobic culture — but in the end it has to be seen as simply wrong. Having sex with other people of your gender isn’t an identity, it’s an act. And, like sex in general among consenting adults, people should be able to do it if they want to. Having sex with someone shouldn’t require an identity crisis. (Nobody sees having-sex-with-white-people as part of their identity, even if that’s primarily who they’re attracted to.)

People shouldn’t be forced to categorize themselves as “gay,” “straight,” or “bi.” People are just people. Maybe you’re mostly attracted to men. Maybe you’re

mostly attracted to women. Maybe you're attracted to everyone. These are historical claims — not future predictions. If we truly want to expand the scope of human freedom, we should encourage people to date who they want; not just provide more categorical boxes for them to slot themselves into. A man who has mostly dated men should be just as welcome to date women as a woman who's mostly dated men.

So that's why I'm not gay. I hook up with people. I enjoy it. Sometimes they're men, sometimes they're women. I don't see why it needs to be any more complicated than that.

A Political Startup

September 8, 2009

[Original link](#)

“Politics is like the weather: everybody discusses it but nobody actually does anything about it.”

The golden dome of the Massachusetts State House rises majestically over the grass of Boston Common. The sun glints off the dome while kids play on the grass, but on the State House steps there is nobody except for a couple of my friends — and me, holding a ridiculously-large stack of paper that threatened to blow away in the breeze. “This is what failure looks like,” I thought.

Within half an hour, I found myself standing in the same place, surrounded by TV cameras and microphones on all sides, reporters throwing questions as fast as I could answer them. And the papers hadn’t blown away. How did I get here?

At the beginning of the year, I cofounded a political action committee, [the Progressive Change Campaign Committee](#). We had no money and no members and not much of a plan for how to get them. We wrote up long proposals for big donors on why they should write us checks, and tried negotiating with electoral candidates on why they should send us members, but neither of these were particularly successful. Then Jon Stewart attacked Jim Cramer.

Cramer came to symbolize the foolishness and vapidness of the media in the face of the financial crisis. His blatantly buffoonish cluelessness (“*Don’t move your money from Bear! That’s just being silly! Don’t be silly!*”) were the epitome of a press that championed the housing bubble and fumbled the crash. We were giddy about the press getting their day in scorn, but we wanted to accomplish positive change as well. So we hit upon the idea of starting a petition to demand CNBC hire someone who was *right* about the housing crisis.

We spread the word to friends and bloggers and before we knew it we had nearly 20,000 signatures — 20,000 new members. It was quite the start.

A couple months later, frustrated that Norm Coleman wouldn’t drop his spurious legal challenges against Al Franken being named a Senator, we started NormDollar.com. We asked people to donate a dollar each day Norm Coleman didn’t drop out of the race, money we’d spend electing progressive candidates. It was featured on *Hardball* and throughout the political press. We also videotaped Norm’s donors’ reactions when we told them about the program. But my

favorite was when we presented Norm with a big novelty check for him to sign, representing all the money he'd raised for progressives.

Now we had money too.

I came back from my month offline to find we were raising money for TV ads — running ads in DC pressuring representatives to support the public health care option, asking whether they'd sold out to their insurance industry campaign contributors. And when Sen. Ben Nelson started a campaign to stall the health care bill, we filmed an ad with Mike Snider. Mike talked plainly to the camera about how, as owner of the local Syzzlyn Skillet, he received a call from his insurers saying they were raising his rates by 42%. "I can't afford that!" he exclaimed. And then to hear his own Senator was trying to prevent health care reform?

Mike was just an average guy who made a real political difference. After we started airing our ad, Ben Nelson's spokesperson tried to denounce him and the Senator himself called Mike and asked to see his health care bills. Mike was a guest on *The Rachel Maddow Show* and his restaurant has become a base of operations for the local political community. Mike's story was so powerful that Ben Nelson was forced to put up his own ads directly responding to it — even though Nelson isn't up for reelection in years — in which he (ridiculously) calls Mike a lying DC politician.

Mike's story really inspired me as to the difference just one person could make, but I never thought that person would be me. When my Senator, Ted Kennedy, passed away, I wanted to honor his memory by fighting for the causes he fought for. His last request had been a letter to the Massachusetts legislature asking them to change the law and let a replacement be appointed to his seat to continue his fight for universal health care. Without the change, the seat would stay vacant for five months while an election could be scheduled — and the next five months will be crucial.

With the rest of the (growing) PCCC team, we came up with a plan to launch a petition asking the legislature to honor that request. We sent out an email asking people to sign and tell their friends. Within a few days, we had 20,000 signatures. I was blown away — clearly people cared.

I'd promised to deliver the signatures on Monday, without really thinking about what that entailed. I called the office of the Senate President and Speaker of the House to ask when I could come by and film a short video of the petitions being dropped off. The President of the Senate's office blew me off, insisting that under no circumstances were cameras allowed in their office and saying that the President simply couldn't meet with me. So we decided to make the delivery something they couldn't ignore.

We emailed our list to ask people in the area to show up on the State House steps at 11am Monday. Then we emailed the press and asked them to get there at 11:15. I stayed up all night the night before, feeding paper into the printer

trying to print out 20,000 names. Then I grabbed a stack and headed to the State House.

The stack — 600 sheets or so — kept trying to fall over and blow away and at the State House there were only a couple friends who were loaning me their camera. We decided to go in and scope out President Murray's office. When we came back, our members started arriving: old ladies with their grandchildren, college students, and everyone in between. The media started pressing closer: a photographer for the *Herald*, a cameraman for Fox. Microphones kept being shoved in my face and people kept asking me to spell my name. I hefted the stack of petitions and kept repeating why I was here.

Local TV news isn't exactly known for its crack reporters, but I have to say I was impressed by Janet Wu. She didn't just ask me the standard questions, but kept pushing me on the hard stuff, barking responses at me, not letting me off the hook. The other reporters smelled blood and joined in. Soon I was at the center of a full scrum of cameras and microphones — surrounded on all sides, every local TV station there. I like to think I comported myself well: I didn't get angry or flustered, I refused to be taken off-message, I kept stressing that this was about doing what the people wanted.

(Later, away from the cameras, Wu was a completely different person. "Hey there, little guy," she cooed at a grandchild. "Hey, it's OK, you can talk to me." Actually, I thought the kid might have the right idea by staying quiet.)

At some point all the cameras dematerialized. "OK, go in," someone said. "Just pretend we're not here." They'd all rematerialized down the street, to film us marching into the capitol, stack of signatures in hand.

Believe it or not, it's not easy to walk into the state capitol holding 600 pieces of paper with TV cameras in front of you and a crowd of supporters behind. I kept wondering where to look and trying not to lose the rest of the crowd. Who knows how that footage came out. And when I got up the steps the reporters dematerialized again and rematerialized inside at the Senate President's office, to film us marching down the hallway. We entered her office and all crowded in — I didn't think we were all going to fit, but we just barely did. The receptionist — in the middle of a phone call — looked a bit flustered. We waited patiently. Soon a broad-shouldered man in a suit came out. "Thanks so much for the petitions," he said, taking them from me. "The proposal will go through the usual process. He turned to head out. I was dumbstruck.

But, bravely, one of the older women spoke up. "Wait," she said. "The normal process? Isn't this a matter of some urgency?" "All I can say is it will go through the usual process." Those women wouldn't let him go. But eventually he did, looking the perfect image of the arrogant unconcerned Boston pol, and Janet Wu stuck a microphone in my face. "Do you feel satisfied?" she asked. I started to speak but she interrupted. "Wait. OK, go again: Do you feel satisfied?"

Outside, a cameraman turned the bright lights on one of the older woman. She

was saying, far more clearly and convincingly than me, that no, she wasn't satisfied. That this was an important issue and she wanted to be heard. I was so glad she came.

And then the press and the supporters dematerialized again. I was left, once again, alone with just my friends. We stood in the hallway trying to process what just happened. We caught the man who'd taken the petitions as he was coming out of the office. "So, what is your actual title?" I asked. "Director of Communications," he said.

"And where is the Senate President really?" asked a friend. "Oh, she's in Russia," he explained. "Russia?" "Yeah, she's helping with a nonprofit to assist orphaned children. Pre-scheduled trip. She does it every year." "You're saying she can't meet with us because she's in Russia saving orphans?" I asked. "That's a pretty incredible excuse." We all laughed. He headed off down the hallway.

"Wait, one more thing," a friend called after him. "Where's a good place around here we can get some lunch?"

Please, [sign our petition](#).

A Short Course in Ethics

September 14, 2009

[Original link](#)

How are we to live? Most people seem to agree that there are “right” things and “wrong” things and we should try to do the right ones, but they’re less clear on how to figure out what the right ones are.

Some say there are certain moral rules (don’t murder, don’t steal) that we must follow to be right. But how do you decide what those rules are? Many such rules have been proposed; how do we pick the good ones?

If you ask someone to justify a rule, they usually do it by listing its *consequences*: if we don’t steal, God will reward us; everyone will be happier if we stop killing. In the end, it seems like everything boils down to consequences: good acts are those which accomplish good things.

So how do we decide what good things are? Doesn’t everyone have their own idea of what’s good? Instead of trying to promote one particular person’s notion of what’s good, it seems like we should balance everyone’s good. In most cases, it’s impossible for us to know what’s actually good for a person, so this usually means taking their word for it and trying to give them what they *want*.

(Cases where people don’t seem to want what’s good for them are usually cases where people are confused about what they want. I may think I really want to eat this whole box of cookies but later I’ll realize I really wish I hadn’t.)

But everyone wants different things — how do we balance their desires? It seems like the only fair thing to do is to treat everyone equally. Of course, this doesn’t mean treating every want equally: if one person wants a yacht and another person wants a dry place to sleep tonight, the second want seems much stronger than the first; filling it will accomplish more overall good.

Here’s another way to look at this. Imagine that before we were born, we all sat up in the heavens and talked about how to design the world. None of us yet know which bodies we would be born into or which parents we’d have, so none of us can possibly be biased. Aren’t we all going to want to promote the greatest good overall? We’ll make sure the worst-off aren’t particularly worse-off in case we’re one of them, and we’ll make sure the rest aren’t especially handicapped in case we’re one of them.¹ If we have to choose between a world with one more yacht for Larry Ellison and one with one more dry place to sleep for a woman in poverty, we’ll probably pick the dry place.

So we have our simple moral principle: when faced with a question, pick the answer that will accomplish the most overall good. Two friends both want to borrow my TV tonight, but one already has a TV and just wants it so he can

watch two channels at once, while the other can't afford even a single television. Our principle suggests the TV goes to the second.

But our principle doesn't just apply to the questions we're obviously faced with. Surely there are many other people who want a TV and have even less than my friend. By our logic, they would seem to deserve the TV even more, even though they didn't happen to be asking me for it and thus forcing me to confront the question.

It seems like we need to think more carefully about the implicit question of each moment: what do I do now — with my time, my money, my possessions? And it seems like we need to apply the same moral rule.

The conclusion is inescapable: we must live our lives to promote the most overall good. And that would seem to mean helping those most in want — the world's poorest people.

Our rule demands one do everything they can to help the poorest — not just spending one's wealth and selling one's possessions, but breaking the law if that will help. I have friends who, to save money, break into buildings on the MIT campus to steal food and drink and naps and showers. They use the money they save to promote the public good. It seems like these criminals, not the average workaday law-abiding citizen, should be our moral exemplars.

Such a thorough-going conception of ethics seems incredibly difficult. Surely it requires severe changes in our life. The traditional notion of ethics is much easier — there are some bad things (stealing, lying, cheating) and we need to try our best not to do them. But, as in any field, it's important to separate the truth from what's convenient. People are often criticized for not doing what they think is right (hypocrisy), but not believing in what's right because it's hard to do is far worse!

I am convinced that the account here is largely correct, but I certainly don't live up to its demanding standards. And that's OK. One of the conclusions of this argument is that it's impossible to be perfectly moral. By accepting that, and keeping it in the back of my mind, I do a little better each day.

For a long time, people told me eating meat was wrong and I refused to believe them, because I thought it would be impossible for me not to eat meat. Then one day, I accepted that they were right and I was doing the wrong thing and I decided I could live with that. I wasn't perfect. But shortly after I decided that, meat started seeming less and less attractive, and I started eating less and less, and now I don't eat it at all anymore.

Accepting you're immoral is the first step to being a more moral person.

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1. This thought experiment comes from philosopher John Rawls, although its conclusion has been [modified by Peter Singer](#).

Honest Theft

September 15, 2009

[Original link](#)

[Yesterday](#) I mentioned the case of my friends who save money by living at MIT. They sleep on couches in the common rooms, break into the showers in the gym, and steal food and drink from the cafeterias. They use the money they save on necessities to promote the public good. I suggested that they're actually behaving more morally than the average citizen. This seems shocking, so let's look at the objections in depth.

There's the obvious argument that by taking these things without paying, they're actually passing on their costs to the rest of the MIT community. But for most of these things, there are no costs: no MIT students use the couches or the showers at night. And while it's true that taking MIT food and drink probably does increase the university's costs slightly, this concern doesn't seem too consistently applied. Do you think it's wrong to take one of the free refreshments at an MIT event? The consequences seem about the same.

Even if they were costing MIT money, it seems this could be justified. MIT receives enormous sums from the wealthy and powerful, more than they know how to spend. Much of it gets spent on unneeded luxuries for their already-elite students. Redistributing it to the town's poorer residents seems potentially justified.

Others claim that this lifestyle results in increased security costs. I don't see how that's true unless the students get caught. Even if they did, MIT has a notoriously relaxed security policy, so they likely wouldn't get in too much trouble and MIT probably wouldn't do anything to up their security.

A more serious complaint is that this "erodes the social contract." Peter Singer (no contract theorist he!) puts this more clearly in his book *Democracy and Disobedience*: In any society people are going to have disputes. Everyone's better off if these disputes are resolved without resorting to force. Thus in most societies there are governments to help resolve disputes peacefully. Resorting to force when you don't like their resolution could tip things back to the bad state of people resolving things through force in general.

I don't think this is a particularly plausible concern. My friends (understandably) keep quiet about their lifestyle. If anyone, *I* am the one undermining the social contract by publicizing it. But let's keep me out of this analysis for a second. It's hard to see how sleeping on MIT couches will lead to violent revolution.¹

It's possible there are other objections to this style of life. Or perhaps some objectors are right — and not only shouldn't we steal from MIT, but we shouldn't

take advantage of their largesse either. But thinking about these questions — as opposed to blindly following rules — is what it means to be a moral person and instead of eroding the social contract it seems much more likely to strengthen our moral sense.

1. Singer identifies one other concern, particular to democracies. (He thinks the previous concern is especially relevant in democracies, since there's not much improvement revolution can lead to, but in the end he decides this isn't too relevant since modern "democracies" aren't actually democratic.) He suggests that it's wrong to participate in politics and vote like everybody else, but then refuse to follow the rules when the decision ends up being something you don't like.

I think this is a fairly silly objection and basically impossible to justify on utilitarian grounds. (The book is Singer's doctoral thesis and is weirdly agnostic on utilitarianism. It's also not particularly well-written, so my apologies if I'm missing part of Singer's argument.)

Imagine it's a presidential election year and the major issue is that candidate A has promised to make kids in public schools wear uniforms while candidate B opposes it. (Imagine also that the president has the power to accomplish this rule change by simple executive order.) Whatever happens, you refuse to send your child to school wearing a uniform — you plan to keep dressing them as you do now. You have two choices: vote for candidate B or not cast a vote for president.

Singer suggests that if you vote for B and A wins, you ought to make your child wear the uniform. It's hard to see how this helps anyone. Nobody knows whether you voted for president or not (it's a secret ballot), no good (as far as I can see) comes from not voting. Indeed, if you vote for B, you make it more likely that everyone avoids this unjust law *and* you make it more likely you won't have to resort to civil disobedience and erode the social fabric.

It's hard to see how any intuitive notion of obligation can trump this.

On Finishing Infinite Jest

September 16, 2009

[Original link](#)

NOTE: For those who have actually read *Infinite Jest*, you'll probably get more out of my very spoiler-heavy summary of [what happens just after the end of the book](#).

I don't remember starting *Infinite Jest*. I don't even remember buying it. I remember seeing its bulk and oddly-entrancing cover in the basement of the seminary coop. But the price sticker on the back shows I bought it on sale at a Borders. I don't think I'd read anything by DFW when I bought it. I can't remember why I would have. I very rarely read novels. Did someone recommend it? I can't imagine who. Maybe I just thought, I need something long to take on this trip.

I remember reading chapter 2 (Eredy Waits for Pot) the week I spent in Boston after I got back from Europe. So I must have taken it to Europe. So I probably bought it at the San Francisco Westfield Borders; that was the bookstore I shopped at back then.

Did I start it in Europe? Around page 750, I found a note I couldn't read in a hand I didn't recognize with a symbol I couldn't understand. But it was stamped with the address of our German hotel. Although I don't remember having a room in the hotel myself; I just remember sleeping in other people's rooms. I must have had a room, though, right?

That week in Boston I tried to write a book. Then I got sick. I stopped leaving the apartment. I stopped eating. I went a bit bats, I suppose. But it was getting sick that start of it, some kind of bad cold or something. I remember that. It didn't leave me with much interest in swallowing food.

I remember taking the novel to the cafe on the corner. I remember the cafe being largely empty, huge lakes of golden light streaming in through the window, making everything glow. Time seemed to be slowed down, every moment made up of beautiful frames. And I read about Eredy waiting for pot.

My apartment at the time was a dingy place. My roommates and I had moved to San Francisco and the place was left empty except for the collecting dust. It was a big place, held three people before we left, and I had it to myself, to go mad in.

I next remember reading it in my new place in San Francisco, which I got later that year. I remember thinking it didn't make much sense and had only a handful of good parts. I dusted it off again at my new place in Boston for

Infinite Summer, starting from where I left off. But around page 500, I realized it wasn't a bunch of isolated stories like I'd assumed. As the Aventura kicked shit into the Antitoi's door I realized I'd been missing the point. On a trip to DC, I flipped back to check a detail and was shocked to find whole swathes of things I didn't even recognize, whole chapters I'd not only forgotten but showed no signs of ever having read, rereading them didn't jog a single memory.

The whole book is laced through with mocking cracks at this disconnected style, like a preemptive apology. And the ending really doesn't help matters. But in the middle it is truly grand, some of the best fiction ever. I just hope that I'll remember it.

What Happens at the End of Infinite Jest? (or, the Infinite Jest ending explained)

September 16, 2009

[Original link](#)

Herb: Is there no “ending” to “Infinite Book” because there couldn’t be? Or did you just get tired of writing it?

DFW: There is an ending as far as I’m concerned. Certain kind of parallel lines are supposed to start converging in such a way that an “end” can be projected by the reader somewhere beyond the right frame. If no such convergence or projection occurred to you, then the book’s failed for you.

([Live Online with David Foster Wallace, May 17, 1996](#))

WARNING: This whole thing is one gigantic spoiler. Only read it if you’ve already tried to figure it out for yourself first.

Gately, having relived his bottom, begins to recover from his infection.

But at the same time, Hal’s condition deepens. Ever since Hal ate the mold as a child, he’s been a brilliant communicator but unable to feel. (694: “Hal himself hasn’t had a bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion since he was tiny ... in fact he’s far more robotic than John Wayne.”) JOI was the only one who could see it. In life, everyone thought JOI was just being crazy but in death (as a wraith) he can actually read Hal’s thoughts and thus confirm his view.

In life he created the Entertainment to draw Hal out (Hal moves outwardly but doesn’t feel inside; victims of the Entertainment feel—something—inside but don’t move outwardly). After all, as he tells Gately, he was willing to resort to desperate measures: “No! *No!* *Any* conversation or interchange [between father and son] is better than none at all.” (839)

JOI’s wraith is responsible for the strange disturbances around ETA — tripods in the forest, moving Ortho’s bed, ceiling tiles on the floor. He knocks the ceiling tiles down in an attempt to find the DMZ. Pemulis is too distracted with getting expelled to have Hal take it, so JOI needs to get it to Hal some other way.

JOI also created DMZ as part of an attempt to undo the effects of Hal’s eating mold as a child (recall: DMZ is a mold that grows on a mold). He left it along with the Entertainment (recall: ETA kids find JOI’s personal effects (670: “a bulky old doorless microwave...a load of old TP cartridges...mostly unlabelled”); the tapes and the DMZ are delivered together to the FLQ) which is about this

goal (it stars a woman named Madame Psychosis (a street name for DMZ) explaining that the thing that killed you in your last life will give birth to you in the next). The DMZ and the Entertainment were meant to go together for Hal. Now that the Entertainment has escaped, he needs to get Hal the DMZ.

Hal never leaves his toothbrush unattended (870), but that's no problem for a wraith. He places the DMZ on Hal's brush and Hal brushes his teeth (860) and immediately begins experiencing symptoms: Ortho thinks Hal's crying when Hal thinks he's speaking in a neutral tone (862).

Hal's symptoms indeed begin to reverse: he is now unable to properly communicate feelings (people see him as either laughing hysterically or terribly sad) but beginning to actually feel (like Gately, he spends a lot of time lying on the floor thinking about the past — the hero of nonaction from his essay (142)). While before, everyone could hear him *except* JOI; now *only* JOI can hear him (since, as with Gately, he can hear Hal's thoughts).

By the time of the match, his symptoms are so bad he's taken by ambulance to the hospital (16: "the only other emergency room I have ever been in [was] almost exactly one year back"), safely escaping the A.F.R.'s assault. Like fellow student Otis P. Lord, he gets the bed next to Gately. Joelle (who is at the hospital for a meeting) visits Gately on her way out and recognizes Hal. She tells them both about the hunt for the lethal Entertainment and the resulting Continental Emergency and they all go to dig up JOI's grave. They persuade John Wayne, a spy for the A.F.R., to become a double agent and help sneak them into JOI's Quebec burial site. Wayne presumably tells the A.F.R. he is actually a triple agent — that he will steal the tape as soon as Hal digs it up. But, as with Marathe, his loyalties are ultimately even-numbered (n40). The A.F.R. finds out and brutally murders him, which is why he can't win the WhataBurger (16f).

As Gately forsee:

he's with a very sad kid and they're in a graveyard digging some dead guy's head up and it's really important, like Continental-Emergency important, and Gately's the best digger but he's wicked hungry, like irresistibly hungry, and he's eating with both hands out of huge economy-size bags of corporate snacks so he can't really dig, while it gets later and later and the sad kid is trying to scream at Gately that the important thing was buried in the guy's head and to divert the Continental Emergency to start digging the guy's head up before it's too late, but the kid moves his mouth but nothing comes out, and Joelle van D. appears ... while the sad kid holds something terrible up by the hair and makes the face of somebody shouting in panic: *Too Late*. (934)

It's too late because someone got there first and took the anti-Entertainment cartridge (126) embedded in JOI's head (31). Whoever took it is presumably the

person who's made and mailed the extant copies. It couldn't be the A.F.R. or O.U.S. or they wouldn't still be searching for it. It probably wasn't the F.L.Q. because they didn't know how to read master cartridges—they just thought they were blank tapes in their displays were blank. (483n205) It couldn't be Avril acting alone; she has problems but she's not that kind of cold-blooded killer. It had to have been Orin.¹

Orin (who never attended his father's funeral) went to the gravesite and dug up his father, releasing the wraith in the process. (244: "After a burial, rural Papineau-region Québécois purportedly drill a small hole down from ground level all the way down through the lid of the coffin, to let out the soul, if it wants out.") Orin, who is such a partisan of his father that he feels the need to repeatedly ruin the lives of people like his mother, has been mailing the tapes to his father's enemies in revenge: disapproving film critics in Berkeley and the medical attaché (whose affair with his mother drove Himself especially wild) in Boston. It's possible he's being influenced by the wraith in these actions.

After the A.F.R. releases roaches into his giant glass tumbler, Orin cuts a deal with the A.F.R. and gives them the tape in return for letting him live. (He's apparently still alive on p. 14.) The A.F.R. uses the tape to set off some sort of intracontinental conflagration (16: "some sort of ultra-mach fighter too high overhead to hear slices the sky from south to north") which apparently topples the Gentle administration (n114: "[Y.G. is] the very last year of Subsidized Time").

As seen in Chapter 1, Hal's condition deepens until he literally can't communicate at all, but no longer feels like a robot anymore. (12: "I'm not a machine. I feel and believe.") The only thing he has left is tennis and he looks forward to playing Ortho Stice in the final match of the WhataBurger. But Stice is possessed by his father (in the manuscript, Stice is called "the Wraithster"), so the novel ends as Hal finally gets to really interface with his father — in the only way he has left.

Thanks to [Jeff Halley](#) and Joe Giacona for help with the part about the DMZ.

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1. Recall that "the padded mailer [received by the attaché] is postmarked suburban Phoenix area in Arizona U.S.A." (36) Also, Orin mentions being "in line in the post office" even though, as Hal points out, "You hate snail-mail. And you quit mailing the Moms the pseudo-form-replies two years ago." (244) Orin doesn't reply to that.

And: "There was reason to think M. DuPlessis had received his original copies from this relative, an athlete. ... [He] may have borne responsibility for the razzles and dazzles of Berkeley and Boston, U.S.A." (723) The other appearances of the Entertainment are New Iberia LA (Orin played football in New Orleans LA) and Tempe AZ (Orin lives in Phoenix AZ). (Thanks to [Greg Carlisle](#), p. 477, for catching these.)

Tim DeLaughter and the Boundary of Spectacle

September 18, 2009

[Original link](#)

The traditional symphony is a highly formal event. Musicians, in formal clothes, sit in a carefully-designed arrangement high above the audience who (also usually in formal clothes) sits in seats and applauds at formally-appropriate moments (recall the odd paradox of most of the audience unsure when to clap; is it the end of the piece or just the end of the movement?). The music performed is also often formal, classical music, like fine art generally, typically signifying something a cut above everyday life.

This is challenged somewhat by things like the Boston Pops, a symphony who, for the 4th of July, performed “Sweet Caroline” with Neil Diamond to a crowd of people sitting on towels on the lawn waving flags. But, even so, the main feeling was of people crowding around to see something spectacular — *look, it’s Neil Diamond!*

The sense was rather different when, wandering past techs and grips, Tim DeLaughter, wearing the dingiest of street clothes, climbed over a forest of cables to the microphone and begun talking about how his father used to beat him for imitating Neil Diamond. *Look, it’s him!* was thoroughly tempered with *Who is this guy?*

“So, you know, I would say things like (*Neil Diamond voice:*) *Please pass the potatoes! I’m so very hungry!* [pats his stomach] and he’d say *Don’t you dare do that again* and bitchslap me [mimes bitchslapping] and of course I’d do it again and again.”

And so the audience was throughly puzzled by the time he, rather casually, dropped in the line “Let me bring out the band” and the couple dozen members wandered out onto the stage, also in street clothes. But soon the lights faded and Tim grabbed the microphone and in a burst of light and music, they launched into a rousing version of “Sweet Caroline.”

Tim pranced on stage like no one you’ve ever seen and the audience bounced up and down and sung along with enthusiasm, but in a throughly confused manner. No one was quite sure how seriously to take a disheveled-looking bunch of dancers, violinists, trumpeters, and harpists led by a guy in street clothes prancing around doing his best imitation of Neil Diamond. (Although, God, nothing can top the chorus girls flicking their hair in tune with “Live and Let Die.”)

A rock band is a special kind of spectacle all on its own — think of Beatlesmania, for example, or how “rock star” is a generalized term for a special kind of awe-inspiring celebrity — and Tim did everything he could to both heighten this

sense and demolish it. They'd launch into furious imposing rock songs and the audience would scream and reach toward them, but then the rock would fade down into a quieter symphonic bridge section and Tim would sit down on the stage and chat casually with someone in the front row, while still playing the bridge's main repeating theme on his guitar.

All the usual audience-musician relations were subverted. Musicians often point their mic at the crowd to inspire them to scream the key line in a chorus. Tim, in the middle of a verse, would bend down and point the microphone in a fan's face and let them sing it. And while some musicians "bodysurf" on the crowd's hands, while he sang about being "under the ocean", Tim literally lay down on the beer-drenched sticky floor and crawled between their legs.

The tension was only heightened in the second act, when the band appeared in their famous white robes, but approached the stage by walking through the audience, saying hi to everyone and hugging like old friends. Tim frequently jumped down into the audience and hugged people in the middle of singing, the microphone in one hand reaching around their back to meet his face on the other side.

The fundamental tension of celebrity is appearing to the world as someone superhuman — achiever of great deeds, seen only in airbrushed photos and on giant screens, known by vastly more people than they themselves know — while still, at base, being a human like everyone else, the kind of person who goes down the street to get a sandwich and chats with people on the subway and all the other humdrum pieces of daily life. It's an odd contradiction and never have I seen it presented better than watching the Polyphonic Spree on stage last night.

The New Science of Causation

September 21, 2009

[Original link](#)

It seems like each new day brings another one of those headlines: regular sleep “linked to” life expectancy, playing video games “associated with” surgical prowess, bullies “at risk” of becoming criminals, and “does breastfeeding reduce a baby’s blood pressure?” (the old rhetorical question gambit). Sometimes the articles are clear: the research has only found a correlation between two variables — breastfeeding and low blood pressure were found together. But more often, they imply that causation is at work — that breastfeeding *causes* lower blood pressure.

You’ve surely heard that old statistics adage: correlation does not imply causation. Just because breastfeeding and low blood pressure are found together doesn’t mean the first caused the second. Perhaps the second caused the first (moms might prefer to keep breastfeeding calmer babies) or some other thing caused both of them (maybe moms who don’t work both tend to breastfeed and stress their kids less). You can’t tell from correlation alone.

Indeed, the philosopher David Hume argued that we could *never* know whether causation was at work. “Solidity, extension, motion; these qualities are all complete in themselves, and never point out any other event which may result from them,” he wrote. But not causation: “One event follows another; but we never can observe any tie between them. They seem conjoined, but never connected.”

And, as philosophers since Plato and Sextus Empiricus have argued, such evidence can deceive us. Imagine finding a button and, each time you press it, a beep is heard. Normally, we’d assume that the button always causes the beep. But we’d be wrong — one day the power goes out and the button does nothing.

Which is why, centuries later, Karl Pearson, the founder of mathematical statistics, banned the notion of causality from the discipline, calling it “a fetish amidst the inscrutable arcana of modern science” and insisting that just by understanding simple correlation one “grasped the essence of the conception of association between cause and effect.”

His followers have kept it banished ever since. “Considerations of causality should be treated as they have always been in statistics: preferably not at all,” wrote a former president of the Biometric Society. “It would be very healthy if more researchers abandon thinking of and using terms such as cause and effect,” insisted another prominent social scientist.

And there the matter has stayed. Causality is a concept as meaningless as “the soul” and just as inappropriate for modern mathematical science. And yet,

somehow, this doesn't seem quite right. If causation is nothing but a meaningless word that laypeople have layered over correlation, then why the ceaseless insistence that "correlation does not imply causation"? Why are our thoughts filled with causal comments (he made me do it!) and never correlational ones?

The result is exceptionally strange. Statistics has no mathematical way to express the notion "mud does not cause rain". It can say mud is correlated with rain (i.e. that there's a high probability of seeing mud if you see rain), no problem, but expressing the simple causal concept — the kind of thing any five-year-old would know — is impossible.

Statisticians may have never had to confront this problem but, luckily for us, Artificial Intelligence researchers have. It turns out if you're making a robot, having a notion of causality is essential — not just because it's the only way to understand the humans, but because it's the only way to get anything done! How are you supposed to turn the lights on if you don't know that it's the light-switch and not the clicking noise that causes it?

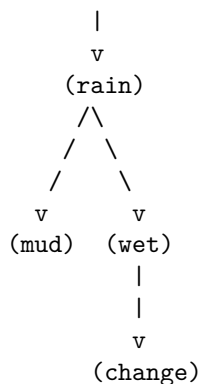
The result is that in recent years several teams of AI researchers have turned their focus from building robots to building mathematical tools for dealing with causality. At the forefront is Judea Pearl (author of the book *Causality*, Cambridge University Press) and his group at UCLA and Clark Glymour (author of *The Mind's Arrows*, MIT Press), Peter Spirtes, and their colleagues at Carnegie Mellon. The result is a quiet revolution in the field of statistics — one most practicing statisticians are still unaware of.

They started by dismissing Plato's skepticism about the problem. Granted, they say, we may never know for sure whether the button *always* causes the beep, but that's too stringent a demand. Science never knows anything for sure — the best we can hope for is extracting the most knowledge from the evidence we have. Or, as William James put it, "To know is one thing, and to know for certain that we know is another."

Next, they created a new mathematical function to formalize our notion of causality: *do(...)*. *do* expresses the notion of intervening and actually trying something. Thus, to mathematically express the notion that mud does not cause rain, we can say $P(\text{rain} \mid \text{do}(\text{mud}=\text{true})) = P(\text{rain})$ — in other words, the chance of rain given that you made it muddy is the same as the chance of rain in general.

But causes rarely comes in pairs like these — more often it comes in complicated chains: clouds cause rain which causes both mud and wet clothing and the latter causes people to find a change of clothes. And so the researchers express these as networks, usually called causal Bayes nets or graphical causal models, which show each thing (clouds, rain, mud) as a node and the causal relationships as arrows between them:

(clouds)
|



And all this was just the warm-up act. Their real breakthrough was this: just as kids can discover causes by observation, computers can discern causes from data. Now obviously the easiest way to do this is just to measure what happens when you do($X=x$) directly — this, for example, is what randomized controlled trials do. Kids do it by dropping a fork on the floor and seeing if this causes Mom to pick it up; scientists do it by randomly giving some people a real drug and others just a placebo. The result is that we can be sure of the cause — after all, it was *we* who dropped the fork and gave out the drug; nothing else could be sneaking in and causing it.

But in most cases we don't have this luxury. We'd like to know whether a new tax policy will cause the economy to tank *before* we enact it; we'd like to know whether smoking causes cancer without forcing kids to smoke; and even in randomized controlled trials, we can give half the patients the real drug, but we can't make them take it. If the drug being tested makes someone so horribly sick that they stop taking it and then get better, drug trials still count that as a victory for the drug!

Obviously we can't always know such things just from observing, but in a surprising number of cases we can. And the researchers have developed a mathematical method — called the *do*-calculus — for determining just when you can. Feed it a Bayes network of variables, their relationships, and their values, and it will return back what it knows and with what certainty.

Thus, in an example Pearl frequently uses, tobacco companies used to argue that the correlation between smoking and cancer was simply because there were certain genes that made people both more likely to smoke *and* more likely to get cancer. It didn't matter if they quit smoking — their genes would lead cancer to get them anyway. Pearl shows that if we assume only smoking causes tar deposits on the lungs and the tar deposits are the only way smoking causes cancer, we can simply measure the tar deposits and calculate whether the tobacco companies are right.

Or, in another example in his book *Causality*, he analyzes data from a study on a cholesterol-reducing drug. Since whether people got the placebo or not

is unassociated with any other variables (because it was randomly assigned) if we merely assume that receiving the real drug has *some* influence on whether people take it, we can calculate the effectiveness of the drug even with imperfect compliance. Indeed, we can even estimate how effective the drug would have been for people who were assigned it but didn't take it!

And that's not all — Peter Spirtes and Clark Glymour have developed an algorithm (known as PC, for Peter-Clark) that, given just the data, will do its best to calculate the causal network behind it. You can download the software implementing it, called [TETRAD IV](#), for free from their department's website — it even has a nice graphical interface for drawing and displaying the networks.

As an experiment, I fed it some data from the IRS about 2005 income tax returns. It informed me that the percentage people donate to charity is correlated with the number of dependents they have, which in turn correlates with how much people receive from EITC. That amount, along with average income, causes how many people are on EITC. Average income is correlated with the tax burden which is correlated with inequality. All interesting and reasonable — and the result of just a few minutes' work.

The applications for such tools are endless. As Pearl points out, they have the possibility to radically improved how statistics are used in medicine, epidemiology, economics, sociology, and law. And, as Glymour observes, it lets us better understand results in neuroscience and psychology. Take *The Bell Curve*, the 1992 bestseller that argued blacks had lower IQs, causing poorer performance in school and thus lower-paying jobs and more crime. Glymour shows, by applying the *do*-calculus, these results only hold if you assume that there are no other interactions between the variables (e.g. that parental attitude toward learning doesn't affect both IQ and performance in school). But the PC algorithm and TETRAD IV can demonstrate otherwise.

Such results may be a revolution in social science, but compared to building human-like robots, they're child's play. That's certainly the impression one gets from Pearl. Discussing his work at a conference of Artificial Intelligence researchers, he said:

One of the reasons I find these areas to be fertile grounds to try out new ideas is that, unlike AI, tangible rewards can be reaped from solving relative small problems. Problems involving barely 4 to 5 variables, which we in AI regard as toy-problems, carry tremendous payoffs in public health and social science.

Billions of dollars are invested each year on various public-health studies: Is chocolate ice-cream good for you or bad for you? Would red wine increase or decrease your heart rate? etc. etc.

The same applies to the social sciences. Would increasing police budget decrease or increase crime rates? Is the Colorado school incident due to TV violence or failure of public education? The

Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research has distributed about 800 gigabytes worth of such studies in 1993 alone.

Unfortunately the causal-analytical methodology currently available to researchers in these fields is rather primitive, and every innovation can make a tremendous difference. [...] This has been changing recently as new techniques are beginning to emerge from AI laboratories. I predict that a quiet revolution will take place in the next decade in the way causality is handled in statistics, epidemiology, social science, economics, and business. While news of this revolution will never make it to DARPA's newsletter, and even NSF is not equipped to appreciate or support it, it will nevertheless have enormous intellectual and technological impact on our society.

For science's sake, I hope he's right.

A Summary/Explanation of John Maynard Keynes' General Theory

September 22, 2009

[Original link](#)

With the recent economic crisis, there has been much talk of John Maynard Keynes and his economics. Keynes, the story goes, figured out the causes of the Great Depression and in doing so revolutionized the field of economics. Some conservative economists have forgotten or ignored his work, but society as a whole remembers his basic discovery: you get out of downturns by spending money.

Reading Keynes' *General Theory of Employment, Money, and Interest* then is a sobering experience. For the book is, indeed, truly brilliant, a definite work of genius. It's the best book on the economy I've ever read; indeed, it's one of the best books I've ever read. Everyone has seen bits and pieces of wit quoted from the book, but Keynes weaves them into a beautiful tapestry that explains the whole of the modern economy. And yet, the book is a necessary now as it was then: economics has not learned a single one of his lessons.

This is a depressing thought, especially since Keynes throughout seems optimistic that once he's explained everything so clearly, economics will be back on the right track. But politics has triumphed over logic and we've forgotten all the crucial things he explained.

Perhaps this is why it has a reputation for being a very tough book — so difficult that even economists can't follow it. But I think this is entirely due to a difference in philosophies: the *General Theory* was the first book on economics I could really understand. And that's because, unlike most economics books, it *makes sense* — the theories it proposes comport with the real world, instead of taking place in some fantasyland of perfect competition.

Still, the book isn't exactly a smooth read. Keynes uses some archaic language and is trying to communicate some complicated ideas. There's no math, but there's still a lot to chew on. So I thought I'd try my best at an explanation/summary. It's a long book, so if you're in a hurry, you might prefer [my shorter summary of the fundamental ideas](#).

[The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money](#) [full text]

Book I: Introduction

1: This chapter cheekily consists of a single paragraph. It says the book is an attempt to show that classical economics (basically that summarized by Alfred Marshall, including Ricardo, Mill, Edgeworth, and Pigou) addresses only a special case of the economy, while this book outlines a more general theory.

2: The classical theory of employment says the labor market is just another market: people get paid what they make and people only work if they get paid enough to make it worth it. Since it seemed unlikely that society had run out of money-making jobs, it was assumed that unemployment was caused either by people not knowing where the jobs were (frictional unemployment) or insisting on being paid more than they could make (voluntary unemployment).

It seems difficult to explain the high unemployment of the Great Depression this way, but economists didn't see how it could be otherwise. So their solution was simple: to end unemployment, people just needed to be willing to work for less.

What this amounts to is Say's Law: supply creates its own demand. If there are people around willing to work, jobs will spring up to make use of them. If people are unemployed, it must be because they're refusing to take the job.

There are two obvious problems with this. First, people may refuse to work for a lower nominal wage when they'll accept working for a lower real (i.e. inflation-adjusted) wage. That is, if management decides to pay people \$4 an hour instead of \$5, people might go on strike, but nobody ever goes on strike demanding a raise because the cost of milk has gone up. (So inflation might actually be a better solution than wage cuts.)

Second, if wages go down, then the cost of making things goes down, which means that prices go down, which means that in real terms wages end up staying about the same.

Keynes has found a crack in the classical theory. The first half of this book will be dedicated to prying it open. The second half is filling it in.

3: When people get money, they spend some of it — but not all of it. And businesses choose whether to hire people based on how much they expect to sell. But how much they sell is exactly dependent on how much people spend.

So it's how much people spend that determines employment. But this is totally consistent with there being unemployment — if people aren't buying, businesses aren't selling, so they fire people (who then buy less).

Indeed, this problem will be worse in richer countries, since the more people make the less of it they need to spend and thus less money is used to hire people. (The details of how the remainder gets invested has to do with interest and will be addressed later.)

Since this seems so basic, Keynes is puzzled at how it's been so ignored:

The completeness of the [classical] victory is something of a curiosity and a mystery. It must have been due to a complex of suitabilities in the doctrine to the environment into which it was projected. That it reached conclusions quite different from what the ordinary uneducated person would expect, added, I suppose, to its intellectual prestige. That its teaching, translated into practice, was austere and often unpalatable, lent it virtue. That it was adapted to carry a vast and consistent logical superstructure, gave it beauty. That it could explain much social injustice and apparent cruelty as an inevitable incident in the scheme of progress, and the attempt to change such things as likely on the whole to do more harm than good, commended it to authority. That it afforded a measure of justification to the free activities of the individual capitalist, attracted to it the support of the dominant social force behind authority.

But although the doctrine itself has remained unquestioned by orthodox economists up to a late date, its signal failure for purposes of scientific prediction has greatly impaired, in the course of time, the prestige of its practitioners. For professional economists, after Malthus, were apparently unmoved by the lack of correspondence between the results of their theory and the facts of observation;—a discrepancy which the ordinary man has not failed to observe, with the result of his growing unwillingness to accord to economists that measure of respect which he gives to other groups of scientists whose theoretical results are confirmed by observation when they are applied to the facts.

The celebrated optimism of traditional economic theory, which has led to economists being looked upon as *Candides*, who, having left this world for the cultivation of their gardens, teach that all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds provided we will let well alone, is also to be traced, I think, to their having neglected to take account of the drag on prosperity which can be exercised by an insufficiency of effective demand. For there would obviously be a natural tendency towards the optimum employment of resources in a society which was functioning after the manner of the classical postulates. It may well be that the classical theory represents the way in which we should like our economy to behave. But to assume that it actually does so is to assume our difficulties away.

Book II: Definitions and Ideas

4: The next three chapters aren't so much part of the argument as attempts to clear up some basic concepts and objections.

We start by observing it's impossible to measure things like "net output" or "price level" accurately — you're always trying to compare qualitatively different

things and run into no end of difficulties.

To say that net output to-day is greater, but the price-level lower, than ten years ago or one year ago, is a proposition of a similar character to the statement that Queen Victoria was a better queen but not a happier woman than Queen Elizabeth — a proposition not without meaning and not without interest, but unsuitable as material for the differential calculus. Our precision will be a mock precision if we try to use such partly vague and non-quantitative concepts as the basis of a quantitative analysis.

We can't measure net output, but we can count the number of people employed. In general, if more people are working then more stuff is getting made, although this obviously isn't a perfect connection. But employment is kind of a more interesting number and it will have to do.

So we'll use only two types of counts: those of actual currency (money-values) and those of people (employment). And while workers are obviously not all equivalent the way dollar bills are, we can take an hour of unskilled labor as our standard and count people with special skills as multiples of an hour of unskilled labor. Thus if someone makes twice as much per hour as an unskilled laborer, we'll count each hour they work as two unskilled hours. We'll call these hours labor-units and we'll call the money that gets paid for them wage-units. Thus the total amount spent on wages equals the wage-unit times the number of labor-units.

[AS: Obviously this accounting fiction isn't particularly realistic since, in reality, the multiples people get paid change as the wage-unit goes up. Let's say I'm a lawyer who makes \$300 an hour and minimum wage is \$5 an hour. If the minimum wage is doubled to \$10 an hour, I'm not suddenly going to get paid \$600 an hour, even though my relative productivity hasn't changed. Keynes seems to suggest this can be modeled as "a rapid liability to change in the supply of labor;" I guess that's possible.]

And as for some people being better at some jobs than others, we just pretend that's an artifact of the equipment they use. In other words, as employment goes up and we run out of skilled truck-builders, we say the truck factory is getting less efficient. (If, indeed, there's nobody left who can build the trucks, we say the truck factory's efficiency has gone to zero.)

As problematic as this is, Keynes points out that it's a lot more realistic than the classical theory, which just seems to magically assume everyone is paid in proportion to their productivity. By subsuming more efficient people with their machinery, Keynes says he better deals with the usual case, which is that the increase in efficiency goes to their boss (who owns the machines). And when more efficient workers actually are paid more, he takes that into account as noted above.

5: Businesses make production decisions not based on sales or anything solidly measurable, but on personal opinions: expectations. These can be either short-term expectations (the barrista will be given the day off if management doesn't expect any customers) or long-term expectations (Starbucks won't open up a new store if they expect coffee consumption to start going down).

Either way, new expectations don't always take effect immediately (if you just opened a new store and then decide it wasn't worth it, you don't immediately close it). And the process of adjusting can have some odd effects: if you need to quickly ramp up production, you might keep hiring until you have more employees than you really need in the long-run. You use the extra people to get you up to speed, then you lay them off. The result is "a gradual crescendo in the level of employment, rising to a peak and then declining to the new long-period level." This can happen even if you don't expect to sell more things, but just a slightly different thing: you "overhire" to get up to speed on the new model, but then fire people until you're back down to your previous level.

An uninterrupted process of transition, such as the above, to a new long-period position can be complicated in detail. But the actual course of events is more complicated still. For the state of expectation is liable to constant change, a new expectation being superimposed long before the previous change has fully worked itself out; so that the economic machine is occupied at any given time with a number of overlapping activities, the existence of which is due to various past states of expectation.

That said, today's decisions are based on the conditions of today and expectations about tomorrow — not on past expectations or the conditions of the past. And, in practice, people don't calculate their expectations from scratch each morning. They keep doing what they did yesterday unless they have a reason to change. Long-term expectations can't be easily checked, so when they do change, they often change suddenly. Thus they can't even be approximately estimated.

6: When you're producing something, there are a couple of things involved. One is the amount of capital and equipment and so on you use up, which we'll call the *user cost*. Another is the amount you pay to employees and other companies and so on, the *factor cost*. These two combined are the *prime cost*. The *entrepreneur's income* is the value of his output less the prime cost — that's what he tries to maximize.

Entrepreneurs can also lose capital due to unavoidable events — a market crash, an earthquake, the passage of time. These are *supplementary costs*. In addition, there are the unavoidable and unforeseen, which we'll call *windfall loss*. We'll define *net income* as just income minus supplementary costs, since people can't really be blamed for the unforeseen events.

The *total income* of the community is just the amount sold minus the user cost. And *total consumption* is just all the stuff that isn't sold to other businesses. [AS: I've been saying businesses because I find it clearer, but Keynes actually says entrepreneurs. I think I also use this kind of interchangeably with capitalists. Sorry.] *Saving*, of course, is just income minus consumption.

Investment is just the amount of current output that isn't consumed. But since saving is just the amount of income that isn't consumed and income is just output (output is always output to someone), savings necessarily equals investment.

[AS: This seems to be a little controversial (and, indeed, tends to be a bit confusing), but let's just accept it as a quirky definition, not any kind of factual claim.]

7: Keynes spends the chapter defending his decision to define savings as equal to investment. [AS: I think he only ends up in making things more confusing, but maybe I'm missing something.]

Book III: The Propensity to Consume

8: We return now to our main argument. Earlier we said people spend the money they get, but not all of it. What changes how much they spend? Not much, Keynes argues. (Maybe large changes in interest rates, but those are rare.)

"The fundamental psychological law," he says, is that, on average, the amount people spend increases as the amount they make increases, but not as quickly. (If you make \$50K a year, you might spend \$40K of it. If you make \$1M, you might spend \$500K of it. Obviously a lot more in absolute terms, but far less proportionately.) And this is especially true in the short-term — people's habits take time to catch up with their incomes.

But this means that as national income increases, a smaller proportion of it will get spent, so more of it will have to be invested. And when national income falls, a larger proportion gets spent as people dip into savings and governments go into deficit. This is fortunate, because lower consumption also means lower income (when people buy less, businesses make less, so they pay you less). If consumption fell at the same rate as income, we'd fall into a downward spiral: lower consumption would mean lower income, which in turn would mean lower consumption, and soon we'd all be out of a job.

"Consumption — to repeat the obvious — is the sole end and object of all economic activity." What are we making things for if not to use them? People can either be put to work making things for people to use today or making things for people to use tomorrow, but that tomorrow "cannot be pushed indefinitely into the future." After all, an hour of labor cannot be "saved" and put into a bank for a rainy day! If people are out of work now, the time they're wasting

will never be recovered. [AS: This is truly brilliant. It's hard to convey the excitement I felt when reading this.] Saving money for the future is not the same as making things for the future — it's only the latter that's useful.

But it's not easy to think of useful things to make for the future. Eventually, we're forced to make things for today. But as our incomes increase, we spend less on things today. And there's our trap: if we don't make things for tomorrow and we don't make things for today, people are forced out of work since there's nothing for them to make.

Another way to look at it is the more stuff we make for tomorrow, the less stuff we need to make tomorrow. And then what do we do? At some point we just need to consume more stuff.

People seem to recognize this when it comes to government making stuff. "What will you do," it is asked, "when you have built all the houses and roads and town halls and electric grids and water supplies and so forth which the stationary population of the future can be expected to require?" But the same logic applies to private investment. What will we do when we've built all the factories the people of the future can be expected to use?

Money can't survive on its own. If we don't ever spend it, it becomes worthless.

9: How does raising interest rates affect consumption? We've said it doesn't have much effect on people's *propensity* to consume, but a higher interest rate means it's more expensive to borrow money, which means companies invest less, which means incomes are reduced. (Since savings=investment, incomes are reduced such that the amount left over for savings equals the lesser amount now invested. [AS: This is the first use of that suspicious definition.]) Most people think that as the interest rate goes up, spending goes down and saving goes up, but this shows that saving and spending both decrease.

The more virtuous we are, the more determinedly thrifty, the more obstinately orthodox in our national and personal finance, the more our incomes will have to fall when interest rises relatively to the marginal efficiency of capital. Obstinacy can bring only a penalty and no reward. For the result is inevitable.

Thus, after all, the actual rates of aggregate saving and spending do not depend on Precaution, Foresight, Calculation, Improvement, Independence, Enterprise, Pride or Avarice. Virtue and vice play no part. It all depends on how far the rate of interest is favourable to investment, after taking account of the marginal efficiency of capital. No, this is an overstatement. If the rate of interest were so governed as to maintain continuous full employment, Virtue would resume her sway; — the rate of capital accumulation would depend on the weakness of the propensity to consume. Thus, once again, the tribute that classical economists pay to her is due to their concealed assumption that the rate of interest always is so governed.

10: We've established that an increase in investment leads to an increase in income. But how much? Even if you hire people for investment, the money those people get paid in turn gets spent on additional consumption, increasing employment indirectly as well. (Of course, this is only true until we hit full employment — then prices just inflate.)

There must be an investment multiplier — call it k — such that an extra \$1 invested leads to \$ k increase in income. And there must be a similar employment multiplier (k') where for each person hired for a job, k' people get hired in total.

But spending can have negative effects as well. [AS: Keynes apparently has government investment — i.e. stimulus — in mind here, although he never really comes out and says it.] If the interest rate goes up, that will slow investment. If people lose “confidence” because of all the spending, they may decide to hold onto their money. And some of the money can “leak” out to other countries. But this just weakens the multiplier, it doesn't eliminate it.

Recall that the classical theory said people needed to be paid enough to compensate them for their distaste for working. But if you've been unemployed long enough, you might actually *want* to work. If that's true, even wasting money is a good thing. “Pyramid-building, earthquakes, even wars may serve to increase wealth, if the education of our statesmen on the principles of the classical economics stands in the way of anything better.”

It is curious how common sense, wriggling for an escape from absurd conclusions, has been apt to reach a preference for wholly “wasteful” forms of loan expenditure rather than for *partly* wasteful forms, which, because they are not *wholly* wasteful, tend to be judged on strict “business” principles. For example, unemployment relief financed by loans is more readily accepted than the financing of improvements at a charge below the current rate of interest; whilst the form of digging holes in the ground known as gold-mining, which not only adds nothing whatever to the real wealth of the world but involves the disutility of labour, is the most acceptable of all solutions.

(Recall that at this time the world was still on the gold standard and thus mining for gold was equivalent to printing new money.)

If the Treasury were to fill old bottles with banknotes, bury them at suitable depths in disused coalmines which are then filled up to the surface with town rubbish, and leave it to private enterprise on well-tried principles of laissez-faire to dig the notes up again (the right to do so being obtained, of course, by tendering for leases of the note-bearing territory), there need be no more unemployment and, with the help of the repercussions, the real income of the community, and its capital wealth also, would probably become a good deal greater

than it actually is. It would, indeed, be more sensible to build houses and the like; but if there are political and practical difficulties in the way of this, the above would be better than nothing.

The analogy between this expedient and the goldmines of the real world is complete. At periods when gold is available at suitable depths experience shows that the real wealth of the world increases rapidly; and when but little of it is so available, our wealth suffers stagnation or decline. Thus gold-mines are of the greatest value and importance to civilisation. just as wars have been the only form of large-scale loan expenditure which statesmen have thought justifiable, so gold-mining is the only pretext for digging holes in the ground which has recommended itself to bankers as sound finance; and each of these activities has played its part in progress-failing something better. To mention a detail, the tendency in slumps for the price of gold to rise in terms of labour and materials aids eventual recovery, because it increases the depth at which gold-digging pays and lowers the minimum grade of ore which is payable.

(Keynes goes on to contrast gold-mining with building new houses which, being actually useful, has the side effect of decreasing the rent of old ones.)

Ancient Egypt was doubly fortunate, and doubtless owed to this its fabled wealth, in that it possessed two activities, namely, pyramid-building as well as the search for the precious metals, the fruits of which, since they could not serve the needs of man by being consumed, did not stale with abundance. The Middle Ages built cathedrals and sang dirges. Two pyramids, two masses for the dead, are twice as good as one; but not so two railways from London to York. Thus **we are so sensible, have schooled ourselves to so close a semblance of prudent financiers, taking careful thought before we add to the “financial” burdens of posterity by building them houses to live in**, that we have no such easy escape from the sufferings of unemployment. We have to accept them as an inevitable result of applying to the conduct of the State the maxims which are best calculated to “enrich” an individual by enabling him to pile up claims to enjoyment which he does not intend to exercise at any definite time. [emphasis added]

Book IV: The Inducement to Invest

11: Imagine you get a new widget-making machine. There's the value of the widgets you expect [AS: there's that word again] it to produce, less the cost of its inputs and maintenance. Call that the *yield*. Then there's the cost of creating one more new widget-making machine. Call that the *supply cost*. The *marginal*

efficiency of capital is the yield less the supply cost. [AS: Marginal efficiency of capital comes up a lot, so we'll save time by calling it "your expected return."]

Of course there's lots of different things you can invest in; we're assuming that you do whatever maximizes your expected return. And obviously you'll keep borrowing money and investing it until your expected return reaches the market rate of interest.

It's through the expected yield that changes in the value of money affect output. If people expect inflation, then expected yields go up and people invest more. Deflation does the opposite.

(Tyler Cowen, in his critical comments on the *General Theory* is struck by a throw-off clause in this chapter: Keynes says that it's unlikely interest rates will go up if people expect inflation, since if people expected inflation prices would have gone up already. [He writes](#): "This simple yet powerful point doesn't get the attention it ought to. Storage costs for goods and services may eliminate this paradox but perhaps not completely. It is striking how few economists have thought this problem through.")

12: As we noted before, capitalists invest if they expect future sales to be high. But how do they know what future sales will be? "If we speak frankly, we have to admit that our basis of knowledge for estimating the yield ten years hence of a railway, a copper mine, a textile factory, the goodwill of a patent medicine, an Atlantic liner, a building in the City of London amounts to little and sometimes to nothing; or even five years hence."

In olden days, what happened was that rough-riding men of business thought taking risks was manly and invested their money as a way of life. They got it in their head that they were going to build a railroad, and by Jove they did. They didn't sit down and calculate whether they could have made more money buying bonds instead. Bonds are for wusses.

But now people invest their money in the stock market, which revises its profitability estimates minute-by-minute. "It is as though a farmer, having tapped his barometer after breakfast, could decide to remove his capital from the farming business between 10 and 11 in the morning and reconsider whether he should return to it later in the week." And since much new investment money is raised on the stock market, it's these estimates which influence new investment.

And the stock market depends on "what is, in truth, a *convention*" — namely that the current valuation of a company is an accurate assessment of its expected yield — that stock prices will only change if there's new evidence suggesting the yield will be different. Thus, even though we actually have no clue what the yield might be, we all agree that the current stock price is our best guess and instead of worrying about the fact we actually have no clue what the "right" stock price is whatsoever, we only have to worry about those things which will affect it (the stock price).

So stock traders don't sit down and try to calculate the long-term expected

yield; they try to guess the short-term change in the stock price and trade base on that.

This is the inevitable result of investment markets organised with a view to so-called “liquidity”. Of the maxims of orthodox finance none, surely, is more anti-social than the fetish of liquidity, the doctrine that it is a positive virtue on the part of investment institutions to concentrate their resources upon the holding of “liquid” securities. It forgets that there is no such thing as liquidity of investment for the community as a whole. The social object of skilled investment should be to defeat the dark forces of time and ignorance which envelop our future. The actual, private object of the most skilled investment to-day is “to beat the gun”, as the Americans so well express it, to outwit the crowd, and to pass the bad, or depreciating, half-crown to the other fellow.

This battle of wits to anticipate the basis of conventional valuation a few months hence, rather than the prospective yield of an investment over a long term of years, does not even require gulls amongst the public to feed the maws of the professional; — it can be played by professionals amongst themselves. Nor is it necessary that anyone should keep his simple faith in the conventional basis of valuation having any genuine long-term validity. For it is, so to speak, a game of Snap, of Old Maid, of Musical Chairs — a pastime in which he is victor who says *Snap* neither too soon nor too late, who passes the Old Maid to his neighbour before the game is over, who secures a chair for himself when the music stops. These games can be played with zest and enjoyment, though all the players know that it is the Old Maid which is circulating, or that when the music stops some of the players will find themselves unseated.

Or, to change the metaphor slightly, professional investment may be likened to those newspaper competitions in which the competitors have to pick out the six prettiest faces from a hundred photographs, the prize being awarded to the competitor whose choice most nearly corresponds to the average preferences of the competitors as a whole; so that each competitor has to pick, not those faces which he himself finds prettiest, but those which he thinks likeliest to catch the fancy of the other competitors, all of whom are looking at the problem from the same point of view. It is not a case of choosing those which, to the best of one’s judgment, are really the prettiest, nor even those which average opinion genuinely thinks the prettiest. We have reached the third degree where we devote our intelligences to anticipating what average opinion expects the average opinion to be. And there are some, I believe, who practise the fourth, fifth and higher degrees.

You might think that this just means someone who actually does sit down

and calculate expected yields could make vast profits from all the speculators playing Snap. But calculating expected yields is much harder than guessing what everyone else will do; there's no reason to think spending the same amount of time doing that is any more profitable.

And getting money for it is much harder — people don't like it when you tell them "Yes, the stocks you bought are worthless *now* but just wait! Nothing real has changed, you just need to hold on and see if I'm right in the long run." People don't like it when their stocks go down. They'd much rather invest their money so that its valuation keeps going up and up and up.

And even if they were willing to wait, why should they trust you? "For it is in the essence of his behaviour that he should be eccentric, unconventional and rash in the eyes of average opinion. If he is successful, that will only confirm the general belief in his rashness; and if in the short run he is unsuccessful, which is very likely, he will not receive much mercy. Worldly wisdom teaches that it is better for reputation to fail conventionally than to succeed unconventionally."

The more open our stock markets get, the more speculators predominate, and the worse things get for us.

When the capital development of a country becomes a by-product of the activities of a casino, the job is likely to be ill-done. The measure of success attained by Wall Street, regarded as an institution of which the proper social purpose is to direct new investment into the most profitable channels in terms of future yield, cannot be claimed as one of the outstanding triumphs of laissez-faire capitalism — which is not surprising, if I am right in thinking that the best brains of Wall Street have been in fact directed towards a different object.

A hefty tax on each trade might be the best way to discourage speculation and thus improve the functioning of the market. You might think (as Keynes once did) that the best solution is to just force people to hold on to what they buy, so they have to figure out what it's really worth beforehand, but this will just push people to hold on to their money. The only solution would be to force everyone to either to buy goods or capital assets with everything they own.

And we return to the problem that many of our economic decisions depend on our "spontaneous optimism," our "animal spirits," our "urge to action rather than inaction," not "the outcome of a weighted average of quantitative benefits multiplied by quantitative probabilities." This means not only that slumps get exaggerated (since they depress animal spirits, worsening the slump) but that economic performance depends to a large degree on keeping businessmen happy. If electing FDR gets them depressed, they might pull back their investments and send the economy into a slump. This isn't a conspiracy, it's just the natural outcome of a system that depends on rich people feeling good. "In estimating the prospects of investment, we must have regard, therefore, to the nerves and

hysteria and even the digestions and reactions to the weather of those upon whose spontaneous activity it largely depends.”

As a result, it seems likely that the State, which can calculate these things with an eye to the long-term and the social good, will take over more and more of the job of organizing long-term investment.

[Tyler Cowen: “This is the best chapter in the book and one of the most important economics essays of all time. ... The insights here have yet to be fully mined.”]

13: We said before that businesses keep investing until their expected return reaches the interest rate (so lower interest rates mean more investment), but what determines the interest rate?

It’s often said that the interest rate is the price people demand for saving money instead of spending it. But this clearly isn’t true — people can save money under their mattress and not get any interest. No, the interest rate is the “price” people demand for parting with their cash.

“— which implies that if the rate of interest were lower, *i.e.* if the reward for parting with cash were diminished, the aggregate amount of cash which the public would wish to hold would exceed the available supply, and that if the rate of interest were raised, there would be a surplus of cash which no one would be willing to hold.” And if that’s true then the quantity of money is the other factor that determines interest rates. Thus the interest rate depends on people’s desire to hoard cash — their liquidity preference (L) — and the quantity of money (M).

Why is there a liquidity preference? Why don’t people just invest all their money? Interest rates never go below zero, after all. “A full explanation is complex and must wait for Chapter 15.” But we can see one reason now: uncertainty about the expected [AS: there’s that word again] rate of interest. If we expect interest rates to go up, we might want to hold on to our cash and use it to buy higher-yield bonds later. And thus, just as capital investment was driven by stock market speculation, interest rates are driven by bond market speculation. Again we have a tradeoff between having a market (and thus volatility) or no market (and thus overcaution).

There are other reasons people might want to hold cash. If they expect to do a cash transaction in the future, they’ll need to sell a bond then — but if the interest rate has risen in the meantime, they’ll be selling the bond at a loss. And if the interest rate falls, the economy will grow and people will need more cash for these sorts of transactions.

OK, so we have the following model: more money reduces the interest rate (as long as liquidity preference doesn’t go up faster), lower interest rates increase investment (as long as expected return doesn’t fall faster), more investment leads to more employment (as long as the propensity to consume doesn’t fall

faster), and if employment increases prices will rise which can increase liquidity preference and thus require more money.

The public can't control the *amount* of hoarding, since that's necessarily equal to the amount of cash. All it can do is change the price of hoarding — the interest rate.

14: “Certainly the ordinary man — banker, civil servant or politician — brought up on the traditional theory, and the trained economist also, has carried away with him the idea that whenever an individual performs an act of saving he has done something which automatically brings down the rate of interest ... without the necessity for any special intervention or grandmotherly care on the part of the monetary authority.”

But we've seen they're quite wrong. Saving doesn't lower the interest rate and thus increase investment — an increase in money does that. Instead, saving lowers demand and thus decreases employment. In which case, “a decreased readiness to spend will be looked on in quite a different light.”

[AS: And so this is the famous paradox of thrift. While each person thinks they'll do better off by saving money instead of spending it, if a whole country decides to save their money, they're all worse off, since nobody will have a job.]

[AS: I'm taking a bit from chapter 16 since it seems to really belong here:]

“An act of individual saving means — so to speak — a decision not to have dinner to-day.” But it is not a promise to have dinner tomorrow — it doesn't replace current demand with future demand; it decreases demand altogether. And since future demand is estimated based on present demand, it tends to decrease investment as well. Thus decreased consumption leads to decreased employment.

It's difficult to get people to realize that investing money doesn't actually lead to an increase in investments. The problem is that capitalists aren't buying capital per se, they're buying an expected yield. They don't care how good the machine is at making widgets, what matters is whether they can make money selling the widgets. If interest rates go up, it no longer becomes possible for them to make money, even though the machine remains unchanged.

15: The central bank can lower the short-term interest rate through open-market operations: printing money and using it to buy short-term government debt. But this doesn't effect the long-term rates, which depend on people's expectations of what the government will do to short-term rates. Perhaps the government should start buying and selling long-term bonds to address this.

It's also possible (although unlikely) that no one will believe the government can keep rates so low and so they begin hoarding all the new cash the government prints. “In this event the monetary authority would have lost effective control over the rate of interest.” [AS: This, I presume, is the liquidity trap.] “But whilst this limiting case might become practically important in future, I know of no example of it hitherto. ... Moreover, if such a situation were to arise, it would

mean that the public authority itself could borrow through the banking system on an unlimited scale at a nominal rate of interest.” [AS: The US, however, is in this situation right now (2009).]

Other traps are hyperinflation (where no one wants to hold onto money) and a financial crisis (where no one trusts the banks enough to let go of money). And there’s the issue that even at low rates of interest, banks still need to trust their borrowers and make enough to pay their expenses, which may require them to raise rates.

16: OK, so we’re in a liquidity trap. There are all sorts of practical problems with lowering interest below zero, so instead what happens is that, in *laissez-faire*, employment falls to reach the new low levels. The only thing that can save us is if “millionaires find their satisfaction in building mighty mansions to contain their bodies when alive and pyramids to shelter them after death, or, repenting of their sins, erect cathedrals and endow monasteries or foreign missions.” That’s no way to run a country.

So the government will print money to keep the interest rate at a level corresponding to full employment. Presumably this means that interest rates will become very low (although you don’t want them so low that nobody’s making things to sell today). But as interest rates get lower, it becomes profitable to invest in building things with smaller and smaller expected yields.

If this happens, then it seems likely that within a generation expected return will reach zero [AS: !!] and everything will reach its marginal cost.

This gets rid of the most objectionable features of capitalism — people could still become rich by saving money, but there would be nothing left to invest it in, so their money wouldn’t ever grow. It would be the end of the rentier — the rich person who grows richer by using his wealth to exploiting others.

17: Let’s step back for a second. Why is money so special? After all, a bond is just a promise to get some money in the future. Why should it be any different from a futures contract on wheat? We could imagine paying the future wheat contracts in terms of wheat, resulting in a wheat interest rate. [AS: This sounds pretty ridiculous, I know, but give it a minute.]

The big problem is that money is the one thing market processes can’t adjust. 1) You can’t just go ahead and make it — it can’t be “grown like a crop or manufactured like a motor-car.” 2) You can’t reclaim it from use for other purposes — it doesn’t have any. (Land can’t be grown either, but if we really needed to we could free some up by moving closer together. 3) It’s very easy to store — it doesn’t spoil. Which is why the suggestion of making it spoil (by printing money with expiration dates, etc.) are on the right track.

Otherwise, our only relief comes from printing more money.

Thus in the absence of money and in the absence — we must, of course, also suppose — of any other commodity with the assumed

characteristics of money, the rates of interest would only reach equilibrium when there is full employment. Unemployment develops, that is to say, because people want the moon; — men cannot be employed when the object of desire (i.e. money) is something which cannot be produced and the demand for which cannot be readily choked off. There is no remedy but to persuade the public that green cheese is practically the same thing and to have a green cheese factory (i.e. a central bank) under public control.

It is interesting to notice that the characteristic which has been traditionally supposed to render gold especially suitable for use as the standard of value, namely, its inelasticity of supply, turns out to be precisely the characteristic which is at the bottom of the trouble.

The classical view is that we are kept poor by our impatience — we insist on spending money now instead of saving it for later, when it will grow into more. But the truth is exactly the opposite: “That the world after several millennia of steady individual saving, is so poor as it is in accumulated capital-assets, is to be explained, in my opinion, neither by the improvident propensities of mankind, nor even by the destruction of war, but by the high liquidity-premiums formerly attaching to the ownership of land and now attaching to money.”

18: Keynes restates the theory.

Book V: Money-wages and Prices

19: Now that we have the theory, we can return to the point we started with: reducing nominal wages is unhelpful. The only thing that could work is a one-time decrease in everyone’s wages to a new level, but that a) is never going to happen in a democracy and b) unfairly penalizes wage-earners over everyone else. “There are advantages in some degree of flexibility in the wages of particular industries so as to expedite transfers from those which are relatively declining to those which are relatively expanding. But the money-wage level as a whole should be maintained as stable as possible, at any rate in the short period.”

20: We’ve said that employment ultimately comes from demand. So why should the government promote investment instead of demand? It’s because investment comes first. If you give people money to buy more (say) iPods, then first all the existing iPods get sold. This raises the price, which makes Apple richer but doesn’t help any employees — and Apple likes to save its money much more than its employees do. Eventually they begin to run out of iPods and start investing in additional factories to make more. And then those factories hire people to work there, who spend their wages on other things. It works, it’s just slow — if you want to get people employed quickly, you’re better off starting with building the factories.

OK, so you promote investment, but how much investment? Well, until you have full employment obviously.

21: Traditional economics is divided between the theory of value (perfect competition, supply and demand, and all that good stuff) in the main spot and then over to the side has a separate theory of money (dealing interest rates and inflation), with no clear connection between the two. “We have all of us become used to finding ourselves sometimes on the one side of the moon and sometimes on the other, without knowing what route or journey connects them, related, apparently, after the fashion of our waking and our dreaming lives.” The right split is between the theory of the individual industry and the theory of the economy as a whole. Or perhaps between the stationary economy and the shifting one, for money’s power “flows from its being a link between the present and the future.”

So how does printing money affect prices? Well, the naive view is that it doesn’t — the additional money gets used to buy more things which hires more people — until everyone is hired. Then the money can’t go to hire more people so it just goes to bid up the prices of things, creating inflation. As I said, that’s the naive view — there are a couple complications.

How does money influence demand? Primarily thru the rate of interest, which depends on liquidity preferences, marginal efficiencies, and investment multipliers. But these all depend on other complicating factors.

Marginal prime costs and labor costs increase as industry is forced to use more expensive equipment and laborers, resulting in higher prices. Some industries hit “bottlenecks” first, causing their prices to rise and demand to be funneled into industries that are faster to respond. Then as some workers receive better wages other workers will demand it and, since business is booming, receive it. Finally, with the additional demand equipment and so on will have to be replaced, raising marginal costs.

There’s an asymmetry in the system that workers will resist falling wages, but not rising ones. But this is good, because otherwise wages would fall to zero in any downturn and the entire economy would shut down. But the side effect is that “the very long-run course of prices has almost always been upward.”

Book VI: Short Notes Suggested by the General Theory

22: Why are there trade cycles, aka business cycles, aka booms and busts?

Let’s start by thinking about the end of the boom. So business is booming and everyone’s optimistic — even though costs of production (and maybe interest rates) are rising, sales are too, so expected profits are looking good. But since no one really knows what they’re doing, especially not the speculators, it’s understandable that “when disillusion falls upon an over-optimistic and over-bought market, it should fall with sudden and even catastrophic force.” Everyone gets

freaked out that they're not going to make money anymore and stops investing and raises their liquidity preference, raising interest rates and lowering investment further.

Because these things go together, they're sometimes mistaken as the cause, but note that it's the expected return which falls first, then interest rates rise. So even lowering interest rates isn't enough to recover from the crash. And "it is not so easy to revive the marginal efficiency of capital, determined, as it is, by the uncontrollable and disobedient psychology of the business world. It is the return of confidence, to speak in ordinary language, which is so insusceptible to control in an economy of individualistic capitalism. This is the aspect of the slump which bankers and business men have been right in emphasising, and which the economists who have put their faith in a 'purely monetary' remedy have underestimated."

And there are other problems: when the stock market crashes, rich people see themselves as less rich and decide to start spending less. (And when everyone follows the stock market, like in the US, this applies to everyone.) And the fact that people aren't spending further decreases expected returns.

So that's the bust. What about recovery? Well, recovery can't come until old equipment is used up and has to be replaced and old stocks of goods that were produced get sold off and have to be replenished. When recovery picks up, it feeds on itself in the opposite way. But you can't jump-start it just by lowering interest rates, since the real problem is expected return. Thus the government must step in.

Reading this, you might think the solution is to raise interest rates to prevent overinvestment during booms, since lowering them doesn't get you out of slumps. But there's two kinds of overinvestment: disappointing investments, where the investment would have made sense except the economy collapsed, and genuine overinvestment, where the investment could never have made money. It's only the second kind that's an actual waste of resources, and the solution to it isn't raising interest rates "which would probably deter some useful investments and might further diminish the propensity to consume, but in taking drastic steps, by redistributing incomes or otherwise, to stimulate the propensity to consume."

Why does redistributing income work? Think about the dot-com bubble where everyone was blowing money on useless fiber-optic cable. If venture capitalists are spending all their money on useless cable, the solution is to take their money away. Instead, you can give it to poor people, who will use it to buy useful things like food and clothing.

What happens isn't so much excessive investment as misdirected investment. Everyone builds houses thinking they'll all sell for lots and lots, then they find they aren't actually selling for so much and the economy collapses. "We reach a condition where there is a shortage of houses, but where nevertheless no one can afford to live in the houses that there are."

Thus the remedy for the boom is not a higher rate of interest but a lower rate of interest! For that may enable the so-called boom to last. The right remedy for the trade cycle is not to be found in abolishing booms and thus keeping us permanently in a semi-slump; but in abolishing slumps and thus keeping us permanently in a quasi-boom. [...]

Except during the war, I doubt if we have any recent experience of a boom so strong that it led to full employment. ... Nor was there over-investment in the sense that the standard and equipment of housing was so high that everyone, assuming full employment, had all he wanted at a rate which would no more than cover the replacement cost, without any allowance for interest, over the life of the house; and that transport, public services and agricultural improvement had been carried to a point where further additions could not reasonably be expected to yield even their replacement cost. Quite the contrary. It would be absurd to assert of the United States in 1929 the existence of over-investment in the strict sense.

In short, increasing interest rates to kill booms “belongs to the species of remedy which cures the disease by killing the patient.”

What would the world of the permanent boom look like? It’s conceivable that it might lead not just to full employment, but *full investment* — a world with so much plenty that you couldn’t expect to make a profit on any kind of durable good. “Moreover, this situation might be reached comparatively soon—say within twenty-five years or less. I must not be taken to deny this, because I assert that a state of full investment in the strict sense has never yet occurred, not even momentarily.”

Others say the problem is that the country is so unequal that poor people can’t spend enough. The solution, they propose, is redistributing money to the poor to promote jobs. They are “undoubtedly in the right [at present],” when investment is “unplanned and uncontrolled.” There’s no other way to raise employment. If you can’t increase investment, you have to increase consumption.

But we *could* increase investment: “the wisest course is to advance on both fronts at once.” Not just so that the people we give money to can buy the new products investment creates, but so that they have enough money to buy even more, and thus spark growth themselves!

23: Now that Keynes has outlined his revolutionary theory, it’s time to look back at other economists the classical school dismissed.

The classical school — including Keynes in earlier years — grew up mocking mercantilism (protectionism) as incoherent and absurd. But maybe it makes some sense: Growth depends on the inducements to new investment. Investment is either foreign or domestic. Domestic investment is encouraged by the interest rate and foreign investment by the balance of trade. Thus, if you ignore direct

investment by the government (as people had), these are the two things to be concerned about.

Now in general the interest rate is governed by the quantity of money and “in an age in which substantial foreign loans and the outright ownership of wealth located abroad are scarcely practicable” (not to mention the international gold standard), money equals precious metals which equals the balance of trade. (Since running a trade deficit with a country means sending them your precious metals instead of your exports.) Thus focusing on the balance of trade serves both purposes — and, at a time we didn’t know how to control interest rates, was the only direct means of controlling them.

Not all protectionism promotes the balance of trade, of course — mid-1800s Britain probably would have done best with complete free trade. But mercantilists saw the key points sooner than most, calling for an increase in money to reduce the interest rate.

But the worst part of the international gold system is the way it sets countries against one another. For a country could only keep its citizens employed if it had gold, and the only way to get gold was by taking it from another country (and thus throwing them out of work). “Never in history was there a method devised of such efficacy for setting each country’s advantage at variance with its neighbours’!”

The mercantilists perceived the existence of the problem without being able to push their analysis to the point of solving it. But the classical school ignored the problem, as a consequence of introducing into their premisses conditions which involved its non-existence; with the result of creating a cleavage between the conclusions of economic theory and those of common sense. The extraordinary achievement of the classical theory was to overcome the beliefs of the ‘natural man’ and, at the same time, to be wrong.

Another thing the classical economists long mocked were laws against usury. “I was brought up to believe that the attitude of the Medieval Church to the rate of interest was inherently absurd, and that the subtle discussions aimed at distinguishing the return on money-loans from the return to active investment were merely Jesuitical attempts to find a practical escape from a foolish theory. But I now read these discussions as an honest intellectual effort to keep separate what the classical theory has inextricably confused together, namely, the rate of interest and the marginal efficiency of capital. For it now seems clear that the disquisitions of the schoolmen were directed towards the elucidation of a formula which should allow the schedule of the marginal efficiency of capital to be high, whilst using rule and custom and the moral law to keep down the rate of interest.” After all, “individual savings may be absorbed either by investment or by debts, and that there is no security that they will find an outlet in the former.” Laws against usury help ensure they do.

It is convenient to mention at this point the strange, unduly neglected prophet Silvio Gesell (1862-1930), whose work contains flashes of deep insight and who only just failed to reach down to the essence of the matter. In the post-war years his devotees bombarded me with copies of his works; yet, owing to certain palpable defects in the argument, I entirely failed to discover their merit. As is often the case with imperfectly analysed intuitions, their significance only became apparent after I had reached my own conclusions in my own way. Meanwhile, like other academic economists, I treated his profoundly original strivings as being no better than those of a crank. Since few of the readers of this book are likely to be well acquainted with the significance of Gesell, I will give to him what would be otherwise a disproportionate space.

Among Gesell's proposals are the notion of stamped money (money you have to pay to get stamped regularly to keep it valid currency) which is a way of discouraging people from hoarding. "The idea behind stamped money is sound. ... But there are many difficulties which Gesell did not face. In particular, he was unaware that money was not unique" — if people didn't hoard it, there's lots of other things they could hoard.

Keynes also discusses Bernard Mandeville's incredible book, *The Fable of the Bees*. This incredible work of economic thought described the division of labor and the invisible hand in 1705, a full seventy years before Adam Smith. And, Keynes points out, it's largely about the paradox of thrift — centuries before Keynes! It's basically been written out of economic history, in part, no doubt, because it was written in the form of a scandalous satirical epic poem. Indeed, it so scandalized its readers at the time that it was "convicted as a nuisance by the grand jury of Middlesex in 1723, which stands out in the history of the moral sciences for its scandalous reputation."

Finally we come to Major Douglas, who led the unorthodox Social Credit movement in the UK:

Major Douglas is entitled to claim, as against some of his orthodox adversaries, that he at least has not been wholly oblivious of the outstanding problem of our economic system. Yet he has scarcely established an equal claim to rank — a private, perhaps, but not a major in the brave army of heretics — with Mandeville, Malthus, Gesell and Hobson, who, following their intuitions, have preferred to see the truth obscurely and imperfectly rather than to maintain error, reached indeed with clearness and consistency and by easy logic, but on hypotheses inappropriate to the facts.

24: The two great economic problems are unemployment and inequality. We have addressed the first, but what are its implications of the second? Inequality

has been addressed somewhat by government redistribution, but some are hesitant to go further because they believe that growth is promoted by savings and so taking away the savings of the rich will retard growth. We have seen that it's quite the opposite — that redistribution, by increasing effective demand, *promotes* growth. “One of the chief social justifications of great inequality of wealth is, therefore, removed.”

That said, one wouldn't want to get rid of money altogether:

[D]angerous human proclivities can be canalised into comparatively harmless channels by the existence of opportunities for money-making and private wealth, which, if they cannot be satisfied in this way, may find their outlet in cruelty, the reckless pursuit of personal power and authority, and other forms of self-aggrandisement. It is better that a man should tyrannise over his bank balance than over his fellow-citizens; and whilst the former is sometimes denounced as being but a means to the latter, sometimes at least it is an alternative.

Let us imagine these policies are implemented. The government lowers interest rates so that there's full employment. Expected return would then probably fall steadily keep it there, unless there's an increase in the propensity to consume (including by the State).

At this point, expected return might be just enough to cover the costs of production, plus a little for risk and skill — just like other goods.

Now, though this state of affairs would be quite compatible with some measure of individualism, yet it would mean the euthanasia of the rentier, and, consequently, the euthanasia of the cumulative oppressive power of the capitalist to exploit the scarcity-value of capital. Interest today rewards no genuine sacrifice, any more than does the rent of land. The owner of capital can obtain interest because capital is scarce, just as the owner of land can obtain rent because land is scarce. But whilst there may be intrinsic reasons for the scarcity of land, there are no intrinsic reasons for the scarcity of capital. An intrinsic reason for such scarcity, in the sense of a genuine sacrifice which could only be called forth by the offer of a reward in the shape of interest, would not exist, in the long run, except in the event of the individual propensity to consume proving to be of such a character that net saving in conditions of full employment comes to an end before capital has become sufficiently abundant. But even so, it will still be possible for communal saving through the agency of the State to be maintained at a level which will allow the growth of capital up to the point where it ceases to be scarce.

I see, therefore, the rentier aspect of capitalism as a transitional phase which will disappear when it has done its work. And with the

disappearance of its rentier aspect much else in it besides will suffer a sea-change. It will be, moreover, a great advantage of the order of events which I am advocating, that the euthanasia of the rentier, of the functionless investor, will be nothing sudden, merely a gradual but prolonged continuance of what we have seen recently in Great Britain, and will need no revolution.

Thus we might aim in practice (there being nothing in this which is unattainable) at an increase in the volume of capital until it ceases to be scarce, so that the functionless investor will no longer receive a bonus; and at a scheme of direct taxation which allows the intelligence and determination and executive skill of the financier, the entrepreneur *et hoc genus omen* (who are certainly so fond of their craft that their labour could be obtained much cheaper than at present), to be harnessed to the service of the community on reasonable terms of reward.

At the same time we must recognise that only experience can show how far the common will, embodied in the policy of the State, ought to be directed to increasing and supplementing the inducement to invest; and how far it is safe to stimulate the average propensity to consume, without foregoing our aim of depriving capital of its scarcity-value within one or two generations. It may turn out that the propensity to consume will be so easily strengthened by the effects of a falling rate of interest, that full employment can be reached with a rate of accumulation little greater than at present. In this event a scheme for the higher taxation of large incomes and inheritances might be open to the objection that it would lead to full employment with a rate of accumulation which was reduced considerably below the current level. I must not be supposed to deny the possibility, or even the probability, of this outcome. For in such matters it is rash to predict how the average man will react to a changed environment. If, however, it should prove easy to secure an approximation to full employment with a rate of accumulation not much greater than at present, an outstanding problem will at least have been solved. And it would remain for separate decision on what scale and by what means it is right and reasonable to call on the living generation to restrict their consumption, so as to establish in course of time, a state of full investment for their successors.

Now the State will still have to guide things; it seems unlikely that just controlling interest rates will be enough to ensure this utopian state of affairs. Instead, it might turn out “a somewhat comprehensive socialisation of investment will prove the only means of securing an approximation to full employment; though this need not exclude all manner of compromises and of devices by which public authority will co-operate with private initiative.” Still, this is a comparatively conservative claim:

But beyond this no obvious case is made out for a system of State Socialism which would embrace most of the economic life of the community. It is not the ownership of the instruments of production which it is important for the State to assume. If the State is able to determine the aggregate amount of resources devoted to augmenting the instruments and the basic rate of reward to those who own them, it will have accomplished all that is necessary. Moreover, the necessary measures of socialisation can be introduced gradually and without a break in the general traditions of society. [...]

Whilst, therefore, the enlargement of the functions of government, involved in the task of adjusting to one another the propensity to consume and the inducement to invest, would seem to a nineteenth-century publicist or to a contemporary American financier to be a terrific encroachment on individualism, I defend it, on the contrary, both as the only practicable means of avoiding the destruction of existing economic forms in their entirety and as the condition of the successful functioning of individual initiative.

For if effective demand is deficient, not only is the public scandal of wasted resources intolerable, but the individual enterpriser who seeks to bring these resources into action is operating with the odds loaded against him. The game of hazard which he plays is furnished with many zeros, so that the players as a whole will lose if they have the energy and hope to deal all the cards. Hitherto the increment of the world's wealth has fallen short of the aggregate of positive individual savings; and the difference has been made up by the losses of those whose courage and initiative have not been supplemented by exceptional skill or unusual good fortune. But if effective demand is adequate, average skill and average good fortune will be enough.

And, if our theory does work and we end up with full employment, then we return to the world of the classical economic theory, whose only flaw was assuming that full employment was the only possible state of affairs. "It is in determining the volume, not the direction, of actual employment that the existing system has broken down."

Is the fulfilment of these ideas a visionary hope? Have they insufficient roots in the motives which govern the evolution of political society? Are the interests which they will thwart stronger and more obvious than those which they will serve?

I do not attempt an answer in this place. It would need a volume of a different character from this one to indicate even in outline the practical measures in which they might be gradually clothed. But if the ideas are correct — an hypothesis on which the author himself must necessarily base what he writes — it would be a mistake, I predict, to dispute their potency over a period of time. At the present

moment people are unusually expectant of a more fundamental diagnosis; more particularly ready to receive it; eager to try it out, if it should be even plausible. But apart from this contemporary mood, the ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back. I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas. Not, indeed, immediately, but after a certain interval; for in the field of economic and political philosophy there are not many who are influenced by new theories after they are twenty-five or thirty years of age, so that the ideas which civil servants and politicians and even agitators apply to current events are not likely to be the newest. But, soon or late, it is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil.

Redesign

September 23, 2009

[Original link](#)

I was going through my weblog archives the other day and found an early post I'd written *nine years ago* (in yet another piece of blogging software I'd written myself...). But what was even more shocking than the notion that I'd been blogging for over a decade was that my web design back then was better than it was today.

This really kept nagging at me, so I took a couple hours tonight to do a redesign. I still have very little in the way of [positive artistic talent](#), so it's nothing impressive, but I do hope that it will keep me from recoiling in horror from my own weblog. My apologies to everyone I borrowed design features from.

Feel free to use this thread to comment on the redesign.

Keynes, Explained Briefly

September 24, 2009

[Original link](#)

If you read the economic textbooks, you'll find that the job market is a market like any other. There's supply (workers) and demand (employers). And the incredible power of market competition pushes the price (wages) to where those two meet. Thus massive unemployment is about as likely as huge unsold piles of wheat: if people aren't buying, it's just because you're setting the price too high.

And yet, as I write, 17.5% of the country is unemployed. Are they all just insisting on being paid too much? Economists are forced into the most ridiculous explanations. Perhaps people just don't know where the jobs are, some say. (Maybe the government should run ads for Craigslist.) Or maybe it just takes time for all those former house-builders to learn new jobs. (This despite the fact that unemployment is up in all industries.) But they're typically forced back to the fundamental conclusion of the textbook: that people are just demanding to be paid too much. It might be for the most innocent of reasons, but facts are facts.

John Maynard Keynes' great insight was to see that all of this was nonsense. The job market is a very special market, because the people who get "bought" are also the people doing all the buying. After all, why is it that people are hired to farm wheat? It's because, at the end of the day, other people want to buy it. But if lots of people are out of a job, they're doing their best to save money, which means cutting back on purchases. And if they cut back on purchases, that means there are fewer people for business to sell to, which means businesses cut back on jobs.

Clearly something is badly wrong with the basic economic theory. So let's go through [Keynes' masterpiece, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*](#), and understand his theory of how the economy works.

When you get your paycheck at the end of the week, you spend it. But presumably you don't spend all of it — you put some money away to save, like you were told as a child. Saving is seen as a great national virtue — thus all those Public Service Announcements with talking piggy banks. Everyone knows why: put some money away today and it'll be worth more tomorrow.

But there's a kind of illusion involved in this. Money isn't worth anything on its own, it's only useful because it can buy things. And it buys things because

it pays other people to make them for you. But you can't save *people* in your bank account — if fifteen million people are out of work, they can't put their time in a piggy bank for when things are looking up. The work they could have done is lost forever.

So yes, some people can save while others borrow from them — you can let your neighbor buy two iPods in exchange for letting you buy four next year — but the country, as a whole, cannot. At the end of the day, someone has to buy the things we can make. But if everyone's saving, that means people aren't buying. Which means the people making stuff are out of a job.

It's a vicious cycle: if people buy less, companies make less, which means people get paid less, which means people buy less. And so on, until we're all out of work. (Thankfully it doesn't get that bad — but only because some people are refusing to lower their wages. The thing that mainstream economists said was causing unemployment is actually preventing it!)

But this cycle can be run in reverse. Imagine Donald Trump hires unemployed people to build him a new skyscraper. They're suddenly getting paid again, which means they can start spending again. And each dollar they spend goes to a different business, which can start hiring people itself. And then *those* newly-hired people start spending the new money *they* make, and so on. This is the *multiplier*: each dollar that gets spent provides even more than one dollar's worth of boost to the economy.

Now let's look at things from the employer's side — say you run an truck factory. How do you decide how many trucks to make? Obviously, you make as many as you think you can profitably sell. But there's no way to calculate something like that — it's a question about what customers will do in the future. There's literally no way to know. And yet, obviously, trucks get made.

It used to be, Keynes says, that wealthy men just thought investing was the manly thing to do. They weren't going to sit around and calculate what kind of bonds yielded the greatest expected return. Bonds are for wusses. They were real men. They were going to take their money and build a railroad.

But they don't make rich people like that anymore. Nowadays, they put their money in the stock market. Instead of boldly picking one great enterprise to invest in, they shift their money around from week to week (or hire someone else to do it for them). So these days, it's the stock market that stimulates most new investment.

But how does the stock market figure out what profits are supposed to be? In truth, it has no more clue than you do. It's really just based around a convention. We all pretend that whatever the stock price is now is a pretty decent guess and then we only have to worry about the various factors that

will cause the stock price to change. We forget about the most basic fact: that nobody has any clue what the stock price should be to begin with.

So instead of people trying their best to figure out which businesses will make money in the future, and investing in those, we have people who try to figure out which stock prices will change in the future, and trying to get there first. It's like a giant game of musical chairs — everybody's rushing not to be the one left standing when the music stops.

Or, you could say, it's like those newspaper competitions where you have to pick the six prettiest faces from a hundred photographs. The prize goes to the person who picks the faces that are most picked, so you don't pick the faces *you* find prettiest, but instead the faces you think *everyone else* will find prettiest. But it's not even that, since everyone else is doing the same thing — you're actually picking the faces you think everyone else will think everyone else will find prettiest! And no doubt there are some people who take this even further.

You might think this means that someone who actually did the work and tried to calculate expected profits would clean up, taking money from all the people playing musical chairs. But it's not so simple. Calculating expected profits is really quite hard. To make money, you'd have to be unusually good at it, and it seems much easier to just guess what everyone else will do.

And even if you were somehow good at guessing long-term profits, where would you get the money to invest? It's in the fundamental nature of your strategy that your investments seem crazy to everyone else. If you're successful, they'll write it off as a lucky fluke. And when your stocks aren't doing well (which is most of the time — they're long-term picks, remember), people will take this as evidence of your failures and pull their money out.

The scary thing is that the more open our markets get, the faster people can move their money around and the more trading is based on this kind of speculation instead of serious analysis. And that's scary because — recall — the whole point of the stock market is to decide the crucial question of what we, as a society, should build for the future. As Keynes says, "When the capital development of a country becomes a by-product of the activities of a casino, the job is likely to be ill-done."

The best solution is probably a small tax on each trade. Not only would this raise a ton of money (modern estimates suggest even a tiny tax could raise \$100 billion a year), it would help redirect all the brains on Wall Street from these wasteful games of musical chairs to something actually useful.

But even if we solve the problem of the stock market, there's still some irreducible uncertainty. Because whether new investment makes sense always depends on whether the economy will be doing well in the future. And whether the economy is doing well depends on whether there's new investment. So, at the end of the day, investment doesn't depend simply on a careful calculation of future expected yield, but on our "animal spirits," our optimism about the

future. It's this factor that exaggerates booms and deepens slumps and makes it hard to get out of a bad situation.

Even more perversely, it means economic performance depends in no small part on keeping businessmen happy. If electing Obama gets businessmen depressed, they might pull back their investments and send the economy into a slump. It doesn't even have to be intentional — they may very well believe that a President Obama is bad for the economy. But when you have a system that only works when businesspeople feel good, their fears become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The result, Keynes suggests, is that the government will have to step in to prevent the economy from crashing every time rich people get a bit of indigestion.

So that's how we calculate the income side of things, now what about costs? Most costs are pretty clear — you need to buy equipment and hire people. But since you need to make stuff now that you can only sell in the future, one of your big costs is going to be money to use in the meantime. And the cost of money is just the interest rate. (If you get a loan for a million dollars at 5% interest, you're essentially paying \$50,000 for the right to use the money now.)

Thus lowering interest rates increases investment — it reduces the cost of getting money, which reduces the cost of making stuff, which means more things can make a profit. And if more things can make a profit, more things get made, which means more people get hired. So what determines the interest rate?

Well, if the interest rate is the cost of money, the obvious answer is the amount of money in circulation. If there's a lot of money lying around, you can get some pretty cheap. Which means that, fundamentally, unemployment is caused by a lack of money: more money (assuming people don't hoard it all) means lower interest rates, lower interest rates (assuming expected profits don't crash) means higher investment, higher investment (assuming people don't stop buying) means more employment, and more employment means higher prices, which means we're going to need more money.

Money is created by the central bank (the Federal Reserve in the US), which decides what they want the interest rate to be and then prints new money (which they use to buy up government debt) until the interest rate is where they want. To get the economy back on track, all they have to do is keep lowering interest rates until investment picks up again and everyone has a job.

But there's one catch: the interest rate can't go below zero. (Keynes didn't think this problem was very likely, but in the US we're facing it right now.) What do you do if the interest rate is zero and people are still out of work?

Well, you can pray that billionaires will start hiring us all to build them giant mansions, but that's no way to run a country. The government has to step

in. Instead of waiting for billionaires to build pleasure-domes, the government can hire people to build things we all need — roads, schools, houses, high-speed Internet connections. Although, honestly, it doesn't have to be things we all need. They could hire people to do anything. This is why inspecting the stimulus money for waste is so ridiculous — waste is perfectly fine, the important thing is to get the money into circulation so that the economy can get back on track.

Another good solution is redistributing income. Poor people are a lot more likely to spend money than billionaires. If we take some money from the billionaires and give it to the poor, the poor will use it to buy things they need and people will get jobs making those things.

Remember that money is just a kind of illusion. In reality, there are just people who want things and people who make things. But we're stuck in a completely ridiculous situation: there are lots of people who desperately want jobs making things — they're literally not doing anything else — while at the same time there are lots of people who desperately want things made. It seems ridiculous not to do something about this just because some people have all the little green sheets of paper!

Capitalism seems to go through frustrating cycles of booms and busts. Some people say the solution is just to prevent the booms — raise interest rates so the party doesn't get out of hand and we won't all be sorry the next morning. Keynes disagrees: the remedy “is not to be found in abolishing booms and thus keeping us permanently in a semi-slump; but in abolishing slumps and thus keeping us permanently in a quasi-boom.”

Think back to the dot-com era, when venture capitalists were spending all their money laying fiber-optic cable under the street. The right solution wasn't for the Fed to raise interest rates until even punch-drunk venture capitalists could realize all this investment in fiber wouldn't be profitable. The right solution was to *take their money away*. Give it to the poor, who will spend it on something useful, like food and clothing.

So those are Keynes' prescriptions for a successful economy: low interest rates, government investment, and redistribution to the poor. And, for a time — from around the 1940s to the 1970s — that's kind of what we did. The results were magical: the economy grew strongly, inequality fell away, everyone had jobs.

But, starting in the 1970s, the rich staged a counterattack. They didn't like watching inequality — and their wealth — melt away. There was a resurgence in classical economics, Keynes was declared to have been debunked, and interest rates were raised drastically, throwing millions out of work. The economy tanked, inequality soared, and things have never been the same since. For a while people talked about levels of inequality that hadn't been seen since the 1920s. Then they talked about a recession the size of which hadn't been seen since the 1930s.

Once again, Keynes provides us with the instructions on how to get out of this mess. The question is whether we'll follow them.

Wanted by the FBI

October 5, 2009

[Original link](#)

I got my FBI file today. ([Request yours!](#)) As I hoped, it's truly delightful. It has only minor redactions for reasons of personal privacy (basically, they deleted agents' names and so on). It all started when the—actually, I'll let the file tell the story:

February 6, from Washington Field to Chicago:

UNCLASSIFIED

FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

Precedence: ROUTINE

Case ID #: 288A-WF-238343 (Pending)

Title: UNSUB(s); US COURTS - VICTIM; COMPUTER INTRUSION - OTHER

Synopsis: To set lead to locate Aaron Swartz.

Enclosure(s): Attached is an Accurant Report for Swartz.

Details: The U.S. Courts implemented a pilot project offering free access to federal court records through the PACER system at seventeen federal depository libraries. Library personnel maintain login and password security and provide access to users from computers within the library. PACER normally carries an eight cents per page fee, however, by accessing from one of the seventeen libraries, users may search and download data for free.

Between September 4, 2008 and September 22, 2008, PACER was accessed by computers from outside the library utilizing login information from two libraries participating in the pilot project. The Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts reported that the PACER system was being inundated with requests. One request was being made every three seconds.

[...] The two accounts were responsible for downloading more than eighteen million pages with an approximate value of \$1.5 million.

[...] Data that was exfiltrated went to one of two Amazon IP addresses.

Investigation has determined that the Amazon IP address used to access the PACER system belongs to Aaron Swartz.

The following information was provided for the IP address:

Name: Aaron Swartz
Address: 349 Marshman Avenue, Highland Park, IL 60035
Telephone: 847-432-8857

A search in Accurant and Swartz's personal webpage confirmed this information. Swartz's social security account number is [...]. The telephone subscriber for telephone number [REDACTED] is [REDACTED].

NCIS report for Aaron Swartz was negative. A search for wages for Swartz at the Department of Labor was negative.

[...]

Washington Field Office requests that the North RA attempt to locate AARON SWARTZ, his vehicles, drivers license information and picture, and others, at 349 Marshman Avenue, Highland Park, IL 60035. Since SWARTZ is the potential subject of an ongoing investigation, it is requested that SWARTZ not be approached by agents.

February 15, Manassas, VA:

Set Lead 1: (Info)

[...]

AARON SWARTZ has a profile on the website LINKEDIN, at www.linkedin.com/in/aaronsw. SWARTZ is listed as a writer, hacker and activist based in the San Francisco Bay Area. SWARTZ's education includes Stanford University, Sociology, 2004. SWARTZ's experience includes the following:

[...]

SWARTZ has a profile on the website FACEBOOK. His networks include Stanford '08 and Boston, MA. The picture used in his profile was also used in an article about SWARTZ in THE NEW YORK TIMES.

SWARTZ's personal webpage, www.aaronsw.com, includes a section titled "Aaron Swartz: a life time of dubious accomplishments". In 2007, SWARTZ began working full-time as a member of the Long-Term Planning Committee for the Human Race (LTPCHR).

February 19, Manassas, VA:

On February 17, 2008 [*sic*], SA [REDACTED] received an email from [REDACTED] Administrative Office of the US Courts, with links to two published articles regarding the compromise of the PACER system.

On February 12, 2009, [REACTED] published an article in THE NEW YORK TIMES titled “An Effort to Upgrade a Court Archive to Free and Easy”. For the article, [REDACTED] interviewed [REDACTED] and AARON SWARTZ regarding the compromise of the PACER system.

The following information is found in the article: [...]

February 24, Chicago:

Synopsis: Lead covered by Chicago North RA

Enclosure(s): Illinois DL/ID Image of Swartz and Accurint Vehicle/Residence Reports for Swartz address.

Details: Attempted to locate AARON SWARTZ, his vehicles, drivers license information and picture, and others at 349 Marshman Avenue, Highland Park, IL 60035.

Successfully located drivers license photo for SWARTZ. Drove by address in an attempt to locate SWARTZ or vehicles related to the residence, but was unsuccessful. House is set on a deep lot, behind other houses on Marshman Avenue. This is a heavily wooded, dead-end street, with no other cars parked on the road making continued surveillance difficult to conduct without severely increasing the risk of discovery. However, divers license and Accurint information lists address above. Other family members are listed as current residents and four vehicles are currently registered to Susan Swartz who resides at above address. Illinois database checks for SWARTZ yielded negative results. SWARTZ has no arrests, no registered vehicles or property.

Chicago considers this lead covered.

March 9, Manassas, VA:

AARON SWARTZ posted a weblog titled “NYT Personals” [on February 13 —AS] at <http://www.aaronsw.com/weblog>. In the weblog, SWARTZ quotes the NEW YORK TIMES article in which he was interviewed. SWARTZ also posts “Want to meet the man behind the headlines? Want to have the F.B.I. open up a file on you as well? Interested in some kind of bizarre celebrity product endorsement? I’m available in Boston and New York all this month”.

March 23, Manassas, VA:

On March 10, 2009, [REDACTED] of THE ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE OF THE US COURTS (US COURTS) provided the following information:

[...] When asked to clarify how a user knows what constitutes unauthorized access and how a user would have known that they had to be in one of the seventeen libraries to access PACER, [REDACTED] had [REDACTED] prepare a response.

[REDACTED] provided the following information:

AARON SWARTZ would have known his access was unauthorized because it was with a password that did not belong to him.

April 14, Manassas, VA

On 04/14/2009, SA [REDACTED] called (847) 432-8857 in an attempt to speak to AARON SWARTZ. A female answered the telephone and stated that SWARTZ was not available [...] SA [REDACTED] left a message for SWARTZ to return her call and the female stated that she would email that message to SWARTZ.

SWARTZ called SA [REDACTED] and left a message on her voicemail stating he could be reached at [...]. This number is a T-Mobile cellular number and returned negative results in Telephone Applications.

SA [REDACTED] spoke to SWARTZ, at telephone number [...], and explained that the FBI is looking for information on how SWARTZ was able to compromise the PACER system so that the US COURTS could implement repairs to the system and get PACER running again. SWARTZ stated that he would have to talk to his attorney first and would call SA [REDACTED] back at a later time.

April 16, Manassas, VA:

On 04/16/2009, SA [REDACTED] returned a telephone call to ANDREW GOOD, (617) [...]. GOOD is AARON SWARTZ's attorney in Boston, MA. GOOD wanted assurance that if SWARTZ was interviewed, what he said would not be used to jeopardize him. SA [REDACTED] explained that assurance could not be given but that we were in an information gathering phase. GOOD refused the interview without the assurance.

April 20, Washington Field Office:

CASE ID #: 288A-WF-238943 (Closed)

[...]

CCIPS Attorney [REDACTED] closed the office's case. Based on the CCIPS closing, Washington Field is closing this case as of this communication.

I've just sent away for the CCIPS file.

djb

October 19, 2009

[Original link](#)

I think it's time to remind people that D. J. Bernstein is the greatest programmer in the history of the world.

First, look only at the objective facts. djb has written two major pieces of system software: a mail server and a DNS server. Both are run by millions of Internet domains. They accomplish all sorts of complicated functions, work under incredibly high loads, and confront no end of unusual situations. And they both run pretty much exactly as Bernstein first wrote them. One bug — one bug! — was found in qmail. A second bug was recently found in djbdns, but you can get a sense of how important it is by the fact that it took people nearly a decade to find it.

No other programmer has this kind of track record. Donald Knuth probably comes closest, but his diary about writing TeX (printed in *Literate Programming*) shows how he kept finding bugs for years and never expected to be finished, only to get closer and closer (thus the odd version numbering scheme). Not only does no one else have djb's track record, no one else even comes close.

But far more important are the subjective factors. djb's programs are some of the greatest works of beauty to be comprehended by the human mind. As with great art, the outline of the code is somehow visually pleasing — there is balance and rhythm and meter that rivals even the best typography. As with great poetry, every character counts — every single one is there because it needs to be. But these programs are not just for being seen or read — like a graceful dancer, they move! And not just as a single dancer either, but a whole choreographed number — processes splitting and moving and recombining at great speeds, around and around again.

But, unlike a dance, this movement has a purpose. They accomplish things that need accomplishing — they find your websites, they ferry your email from place to place. In the most fantastic movies, the routing and sorting of the post office is imagined as a giant endless choreographed dance number. (Imagine, perhaps, “The Office” from *Brazil*.) But this is no one-time fantasy, this is how your email gets sorted *every day*.

And the dance is not just there to please human eyes — it is a dance with a purpose. Each of its inner mechanisms is perfectly crafted, using the fewest number of moving parts, accomplishing its task with the most minimal energy. The way jobs are divided and assigned is nothing short of brilliant. The brilliance is not merely linguistic, although it is that too, but contains a kind of

elegant mathematical effectiveness, backed by a stream of numbers and equations that show, through pure reason alone, that the movements are provably perfect, a better solution is guaranteed not to exist.

But even all this does not capture his software's incredible beauty. For djb's programs are not great machines to be admired from a distance, vast powerhouses of elegant accomplishment. They are also tools meant to be used by man, perfectly fitted to one's hand. Like a great piece of industrial design, they bring joy to the user every time they are used.

What other field combines all these arts? Language, math, art, design, function. Programming is clearly in a class of its own. And, when it comes to programmers, who even competes with djb? Who else has worked to realize these amazing possibilities? Who else even knows they are there?

Oddly, there are many people who profess to hate djb. Some of this is just the general distaste of genius: djb clearly has a forceful, uncompromising vision, which many misinterpret as arrogance and rudeness. And some of it is the practical man's disregard for great design: djb's programs do not work like most programs, for the simple reason that the way most programs work is wrong. But the animosity goes much deeper than that. I do not profess to understand it, but I do honestly suspect at some level it's people without taste angry and frustrated at the plaudits showered on what they cannot see. Great art always generates its share of mocking detractors.

This is not to say that djb's work is perfect. There are the bugs, as mentioned before, and the log files, which are nothing if not inelegant, and no doubt djb would make numerous changes were he to write the software again today. But who else is even trying? Who else even knows this is possible? I did not realize what great art in software could be until I read djb. And now I feel dirty reading anything else.

More: You may also be interested in [what djb is doing now](#).

Subjectivism

October 19, 2009

[Original link](#)

I have two friends — let's call them Q and R — whose political philosophy I find alien and fascinating. Like me, they genuinely want to help the poor but, like conservatives, they object to most typical solutions for doing so. (And yes, I know conservatives claim they want to help the poor, but it usually turns out that there are other things they think are more important. Not so with Q and R.)

Q thinks the most important thing is how it *feels* to be poor. The problem isn't so much that they don't have money, but that they're made to feel bad because of it. Welfare is thus a bad idea because it just makes the poor feel worse — not only can they not make money, but they have to come hat-in-hand to the government for help. My first reaction to this was that the poor were wrong: it wasn't their fault they were poor, they were just the losers in a rigged game. But, of course, they don't know the game is rigged and things they don't know can't make them feel better. By focusing on the objective facts, Q argues, we're ignoring the actual lived experiences of the poor.

Q is thus upset by socialist writers, like Orwell (*Down and Out in Paris and London*, *The Road to Wigan Pier*) and Ehrenreich (*Nickel and Dimes*, *Bait and Switch*), who attempt to get the reader to imagine what it would be like if they were poor. Because this is just another way of getting the reader to focus on the objective situation. In all probability, the reader will *not* be poor and thus the question of what it would be like is irrelevant; what's important is what it would be like for the actual poor and that requires talking to them.

R also objects to welfare policies, but on rather different grounds. R starts from the premise that people are bad at making themselves happy. Well-to-do professionals, who seem so much better off than the poor, may not actually be doing that much better. To continue to live in the style to which they've become accustomed, they must work long hours at a job they dislike. Because of the endowment effect, getting off this treadmill would cause them even more pain. A few lucky people earn money at tasks they find fulfilling, but perhaps not many more than are happy being poor.

Welfare — or, indeed, any proposal to improve the objective situation of the poor — is a bad idea in R's view because it simply makes it harder for them to get off the treadmill. One might think the right response to this is what we might call (with apologies to Thaler) a kind of utilitarian paternalism, where the government steps in and shows people how to be happy. But why would the government know how to be happy? Having a satisfied life is a cultural problem, R argues, and the solution lies in non-governmental steps to reform culture.

I find these arguments interesting because they start from rather inarguable premises (what matters is how it feels to be poor, people don't know the best way to make themselves happy) to draw very frustrating conclusions.

Take Q. Corporate profits (and thus employee pay) depend on how much of a monopoly the company has. Even the secretary at Google is a millionaire, while even the owner of a farm is desperately poor. There's no way to make a company in a competitive market pay more because there just isn't more money to pay. But getting rid of competitive markets seems like a bad idea; competition has clearly made our lives better. But if we want to make things better for those who aren't paid well (and let's just say we do, since that's kind of the basic premise of this whole article), that just leaves transferring money from those who have it to those who don't. Which, according to Q, doesn't make anyone feel better.

Other countries seem to deal with this by designing the money so that money isn't transferred directly, but is spent on universally available public services. It's not that the French poor get given money they can spend on health care, it's that in France health care is free to everyone. Poor people don't feel singled out and aided—everyone uses government health care. (And the wealthy are much less likely to vote against programs they themselves use.)

This also goes some way to addressing R's objection: people aren't being given more money to spend how they see fit, they're being given access to services we expect to make them happy. And the access doesn't ever go away, so it doesn't contribute to the endowment effect.

Even so, R would argue, much of these universal services are things like education which make it so that a broader group of people can sign up to work at rat race jobs and thus get on the unhappy treadmill. Why support policies that bring more people into this unhappy system? (R also happens to think schooling is bad on its own terms, as is health care, but I don't think that's necessary for the argument.)

But a tax for service system compresses the whole wage structure. The wealthy earn less money, because they pay some of it in taxes, and thus don't have as far to fall. And the poor get more services, which means that even if the wealthy do lose their job and fall, they don't fall as far, since the floor has been raised. All of this would seem to make it easier to quit a job you don't like. (Egads, I'm mixing metaphors like Thomas Friedman. Falling off a treadmill to services on a higher floor?) Indeed, in the extreme case, services would be so high you wouldn't have to work at all unless you wanted to. (Whether this extreme is economically feasible is a separate discussion.)

So that's what I'm for: democracy within organizations, transfers between organizations, and structuring the rules of the market to maximize social benefit. Oh, and [euthanasia of the rentier](#).

Because We Can

October 20, 2009

[Original link](#)

When I first started studying the First Amendment — nearly a decade ago; yikes, this is a very overdue blog post — I read about the different theories trying to make sense of it. Some scholars argued the First Amendment’s goal was to create a robust marketplace of ideas: if everyone could share their opinion, the truth could come out through robust debate. Others concluded the First Amendment was a sort of logical safeguard: by protecting speech and assembly and petitions for redress of grievances, it guaranteed people the right to work against laws they disapprove of, kind of the way the Second Amendment is said to be a bulwark against totalitarianism.

These aren’t just theoretical debates; the theories have practical consequences for how one interprets that key amendment. If you believe it’s for a marketplace of ideas, then you will support regulation aimed at correcting market failures by suppressing certain kinds of problematic speech. If you believe it’s a political safeguard, then you will not be too worried about speech regulation aimed at clearly nonpolitical speech.

Now, I’m not quite sure why such a theory is needed. The First Amendment always struck me as perfectly clear: “Congress shall make no law.” No law meant no law (at least with regard to content; I’m more lenient when it comes to regulating other aspects). But if one has to have a theory, it struck me the right one was something completely different: Because We Can.

The Framers were very skeptical of government. The system they designed was full of checks and fetters, of which the First Amendment is probably the most extreme (unless you believe in a libertarian conception of the Tenth). They saw government as a necessary evil; they were willing to accept it, but they wanted to constrain it where they could.

And speech is a very obvious way to constrain it. A government needs to be able to stop violence and make war and so on or its people will get very badly hurt. But there’s no reason it has to stop speech. As the old saying goes, sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me. Words do hurt, of course, but theirs is a tolerable pain. People, and society, march on even in the face of grievous insults. And so the Framers decided to exclude this class of regulation from the government’s ambit. Not because speech is particularly good, but because it’s not particularly bad. Because it’s one thing they could safely exclude. Because we can.

The implications of this theory for interpretation are obvious: they lead to the most expansive conception of the First Amendment compatible with the other

goals of government: a stable democratic body to promote the general welfare, and so on. That's certainly further than any court heretofore has gone and probably a bit further than I'd personally prefer, but isn't that what fetters are for?

Disciplinary Bubbles

October 20, 2009

[Original link](#)

Here's another blog post that's long overdue. There seems to be a surge of interest in the topic lately, so I thought I'd write up my longstanding thoughts.

The academy is often thought of as the ideal for developing knowledge: select the brightest minds in the country, guarantee them jobs, allow them all the resources they need to research anything, don't interfere with any of their conclusions. On some issues, these independent-minded academics form a consensus and we tend to give their consensus very heavy weight. They can't all be wrong, can they?

And yet, in my empirical research, I find they very often are. A short blog post is no place to do a careful study, but I can mention some examples. The classic works in industrial relations turn out to be complete hoaxes, yet they've dominated the teach of the field for over half a century. (See [Alex Carey's book](#) for details.) In political science, the most respected practioner's most famous work shades and distorts his own findings to support a theory wildly at odds with the facts. (See [Who Really Rules?](#)) The whole field of fMRI studies are so flat-out ridiculous that journal articles are even [making jokes about them](#). And, maybe most blatantly today, economics was dominated by a paradigm that believed substantive unemployment was impossible, despite that notion having been famously and thoroughly debunked by Keynes and, of course, reality.

How is this possible? I think the key, as in most institutional studies, is that of the filter. To become a professor of X, one must first spend several years receiving an undergraduate major in X, then several more years going to graduate school in X, then perhaps work as a postdoc or adjunct for a bit, before getting a tenure-track position and working like mad to make enough of a dent in the field of X to be seen as deserving of a prominent permanent position. When your time is called, a panel of existing professors of X passes judgment on your work to decide if it passes muster. Can you imagine a better procedure for forcing impressionable young minds to believe crazy things?

And so this process forms what I call disciplinary bubbles. Take the case of industrial relations for a moment. The field was largely created by the Rockefellers, who wanted research into how they could get rid of their unions. They paid lavishly and, not surprisingly, found people who told them what they wanted to hear: that treating workers nicely made unions unnecessary and companies more efficient. The studies were completely bogus but the people who conducted them were hailed as heroes, and provided with lavish funding to continue their research. The funding started new departments which trained new proteges, each of whom was taught that the founding studies as gospel.

They were told to work on expanding and refining the results, not results, not questioning then, and so they did, becoming industrial relations professors in their own right and continuing the cycle.

Like other bubbles, disciplinary bubbles are difficult to pop. Imagine you do research outside their incorrect assumptions. Your research will simply be marginalized and ignored — you don't get into the conferences or the journals, it's just not seen as valid work. And even if you try to disprove the bogus assumptions, you get ignored. Everyone already in the field has built their careers on those assumptions. They've long rationalized them to themselves; nobody is going to support someone who argues their life's work is built on sand.

Thus ignorance marches on.

djb

October 26, 2009

[Original link](#)

English

translated by *Motohiro Takayama (mootoh)*

D.J. Bernstein

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: [djb](#)

: [djb](#) by Aaron Swartz’s Raw Thought

The Logic of Google Ads

November 3, 2009

[Original link](#)

When should you buy ads? Let's assume your goal is for people to click on the ads and give you money. (Reasons this may not be true: persuasion, brand-building, budget-maximizing.) The return from a block of ads is thus $\text{revenue} - \text{marginal_costs} - \text{ad_costs}$. Ads are an investment like any other; you keep buying them until your return on investment ($\text{revenue} - \text{marginal_costs} / \text{ad_costs}$) equals your cost of capital (usually the interest rate).

For simplicity, we'll assume your marginal cost is zero. (My marginal cost is almost always zero, so this doesn't strike me as too unrealistic.) So how do you estimate revenue? You can track how much money people who click on your ad give you, but this has two flaws. First, customers often give you more money over time. Maybe they buy level one of your video game when they click on the ad, but then they may buy levels two and three the next day after they beat level one. The future is always in the future, so revenue-per-user numbers may be too small.

Second, they might have given you money anyway. Your video game ads probably run on video game review sites, where readers might buy your game just from the review, even if you hadn't bought an ad. So your revenue numbers may be too big.

But these problems aren't so serious. In the first case, the worst that happens is you don't buy as many ads as you should. In the second, you don't actually lose money, it's just that some extra profit you could have kept has gone into ads.

Let's turn to the ad seller. They probably want to maximize how much they charge per ad impression (CPM). (Reasons this may not be true: unseemly ads.) A good way to do this is to hold an auction. It's impractical to have everyone bid live, so Google auctions work like eBay auctions: you enter the maximum you're willing to pay and get charged just enough to beat the other bidders. (One can think of this as a computer-simulated auction where everyone keeps bidding up the price by pennies until they hit the maximum they're willing to spend.)

But what are you bidding on? Ad sellers want to maximize revenue per impression, but ad buyers want to maximize profit per expense. In an ideal world, ad

sellers auction off impressions (this is [what Google Ad Manager does](#)) while ad buyers bid per dollar of profit (entering their cost of capital).

Determining how much profit you make from an ad is hard. Can we just trust you? Let's say you make \$2 in profit per 1000 impressions and everyone else makes \$1. Now you can lie and say you make \$1 in profit and then pay twice as much per profit-dollar. Now you pay the same amount as before, but you win all the profit-dollar auctions. Now that's not wrong — you're clearly making more money than the other bidders, so you should win — but your bid isn't cost-per-profit anymore, it's cost-per-impression.

What if you paid based on revenue? Verifying revenue is difficult, but Google could do it if everyone was using Google Checkout. (If you sent some of your users to a non-Google Checkout system, Google could catch you and fine you.) Google offers [nicer ads](#) to Checkout users, but they still don't have much market share, making this system impractical at present.

Some search engines apparently had cost-per-action (CPA) auctions, where you paid based on how many people actually bought things. I have no idea how they made that work, since lying about how many people took an action seems really profitable and easy. Maybe that's why no one does this anymore.

That just leaves cost-per-click (CPC). Cost-per-click seems ideal, since it's verifiable by both the ad seller (who uses a redirect link to track clicks) and the ad buyer (who sees the users show up on their page). It's a nice half-way point between buyer and seller.

So the ad seller holds an auction for CPC and multiplies CPC by click-thru-rate (CTR) to calculate CPM. They show the highest CPM ads, charging each the bidder below their CPC, times their relative CTRs. (In reality, Google doesn't just use CTR; they also factor in the relevance of the ad and the quality of the page it goes to.) And, voila: we've derived the basics of an online ad system.

This works out great for the ad seller — they maximize CPM, just like they wanted — but the ad buyer is still stuck converting their ROI into CPC. The ad buyer, recall, wants to increase their spending on ads (now determined to be CPC) until their return on investment equals their cost of capital.

It seems like this should be pretty easy, and indeed Google does provide [tools to calculate ROI](#), but apparently not to optimize it. What they do provide is [a tool](#) to optimize your cost-per-action. **Does anyone know why this is?**

It seems like an automatic ROI optimizer would lead many people to spend more money on ads. It's hard to believe Google is leaving all that money on the table.

But Google does intelligently optimize the ads themselves. The variance in click-thru rates between different ads is huge — it's not uncommon to see two

very similar ads, but one gets ten times as many clicks as the others. Google lets you put in as many ads as you like and [automatically rotates them](#), showing ads with better CTRs more often.

So far we've just had a single ad seller. In the real world, lots of people want to sell ads and lots of people want to buy them. How do you match them up?

One option is make the buyer choose. This is how Google Search works: Google holds an auction for each search query and buyers pick which ones they want to compete in. Another is to group related websites together and run ads evenly across all of them. This is how most smaller ad networks work. And then there's AdSense. AdSense scans a page for relevant keywords, then runs the Google Search ads that won auctions for those keywords.

Google also knows a lot about ad *viewers*. By tracking what web pages you visit, they know [what topics you're interested in](#). I'm apparently interested in Unix, the environment, elections, government, and social science, so Google prefers to show ads on those subjects to me.

But there's another way to think about ad matching: as a giant optimization problem. Which combinations of user, ad placement, and advertisement optimize click-thru rates (or, ultimately, ROI)?

For each of these, there are lots of variables. For each user, you know their history, geographical location, computer (browser, operating system, screen size), ISP, etc. For each ad placement, you know time of day, hosting website, page content, etc. And for each ad, there are numerous possible variations in phrasing and design that can be tested, as mentioned before.

The possible combinations are infinite. You can't test all of them, so you need to come up with ones that are plausible. You can look at which combinations worked in the past: has this ad done significantly better in some cities than others, or at some times than others? And you can look for patterns across ads: do ads that do well on CNN also do well on MSNBC? These hypotheses can then be tested and, if they work, you start running ads more there.

Netflix claims they've made millions from slight improvements in their movie recommendations.¹ When they offered a prize for more, researchers found thousands of tiny patterns and came up with all sorts of innovative algorithms to try to get an edge. After 32 months, researchers doubled the algorithm's effectiveness.

Imagine how much more is at stake for Google. Last year, they received \$21 *billion* in ad revenue, of which 60% was apparently profit. Even tiny improvements would be worth the highest salaries — a 0.004% improvement would make \$500,000. Doubling it would create unspeakable wealth.

Yet Google has no contest for improving ad click-thru rates. Indeed, press reports suggest they don't even have an internal team working on it. The AdWords user-interface (recently redesigned from jaw-droppingly wretched to just wretched) would seem to suggest they don't do this kind of optimization at all. Their blog asks people to [optimize things manually](#). No doubt there are some things humans (even ad purchase reps) can do better than computers, but surely there's a lot more they can do together — with humans giving the machine additional hints and hypotheses to test. But there doesn't seem to be anything like that.

It's hard to believe this is true. It's hard to believe this can last.

Google's chief economist [claims](#) that Google's sewn up the ad market by being better than everyone else. What if you made an ad network that was better than Google?

Right now Google takes a 20% cut of every auction price. What if you were willing to take just 10%? You could give ad sellers a slightly higher CPM — they'd gladly run your ads when they paid more and Google's the rest of the time. Then you can offer ad buyers a slightly lower CPC. As long as the money people made was more than the cost of setting things up, they'd switch. I'm actually not sure why this hasn't happened.

Now imagine that you were a genius CS student who could come up with a better ad optimization algorithm. Your system would have a higher overall CTR, since it presented users with better ads. This means that, again, you can pay higher CPMs (since more people click per impression). And you can redirect some of the money you would spend on higher CPMs into lower CPCs, to attract advertisers.

But to develop the algorithms and do the optimization you need the data. Lots of it — lots of users, lots of advertisers, lots of ad spots. No startup will ever have that; it's only left to Google (or whichever giant eventually replaces them).

I'm not normally one to be too concerned about improving Google's bottom line (they seem to be doing alright), but as an ad buyer I'm frustrated I have to do this work myself. I'd rather solve the problem for everyone. And if Google wants to pay me for that, I certainly wouldn't mind.

1. It's weird that Netflix is so much more interested in this than, say, Amazon. Amazon makes money on every sale, whereas Netflix loses money every time they send a DVD out. Netflix claims they make up for this in higher customer retention rates, but why didn't Amazon think of this first?

Election Ballot 2009

November 3, 2009

[Original link](#)

I hope that you all vote today if you can.

As the left gained power, many cities switched to off-year elections and non-partisan candidacy. Removing party affiliations from the ballot servers as a kind of poll tax, it forces people to spend time researching each candidate individually instead of just knowing they support a particular party. For those in Cambridge, MA, I have tried to help out by doing the research for you.

Cambridge has the additional complication of having a decent voting system, so you can list your candidates in order of preference. There are two questions on the ballot. For city council, there seem to be three basic categories: People with good ideas, people with no ideas, and people with bad ideas. I have listed them in that order:

1. Lawrence J. Adkins (more public services, affordable housing and health)
2. Mark Flanagan (homeless shelter)
3. Larry Ward (inclusionary zoning)
4. James M. Williamson (elected mayor, street nuisances)
5. Kenneth E. Reeves (Harlem Children's Zone)
6. Charles Marquardt (fire the city manager)
7. Gregg Moree (energy efficiency, living wage)
8. Kathy Podgers (housing vouchers, parks)
9. Tim Toomey (fuel efficient vehicles)
10. Marjorie Decker (community engagement)
11. Neal Leavitt (achievement gap)
12. Silvia Glick (neighborhood protection)
13. Sam Seidel (afterschool)
14. Henrietta Davis (goo-goo)
15. E. Denise Simmons (311)

16. Minka vanBeuzekom (transparency)
17. Tom Stohlman (do nothing)
18. Craig Kelley (traffic enforcement, no TV for kids)
19. Leland Cheung (promote entrepreneurship, school reform)
20. David Maher (segregated schools, service cuts)
21. Edward Sullivan (tough on crime, homeland security)

School issues are inevitably depressing. Everyone says they oppose the achievement gap and so on, so my first test was to see how people felt about standardized tests (ordered from opposition to support):

1. Marc McGovern (community education centers)
2. Alice Turkel (portfolios, high quality preschool)
3. Richard Harding (no high-stakes)
4. Nancy Tauber (no teaching to the test)
5. Patty Nolan (no drill and kill)
6. Alan Steinert, Jr. (tests are “something to be endured”)
7. Joseph Grassi (desegregation)
8. Fred Fantini (more assessment)
9. Charles Stead, Sr. (tight ship principal)

Happy Election Day!

UPDATE: The winners were (in order): 9, 14, 15, 20, 5, 18, 19, 13, 21. And: 4, 3, 1, 8, 5, 2.

Is the DMCA a scam?

November 14, 2009

[Original link](#)

I received my first DMCA takedown notice today. I published publicly-available IRS information about the nonprofit Kwaze-Kwasa [USA] Inc. Kwaze-Kwasa sent a letter to my ISP asking that it be taken down. I do not know why they want to keep this public information off the Internet, but I do know that the law lets them.

For those who aren't familiar, the Digital Millennium Copyright Act contained a section known as OCILLA (distinct from its also-famous anticircumvention provisions) that regulates publishing copyrighted material online.

There are three big parties with interests in this subject: copyright holders, who want strong tools to keep copyrighted material offline; ISPs, who don't want copyright law to apply to them' and Internet users, who want to be able to publish and read interesting content. OCILLA was largely written by ISPs and pretty much maximizes their interests at the expense of copyright holders and users.

I'm very glad that copyright holders get the short end of the stick — they want to modify the law to make sites like YouTube illegal, just because some people upload copyrighted material to it. If they had their way, websites based around user-generated content would pretty much be impossible.

But I am frustrated the law doesn't do enough for users. The takedown notice I was sent was obviously bogus — it didn't even allege a copyright violation, since the information I published wasn't even copyrightable (it was all basic facts and statistics published by the US government). Yet my ISP informed me that if I didn't take the page down, they'd take my entire website offline. And they have to do that because if they don't, they can be sued under the copyright law and could face very heavy penalties.

To get the page backup, I have to swear under penalty of perjury that I think the takedown was a mistake (yet the sender of a takedown does not have to swear that they think the takedown is valid!), consent to a lawsuit if the sender disagrees, and wait two weeks. Two weeks!

In short, the DMCA lets you get any page taken off the Internet for two weeks. This isn't just a law itching for abuse; it's a law being abused.

How I Hire Programmers

November 29, 2009

[Original link](#)

[Español](#)

There are three questions you have when you're hiring a programmer (or anyone, for that matter): Are they smart? Can they get stuff done? Can you work with them? Someone who's smart but doesn't get stuff done should be your friend, not your employee. You can talk your problems over with them while they procrastinate on their actual job. Someone who gets stuff done but isn't smart is inefficient: non-smart people get stuff done by doing it the hard way and working with them is slow and frustrating. Someone you can't work with, you can't work with.

The traditional programmer hiring process consists of: a) reading a resume, b) asking some hard questions on the phone, and c) giving them a programming problem in person. I think this is a terrible system for hiring people. You learn very little from a resume and people get real nervous when you ask them tough questions in an interview. Programming isn't typically a job done under pressure, so seeing how people perform when nervous is pretty useless. And the interview questions usually asked seem chosen just to be cruel. I think I'm a pretty good programmer, but I've never passed one of these interviews and I doubt I ever could.

So when I hire people, I just try to answer the three questions. To find out if they can get stuff done, I just ask what they've done. If someone can actually get stuff done they should have done so by now. It's hard to be a good programmer without some previous experience and these days anyone can get some experience by starting or contributing to a free software project. So I just request a code sample and a demo and see whether it looks good. You learn an enormous amount really quickly, because you're not watching them answer a contrived interview question, you're seeing their actual production code. Is it concise? clear? elegant? usable? Is it something you'd want in your product?

To find out whether someone's smart, I just have a casual conversation with them. I do everything I can to take off any pressure off: I meet at a cafe, I make it clear it's not an interview, I do my best to be casual and friendly. Under no circumstances do I ask them any standard "interview questions" — I just chat with them like I would with someone I met at a party. (If you ask people at parties to name their greatest strengths and weaknesses or to estimate the number of piano tuners in Chicago, you've got bigger problems.) I think it's pretty easy to tell whether someone's smart in casual conversation. I constantly make judgments about whether people I meet are smart, just like I constantly make judgments about whether people I see are attractive.

But if I had to write down what it is that makes someone seem smart, I'd emphasize three things. First, do they know stuff? Ask them [what they've been thinking about](#) and probe them about it. Do they seem to understand it in detail? Can they explain it clearly? (Clear explanations are a sign of genuine understanding.) Do they know stuff about the subject that you don't?

Second, are they curious? Do they reciprocate by asking questions about you? Are they genuinely interested or just being polite? Do they ask follow-up questions about what you're saying? Do their questions make you think?

Third, do they learn? At some point in the conversation, you'll probably be explaining something to them. Do they actually understand it or do they just nod and smile? There are people who know stuff about some small area but aren't curious about others. And there are people who are curious but don't learn, they ask lots of questions but don't really listen. You want someone who does all three.

Finally, I figure out whether I can work with someone just by hanging out with them for a bit. Many brilliant people can seem delightful in a one-hour conversation, but their eccentricities become grating after a couple hours. So after you're done chatting, invite them along for a meal with the rest of the team or a game at the office. Again, keep things as casual as possible. The point is just to see whether they get on your nerves.

If all that looks good and I'm ready to hire someone, there's a final sanity check to make sure I haven't been fooled somehow: I ask them to do part of the job. Usually this means picking some fairly separable piece we need and asking them to write it. (If you really insist on seeing someone working under pressure, give them a deadline.) If necessary, you can offer to pay them for the work, but I find most programmers don't mind being given a small task like this as long as they can open source the work when they're done. This test doesn't work on its own, but if someone's passed the first three parts, it should be enough to prove they didn't trick you, they can actually do the work.

(I've known some people who say "OK, well why don't we try hiring you for a month and see how it goes." This doesn't seem to work. If you can't make up your mind after a small project you also can't make it up after a month and you end up hiring people who aren't good enough. Better to just say no and err on the side of getting better people.)

I'm fairly happy with this method. When I've skipped parts, I've ended up with bad hires who eventually had to be let go. But when I've followed it, I've ended up with people I like so much so that I actually feel bad I don't get to work with them anymore. I'm amazed that so many companies use such silly hiring methods instead.

Googling for Sociopaths

December 14, 2009

[Original link](#)

One of the best things about capitalism is the way it handles sociopaths. Major executives look up to Alexander the Great and apparently try to follow in his footsteps. But instead of leading a murderous campaign across Asia, they decide to make something people want: newspapers and movies and television shows. True, they're far from perfect, but you have to admit it's a lot better than mass slaughter.

Many books have been written about Google, even though we're all pretty familiar with the company to begin with, but what makes Ken Auletta's *Googled* interesting is that it's a history of the company as told by the incumbent sociopaths. These are the people Auletta has spent his life covering: the media moguls who tried to acquire and conquer their own empires of content and delivery. And to them what's most shocking and galling about Google's incredibly rapid rise is that instead of being engineered by a fellow sociopath, it was largely done by normal, decent people plainly applying the forces of new technology.

"What has Google ever done for the world?" ask the sociopaths at various points throughout the book. "All they do is steal other people's content!" To a normal human the question is ridiculous — it's almost impossible to imagine life without Googling for something, checking your Gmail, or watching videos on YouTube — but sociopaths aren't used to doing things that create value for people. They're just interested in conquering more and taking control. When Disney bought ABC for \$19 billion, it didn't improve most people's lives in any real way, but it did let Michael Eisner regain control of the company he once ran.

So naturally the sociopaths are outraged that their control is being taken away. Newspapers, book publishers, television companies, ad agencies — their businesses are all failing, while Google's is on the rise. The sociopaths may be outraged, but this is exactly what's *supposed* to happen. Most people don't have a vested interest in whether ABC does well or even continues to exist. What they want are good television shows at a reasonable price, and if they can get those from Apple and Google instead of their local cable company, then bully for Apple and Google.

The thing that's hard for the sociopaths to get their head around is that this isn't because one of their rivals has outsmarted them — it's just the march of

technology. When the only way to get most television shows to people's houses was over a wire or across airwaves that could only hold so many channels, their particular distribution model made sense. But when the same connection — whether cable, DSL, satellite, or WiFi — can let people download whatever video program they choose, an entirely new model can take hold. The shift isn't Google's fault any more than America should be blamed for breaking off from Pangea.

As a result, the closest people to moguls behind the recent shifts in media distribution are two computer science grad students: Larry and Sergey. These guys don't even have the decency to behave like real moguls — they wear t-shirts and sneakers, get bored during meetings, and like to travel around the world instead of around Manhattan. What's worse, they're constantly talking about “making the world a better place” (by, for example, donating 1% of their profits to charity) and “empowering the user” (by cutting out middlemen and not forcing choices down people's throats). Sociopaths don't talk like that! Who do these people think they are?

Google gets a lot of criticism (often deserved), but it's worth taking a moment to think of all the things they haven't done. If Microsoft had Google's market share in search, is there any doubt that they'd be systematically demoting or even banning their competitors in the search results? Demoting someone in Google is a virtual death sentence, and yet not only has Google never been accused of using this vast power, the idea itself is almost unimaginable.

Hearing things from the sociopaths' perspective, it's easy to get fooled. “Yeah!” you think. “Why should these Google guys get to control everything?” But for average people, this shift has been great: much more stuff is available, faster and freer than ever before, and the people making all the money off of it are actually decent human beings who feel some responsibility for the planet they inhabit. Sure, I don't agree with them on everything and there's a lot more they can do, but let's not lose sight of the basic point: at least they're not sociopaths.

- [Buy the book](#)

Researcher Job

December 27, 2009

[Original link](#)

I'm looking for a researcher to work with on a couple projects. The research will mostly be into questions of United States government policy and the relevant factual basis. For example, you might be asked to look up things about cap-and-trade legislation and the evidence for anthropogenic global warming. You can do it part-time. You can work from anywhere. I think the work will be interesting and I'll be doing it too. I think the work will be important, which is why I'm doing it.

The requirements are:

- generally lefty politics
- the ability to figure out the answers to complicated and politically controversial questions and find primary sources supporting those answers
- the ability to write clear summaries of those answers

The ideal person is probably someone who's contributed to Wikipedia, but that's not a requirement.

If you're interested, send a paragraph you wrote explaining or summarizing something to me@aaronsw.com with "researcher" in the subject. If you have ideas for how to find people like this, post them in the comments. (Or email them. Whatever.) I'll probably end up hiring a bunch of researchers so the more people and ideas the better.

Against Reflective Equilibrium (or, What is ethics for?)

December 30, 2009

[Original link](#)

Imagine you were an early settler of what is now the United States. It seems likely you would have killed native Americans. After all, your parents killed them, your siblings killed them, your friends killed them, the leaders of the community killed them, the President killed them. Chances are, you would have killed them too, and you probably wouldn't have seen anything wrong with this.

Indeed, it probably wouldn't even have occurred to you to think about the morality of this. If you did, it would probably seem just. They were trying to kill *you*! And your family! Going after them was just self-defense! (It wasn't, of course; you invaded *their* land.)

Or if you see nothing wrong with killing native Americans, take the example of slavery. Again, everyone had slaves and probably didn't think too much about the morality of it. That was just the way the world was. If you were asked about the big moral questions you faced, you'd probably think of things like the proper time to pay back a loan, or lying to your wife, or maybe a child's duty of obedience to their father.

Today, looking back on people who murder native American and keep slaves, those seem like comparatively small potatoes. Sure, we justify it by saying that they were just people of their time, but still... It's hard to get over the fact that George Washington ordered his general to "lay waste all the settlements around...that the country may not be merely overrun, but destroyed." (He also ordered that they not "listen to any overture of peace before the total ruin of their settlements is effected. Our future security will be in...the terror with which the severity of the chastisement they receive will inspire them.") It somehow colors everything he says. Whatever he may have thought about loan repayment or lying, slavery was the big moral question of his time, and (in practice, at least) he got it wrong.

We don't kill native Americans much these days and we don't keep slaves, but it's hard to believe that our era must be morally perfect. Surely if people back then could make such huge moral blunders, we could be making similar ones right now. And ethical philosophy is useless if it can't help us avoid such huge mistakes.

Some people suggest that the way to do ethical philosophy is to listen to our intuitions. "I do not think our intuitions about cases are less reliable than those about principles," Frances Kamm argues.

But *of course* our intuitions about cases are less reliable! If we could simply trust our intuitions, we wouldn't need ethical philosophy at all. If something was wrong, we would just know it was wrong. There would be nothing philosophy could tell us.

Obviously this is absurd. Lots of people do things that seem clearly unethical while thinking they're in the right. Perhaps Kamm thinks these mistakes are merely the result of temporary passions and that from her desk at Harvard she can consider such question with a more objective eye.

But, as I have shown, people's intuitions about cases are *systematically* distorted. Sitting at a desk wasn't enough to persuade George Washington to stop killing native Americans. His mistake wasn't the result of some momentary passion, but of an entire culture that had normalized mass murder and a society that depended on it. To think that he would just suddenly sit down and go "Hmm, murdering Indians feels wrong to me" is ridiculous. The only way he would possibly conclude that is by taking seriously his *principles*.

I grew up eating animals. I saw nothing wrong with this. My parents ate them, my siblings ate them, my friends ate them, people on TV ate them, the President ate them. I doubt I stopped to think about the morality of eating animals any more than I stopped to think about the morality of brushing my teeth. If you asked me for my intuition, I would have said eating animals was just fine. It was only when I stopped eating animals that my intuitions began to change.

Cómo contrato programadores

December 30, 2009

[Original link](#)

[English](#)

traducido por iPodizados

Hay tres preguntas cuando estás contratando a un programador (o a cualquier otro trabajador, para el caso): ¿Es inteligente? ¿Puede sacar el trabajo adelante? ¿Puedo trabajar con él? Alguien que sea inteligente pero que no saca el trabajo adelante debería ser tu amigo, no tu empleado. Puedes hablar sobre tus problemas mientras procrastinas (posponer conscientemente un trabajo que sabemos que tenemos que hacer) con su trabajo real. Alguien que saca adelante el trabajo pero que no es inteligente, es ineficiente: los que no son inteligentes sacan el trabajo adelante usando el camino más difícil y trabajar con ellos es lento y frustran. Por último, alguien con quien no puedes trabajar... bueno, pues no puedes trabajar con él.

El proceso tradicional de contratación de programadores consiste en: a) leer un curriculum, b) realizar algunas preguntas difíciles en una conversación telefónica, y c) darles un problema de programación en persona. Creo que es un sistema horrible para contratar a alguien. Se puede aprender muy poco de un curriculum y la gente se pone nerviosa cuando les haces preguntas complejas en una entrevista. Programar no es el típico trabajo que se hace bajo presión, así que ver cómo se comporta alguien cuando está nervioso es bastante inútil. Y las preguntas de la entrevista que normalmente se formulan parecen escogidas simplemente para que sean crueles. Creo que soy un programador bastante bueno, pero nunca he superado una de esas entrevistas y dudo que nunca lo pueda hacer.

Así que cuando tengo que contratar gente, intento responder a las tres preguntas [que planteaba al principio]. Para saber si pueden sacar el trabajo adelante, les pregunto qué han hecho. Si de verdad hacen su trabajo, a estas alturas deberían tener algo ya hecho. Es difícil ser buen programador sin algún tipo de experiencia previa y en estos días todo el mundo puede obtener experiencia colaborando en algún proyecto de software libre. Así que les pido una muestra del código y una demostración y miro a ver si me gusta. Aprendes un montón rápidamente, porque no les estás mirando mientras responden a una compleja pregunta de entrevista, sino que estás viendo el código real que han producido. ¿Es conciso? ¿Claro? ¿Elegante? ¿Usable? ¿Es algo que querías en tu producto?

Para saber si alguien es inteligente, tengo una conversación informal con ellos. Hago todo lo posible por eliminar la presión: me encuentro con la persona en un café, les digo claramente que no es una entrevista, hago todo lo que puedo por

ser informal y amigable. Bajo ningún pretexto les hago “preguntas estándar” de entrevista. Simplemente hablo con ellos como lo haría con alguien que conozco en una fiesta. (Si le pides a la gente que conoces en una fiesta que enumeren sus puntos fuertes y débiles o que estimen el número de afinadores de piano que hay en Madrid, tienes problemas más importantes). Creo que es bastante sencillo saber si alguien es inteligente mientras sostienes una conversación informal con él. Constantemente hago juicios sobre si la gente que estoy conociendo es inteligente, de la misma forma que constantemente estoy evaluando si la gente que veo me parece atractiva.

Pero si tuviera que escribir qué es lo que hace que alguien me parezca inteligente, pondría el énfasis en tres cosas. La primera ¿tienen conocimientos? Pregúntales en qué han estado pensando y comprueba su nivel de conocimiento sobre ello. ¿Parecen comprenderlo al detalle? ¿Pueden explicarlo claramente? (explicaciones claras son un signo de que realmente conocen la materia). ¿Saben cosas sobre ese tema que tú no sabes?

Segunda, ¿son curiosos? ¿Responden haciéndote preguntas sobre ti? ¿Están genuinamente interesados o simplemente están siendo educados? ¿Realizan preguntas sobre lo que estás diciendo? ¿Te hacen pensar sus preguntas?

Tercero, ¿Aprenden? En algún punto de la conversación, probablemente acabarás explicándole algo. ¿Lo entienden de verdad o simplemente asienten y sonríen? Hay gente que sabe cosas sobre alguna pequeña área, pero no tienen curiosidad con respecto a otras. Y hay gente que es curiosa pero no aprende, realizan muchas preguntas pero en realidad no están escuchando. Y yo quiero alguien que cumpla las tres cosas [escuchar+preguntar+aprender].

Finalmente, concluyo si puedo trabajar con alguien pasando algún tiempo con esa persona. Mucha gente brillante puede parecer agradable en una conversación de una hora, pero sus excentricidades se hacen patentes después de un par de horas. Así que, una vez que hayas acabado la charla, invítale a comer con el resto del equipo o a jugar a algo en la oficina. Por supuesto, mantengo las cosas tan informales como sea posible. El objetivo es, precisamente, ver si te ponen de los nervios.

Si todo parece correcto y ya me siento preparado para contratar a alguien, hago una pequeña comprobación final de seguridad para confirmar que no me la han dado con queso: les pido que hagan una parte del trabajo. Normalmente, esto supone escoger una parte del proyecto suficientemente independiente y pedir que la escriban (si realmente necesitas ver a alguien trabajando bajo presión, ponles una fecha de entrega). Si es necesario, puedes ofrecer pagarles por el trabajo, pero a la mayoría de los programadores que me he encontrado no les importa que les encargues una tarea pequeña como esta siempre y cuando puedan publicar el código de su trabajo cuando esté acabado. Esta prueba no funciona por ella misma, pero si alguien ha pasado las primeras tres partes, debería ser suficiente para probar que no te han engañado, y que realmente pueden sacar adelante el trabajo.

(He conocido gente que me dice “Perfecto, ¿por qué no probamos a contratarte un mes y vemos cómo sale? Esto no parece funcionar. Si no puedes hacerte una idea después de encargarle un pequeño trabajo, también podría pasarte que un mes después tampoco tuvieras una opinión clara y has acabado contratando gente que no son suficientemente buenos. Mejor decir directamente no y equivocarse por el lado de intentar conseguir a los más indicados [que acabar con alguien que no da la talla].

Estoy bastante contento con este método. Cuando me he saltado algunas partes, he acabado con contrataciones fallidas que finalmente he tenido que deshacer. Pero cuando las he seguido, he conseguido gente que me gusta tanto que me siento mal si tengo que dejar de trabajar con ellos.

Me sorprende que en vez de esta perspectiva, haya tantas empresas que utilicen unas técnicas tan estúpidas para contratar.

A Backup Solution?

January 3, 2010

[Original link](#)

For years I've wanted a backup solution that just works. ([Here's a blog post from 2006 asking for it.](#)) The recent Coding Horror disaster got me thinking that this year I should take another look.

There have been some great strides in backup software in recent years. For Unix, there's `rdiff-backup`, `duplicity`, `brackup`, and `tarsnap`. For Macs, there's Time Machine (which doesn't support remote backups), BackBlaze, Mozy, and Carbonite (which don't do full-disk backups). None of them seem to just work.

It seems amazing to me how bandwidth and disk drives have gotten huge in recent years, while backup software has gotten more conservative and efficiency-obsessed. If you want to make regular copies of your entire disk, the best program is still old-fashioned `dump`, a program written in the era of tape drives. All the state-of-the-art stuff is designed to run on particular folders.

But then I found [CrashPlan](#). For \$100, you can back up all your machines to it as often as you like. The installation process is super-simple, it runs in the background without killing your net connection (BackBlaze would always slow my machine and my network down), and it works on Macs as well as Unix. It even makes it easy to control remote headless servers — just open an SSH tunnel to the machine you want to configure and you can use your local client to configure the remote machine.

The only trouble is that it [doesn't support bare-metal restores](#) or `xattr`. I don't understand why and hope that'll be fixed.

Does anyone know of a better solution?

Update: Everyone hates Mozy. [SpiderOak](#) seems interesting, but is even less designed for full-disk backup.

2009 Review of Books

January 3, 2010

[Original link](#)

Well, it's time for my annual look back thru the books I read this year. (Previously: [2006](#), [2007](#), [2008](#).) I've included links to reviews, where I have them, and italicized the titles of the books I recommend without reservation.

1. The Liberal Hour ([my review: 3 stars](#))
2. Depression Economics ([4](#))
3. The Great Derangement ([4](#))
4. Politics the Wellstone Way ([4](#))
5. Who Really Rules? ([5](#))
6. Fat Cats and Democrats ([3](#))
7. For Common Things
8. Who Governs?
9. Supreme: The Story of the Year ([2](#))
10. Changing the Powers that Be ([4](#))
11. New Kings of Nonfiction
12. On Writing Well ([3](#))
This book is really dreadful, mostly because the author actually cannot write well.
13. *The Power Broker* ([5](#))
I cannot possibly say enough good things about this book. Go read it. Right now. Yes, I know it's long, but trust me, you'll wish it was longer. I think it may be simply the best nonfiction book.
14. What Are Intellectuals Good For?
15. Priorities in Health ([4](#))
16. Invisible Hands
17. The Option of Urbanism

18. Getting There
19. On Directing Film (4)
Not just a great book about directing, but a great book about *writing*.
20. The High Cost of Free Parking (4)
21. The Leftmost City
22. Outliers
23. The Hearts of Men (4)
24. The Power Elite and the State (3)
25. Southern California Country
26. Seeing Like a State (4)
27. Traffic
28. Fast Food Nation
29. Building Rules (2)
30. Urban Fortunes (4)
31. Falling Behind
32. [The Sources of Social Power, Vol. 2](#)
Not an easy book, but Michael Mann continues to amaze.
33. Divided Highways
34. Prisoner's Dilemma
35. Running After Antelope
36. Cities of Tomorrow
37. Suburb (4)
38. [The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces](#)
If Feynman was a sociologist, this is probably the book he'd write. A delightful little thing.
39. Downtown
40. Radical Innocent
41. Suburban Nation
42. Zoned Out

43. [*American Apartheid*](#)

This book is criminally under-publicized. Everyone has their own crazy theories about why it is that blacks are disadvantaged in our society. Massey and Denton show it's much more obvious than any of that: they're victims of extreme segregation, with all the negative effects that entails. An absolutely brilliant book.

44. Crabgrass Frontier

45. Human Consequences of Urbanism

46. The Essential William H. Whyte

47. Gridlock Economy

48. Barbed Wire: A Political History

49. Market Rebels

50. Blockbusting in Baltimore

51. Chicago: A Biography of the City and Its Region

52. The Zoning Game

53. Zoned American

54. Bourgeois Nightmares

55. The Zoning of America

56. The Sun Also Rises

57. Bourgeois Utopias

58. Planned Sprawl

59. Block By Block

60. Opus 300

61. [*The Path to Power*](#)

After you finish *The Power Broker*, if you want more, read this.

62. Means of Ascent

63. Death at an Early Age

64. A City Transformed

65. Master of the Senate

66. City of Quartz

- 67. *The Liberal Defence of Murder*
This book is like a little miracle. I'm not even sure how to describe it, except to say that it turns one's understanding of history completely upside-down.
- 68. *Categorically Unequal*
If you're interested in inequality, this little overview is the place to start.
- 69. Side Effects
- 70. *The Fox and the Hedgehog*
Absolutely delightful.
- 71. The Threat to Reason
- 72. Plunder and Blunder
- 73. The Waxman Report
- 74. Who Rules America? (6th ed.)
- 75. *Angler*
Great introduction to how to use "the bureaucracy" and Cheney's utter deviousness.
- 76. Chief of Staff
- 77. *Showdown at Gucci Gulch*
Best book I've found on how positive bills actually get passed.
- 78. So Much Damn Money
- 79. Return of the L Word
- 80. The Way We Live Now
- 81. American Project
- 82. Streetcar Suburbs
- 83. Creating the Second Ghetto
- 84. Strangers in a Strange Land
- 85. Economic Growth and Neighborhood Discontent
- 86. The Federal Bulldozer
- 87. The Life You Can Save
- 88. Justice (Sandel)

- 89. Acme 18
- 90. The World We Have Lost
- 91. [Reason & Persuasion: Three Dialogues by Plato](#)
Great fun.
- 92. Two Memoirs (Keynes)
- 93. *Bat Boy: The Musical*
If you ever get a chance, go see it. It's the greatest musical ever.
- 94. John Maynard Keynes (Skidelsky)
- 95. Facing Unpleasant Facts
- 96. *Bad Samaritans*
The best introduction to the real issues of globalization and international development.
- 97. Reclaiming Development
- 98. Kicking Away the Ladder
- 99. Democracy and Disobedience
- 100. Infinite Jest
- 101. Elegant Complexity
- 102. Inequality and Industrial Change (4)
- 103. Network Power
- 104. *The General Theory of Employment, Money, and Interest*
- 105. Created Unequal
- 106. The Roseto Story
- 107. Political Economy of Industrial Policy
- 108. Deception and Abuse at the Fed
- 109. Balancing Acts
- 110. The Global Class War
- 111. Untitled New Deal Manuscript (Domhoff)
- 112. Acme 17
- 113. Secrets of the Temple

114. Supercapitalism
115. Political Control of the Economy
116. Freshman Orientation
117. Congressional Procedures and the Policy Process
118. The Political Economy of Trust
119. The Audacity to Win
120. Googled
121. Fantastic Mr. Fox
122. Dismantling Utopia
123. Rub Three Times
124. [The Latke Who Couldn't Stop Screaming: A Christmas Story](#)
125. Adventures in Cartooning
126. The Composer is Dead
127. Horseradish
128. [Nemesis](#)
A wonderful book for anyone interested in how science is actually done.
([chapter 1](#), [chapters 2-4](#))
129. Keynes: Return of the Master
130. Chris Ware (Raeburn)
131. [Gaming the Vote](#)
Poundstone's really become an amazing writer. While this isn't as good as [Fortune's Formula](#) it really is quite fun. Poundstone takes a rather novel tack in making the argument for voting system reform. Instead of saying that it will allow for third-parties to get a fair hearing, he argues it will protect the major parties from the insidious effect of spoilers.
Furthermore, instead of IRV, Approval, or even Condorcet voting, he endorses Range Voting as the best voting system, arguing against Condorcet on some weird grounds about determinant ballots that just doesn't make sense to me (p. 226).
Both of these seem reasonable when Poundstone lays them out, but are totally insane upon further inspection. Voting reform may protect against spoilers in the short-term, but in the long term it'll likely doom us to some kind of fractured multiparty system. (That's not to say it's a bad thing.) And range voting, like its proponents, is totally batshit insane. (He even

passes on their ridiculous claims about it being better than democracy with a straight face.)

Let's think about this for a second. Strategic voting with a range ballot (which even range voting's proponents say they'll do) is simply approval voting (plus maybe some meaningless nursery effect — if you want that, just have a nonbinding approval box or something). So for the system to work, it depends on people voting astrategically. But obviously those people's votes will count less than strategic votes. So range voting's only advantage over approval voting is that it counts the votes of naive voters less. How is that fair?

I think the Range Voting comparison with Condorcet is rigged; you'll notice they never provide any explanation for why their supposedly strategic Condorcet behavior is actually strategic. And the only strategic Condorcet behavior Poundstone provides is trying to create a tie to force it into sequential dropping, which seems wildly implausible in a real-life scenario. So it still seems Condorcet outperforms them all.

132. [If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?](#)

I really enjoyed this book. It starts with a simple thought experiment: imagine you had a long-lost identical twin who grew up in a conservative home and became a conservative. You, by contrast, grew up in a liberal home and became a liberal. Wouldn't meeting him make you question your beliefs? And thus, shouldn't the possibility that you *could* meet him make you question your beliefs? (I'm not totally convinced by this; my beliefs are much more shaken by converts — people who were strong believers in X but converted to believing in Y.)

From this, Cohen heads to a reminiscence of his own upbringing, which I found especially touching, perhaps because he has the identity I wish I had: a Canadian communist in an antireligious Yiddish-speaking home. In the middle there's a good bit on Hegel, Marx, and why not to heighten the contradictions, and he concludes by refuting Rawls with the same argument Matt Yglesias used on Kent Conrad: Rawls says that in a just society, everyone would embrace the Difference Principle, but the Difference Principle allows for differences because some people will work harder if they get more, but if those people embrace the principle then why wouldn't they give their money to the poor and embrace egalitarianism? He ends by addressing the title question and accepting a sort of Yglesian approach to politics: an overriding concern with the structure of political institutions, but also a strong sense of moral demands for people to achieve the best they can within existing structures.

Finally, it got me wondering: a lot of Marx (and, I would add, Keynes) thinks about the future as some sort of society where industrial products give us abundance and economic laws loosen their hold on us. The industrial revolution didn't do that, but perhaps the post-scarcity technological future might?

And my first book of the new year is Daniel Ellsberg's *Secrets*, which I'm already loving.

Do It Now

January 8, 2010

[Original link](#)

A year or two ago, I came up with a brilliant scheme for handling my email. The problem, I decided, was that there was just too much of it. Spam was mixed in with notes from friends along with important things from work and todo items I'd written to myself. What I needed to do was go thru and sort it — pick out the really important stuff to handle right away and move the junk to the bottom. So I wrote a little program that would let me go through and sort my email into neat little folders ordered by priority.

Well, here's what happened: I sorted all my email, and then I didn't answer any of it. I told myself that I shouldn't answer the unimportant stuff until the important stuff was taken care of, then when I looked at the important stuff it seemed hard, so I decided to go read some blogs first. To this day, all those important emails are just sitting there.

Recently, I came up with a really dumb system for handling my email: just do it. I'd start at the top of my inbox, answer the most recent email, and move on to the next one. No excuses. No matter what the email at the top was — no matter how difficult or awkward or unimportant, I had to answer it. I couldn't move on to another email and come back to it later. I had to answer the most recent email, no matter what it was.

By the end of the day, I'd answered a month's worth of email.

We procrastinate because we are afraid. We're afraid it's too much work and that it will drain us. We're afraid we'll screw it up and get in trouble. We're afraid we don't know how to do it. We're afraid because, well, we've been putting it off forever and every time we put it off it seems a little more fearsome in our minds. That's why not putting things off is so liberating. We're forced to confront our fears, not let them grow bigger by repeatedly running away. And when we confront them, we find they're not so scary after all.

This doesn't just apply to email, of course — it works for any todo list. But only if you say no to reordering, prioritizing, estimating deadlines, and doing the most important things first. Forget all that. Do it now.

Should our cognitive biases have moral weight?

January 8, 2010

[Original link](#)

In [a classic piece of psychology](#), Kahneman and Tversky ask people what to do about a fatal disease that 600 people have caught. One group is asked whether they would administer a treatment that would definitely save 200 people's lives or one with a 33% chance of saving 600 people. The other group is asked whether they would administer a treatment under which 400 people would definitely die or one where there's a 33% chance that no one will die.

The two questions are the same: saving 600 people means no one will die, saving just 200 means the other 400 will die. But people's responses were radically different. The vast majority of people chose to save 200 people for sure. But an equally large majority chose to take the chance that no one will die. In other words, just changing how you describe the option — saying that it saves lives rather than saying it leaves people to die — changes which option most people will pick.

In the same way that Festinger, et. al. showed that our intuitions are biased [by our social situation](#), Kahneman and Tversky demonstrated that humans suffer from consistent cognitive biases as well. In a whole host of examples, they showed people behaving in a way we wouldn't hesitate to think was irrational — like changing their position on whether to administer a treatment based on what it was called. (I think a similar problem affects our intuitions about killing versus letting die.)

This is a major problem for people like Frances Kamm, who think our moral philosophy must rely on our intuitions. If people consistently and repeatedly treat things differently based on what they're called, are we forced to give that moral weight? Is it OK to administer a treatment when it's described as saving people, but not when it's described as not saving enough? Surely moral rules should meet some minimal standard of rationality.

This problem affects a question close to Kamm's work: what she calls the Problem of Distance in Morality (PDM). Kamm says that her intuition consistently finds that moral obligations attach to things that are close to us, but not to things that are far away. According to her, if we see a child drowning in a pond and there's a machine nearby which, for a dollar, will scoop him out, we're morally obligated to give the machine a dollar. But if the machine is here but the scoop and child are on the other side of the globe, we don't have to put a dollar in the machine.

But, just as with how things are called, our intuitions about distance suffer from cognitive biases. Numerous studies have shown that the way we think about

things nearby is radically different from the way we think about things far away. In [one study](#), Indiana University students did better on a creativity test when they were told the test was devised by IU students studying in Greece than when they were told it was devised by IU students studying in Indiana.

It's a silly example, but it makes the point. If our creativity depends on whether someone mentions Greece or Purdue, it's no surprise our answers to moral dilemmas depend on whether they take place in the US or China. But surely these differences have no more moral validity than the ones that result from Tversky's experiment — they're just an unfortunate quirk of how we're wired. Rational reflection — not faulty intuitions — should be the test of a moral theory.

Is Apple Evil?

January 27, 2010

[Original link](#)

Today's iPad introduction has to be about the most depressing Apple product launch I've ever watched. As has been [noted](#), Jobs' Reality Distortion Field only works when he believes in what he's selling and he didn't seem to really believe in this. The audience must have further added to the disappointment, expecting a revolutionary product and only getting an oversized iPhone (iPod touch, actually).

That's not to say the iPad won't sell, or that I don't want one. The scariest thing is that I think it probably will. It's clear that Apple plans for the iPhone OS to be the future of its product line. And that's scary because the iPhone OS is designed for Apple's total control.

A lot of people have argued that requiring Apple to approve every application for the iPhone OS is some kind of "mistake", something they'll remedy as soon as they realize how bad things have gotten. But recent events — Phil Schiller's personal interventions, comments on their call to analysts, etc. — have made it clear it's not a mistake at all. It's their plan.

The iPad is their attempt to extend this total control to what's traditionally been thought of as the computer space. This is just the first step, but it's not hard to imagine Apple doing their best to phase out the Macintosh in the next decade, just as they phased out OS 9. In their ideal world, all computing will be done on the iPhone OS.

And the iPhone OS will only run software that they specifically approve. No Flash or other alternate runtimes, no one-off apps or open source customizations. Just total control by Apple. It's a frightening future.

I don't know why they're doing it. It's hard to see how it makes them more money. (Curating all those apps must be expensive, not to mention the lost sales from the unapproved ones.) I can only presume it's a result of Jobs' megalomaniacal need for control — not only does the hardware have to be flawless, the software must be too. And the only way to ensure that is to have Apple approve every inch of it.

I love Apple products. I'm a huge Apple fan. I'd buy an iPad right now if I could. But, for the first time, I've got a real sinking feeling in my stomach.

Fewer Representatives or More Monitors?

January 30, 2010

[Original link](#)

Matt Yglesias saw Lawrence Lessig speak about the problem of money in politics concluded his concern on the influence of money in politics was “[too narrow](#)”. I tend to agree that Lessig’s focus is a bit too narrow — that’s why I started [the PCCC](#) — but I was shocked by Yglesias’ “broader” solution: fewer elected officials.

Matt’s focus on institutional reforms is definitely a well-needed antidote to most political journalists’ tendency to focus on personalities and other small-picture details, but in this instance it’s just crazy. In what sense is the number of elected officials broader than the influences that come to bear on them?

Matt seems to be arguing that countries with fewer elected officials are better run because voters can monitor the performance of those officials better. I don’t see how this argument can possibly survive engagement with the details of our political system.

Let’s take health care, since that’s in the news lately. Health care has basically been talked about nonstop by every news outlet, yet even voters who follow these things in detail have no clue what’s really in it. (This is true even of my friends who are political junkies; they know a public option isn’t in the bill, but they basically have no idea what the exchanges are or how they would work.) When election season rolls around, campaigns will begin running lots of ads about the health care bill. None of these ads will help inform them what’s in it. And the press will continue not to inform them about what’s in it.

I don’t see how having fewer elected officials will change any of this. The problem is not that voters try to monitor their elected officials but are simply overwhelmed; the problem is that voters have no tools for actually monitoring their elected officials in any meaningful sense. Yes, one can point to a [Chris Hayes flowchart](#) here or [an Alec MacGillis guide](#) there, but there’s no way any significant number of voters know how to find those things. And even if you tell them about those, there’s no system for finding similar documents about issues in the future.

And that’s the biggest issue Congress is considering this session! And that’s just its broadest outlines! The health care bill has thousands of pages of detailed provisions and it’s just one of thousands of bills Congress is trying to pass. There’s nobody who’s even reading all of those provisions, let alone trying to figure out which ones are good ideas and which representatives are fighting for the good ideas.

Instead, there's a vast industry of lobbyists, each of which care really deeply about a handful of those tiny issues and are willing to spend vast amounts of money and effort persuading members of Congress to take their side. On most issues, they face no opposition. So naturally, the members take their side.

What's needed is not fewer representatives, but better monitoring systems and institutional incentives to make monitoring less necessary. Better monitoring systems is what I'm working on and better institutional incentives is what Lessig is fighting for. If Matt thinks that fewer representatives is a better or "broader" solution, I'd like to hear him explain how it's going to help.

Disclosure: I'm on the board of Lessig's group, Change Congress.

The Vioxx Story

February 10, 2010

[Original link](#)

In his book *[Doubt is Their Product](#)*, David Michaels (currently head of OSHA) tells the Vioxx story in a way I'd never heard before (pp. 146-147):

Aspirin and Aleve work by inhibiting the COX-1 and COX-2 enzymes. Inhibiting COX-2 lessens pain, but inhibiting COX-1 causes stomach problems like bleeding and ulcers. So the new class of COX-2 inhibitors, like Vioxx, were supposed to stop the pain without the nasty stomach side-effects.

Of course, aspirin has the additional side effect of protecting your heart, so when they designed a study demonstrating the benefits of Vioxx, they made sure to a) exclude anyone with heart problems, and b) compare it against Aleve, which doesn't have the same beneficial effects for the heart.

The result of the study was shocking: despite all these efforts, the people who took Vioxx had 4 times the number of heart problems as the people who took Aleve. So what did the makers of Vioxx do? They told the FDA that this study showed how incredibly effective *Aleve* was at reducing heart attacks! Yes, it wasn't that Vioxx increased the risk of a heart attack by 4 times — it was that Aleve magically reduced heart attacks by 80%.

And the FDA believed them.

When Is Transparency Useful?

February 11, 2010

[Original link](#)

The following essay appears in the new O'Reilly book [Open Government](#) and attempts to combine and clarify some of the points I made in previous essays. It was written in June 2009.

Transparency is a slippery word; the kind of word that, like *reform*, sounds good and so ends up getting attached to any random political thing that someone wants to promote. But just as it's silly to talk about whether "reform" is useful (it depends on the reform), talking about transparency in general won't get us very far. Everything from holding public hearings to requiring police to videotape interrogations can be called "transparency"—there's not much that's useful to say about such a large category.

In general, you should be skeptical whenever someone tries to sell you on something like "reform" or "transparency." In general, you should be skeptical. But in particular, reactionary political movements have long had a history of cloaking themselves in nice words. Take the Good Government (goo-goo) movement early in the twentieth century. Funded by prominent major foundations, it claimed that it was going to clean up the corruption and political machines that were hindering city democracy. Instead, the reforms ended up choking democracy itself, a response to the left-wing candidates who were starting to get elected.

The goo-goo reformers moved elections to off-years. They claimed this was to keep city politics distinct from national politics, but the real effect was just to reduce turnout. They stopped paying politicians a salary. This was supposed to reduce corruption, but it just made sure that only the wealthy could run for office. They made the elections nonpartisan. Supposedly this was because city elections were about local issues, not national politics, but the effect was to increase the power of name recognition and make it harder for voters to tell which candidate was on their side. And they replaced mayors with unelected city managers, so winning elections was no longer enough to effect change.¹

Of course, the modern transparency movement is very different from the Good Government movement of old. But the story illustrates that we should be wary of kind nonprofits promising to help. I want to focus on one particular strain of transparency thinking and show how it can go awry. It starts with something that's hard to disagree with.

Sharing Documents with the Public

Modern society is made of bureaucracies and modern bureaucracies run on paper: memos, reports, forms, filings. Sharing these internal documents with the public seems obviously good, and indeed, much good has come out of publishing these documents, whether it's the [National Security Archive](#), whose Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests have revealed decades of government wrongdoing around the globe, or the indefatigable [Carl Malamud and his scanning](#), which has put terabytes of useful government documents, from laws to movies, online for everyone to access freely.

I suspect few people would put “publishing government documents on the Web” high on their list of political priorities, but it's a fairly cheap project (just throw piles of stuff into scanners) and doesn't seem to have much downside. The biggest concern—privacy—seems mostly taken care of. In the United States, FOIA and the Privacy Act (PA) provide fairly clear guidelines for how to ensure disclosure while protecting people's privacy.

Perhaps even more useful than putting government documents online would be providing access to corporate and nonprofit records. A lot of political action takes place outside the formal government, and thus outside the scope of the existing FOIA laws. But such things seem totally off the radar of most transparency activists; instead, giant corporations that receive billions of dollars from the government are kept impenetrably secret.

Generating Databases for the Public

Many policy questions are a battle of competing interests—drivers don't want cars that roll over and kill them when they make a turn, but car companies want to keep selling such cars. If you're a member of Congress, choosing between them is difficult. On the one hand are your constituents, who vote for you. But on the other hand are big corporations, which fund your reelection campaigns. You really can't afford to offend either one too badly.

So, there's a tendency for Congress to try a compromise. That's what happened with, for example, the Transportation Recall Enhancement, Accountability, and Documentation (TREAD) Act. Instead of requiring safer cars, Congress simply required car companies to report how likely their cars were to roll over. Transparency wins again!

Or, for a more famous example: after Watergate, people were upset about politicians receiving millions of dollars from large corporations. But, on the other hand, corporations seem to like paying off politicians. So instead of banning the practice, Congress simply required that politicians keep track of everyone who gives them money and file a report on it for public inspection.

I find such practices ridiculous. When you create a regulatory agency, you put together a group of people whose job is to solve some problem. They're given the

power to investigate who's breaking the law and the authority to punish them. Transparency, on the other hand, simply shifts the work from the government to the average citizen, who has neither the time nor the ability to investigate these questions in any detail, let alone do anything about it. It's a farce: a way for Congress to look like it has done something on some pressing issue without actually endangering its corporate sponsors.

Interpreting Databases for the Public

Here's where the technologists step in. "Something is too hard for people?" they hear. "We know how to fix that." So they download a copy of the database and pretty it up for public consumption—generating summary statistics, putting nice pictures around it, and giving it a snazzy search feature and some visualizations. Now inquiring citizen can find out who's funding their politicians and how dangerous their cars are just by going online.

The wonks love this. Still stinging from recent bouts of deregulation and antigovernment zealotry, many are now skeptical about government. "We can't trust the regulators," they say. "We need to be able to investigate the data for ourselves." Technology seems to provide the perfect solution. Just put it all online—people can go through the data while trusting no one.

There's just one problem: if you can't trust the regulators, what makes you think you can trust the data?

The problem with generating databases isn't that they're too hard to read; it's the lack of investigation and enforcement power, and websites do nothing to help with that. Since no one's in charge of verifying them, most of the things reported in transparency databases are simply lies. Sometimes they're blatant lies, like how some factories keep two sets of books on workplace injuries: one accurate one, reporting every injury, and one to show the government, reporting just 10% of them.² But they can easily be subtler: forms are misfiled or filled with typos, or the malfeasance is changed in such a way that it no longer appears on the form. Making these databases easier to read results only in easier-to-read lies.

Three examples:

- Congress's operations are supposedly open to the public, but if you visit the House floor (or if you follow what they're up to on one of these transparency sites) you find that they appear to spend all their time naming post offices. All the real work is passed using emergency provisions and is tucked into subsections of innocuous bills. (The bank bailouts were put in the Paul Wellstone Mental Health Act.) Matt Taibbi's *The Great Derangement* tells the story.
- Many of these sites tell you who your elected official is, but what impact does your elected official really have? For 40 years, people in New York

thought they were governed by their elected officials—their city council, their mayor, their governor. But as Robert Caro revealed in *The Power Broker*, they were all wrong. Power in New York was controlled by one man, a man who had consistently lost every time he'd tried to run for office, a man nobody thought of as being in charge at all: Parks Commissioner Robert Moses.

- Plenty of sites on the Internet will tell you who your representative receives money from, but disclosed contributions are just the tip of the iceberg. As Ken Silverstein points out in [his series of pieces for Harper's](#) (some of which he covers in his book *Turkmeniscam*), being a member of Congress provides for endless ways to get perks and cash while hiding where it comes from.

Fans of transparency try to skirt around this. “OK,” they say, “but surely *some* of the data will be accurate. And even if it isn't, won't we learn something from how people lie?” Perhaps that's true, although it's hard to think of any good examples. (In fact, it's hard to think of any good examples of transparency work accomplishing anything, except perhaps for more transparency.) But everything has a cost.

Hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent funding transparency projects around the globe. That money doesn't come from the sky. The question isn't whether some transparency is better than none; it's whether transparency is really the best way to spend these resources, whether they would have a bigger impact if spent someplace else.

I tend to think they would. All this money has been spent with the goal of getting a straight answer, not of doing anything about it. Without enforcement power, the most readable database in the world won't accomplish much—even if it's perfectly accurate. So people go online and see that all cars are dangerous and that all politicians are corrupt. What are they supposed to do then?

Sure, perhaps they can make small changes—this politician gets slightly less oil money than that one, so I'll vote for her (on the other hand, maybe she's just a better liar and gets her oil money funneled through PACs or foundations or lobbyists)—but unlike the government, they can't solve the bigger issue: a bunch of people reading a website can't force car companies to make a safe car. You've done nothing to solve the real problem; you've only made it seem more hopeless: all politicians are corrupt, all cars are dangerous. What can you do?

An Alternative

What's ironic is that the Internet does provide something you can do. It has made it vastly easier, easier than ever before, to form groups with people and work together on common tasks. And it's through people coming together—not websites analyzing data—that real political progress can be made.

So far we've seen baby steps—people copying what they see elsewhere and trying to apply it to politics. Wikis seem to work well, so you build a political wiki. Everyone loves social networks, so you build a political social network. But these tools worked in their original setting because they were trying to solve particular problems, not because they're magic. To make progress in politics, we need to think best about how to solve its problems, not simply copy technologies that have worked in other fields. Data analysis can be part of it, but it's part of a bigger picture. Imagine a team of people coming together to tackle some issue they care about—food safety, say. You can have technologists poring through safety records, investigative reporters making phone calls and sneaking into buildings, lawyers subpoenaing documents and filing lawsuits, political organizers building support for the project and coordinating volunteers, members of Congress pushing for hearings on your issues and passing laws to address the problems you uncover, and, of course, bloggers and writers to tell your stories as they unfold.

Imagine it: an investigative strike team, taking on an issue, uncovering the truth, and pushing for reform. They'd use technology, of course, but also politics and the law. At best, a transparency law gets you one more database you can look at. But a lawsuit (or congressional investigation)? You get to subpoena all the databases, as well as the source records behind them, then interview people under oath about what it all means. You get to ask for what you need, instead of trying to predict what you may someday want.

This is where data analysis can be really useful. Not in providing definitive answers over the Web to random surfers, but in finding anomalies and patterns and questions that can be seized upon and investigated by others. Not in building finished products, but by engaging in a process of discovery. But this can be done only when members of this investigative strike team work in association with others. They would do what it takes to accomplish their goals, not be hamstrung by arbitrary divisions between “technology” and “journalism” and “politics.”

Right now, technologists insist that they're building neutral platforms for anyone to find data on any issue. Journalists insist that they're objective observers of the facts. And political types assume they already know the answers and don't need to investigate further questions. They're each in their own silo, unable to see the bigger picture.

I certainly was. I care passionately about these issues—I don't want politicians to be corrupt; I don't want cars to kill people—and as a technologist I'd love to be able to solve them. That's why I got swept up in the promise of transparency. It seemed like just by doing the things I knew how to do best—write code, sift through databases—I could change the world.

But it just doesn't work. Putting databases online isn't a silver bullet, as nice as the word *transparency* may sound. But it was easy to delude myself. All I had to do was keep putting things online and someone somewhere would find a use for them. After all, that's what technologists do, right? The World Wide Web

wasn't designed for publishing the news—it was designed as a neutral platform that could support anything from scientific publications to pornography.

Politics doesn't work like that. Perhaps at some point putting things on the front page of the *New York Times* guaranteed that they would be fixed, but that day is long past. The pipeline of leak to investigation to revelation to report to reform has broken down. Technologists can't depend on journalists to use their stuff; journalists can't depend on political activists to fix the problems they uncover. Change doesn't come from thousands of people, all going their separate ways. Change requires bringing people together to work on a common goal. That's hard for technologists to do by themselves.

But if they do take that as their goal, they can apply all their talent and ingenuity to the problem. They can measure their success by the number of lives that have been improved by the changes they fought for, rather than the number of people who have visited their website. They can learn which technologies actually make a difference and which ones are merely indulgences. And they can iterate, improve, and scale.

Transparency can be a powerful thing, but not in isolation. So, let's stop passing the buck by saying our job is just to get the data out there and it's other people's job to figure out how to use it. Let's decide that our job is to fight for good in the world. I'd love to see all these amazing resources go to work on *that*.

Thanks to Andy Oram and Andy Eggers for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this essay.

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1. For more, see <http://sociology.ucsc.edu/whorulesamerica/power/local.html>.
 2. *Fast Food Nation*, Eric Schlosser, Houghton Mifflin, 2001. [p. 180]

HOWTO: Lose weight

March 1, 2010

[Original link](#)

The standard advice for losing weight is to eat less and exercise.

Exercise is almost worthless as a weight-loss strategy: the number of calories you burn through exercise is miniscule and typically more than made up by your instinct to eat a little extra after exercising. Increased exercise is a *consequence* of losing weight, not a cause — when you lose weight you will have more energy and it will be easier to move, so you will then exercise. You have to lose weight first.

That leaves eating less. I have found three strategies to be effective here:

1. **Get rid of all snacks.** It used to be when I was hungry, I'd just grab a snack from the kitchen. It got so I basically did this without thinking and, as a result, I ended up eating a lot of snacks. Now the only food I have is unprepared; if I want to eat, I have to consider it and take the time to actually cook something or travel to someplace that sells prepared food.
2. **Drink more water.** There are [lots of reasons](#) to drink more water, but it's also a great way to lose weight. A lot of what feels like hunger is actually thirst, while having water in your stomach seems to counteract certain feelings of hunger. Furthermore, burning fat requires extra water.
3. **Don't be afraid to be hungry.** This is no doubt my most controversial tactic, but I do tend to think the body has a “set point” for the number of calories it's used to consuming. Lowering that set point may mean ignoring a bout of hunger or two and possibly even going a whole day without eating. But after that, your body gets full after eating much less. Again: I'm not saying more than a day — this isn't anorexia — but a one-day fast is far from unheard of.

This may be easier for me since I almost always eat meals alone, making it no big deal if I skip them. People who eat meals with others may need to get used to only eating a side dish or just nibbling at their order.

Losing weight has been better than I ever imagined. Not only am I dramatically thinner, but I have more energy, I waste less time eating, and I now like the way I look. I'm much more flexible and mobile and, most incredibly, I've gotten taller — this at the age of 23. (A lot of people are skeptical that I've actually grown taller, but the changes are measurable and dramatic and come with all the symptoms of height growth I remember from my childhood (including the

strange urge to stretch vertically on a regular basis). I suppose it's possible the height difference simply results from better posture, but that seems worth counting.)

I do not propose a new diet or some new theory. These are very simple commonsense tips: remove temptation, get enough water, remove obligation. But I've found they've been enough for me to lose dramatic amounts of weight. I used to be embarrassingly chubby, now people worry I have anorexia.

HOWTO: Read more books

March 2, 2010

[Original link](#)

read so many books. Do I read unusually quickly? Do I spend an unusual amount of time reading? I did a simple calculation: The average person spends 1704 hours a year watching TV. If the average reading rate is 250 words per minute and the average book is 180,000 words, then that's 142 books a year. To my surprise, I wasn't reading nearly enough books. So I've taken some steps to read more:

1. **Block your favorite blogs.** I definitely have the mental habit [noted in this xkcd cartoon](#): at the first sign of mental difficulty, I tab to a different window and begin typing the URL of a favorite blog. This habit is purely automatic, I do it without even thinking about it. As a result, I spend many, many hours a day reading blogs and following their links.

To overcome this habit, I added all my favorite blogs to an `/etc/hosts` file that redirects them to a bogus IP. Now when I type their URLs, I get an error message. I did the same with Hulu and other sites I use to watch TV shows; if you have a real television, be sure to get rid of it too. Now I usually try visiting a couple different blogs before my conscious self realizes what's happening, but this happens soon enough and, over the past couple weeks, I've managed to pretty much train myself out of this bad habit.

Now I either focus on the problem at hand or think enough about it to take a break and go for a walk, eat something, drink some water, read a book, or take a nap.

2. **Order lots of books at the library.** Most people think the way you read more books is by spending more time reading. But I've found that, [like exercise](#), this is an effect and not a cause. I spend time reading when I have a great book to read. When I don't, I feel no urge to read and when I do start reading something, I put it down quickly. But if I'm reading a great book, I spontaneously come up with times and places to read it.

But figuring out which books are great in advance is hard. People's experiences about which books they find compelling depend somewhat on their interests and finding accurate critics is problematic. So the best way I've found to see whether a book is good is to just start reading it.

My local library system ([Minuteman](#)) allows you to request up to 20 books online and then delivers them to the branch library nearest you. So whenever someone makes a book recommendation or I hear about a book that seems interesting, I request it online. Then I go and pick up a stack of books at the library every week or so.

I begin reading them and finish the ones that are exciting enough to finish and return the ones that are unpromising enough to give up on. Then I return them all and get some more.

I also find that the due dates and the growing pile of books provides additional impetus to read them. And the habit doesn't cost me any money this way, so I don't feel guilty about it. (I'm sure you can come up with reasons I should feel guilty, but the fact remains that I don't.)

3. **Alienate everyone close to you.** The biggest consumer of time is undoubtedly other people, in large measure because talking to other people is so fun that you don't notice time going by. By keeping yourself away from other people (living alone is a good start), you free up an enormous amount of time for reading. I find this is particularly useful in reading books, since books can usually substitute for human company: you can take them with you on the train and to meals and curl up with them at night and so on.

Getting rid of other hobbies no doubt also helps. (And, unlike people, books don't encourage you to have other hobbies.) I didn't have any other hobbies, so this was less of a problem for me, but you may want to think about the things you do instead of reading books and stop doing them.

4. **Keep the temperature low.** A common problem is falling asleep while reading. But I find it's difficult to fall asleep when I'm cold (whereas it's very easy to sleep when I'm warm), so I keep the temperature quite low in my apartment during the day. Even when I'm snuggled up in bed, I'm usually cold enough that I can't fall asleep.

I suspect few people will take all of this advice, but hopefully some of it is useful to you.

On DIRFAs

March 4, 2010

[Original link](#)

You are traveling in a strange and foreign country, where you don't speak the language, when you run into a friendly old man who gestures for you to follow him back to his hut. There he offers you the choice of one of two different kinds of soup that a woman in the kitchen (his wife, you presume) has made. You choose one and he pours you a bowl. It is delicious and you eat the whole thing before bowing deeply and heading for the door. But he blocks you and stares you down. You're puzzled; what does he want? He removes a coin from his pocket and begins fingering it. He gestures to your own pocket.

You look around and realize you were quite mistaken. This was not a friendly old man inviting you back to his house for supper — this is a barker attracting customers to his restaurant! And now, of course, he wants you to pay.

Now you may pay — perhaps because you feel bad for the old man and woman and don't want them to be out money on your account, or perhaps because you've just noticed the menacing broad-shouldered fellow in the corner with a club — but either way, you pay out of some personal desire: a desire to help the couple, or avoid the club.

Upon return to the States, you relax from your stressful journey by heading to your favorite restaurant. The waiter brings you a menu listing the various options (it is a classy place, so no prices are marked) and you say that you would prefer one. The waiter eventually returns with it, you eat it, and it's delicious.

Now the situation, despite seeming very similar, is somehow entirely different. You feel an obligation to stay and pay the bill. Not simply because you don't want to get arrested, or because you want to be able to return to the restaurant later. You have a reason to pay the bill independent of any of your own desires. You must pay the bill because, by sitting down and ordering, you promised you would.

One cannot accidentally promise, which is why the promise didn't exist in the foreign country, but you knew full well that ordering at the restaurant in the States was a promise to pay full price at the end of the meal. And by promising, you have created a desire-independent reason for action, or, as I put it, a DIRFA.

DIRFAs are surely the most amazing and confounding of all of Searle's discoveries. It seems crazy to think that there can be some magical realm, independent of any individual human desire, to which we can be called to account. And yet, there it is. We pay at the restaurant not because we want to, or because we want to help certain others, but because we have committed to doing so and that commitment somehow binds us.

In his new book, *Making the Social World*, Searle shows that, contrary to appearances, DIRFAs (like all social institutions) are merely an outgrowth of language. This is an incredible claim, but Searle makes a convincing case.

Imagine saying, “Barack Obama is president of the United States.” A simple, unexceptional act. But simply by doing it, you have entered into a whole series of social commitments. You have committed that you believe it. If you said it and did not believe it, people could rightly criticize you for lying. And your belief commits you to its truth; if it turned out to be false, people could criticize you for being wrong. You also commit yourself to communicating this belief; if you mumbled and your audience misheard you, you could be criticized for being unclear. If you were speaking to someone who had a friend named Barack Obama and did not know of the other man with the same name who is currently the US President, you could be criticized for being confusing.

A simple statement — the physical act consisting of a few vocal cord vibrations and associated lip movements — has pulled you into a whole web of social attachments and commitments. To communicate presupposes a whole system of social ontology.

It is difficult to overstate the implications. Much of political thought is about why people participate in institutions that do not benefit them. Why don’t the workers rise up and overthrow capitalism if all they have to lose are their chains? Is it because hegemony has persuaded them that the existing order is just and natural? Searle lays the foundations for a much simpler solution.

Kaczynski argued that the left was the result of oversocialization. Leftists took the social constraints they were taught — don’t discriminate on the basis of race, for example — so strongly that they begin applying them much more widely than the others around them. But Searle shows how this is a necessary outgrowth of empathy, the left’s defining traits: social institutions are grounded in a form of collective intentionality, where others count upon you to obey the institutional rules. Someone who can better imagine others’ minds must feel this network of expectations on them to be especially strong.

This book feels like Searle’s last book. It weaves together the entire scope of his career — from speech acts, to consciousness, to politics — in a single, stunning answer to this most vexing question: how can we mere sacks of meat, through brute physical acts, create constructions (like promises, or money, or corporations) that can then turn around and bind us. How glorious to see an entire lifetime of work coming together to answer this question at last.

- [Buy the book](#)

Philosophical Puzzles Resolved

March 8, 2010

[Original link](#)

Puzzle 1: Equality and Disability

Daniel Wikler posed to me the following problem he encountered while Staff Ethicist at the WHO.¹ The WHO recommends two principles: first, treat all citizens equally; second, aim to maximize overall quality of life. But imagine two citizens will die without a kidney transplant, one of whom is seriously disabled, but there is only one kidney. The first principle requires that both have an equal chance of getting the kidney. But the second principle requires we give it to the non-disabled person: if the disabled person dies, overall quality of life in the society will be higher, since it will have one less disabled person. (We accept, by definition, that disability lowers quality of life.) What to do?

Response: It seems pretty clear that the first value is simply wrong. We have no interest in promoting the health of the population; the population is simply an abstraction. Our interest is in promoting the health of (the sum of) individual people, who are conscious and therefore have moral interests.

One can see this clearly by looking at the cases where the population changes but people do not: birth, death, exile, and immigration:

Birth: The society has a controlled population growth program and assigns birth permits; birth permits are assigned to parents with the healthiest genes.

Death: The society has a limited number of organs; organs are given to the least-injured.

Exile: Sick people are tossed out of the society.

Immigration: Only healthy people are allowed to immigrate.

In all four such cases, it seems pretty clear to me that the population health position is wrong. (Exile seems particularly cruel.)

Puzzle 2: The Repugnant Conclusion

Derek Parfit [poses](#) the following problem. 1: Imagine there are a group of happy people (A). 2: Now imagine that some other people are created in some other completely unconnected place that are happy, but less happy than the previous group (B). 3: Now imagine that both groups are adjusted to be at some equal, but intermediate point of happiness between A and A+. 4: Now imagine these

two societies are connected, resulting in C: more people at a lesser degree of happiness.

2 is no worse than 1, since the additional people are happy and do not affect anyone. 3 is no worse than 2, since the people in B are made happier by more than the people in A are made unhappy. 4 is no worse than 3, since we are simply introducing folks to each other. But continue this and you reach the repugnant conclusion: a huge swarm of people who are just barely happy is better than a handful of people who are extremely happy.

Response: The problem is step 2, which is in fact worse than 1. Parfit assumes that simply adding extra people whose lives are worth living cannot make things worse. But that's ridiculous. Imagine our society, then imagine our society with a bunch more feral people living on the huge island of garbage in the middle of the Pacific, unable to speak except in a growl, with none of the surrounding societies ever noticing. I think the people living in the garbage heap's lives would be worth living (I wouldn't want to kill them, nor would they want to be killed), but I distinctly prefer the former society.

Puzzle 3: The Logic of the Larder

Many people say that we shouldn't eat animals, because that would mean killing them. But for many of these animals, if they aren't going to be killed and eaten, they would never be born in the first place. What if the animal preferred to have a short, pleasant existence before being consumed as food rather than having no existence at all? Wouldn't that mean we should breed the animal, give it a nice life, then kill and eat it?

Response: This is a ridiculous hypothetical — you're suggesting an animal that doesn't exist yet has a preference about existing. I don't respect hypothetical creatures' hypothetical desires to not be hypothetical. If I did, you could get me to do all sorts of absurd things just by hypothesizing them. You could, say, simply hypothesize a utility monster's very strong desire to exist and I would be morally bound to try to create one. Or perhaps my hypothetical children really want to exist, so I have to hurry to procreate. That's ridiculous.

I think we should maximize the actual interests of actual people.

Puzzle 4: Addition vs. Subtraction

As a consequentialist, if I support not adding people (as I do in my resolution to 2 and 3), then I must support removing people, since the consequences are identical. If I prefer a society with fewer, happier people, then I must support euthanizing some people to make the rest better off. Sure, there are practical questions with implementing this, but philosophically, I must be in favor of eliminationism.

Response: I am not a consequentialist about societies, I'm a utilitarian: I think we should work toward outcomes that maximize the interests of individuals.

There's a fundamental disanalogy between addition and contraction. Addition means creating new people with interests that didn't exist before the addition. Contraction, on the other hand, means getting rid of actually-existing people. I do not respect the hypothetical interests of hypothetical individuals to not be hypothetical, but I do respect real people with real interests right now, who presumably have an interest in not being gotten rid of. Thus, I support not getting rid of people and not arbitrarily creating new ones.

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1. The problem is also discussed in F.M. Kamm, "[Disability, Discrimination, and Irrelevant Goods](#)"

Theory of Change

March 14, 2010

[Original link](#)

I am increasingly convinced that the difference between effective and ineffective people is their skill at developing a theory of change. Theory of change is a funny phrase — I first heard it in the nonprofit community, but it’s also widespread in politics and really applies to just about everything. Unfortunately, very few people seem to be very good at it.

Let’s take a concrete example. Imagine you want to decrease the size of the defense budget. The typical way you might approach this is to look around at the things you know how to do and do them on the issue of decreasing the defense budget. So, if you have a blog, you might write a blog post about why the defense budget should be decreased and tell your friends about it on Facebook and Twitter. If you’re a professional writer, you might write a book on the subject. If you’re an academic, you might publish some papers. Let’s call this strategy a “theory of action”: you work *forwards* from what you know how to do to try to find things you can do that will accomplish your goal.

A theory of change is the opposite of a theory of action — it works backwards from the goal, in concrete steps, to figure out what you can do to achieve it. To develop a theory of change, you need to start at the end and repeatedly ask yourself, “Concretely, how does one achieve that?” A decrease in the defense budget: how does one achieve that? Yes, you.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Congress passes a new budget with a smaller authorization for defense next year.

Yes, that’s true — but let’s get more concrete. How does that happen?

AUDIENCE: Uh, you get a majority of the House and Senate to vote for it and the President to sign it.

Great, great — so how do you get them to do that? Now we have to think about what motivates politicians to support something. This is a really tricky question, but it’s totally crucial if we want to be effective. After all, if we don’t eventually motivate the politicians, then what we’ve done is useless for achieving our goal. (Unless we can think of some other way to shrink the defense budget.)

But this is also not an insoluble problem. Put yourself in the shoes of a politician for a moment. What would motivate you? Well, on the one hand, there’s what you think is right. Then there’s what will help you get reelected. And finally there’s peer pressure and other sort of psychological motivations that get people to do things that don’t meet their own goals.

So the first would suggest a strategy of persuading politicians that cutting the defense budget was a good idea. The second would suggest organizing a constituency in their districts that would demand they cut the defense budget. And maybe one of you can figure out how to use the third—that's a little trickier.

But let's stick with the first, since that's the most standard. What convinces politicians that something is the right thing to do?

AUDIENCE: Their beliefs?

In a sense, I suppose. But those are going to be pretty hard to change. I'm thinking more, if you have a politician with a given set of beliefs, how do you convince them that cutting the defense budget advances those beliefs?

AUDIENCE: You outline why to them.

Well, OK, let's think about that. Do you think if you ran into Nancy Pelosi in the hallway here and you tried to explain to her why cutting the defense budget would accomplish her beliefs, that you'd convince her?

AUDIENCE: Probably not.

Why not?

AUDIENCE: Because she wouldn't really listen to me — she'd just smile and nod.

Yeah. Nancy Pelosi doesn't trust you. She's never met you. You're not particularly credible. So you need to find people the politicians trust and get them to convince the politicians.

Alright, well, we can continue down this road for a while — figuring out who politicians trust, figuring out how to persuade *them*, figuring out how to get them to, in turn, persuade the politicians, etc. Then, when the politicians are persuaded, there's the task of developing something they can vote for, getting it introduced so they can vote on it, then getting them to vote on the specific measure even when they agree with the overall idea. You can see that this can take quite a while.

It's not easy. It could take a while before you get to a concrete action that you can take. But do you see how this is entirely crucial if you want to be effective? Now maybe if you're only writing a blog post, it's not worth it. Not everything we do has to be maximally effective. But DC is filled with organizations that spend millions of dollars each year and have hardly even begun to think about these questions. I'm not saying their money is totally wasted — it certainly has some positive impacts — but it could do so much more if the people in charge thought, concretely, about how it was supposed to accomplish their goals.

I'll close with one more example, showing how this strategy can be used personally as well. I was at a party once and I told someone I was writing a book and that I wanted it to be a bestseller. They laughed at that and I think it's because they had a theory of action model in their head: you write the best

book you can, and of course you want it to be a bestseller, but either it does or it doesn't.

But I was working backwards, I had a theory of change: I asked, What makes something a best seller? Well, lots of people buy it. OK, how do you get lots of people to buy something? Well, you have to persuade them it's something they want. OK, how do you persuade them it's something they want? Well, first it has to meet some desire or need they have and second you need to explain to them how it meets that need. So what are the desires or needs people have? (Looking at bestsellers: entertainment, escape, self-improvement, etc.) What are the ways of explaining your book meets their need? (Being popular early on, appearances in the media, persuading readers to tell other readers, etc.)

Again, we can keep going for quite a while until we get all the way back to something I can actually do. But because of this, I didn't have to simply have to hope that my book became a bestseller, like every other author. I could actually do something about it.

That's the power of a theory of change.

The Reason So Many People Are Unemployed

March 14, 2010

[Original link](#)

Around the time of the Great Depression, a man named John Maynard Keynes made an incredible discovery. The reason so many people were out of work was not really because of irresponsible banks or high taxes or reckless government policy. It was really much simpler than all that: there wasn't enough money.

Now, as individuals, we'd all like a little more money for ourselves. But pause for a moment and think about what it means if there isn't enough money in the economy as a *whole*. A good way to wrap your head around this is to think about a much smaller case: instead of the whole economy, let's think about a now-famous babysitting co-op on Capitol Hill. Instead of dollars, the co-op used its own scrip that was worth an hour of babysitting time. When you wanted to go out, you'd pay a couple hours to someone else to watch your kids; then when they wanted to go out, they'd pay you or someone else to do the same for them.

It all worked great for a while, until one day they found they had too few pieces of scrip. Every couple had only a couple hours left and, having so little, they didn't want to waste it. So they all decided to save it for a very special occasion. This was kind of an incredible situation — even though there were people who wanted someone to babysit their kids, and people who were willing to do just that, the deal didn't happen, simply because the co-op hadn't printed enough colored pieces of paper. Eventually the co-op learned their mistake, printed some more scrip and handed it out, and everybody went back to babysitting like before and were much happier for it.

The same thing happens in the real economy. When there aren't enough green-colored pieces of paper around, everybody gets worried and holds on to the little they have. Even if you'd like someone to build an extension on your house, and there's someone else out there who'd like to build an extension on your house, the deal doesn't happen, just because you don't have enough green pieces of paper (or, more realistically, dollars in your bank account). This is a total waste. You don't get the extension and the other guy doesn't get a job, all because we haven't run the printing presses enough (or added enough zeroes to the bank's computers).

Before the Great Depression, most countries wouldn't simply print more colored pieces of paper. They were on the "gold standard" and they would only print more currency when more gold was discovered. This led to the most bizarre series of booms and busts as more gold was discovered in strange places and then "used up" by population growth or other things. After Keynes, countries eventually stopped this silliness and just started printing their money directly.

As soon as they abandoned the gold standard, they begun recovering from the Great Depression.

But the power to print more money is obviously a very special power and you wouldn't want it to fall into the wrong hands. So, in the United States, we've taken it away from elected politicians and given it (mostly) to the big banks. The banks select people to run their local Federal Reserve and then some of those people (along with some additional folks nominated by the President) are selected to be members of a group called the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC). The FOMC, essentially, decides how much money there should be in circulation, which in turn decides how many people have jobs.

You might think this sounds crazy — a bunch of unelected bankers get to decide how many people have jobs? — and, in fact, it is crazy. But I'm not making it up. Ask a macroeconomist, like Paul Krugman, and this is exactly what he'll tell you. And if you look in the Federal Reserve Act or on the Fed's website, you'll find their mission is to “promote effectively the goals of maximum employment, stable prices, and moderate long-term interest rates.” These multiple goals are relatively recent; before 1978, the goal was simply “maximum employment, production, and purchasing power.”

Now some people will claim that the Federal Reserve has done all it can to create more jobs but the recession is so deep this time that there's nothing else it can do. But that's just not true — even the chairman of the Federal Reserve, Ben Bernanke, says it's not true. He was asked about this in a Senate hearing. As the *Economist* summarized his response: “Mr Bernanke does not want to risk a de-anchoring of inflation expectations. He is willing to accept 10% or greater unemployment and the resulting economic and political fall-out in order to avoid that risk.”

Which brings us to the subject of inflation. Obviously if you print a lot of new money, it makes existing money worth a little less. This is annoying, but is it worse than having people out of work? Well, it depends who you are. If you have a lot of money, you're more worried about it becoming worth less. But if you work for a living, you're more worried about people being out of work. As you might expect, Mr. Bernanke has a lot of money, as do the other bankers on the committee and the people who selected them. So they've decided to let millions and millions of people be unemployed and the rest of us experience the resulting recession rather than risk the chance that some of their money might be worth a little less.

The biggest reason this is possible is because nobody realizes it. If it was conventional wisdom that a bunch of unelected bankers looking out for rich people were the reason everyone was out of work, politicians would be forced to explain to angry voters why we had this crazy system and might actually consider doing something about it. But, incredibly, it just seems like nobody has any idea. Voters don't realize it, politicians don't understand it, journalists don't cover it. And, in fact, they're so far from having any idea that it's really difficult to explain it to them. When you say a bunch of unelected bankers

are the reason there are no jobs, they just look at you like you're crazy. I've just spent a page or two explaining it and you still probably think I'm crazy. But it's true! This isn't some Ron Paul-type crackpot idea; this is mainstream economics, from Paul Krugman to the head of George W. Bush's Council of Economic Advisors.

I feel a bit like the guy in one of those movies, going around and telling everyone that the murderer is standing right over there — right there, look! — but nobody believes him and people continue to die. It's incredibly frustrating, and I have no idea what to do about it.

One final point: How did we get into this mess in the first place? Why did we suddenly find ourselves without enough money? Well, there was a housing bubble: for many years, house prices kept going up and up for no other reason than everyone was betting that they were just going to keep going up. When house prices were unsustainably high, that was part of the money in circulation. But when the music stopped and the bubble popped, house prices cratered and nearly \$8 trillion disappeared overnight. The government has printed a bunch of money since then, but nowhere near the \$8 trillion we lost. Obviously a lot of other bad stuff happened during the financial crisis, but this is the reason everybody is out of work.

The Anti-Suit Movement

March 16, 2010

[Original link](#)

I don't like wearing suits. In part, this is simply a question of personal taste — I find them uncomfortable and overpriced, and I don't like the way they look. But it's also a question of principle. Suits — and the other trappings of “respect” that go with them, like titles and sir's and the rest — are the physical evidence of [power distance](#), the entrenchment of a particular form of inequality.

As a result, when I go to events I try to avoid wearing a suit if I can. But sometimes not wearing a suit just feels really out of place. When you show up to a room of people in suits wearing a t-shirt and jeans, people don't think you're taking a brave stand on principle; they just think you're unkempt.

Yet these things do change. In the 1950s, college kids went to class in suits and addressed their professors as sir. The 1960s changed all that. Today, at most colleges, wearing a suit to class would be the weird thing to do.

This seems like a traditional collective action problem. If one person doesn't wear a suit, they seem weird, but if everyone doesn't wear a suit, they're all fine. But the idea of doing political organizing around not wearing a suit just seems bizarre. It's hard to know who to organize — each event has a different group of people — and even if you could find the people and they agreed with you, asking folks to join a no-suit pact just seems weird.

So suits are emblematic of this strange kind of politico-cultural issue — a political question that's not amenable to a political solution. And yet, from the 1960s, we know that these battles can be won. Does anyone know how?

A Reading Machine

March 29, 2010

[Original link](#)

One of the things that has long puzzled me is why children, who so incredibly pick up spoken language without formal instruction, encounter so much trouble when learning to read. Perhaps, I thought for a while, it is because there is a “language organ” that has specifically evolved to let them learn speech while reading has to be learned with more general portions of the brain. But the more I learn about neurology, the more ridiculous that seems.

In retrospect, the answer is rather obvious. Children learn a language because they are surrounded by it. It’s unavoidable. Their world is full of people speaking it and the pattern matchers in their brains go to town, figuring out the structures underlying its grammar and associated its vocabulary with the other things they see around them.

It’s impossible for there to be anything similar with words. Sure, some words appear in fairly regular positions (MEN on bathroom doors, perhaps) and children may learn to recognize them, but for the most part words are rather avoidable and their patterns hard to spot. How are children to draw a connection between the words in the newspaper and any sentences that they can understand? The only clues are the pictures and anyone who’s read picturebooks to a kid knows that kids make valiant use of those few clues, but it’s simply not enough to let them learn to read.

What’s needed is a way to give children the additional clues they require, but at their own pace. An adult can read books but only reads linearly and soon gets bored of reading the same thing over and over again. (I’ve often thought that children were being stupid by reading the same things over and over and over again. Now I realize I’m the stupid one; it’s the kids who are being smart. Only through repetition can your brain see the patterns!) It’s very difficult for children to pick up a pattern under such conditions.

But devices never get tired, so I would propose a device. Here is what I imagine: Give the child an iPad with a special program for reading books. The program provides a selection of nice picture books with words in large type underneath. Switching pages can be done the usual way; kids seem pretty good at figuring out gestural interfaces. But the big innovation is simply this: when you touch a word, it turns red while the speakers say it out loud.

In this way, the child can have the machine read the book to them. Tap the words in sequence and the book pronounces them. If a word is somehow unclear, just tap it again. When you finish the page, just go to the next one. When you finish a book, read another, or start over.

Soon, I imagine, the child will make some basic associations. They will learn that tapping the word “the” makes the sound “thuh” and means “the”. They will no longer need to tap it every time to find this out — they can save time by saying it out loud themselves. Eventually, they can just say it in their heads.

Pretty quickly, more and more common words can be handled this way. Then the child begins noticing patterns between common words. All the words beginning with k have a kuh sound! With such patterns recognized, some words can be sounded out. Eventually, only strange words need to be tapped — the rest the child can read by themselves.

People who have not spent much time around children might claim such a device will make children lazy — why learn to read when a device will do it for them? But children are desperate to read; those who cannot will often try to memorize the shorter books their parents read to them so they can pretend to read those books themselves. This device would simply give them the tools they need. It would lead their brains to make the same associations that the software makes occur physically: point at this word, hear this sound. And there’s nothing brains are better at than recognizing such simple patterns and being able to predict them in the future.

Perhaps this software already exists. If so, please tell me. If not, I’d like to work with someone to make it. Will it work? There’s only one way to find out, but I think it’s got a pretty good shot.

How to Get a Job Like Mine

April 7, 2010

[Original link](#)

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Apparently a lot of people have gotten the mistaken impression from my blog that I sit around and think about abstract philosophy all day. Well, I guess I do kind of do that, but my day job is actually much more exciting. I'm a cofounder of [the Progressive Change Campaign Committee](#) ([BoldProgressives.org](#)) and I spend my days experimenting with new ways to get progressive policies enacted and progressive politicians elected.

Like a lot of people, I grew up feeling frustrated with the world — extremes of wealth and poverty, insane and bloody wars, outdated intellectual monopoly laws, big corporations run amok. But I had no idea what to do about it. Writing just felt like preaching to the choir, marching in the streets felt like the protest of the powerless, working with people on the ground just didn't seem to scale.

But when my friend Larry Lessig decided to run for Congress, I begun to see that there was something I could do. During the short-lived campaign, we were besieged with offers of help from consultants, software companies, and services firms. Their technology was invariably outdated and incompetent (the leading tools are built on SQL Server), uncoordinated and poorly-designed. The advice they gave was horrendous, their incompetence bordered on sabotage, and the prices they charged would bankrupt us.

We started the Progressive Change Campaign Committee in January 2009 with the notion that we could fix all that. We would help filter the good consultants from the bad, write up best practices and conduct experiments to learn what works. Along the way, we got pulled into issue campaigns as well — at first [going after CNBC for their terrible coverage of the economic crisis](#), then spending most of the last year [getting Congress to pass a public option in the health care bill](#). Along the way, we've gotten over 400,000 members and raised over a million dollars for our various tactics. Not bad for our first year!

But now, as the 2010 campaigns ramp up, we're getting back to our original mission. We've been working with campaigns to help them find talented staff, competent consultants, and money-saving techniques. But we also need some talented programmers to build the next generation of campaign tools. We've got some really exciting ideas, but we need your help.

So here's the ask: **Want to work with me on building some amazing tools for some amazing campaigns?** If so, just send me an email at aaron@boldprogressives.org or [just fill out this form](#).

Then, tell your friends. Your country needs you.

That Sounds Smart

June 18, 2010

[Original link](#)

How do you tell if what someone is saying is smart? Most people's first instinct is to think that things they can't understand must be smart. After all, to say such things they must have learned them and aren't people who have learned more about something generally smarter than people who haven't? Thus the common phenomena of people trusting jargon-laden statements.

One problem with this method is simply that jargon can be faked. It's not too hard to make up a bunch of longish words that sound complicated. And if you don't understand them, you'll have a hard time telling whether they're real or made up.

But the more serious problem is that this method is exactly backwards. Smart people actually say things that are very simple and easy to understand. And the smarter they are, the more clear what they say is. It's stupid people who say things that are hard to understand.

Part of this is because stupid people say things that aren't true, things that aren't true don't make sense, and things that don't make sense are hard to understand. But you can also look at it from the other end: if you genuinely understand something — really, truly understand it — then it doesn't seem complicated and you can explain it rather simply.

But the larger consequence is that if you're smart the world doesn't seem very complicated. This might seem obvious, but the obvious thought is rather different. The obvious thought is: The world doesn't seem complicated to smart people. But this isn't what smart people actually think. They think the world isn't complicated, period.

This is because when they try to explain part of the world they understand to someone, they explain it clearly, and, as a result, that person now understands it. This is proof that it's not just uncomplicated for them, it's uncomplicated for everyone.

But, I suspect, for most people the world is a strange and mysterious place, governed by principles they do not understand, which affect them severely but cannot be controlled, only coped with as best as possible. This is certainly how most people regard their computers.

By contrast, when I listen to smart people some part of the world I only dimly understood or never considered becomes immediately clear. Even if I don't agree, I never have any trouble understanding. Listening to them, is like breathing pure oxygen and I cannot get enough.

This means the tradeoff between being expert and being popular doesn't actually exist. People who truly understand their subject should have no trouble writing for a popular audience. And, in fact, their writing will probably be better than that of the professional popularizers.

A good example of this was the early days of the blog *Freakonomics*. It had two writers, a successful economist and a popular journalist. The two had worked together on the bestselling book of the same name, with the general assumption that it was the journalist who had made the economist's work clear. But reading their individual posts on the blog, you could see it was the reverse: the economist was a much clearer writer than the journalist.

Another result is that you find the really smart things in unexpected and undervalued places. Smart writing won't be in formal and difficult-to-understand journal articles, but in the profanity-laced angry rants you'll find on someone's blog. That's where the smart people are, even if everybody else just thinks they're dumb.

The Political Philosophy of Toy Story 3

June 20, 2010

[Original link](#)

[SPOILER WARNING: This is pretty much all spoilers, so please see the movie before reading. It's a really, really good movie — probably the best Disney film. So you should totally see it. First.]

UPDATE: I missed a bunch the first time I saw the movie; this version has been amended to include the subthemes about immigration and socialization.

The film begins with Woody trying to defend a crumbling system of communism (presumably the Soviet Union). Toys have a duty to their owners, he argues. The owner is a personified totalitarian state (Stalin?) — he decides what the toys do and the toys are not permitted to escape. For some reason (false consciousness?), the other toys instinctively agree with this but find the notion hard to sustain when their owner makes clear he doesn't want them anymore (massive unemployment).

The last straw is when, through a comic mishap, they get the misimpression their owner is trying to throw them away. They feel this existential threat releases them from their duty of loyalty.¹ The state's one duty to its citizens is to keep them alive; if it can't do that, the system falls apart. Note, however, that it's only the misimpression that removes the duty. When they learn (from Mrs. Potato Head) that they were mistaken and Andy only planned to put them in the attic, they rush to return to him. The attic won't actually kill them and so doesn't remove the duty.

Communism having collapsed, the toys emigrate to Sunnyside (the US, that nation of immigrants), which leader Lotso depicts as a libertarian paradise. In his introductory speech, he touts the joys of self-ownership and interacting with children through the market (new children are constantly replacing old ones, maximizing the efficiency of the toys), as well as the improved material comforts his system brings (the repair depot, the dream house). The toys are enchanted.

However, they quickly realize libertarian paradise is actually a far worse nightmare than communism. Lotso explains that immigrants have to work their way up, starting by doing the painful, backbreaking jobs that the current population (all former immigrants themselves) won't do. There are a couple exceptions: Barbie is taken as a (Russian) mail-order bride and the entrepreneurial Buzz is chosen for promotion to the managerial class and resocialized so he won't sympathize with his old comrades.²

Sunnyside's supposed freedom is actually slavery, complete with military discipline (via the reset Buzz) and a panopticon prison (via the monkey and symbolized by the treehouse). Their days are spent in torturous labor from which there is no real escape. Lotso has used his freedom to accumulate all the power for himself and does not allow any for anyone else.

Meanwhile, Woody is adopted by Bonnie's benevolent dictatorship. People are given a second chance there — they can adopt new names, new identities, and spend their days doing improv. They do work under Bonnie's direction, but they do so voluntarily, and are free to leave if she becomes a tyrant. As Andy makes clear at the end of the film, it is Bonnie who owes a duty to the toys, not vice versa.

Back at Sunnyside, the toys overthrow Lotso's capitalist domination by working together, harnessing the collective power of the working class and using the managerial class (i.e. Ken and Bookworm) against itself (via deception and torture!). But their success eventually persuades some members of the managerial class to become their allies (e.g. Ken, despite having been tortured³, and ultimately Lotso's right-hand toy, Big Baby) and at a key moment they together overthrow the capitalist Lotso, as Barbie gives a rousing speech nailing the key flaw with libertarianism: "authority should derive from the consent of the governed, not the threat of force."

However, the new revolutionaries also leave, preventing them from installing themselves as a new dictatorship of the proletariat. And in a final act betraying that he is finally beginning to question communism, Woody asks Andy (surely his first request of the state in his entire life!) that his comrades be given to Bonnie. Andy agrees, and takes the extra step of giving Woody to Bonnie as well, finally dissolving his duties to the state.

Meanwhile, Ken and Barbie now lead Sunnyside, making it a "fun and groovy" socialist utopia. (Its actual day-to-day operation is, of course, left vague, but there is apparently lots of dancing in the streets.) Having risen up and overthrown Lotso, the toys can now operate on the basis of mutual equality. A happy ending for everyone.

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1. The same seems to apply to the Green Army Men who leave earlier, but only because they (pretty reasonably) believe they're going to get thrown away even when other toys just go to the attic.
 2. Very *Street Corner Society*, so another possible reading is that they're fleeing fascist Italy.
 3. Perhaps Ken realizes that he will get to lead a Lotso-less Sunnyside?

Brought to You by the Letter S

June 21, 2010

[Original link](#)

When you're writing laws, changing the smallest details can have huge effects. But I've never seen anything as big as what happened this week, when the White House gutted an entire section of financial regulation by removing the letter **s**.

Right now, shareholders of big companies vote to decide who will be on the board of directors by filling out a mail-in ballot called a proxy card. But currently the corporation's CEO gets to decide who's on the card! The result is a board hand-picked by the CEO — and they return the favor by providing CEOs with exorbitant salaries.

The current financial regulation bill — in a provision passed by both the House and Senate — would change that by allowing shareholders with 5% of the stock to come together and propose additional names for the ballot. But the White House is trying to gut this proposal at the last minute, and they've done it in an incredibly sneaky way — they removed the letter **s** from the end of the word shareholders.

Now instead of shareholders whose stock adds up to 3% coming together, you have to be a single shareholder with 5% of the stock all by yourself. And for most big companies, there just isn't anyone like that. Take GE, for example — its biggest shareholder only owns about 3.4% of the company.

So by removing a single letter, they managed to make this provision completely useless.

The White House is being barraged by major CEOs begging them to keep fighting for this provision — after all, no CEO wants to see their lavish salaries cut! As Barney Frank put it, “I think there are some people in the White House who think, ‘Well, we’re fighting the financial institutions, but why fight with some of the others, you know, the other corporations?’” Apparently they're so scared of a fight, they're willing to gut a provision passed by both the House and Senate.

If you're interested in fighting for real corporate reform, please sign our petition to the White House:

“Stop lobbying against shareholder power in corporate decision-making — and against protections that would finally rein in CEO pay. That's not change we can believe in.”

Add your name:

Sign

first name

last name

email

zip

Management, Organizing, Mobilizing

June 29, 2010

[Original link](#)

Management is art of getting people who work for you to accomplish things. It's a subtle and fascinating art, the applied version of my great intellectual love, sociology. It's usually practiced badly, but even when done badly it can accomplish incredible things. One person can only do so much on their own—their time, their powers, their creativity are all limited. But even an incompetent manager, who uses only a fraction of the powers of her employees, is capable of accomplishing tasks far beyond the range of any single person.

Organizing is the art of getting people who don't work for you to accomplish things. Many of the underlying concepts are the same but the execution is vastly more difficult. You don't really get to pick your people. The people you get don't simply follow instructions, they must be persuaded and cajoled and made to understand your vision. But when it works, they accomplish great things you never would have allowed them to try.

Organizing has many forms. The obvious one is where you take a batch of volunteers and try to shape them into a manageable force. The best are selected, developed, promoted, and taught to do the same. It is like traditional management in reverse: instead of starting with the top of a hierarchy and building down through hiring, you start with a bunch of people at the bottom and try to build them up through training and promotion.

But organizing also means finding other leaders, people embedded in management structures (organizations) of their own, and using them toward a common goal. Sometimes this means explicit direction of their efforts, as in a coalition, where you get the heads of various groups to all work on a common project, or sometimes it's simply having them lend their name or knowledge to the cause. A great organizer of this sort develops rich networks they can quickly call upon in need. (Journalists can be good organizers in this sense, developing connections with sources and experts they can leverage to create a story.)

Organizing is most prevalent in my own field of politics, where the work I tend to do is often called "online organizing." This term usually means the kind of stuff you see on the MoveOn mailing list: emails asking you to call your senator, host a house party, attend a vigil — but mostly tell your friends and give us money. Since I got into this business, cranky old-timers have been yelling at me that organizing people over the Internet is impossible, that you have to organize people face-to-face. This struck me as a ridiculous claim (and still does), but I think I now see the truth these critics are reacting to.

Online organizing is a huge misnomer. Sending emails to millions isn't organizing, any more than writing company wide memos is managing. It does not teach people new skills or persuade them of a larger vision or get them to continue the work themselves. It takes people where they are and gives them small things they can do from there.

Mobilizing can be done thru any medium. The folks who knock on your door to ask for your vote (or donation) are face-to-face mobilizers. You can do the same by telephone or television (call now to contribute!). It is, however, a one-way relationship. You are simply a number on a list.

But this doesn't mean online organizing is impossible, just that it isn't often done. Obviously it's much harder than mere mobilization—and much more complicated—but it's much more rewarding as well. It is what makes for a successful open source project, or a thriving online community. The problem is one of scale — and that's true when it's done through any medium. IAF and ACORN never had five million members. Still, this seems to be the genuinely important question: whether the scaling power of the Internet allows for a revolution in the scale of real organizing. I don't know, but the first step toward answering it is being clear about what it means.

The Perils of Parfit 1: Credible Commitments

July 1, 2010

[Original link](#)

On the advice of several people, I started reading Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons*. I haven't gotten very far, but it seems to me to be a horribly muddled book, wrong on just about every point. So perhaps this will be an ongoing series where I debunk the book in sequence. I apologize to my readers if these posts seem obvious and not very interesting. That's because I think the situations Parfit discusses are actually quite simple and it's only his muddled terminology that makes them seem tricky.

Let's clarify Parfit's discussion of self-defeating theories, which really comes down to a discussion about credible commitments. For simplicity, imagine there is no interest or inflation and your only goal in life is to maximize how much money you have. Thus an act is rational iff it contributes to that goal.

Case 1: There are two buttons. SUBTRACT removes \$1000 from your bank account, ADD adds \$5000 to your bank account. Obviously it is rational to press ADD and irrational to press SUBTRACT.

Case 2: There is one button, BOTH, which does both at the same time. Obviously it is rational to press BOTH, since it results in a net gain of \$4000.

Case 3: There is a different button, DELAY, which adds \$5000 to your bank account today and then removes \$1000 in exactly one week. (DELAY is a weird button — to prevent you from using it twice at the same time, it stays down for the whole week and only pops back up once the \$1000 is removed.) Obviously it is rational to press DELAY since it too results in a net gain of \$4000.

Case 4: There are two buttons: DELAY, which is the same as before, and EVADE, which changes your bank account number so that none of the other buttons work. You can only press each button once and they have no other consequences. It is rational to press DELAY and then EVADE, for a net gain of \$5000.

When is it rational to press EVADE? Only when you don't expect to be able to press DELAY ever again. (EVADE gains you at most \$1000, while DELAY gains you at least \$4000.) If you could press DELAY twice, would it be rational to hit EVADE after the first press? Of course not, it'd cost you at least \$4000. But Parfit seems to suggest one is acting rationally irrationally by not pressing it. The notion seems nonsensical.

Case 5: Same two buttons, except after you press the DELAY button it engages a little impenetrable metal cover that physically prevents you from pressing

EVADE. It's rational to press DELAY. Then it's rational to press EVADE, but that's kind of irrelevant, because it's also impossible.

Case 6: Same as 5, except it injects you with a serum that prevents you from pressing EVADE. Again, it's rational to press DELAY and then rational but impossible to press EVADE.

I don't see a big difference between these two cases, but Parfit seems to think the difference is vital.

Perhaps it's the fact that another person is involved that leads to the complications?

Case 7: Same as 4, except the \$1000 goes into Bob's account and only Bob can press DELAY. Bob has the same notion of rationality as you and thus will only press DELAY if he believes you will not press EVADE. You could promise not to press it, but it would be irrational for you to keep that promise so Bob rightly does not believe it. However, it would be rational for you to engage the impenetrable cover or take the serum that prevents you from pressing EVADE.

There is no rational irrationality. Your goal of maximizing your money is not self-defeating. This all seems like the most obvious, unarguable stuff in the world. So I don't see why Parfit is so confused about it.

You Don't Know John (Maynard Keynes)

July 27, 2010

[Original link](#)

From the right, [Gary Becker](#) writes:

Keynes and many earlier economists emphasized that unemployment rises during recessions because nominal wage rates tend to be inflexible in the downward direction.

From the left, [Matt Yglesias](#) writes:

...the Keynesian prescription is not only for the government to run deficits in response to recessions, but to run surpluses in expansions. Thus, the Clinton administration's fiscal policies were arguably "Keynesian" but the Reagan and (especially) George W Bush administrations were implementing an agenda that flew in the face of Keynes' ideas much more clearly than anything Angela Merkel's ever done.

Neither of these are true at all. Pretty much the very first thing Keynes says in the general theory is that downwardly-inflexible nominal wage rates (sticky wages) are a *good* thing. And he spends a large part of chapter 8 denouncing the practice of saving surpluses (sinking funds).

So where do they get this stuff? While these aren't the views of Keynes, both these views are held by the so-called "New Keynesians" — people like Paul Krugman and Greg Mankiw, who have tried to shoehorn a moderate version of Keynes into classical economics. These proponents are rather more prominent than more traditional Keynesians like Jamie Galbraith, so political commentators hear their view and assume it's a faithful representation of Keynes' own.

Perhaps Keynes was wrong — after all, we shouldn't slavishly follow the scribbles of some defunct economist. But if so, we should tell the truth and admit we're disagreeing with Keynes, not expounding his ideas. (Both Yglesias and Becker have not run a correction, despite my emails.) Furthermore, we should actually engage with Keynes' argument.

On sticky wages, Keynes says that if nominal wages could fall, then nominal costs would fall, which would mean that nominal prices would fall, which means that real wages would end up staying the same.¹ But, even worse, if there was no stickiness at all, nothing would stop nominal wages from falling further and

further until eventually everyone was paid zero.² I have never heard the New Keynesians respond to this argument.

On the question of surpluses, Keynes criticizes them as a pointless reduction of aggregate demand. They create unemployment because they take money out of circulation for no real purpose. It's just supposed to sit around until a "rainy day" when the economy isn't doing so well. But when that rainy day comes, the reason the economy isn't doing well is because people are out of work. If that's true, you can simply print more money to get them back to work without any ill effects. (Printing money only causes inflation at full employment.) You don't get any benefit from having taken the money out of circulation earlier.³

Both these seem like strong arguments to me. Perhaps that's why it's easier to pretend they don't exist.

1. [Chapter 2:](#)

...if money-wages change, one would have expected the classical school to argue that prices would change in almost the same proportion, leaving the real wage and the level of unemployment practically the same as before, any small gain or loss to labour being at the expense or profit of other elements of marginal cost which have been left unaltered.

2. [Chapter 21:](#)

If, on the contrary, money-wages were to fall without limit whenever there was a tendency for less than full employment, the asymmetry would, indeed, disappear. But in that case there would be no resting-place below full employment until either the rate of interest was incapable of falling further or wages were zero. In fact we must have some factor, the value of which in terms of money is, if not fixed, at least sticky, to give us any stability of values in a monetary system.

3. [Chapter 8:](#)

We must also take account of the effect on the aggregate propensity to consume of Government sinking funds for the discharge of debt paid for out of ordinary taxation. For these represent a species of corporate saving, so that a policy of substantial sinking funds must be regarded in given circumstances as reducing

the propensity to consume. It is for this reason that a change-over from a policy of Government borrowing to the opposite policy of providing sinking funds (or *vice versa*) is capable of causing a severe contraction (or marked expansion) of effective demand.

[...]

Or again, in Great Britain at the present time (1935) [thanks to] the principles of “sound” finance [sinking funds are so large] that even if private individuals were ready to spend the whole of their net incomes it would be a severe task to restore full employment...The sinking funds of local authorities now stand ... at an annual figure of more than half the amount which these authorities are spending on the whole of their new developments. [footnote giving the amounts] Yet it is not certain that the Ministry of Health are aware, when they insist on stiff sinking funds by local authorities, how much they may be aggravating the problem of unemployment.

Campaigners, Please!

August 4, 2010

[Original link](#)

So I'm looking to hire a campaigner for my online progressive group. What does a campaigner do? Well, the basic process looks like this:

1. Read the news and look for a political fight that might interest people.
2. Think of a way that ordinary people can get involved.
3. Write an email briefly explaining the issue and persuading people to take action on it.
4. Channel those actions into a wider impact, e.g. by informing the press, delivering petitions, running ads, etc.

People who might be a good fit for this include political bloggers, who have a lot of experience with 1 and 3, and people who have run campaigns on local issues, giving them experience with 2 and 4. It's also helpful if you have experience with web design and HTML.

But the most important thing is just being creative and persuasive and passionate about the issues. Every campaign is different and each one has to be run differently to seize people's attention. Someone who can think outside the box and try something new each time is going to be more successful than someone who's an expert at the standard way of doing things.

Having done it myself, nothing competes with the thrill of running a campaign. Instead of just getting upset about the news, you get to do something about it. You get to rally people to action, explain the story to the media, and really get into a fight with the bad guys. And every once in a while you actually win a victory that improves the lives of millions of people. It's ridiculously exciting, fun, and rewarding.

If you're interested, send a resume and a short note persuading me to take some action to me@aaronsw.com with "campaigner" in the subject.

Rethinking Hyperbolic Discounting (or, The Percentage Fallacy, Continued)

October 7, 2010

[Original link](#)

In a famous experiment, some people are asked to choose between \$100 today or \$120 tomorrow. Many choose the first. Meanwhile, some people are asked to choose between \$100 sixty days from now or \$120 sixty-one days from now. Almost everyone choose the latter. The puzzle is this: why are people willing to sacrifice \$20 to avoid waiting a day right now but not in the future?

The standard explanation is hyperbolic discounting: humans tend to weigh immediate effects much more strongly than distant ones. But I think the actual psychological effect at work here is just [the percentage fallacy](#). If I ask for the money now, I may have to wait 60 seconds. But if I get it tomorrow I have to wait 143900% more. By contrast, waiting 61 days is only 1.6% worse than waiting 6 days. Why not wait an extra 2% when you get 16% more money for it?

Has anyone done a test confirming the percentage fallacy? A good test would be to show people treat the \$100 vs. \$120 tradeoff as equivalent to the \$1000 to \$1200 tradeoff.

The Real Problem with Waiting for “Superman”

October 8, 2010

[Original link](#)

[crossposted at [HuffPo](#)]

Waiting for “Superman”, in case you haven’t heard, is the hot new film from *Inconvenient Truth* director Davis Guggenheim. While his last film capitalized on liberal guilt over destroying our planet (and maybe voting for Ralph Nader?), “*Superman*” (yes, the film is weirdly insistent on those unnecessary quotation marks) is for people who feel bad about sending their kids to private school while poor kids wallow in the slums.

“Teaching should be easy,” Guggenheim declares as we watch a cartoon teacher rip open his students’ skulls and pour what looks like blue Spaghetti-O’s inside. (When he closes the skulls the kids sprout wings and fly out the open classroom window.) This is about as close as the film gets to depicting actual teaching. (I checked with the friend who paid for my ticket and he confirmed this scene was meant seriously, though thankfully not literally.)

Despite repeatedly insisting poor kids just need better teachers, the film never says what it is that better teachers actually do. Instead it highlights the voices of American Express pitchman Geoffrey Canada and Bill Gates, whose obsessions with higher standardized test scores have led their schools to cancel recess and art in favor of more hours of scripted memorization. Why bother with art if teaching is just about filling kids’ heads with pre-determined facts?

The real crisis in American education isn’t teachers’ unions preventing incompetent teachers from getting fired (as awful as that may be), it’s the single-minded focus on standardized test scores that underlies everything from Bush’s No Child Left Behind to Obama’s Race to the Top to the charter schools lionized in the film. Real education is about genuine understanding and the ability to figure things out on your own; not about making sure every 7th grader has memorized all the facts some bureaucrats have put in the 7th grade curriculum.

This would be obvious if the film dared to show real teaching in the schools it lauds. Instead of the rich engagement you imagine from progressive private schools, you find teachers who read from assigned scripts while enforcing a regime of zero-tolerance discipline. They’re nightmarish gulags where children’s innate creativity is beaten out of them and replaced with martial order. Because standardized behavior is what makes you do well on standardized tests.

Film is the perfect medium for showing what this life is like. Seeing terrified kids up on the big screen, you can’t help but empathize with them. So we never see it. Instead, the film hides behind charts and graphs and interviews. “When

you see a great teacher, you are seeing a work of art,” Geoffrey Canada tells us, but this is something Guggenheim would rather tell than show.

The film has other flaws. It insists all of America’s problems would be solved if only poor kids would memorize more: Pittsburgh is falling apart not because of deindustrialization, but because its schools are filled with bad teachers. American inequality isn’t caused by decades of Reaganite tax cuts and deregulation, but because of too many failing schools. Our trade deficit isn’t a result of structural economic factors but simply because Chinese kids get a better education. Make no mistake, I desperately want every kid to go to a school they love, but it seems far-fetched to claim this would solve all our country’s other problems. At the end of the day, we have an economy that works for the rich by cheating the poor and unequal schools are the result of that, not the cause.

I’m glad a talented filmmaker has decided to draw attention to the horrible inequities in our nation’s schools. But I’m terrified that the solutions put forth by its proponents will only make things worse. We know what happens when we fire teachers who don’t do enough to raise their students’ test scores, or when we adopt more stringent requirements for classroom curriculum: we squeeze out what little genuine education these schools have left. And that’s something we should really feel guilty about.

When Brute Force Fails

October 18, 2010

[Original link](#)

Liberals don't like talking about crime. The classic answer—fixing the root causes of crime—now seems hopelessly ambitious. And our natural sympathy for the millions ground down by an out-of-control prison system and a pointless war on drugs doesn't play well with voters, especially when most criminals can't vote. The general belief seems to be that the problem of crime has been solved—after all, crime levels have dropped dramatically since the law-and-order 80s—and that the real problem now is not too much crime, but too much punishment. If voters don't agree, it's because TV news continues to obsess over violent crime even as actual occurrences of it have cratered, leaving behind a population who wants to do even more to crack down on an army of bad guys who don't really exist. The smartest liberal position on crime seems to be changing the subject and talking about white-collar crime instead (which, as recent economic news has made clear, is a real epidemic).

Mark Kleiman, in his brilliant new book, *When Brute Force Fails*, takes a different view. Crime, aside from drug crimes (where his work persuasively argues that “the abuse of illicit drugs is a human tragedy but not a major threat to the social order”), is serious. (Presumably this only applies to classic violent crimes; it's obvious this logic doesn't work for violations of copyright law and civil disobedience.) Even where there's a small amount of actual crime, it's possible that's just because people are wasting so much time preventing it. There's a serious social cost to having to remember to lock our doors and carry our keys around all the time, let alone the money we waste on burglar alarms and car-tracking services and all the rest.

While I find the methodology he uses to show it wildly problematic¹, I agree with his point that crime really sucks. Even if a burglar only causes \$400 worth of damage, I'd pay far more than \$400 to prevent a burglary — the loss of privacy, the sense of violation, the disruption of my normal order, the distraction of having to deal with police and repairmen and insurance agents, etc. all add up to make burglary a nightmare well above the direct economic damage it causes.

Such things are a frustration for white suburbanites, but for poor people stuck in the ghetto, they're a nightmare. Crime is yet another disadvantage and a particularly noxious one at that. Even aside from all the other indignities suffered by the poor, just imagining life in a crime-ridden neighborhood is enough to make your skin crawl.

But, Kleiman insists, we also have to count the harm to the criminals! Going through lengthy court proceedings, spending years in abusive prisons, having

to deal with officious parole officers and the loss of liberty they cause are all serious costs and we can't wave them away just because they happen to the bad guys. Law enforcement isn't a zero-sum game: both criminals and victims can benefit from less punishment.²

So there's the question: How can we have less crime with less punishment? The first thing to notice is that low-crime is an equilibrium state: if nobody is committing any crimes, all anti-crime resources can be focused on anyone who decides to break the law, making it irrational for them to even try. But high-crime is also an equilibrium (assuming reasonable levels of punishment): if everyone is breaking the law, the police can't possibly stop all of them, so it's not so risky to keep on breaking the law.

To reduce both crime and punishment, you just need to tip the society from one equilibrium to the other. And, Kleiman argues, we can do that with a technique he calls "dynamic concentration." Imagine there are three robbers (Alice, Bob, and Carol) and one policeman (Eve). Eve can only stop one robber at a crime, so if more than one person is committing a burglary at the same time, she decides to be fair and switch around who she arrests — sometimes she nabs Alice, sometimes Bob, sometimes Carol.

The problem is that the robbers know this and they know it means they only have a 1/3 chance of getting caught. A guaranteed arrest is bad news, but a 1/3 chance of getting arrested isn't worth quitting over. So the robbers keep on robbing and the cop keeps failing to keep up with them.

But now imagine Eve adopts a new policy: dynamic concentration. Instead of randomly deciding who to go after, she goes after people in alphabetical order. So if Alice is committing a crime, Eve always goes after her first if she's committing a crime — otherwise Bob, and then Carol. Now Alice knows that if she robs someone, she's guaranteed to get caught (instead of just having a one-third chance), so she decides to sit this one out. You might think this would just lead Bob to step into the breach, but now that Alice is out, Eve can turn her focus to Bob instead. So Bob also decides to call it quits. That just leaves Carol, who Eve now gets to watch like a hawk, and so Carol also gives up the game. And there you have it: dynamic concentration stops all the crime without adding any more police.

Obviously things aren't so clean in the real world, but I think this is the first game-theoretic argument I've read that seems to have some real force. Kleiman backs it up with some messier simulations and some real-life examples. Unfortunately, most are stories about cracking down on drugs or other unserious crimes like squeegee men, but the general point seems to work.

For twenty years, High Point, North Carolina had tried to fight the crack dealing in the city's African-American West End neighborhood. Any viewer of *The Wire* can guess the results: as soon as they made a case against one drug dealer, another would jump in to take his place. So with the help of crime scholar David Kennedy, they tried a new approach. First, they spent months building

trust between the police and the community to build consensus that the drug trade was something worth stopping. Then they pushed extra resources into the neighborhood and started putting together cases against the dealers — but didn't make any arrests. Only when they had a case against every known dealer did they act.

Even then they didn't make arrests. They visited the dealer's homes with a neighborhood leader, who told them that the neighborhood had decided they had to go straight. Meanwhile a cop presented them with the legal case against them. The pair asked the dealer to quit and offered whatever services—tattoo removal, job training—would help them do that. Ten of the thirteen dealers took them up on the offer, leaving plenty of room for the justice system to lock up the remaining three, plus the one new dealer who tried to take over their old business. Five years later, the market is still closed, and the police have been able to direct their resources to pull the same trick on the other drug markets. Crime is down, and arrests are down too. Dynamic concentration works, with the city's different drug markets standing in for Alice, Carol, and Bob. (The other examples—especially Hawaii's HOPE program—are even more interesting, but take longer to tell.)

Dynamic concentration isn't a panacea. Obviously it only works where the costs of monitoring are much less than the costs of enforcement. But this still leaves lots of opportunities and clever selection of the population to concentrate on can significantly decrease the cost of monitoring.

While the big idea of dynamic concentration is at the center of the book, it's not one of those one-trick monographs where the author lays out one good idea and then spends the rest of the book repeating it. Instead, the book ranges over the whole theory and practice crime control in America and nearly every page is filled with interesting facts and a new perspective.

And in a brilliant final chapter, he turns his lens on himself and asks what could go wrong with his proposals. For an intellectual, the level of humility and self-criticism involved is truly impressive. (He confesses to probably all of the complaints that you're thinking about raising right now.)

For anyone interested in policy analysis, this book should be a classic. It shows how simple tools (calculating the scale of the problem, modeling it with game theory, and calculating the costs of a solution) can have radical implications.

- [Buy the book](#)

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1. Kleiman uses surveys asking people how much they would pay to achieve a ten percent reduction in a crime. Aside from all the usual problems with such willingness-to-pay metrics, this seems like a particularly meaningless question. I don't have a good sense of what the crime rate is, let alone

what a 10% decrease in it would look like. I can't possibly assign a sensible monetary value to something so abstract. It'd be better to ask people what they'd pay to prevent one crime, assuming the crime rate is low enough that [Karelis-type effects](#) don't come into play.

2. Since a rational criminal would by definition be better off committing the crime, this mainly comes up in cases of information asymmetry. Unlike in playground games of Cops and Robbers, real police are better off warning the criminals away from doing crime than tricking them into doing it and then sneaking up and catching them.

Outline of a Digital Preservation System

October 18, 2010

[Original link](#)

I hate losing data. Don't you wish there was some way to store stuff so that it will be available forever, so that your websites could live on even after you die? But it's a tricky problem. There are a number of things you have to worry about:

- Hardware failure. The disk you had your data on died and you can't get data off it anymore. Or, even worse, your data has been silently corrupted.
- Hardware skew. Your disks are still good, but they're ancient and obscure and no one has drivers for them anymore. (I have some old IBM tapes that I can't read because the devices are so obscure.)
- Filesystem skew. You can read the raw devices but the data was stored on it using a striping technology no modern operating systems implement, with a filesystem which stopped being supported after its lead developer was arrested for murder, and then encoded with a higher-level file distribution system that used erasure coding to spread data across multiple machines.
- Format skew. Your documents may be stored in an obscure format that nobody has a reader for anymore.
- Institutional failure. The people in charge of making sure all the other problems get addressed die or move on.

There's a basic outline to the skew problems: use the simplest, most popular choice possible and then move to a replacement as it shows signs of going permanently extinct. It seems unlikely to me that ASCII text on a Unix file system in a JBOD configuration will ever completely die off, but if it does you'll be safe for a long time before you'll have to move things over.

Similarly, for the failure problems you want: a) to choose reliable material, b) to implement constant sanity checks, and c) have several layers of backups if the sanity checks don't get executed or fail.

OK, so let's get to a specific outline. You have a bunch of standard files (mostly ASCII derivatives, maybe PDFs) in a standard file system (UFS?) mounted read-only (with hardware-level write-prevention) from a bunch of standard SATA disks (no RAID or anything like that) on some machines running a modern Unix. You can serve these files up using bog-standard HTTP (or

any other file transfer protocol that can be mapped to the model of a Unix file system). The file names (less a prefix for mounting the drive) are designed to be globally unique. The best way to do this is probably to combine a date and a DNS name (ala `tag:`). So you could imagine this file to be at:

```
/hdd7/2002/www.aaronsw.com/weblog/preservation.html
```

Alongside the files, for each drive you have a manifest that lists the date the file was added to the preservation system followed by the globally-unique filename and two hashes: a fast hash (probably CRC32) and a standard secure hash (probably SHA1). As a background process, you (nightly? weekly?—depends on how long it takes, I guess) go through each file and compare its fast hash against the one listed in the manifest. If the comparison fails, you go offline and sound the alarm.

Going offline isn't so bad, because you have at least two other replicas in different geographic locations under different political regimes. Any request traffic can go to them instead while you restore your system.

For safety, you should probably toss the whole drive and get it restored from one of the replica sites.

The manifest from each system at each site is replicated on a series of index servers (at least one at each site). The index servers run a simple HTTP redirector that maps from the secure hash or the globally unique filename to a box storing the file, using a table they generate from the manifests.

If bandwidth isn't an issue, the index server should proxy the data instead of redirecting you to preserve URLs. If it is an issue, you should probably try to reset the DNS name to any server which has failed to point to another redirector. So you can imagine the stable URL being:

```
http://preservation.example.org/2002/www.aaronsw.com/weblog/preservation.html
```

and that redirecting to:

```
http://27.preservation.example.org/hdd7/2002/www.aaronsw.com/weblog/preservation.html
```

which serves the file. When 27 fails (i.e. is no longer serving all the data it was previously serving), it's given a new number and the DNS A record for 27.web.resource.org is changed to point to the index servers. The index servers strip off any hdd prefix (such prefixes are prohibited at the root of the global namespace) and serve the request as they do a request for the stable URL.

The index servers also have a manifest of the manifests (with similar regular verification procedures). Each data server regularly publishes a file with the date and the secure hash of the manifest that its regular check was compared

against. The index servers regularly request this file from each of the data servers and take offline any servers whose manifest hash doesn't match the one in their manifest of manifests.

Finally, a master manifest is generated by combining all of the manifests, sorting by date, and removing duplicates. (If in this process you find two different hashes for the same file, go offline and sound the alarm.) At the end of every day during which files were added to the collection, the system verifies that the secure hash of all the files up through yesterday is the same as it was yesterday and then makes sure the index servers all agree on the new hash. If there is consensus, the hash of this new master manifest is calculated and very widely published (perhaps including a classified ad in the largest newspaper in each country). You should always be able to work backward from this widely-published hash to a correct state of the entire system. And since all of the manifests are public, anyone with a recent newspaper and some time on their hands should be able to verify the accuracy of their data.

Now this protects against accidental day-to-day hardware failure, but you also want to protect against long-tail catastrophic failures. You should use heterogeneous systems to avoid simultaneous hardware failure or software vulnerability, there should be no one with physical or electronic access to all the systems, as much as possible you should not be able to delete data without physical access, and the locations should be physically secure. Does it make sense to make an alternate copy (i.e. paper with bytes written in OCR-A or something?) in case of an EMP blast or something like that? Thinking about how to protect against these obscure failures seems like the trickiest part.

This system should be fairly simple to implement and operate (I can't imagine it being more than a couple pages of Python code) but even so you need someone to implement and operate it.

Recall that we have at least three sites in three political jurisdictions. Each site should be operated by an independent organization in that political jurisdiction. Each board should be governed by respected community members with an interest in preservation. Each board should have at least five seats and move quickly to fill any vacancies. An engineer would supervise the systems, an executive director would supervise the engineer, the board would supervise the executive director, and the public would supervise the board.

There are some basic fixed costs for operating such a system. One should calculate the high-end estimate for such costs along with high-end estimates of their growth rate and low-end estimates of the riskless interest rate and set up an endowment in that amount. The endowment would be distributed evenly to each board who would invest it in riskless securities (probably in banks whose deposits are ensured by their political systems).

Whenever someone wants to add something to the collection, you use the same procedure to figure out what to charge them, calculating the high-end cost of maintaining that much more data, and add that fee to the endowments (split

evenly as before).

What would the rough cost of such a system be? Perhaps the board and other basic administrative functions would cost \$100,000 a year, and the same for an executive director and an engineer. That would be \$300,000 a year. Assuming a riskless real interest rate of 1%, a perpetuity for that amount would cost \$30 million. Thus the cost for three such institutions would be around \$100 million. Expensive, but not unmanageable. (For comparison, the Internet Archive has an annual budget of \$10-15M, so this whole project could be funded until the end of time for about what 6-10 years of the Archive costs.)

Storage costs are trickier because the cost of storage and so on falls so rapidly, but a very conservative estimate would be around \$2000 a gigabyte. Again, expensive but not unmanageable. For the price of a laptop, you could have a gigabyte of data preserved for perpetuity.

These are both very high-end estimates. I imagine that were someone to try operating such a system it would quickly become apparent that it could be done for much less. Indeed, I suspect a Mad Archivist could set up such a system using only hobbyist levels of money. You can recruit board members in your free time, setting up the paperwork would be a little annoying but not too expensive, and to get started you'd just need three servers. (I'll volunteer to write the Python code.) You could then build up the endowment through the interest money left over after your lower-than-expected annual costs. (If annual interest payments ever got truly excessive, the money could go to reducing the accession costs for new material.)

Any Mad Archivists around?

[Thanks to Brewster Kahle and the Internet Archive for inspiring many of the technical details of this scheme.]

A Censorship-Resistant Web

December 21, 2010

[Original link](#)

Imagine someone put a document up at `http://pentagonpapers.com/volumes/1.html` that a) some people want to read and b) some people want to keep you from reading.

Step one: How it works now

On the current Web, the way you request such a document is like this:

1. You ask one of your pre-programmed root servers who is in charge of `.com`
2. They respond with VeriSign, so you ask VeriSign who is in charge of `pentagonpapers.com`
3. They respond with Acme ISP, so you ask ACME ISP where to find `pentagonpapers.com`
4. It responds with an IP address, so you request the page from that IP

The censors can ask VeriSign to give them control of `pentagonpapers.com`, they can try to shut down Acme ISP, they can try to prevent you from getting hosting, and they can try to shut down your IP. All of these have been used recently, with some success. You need a backup plan.

Let's imagine we want this URL to resolve in an uncensorable way. How would we do it?

Step one: Domain name ownership

First we would have a *certificate authority* (CA) which would sign statements of the form: "As of [DATE], [DOMAIN NAME] is owned by the holder of [PUBLIC KEY]." (Let's call this a *certificate*.) Conveniently, there's already a whole industry of trusted businesses that make these statements — they're called SSL certificates.

The problem is that CAs are presumably just as subject to attack as the registrars (in fact, in some cases they are the registrars!). One possibility is to set up a certificate authority that will not sign such statements for people attempting to engage in censorship. It seems probable that such a policy would be protected

by the First Amendment in the US. However, “people engaging in censorship” is a somewhat subjective notion. Also, it’s always possible a court could order the certificate authority to turn over the private signing key (or the key could be obtained in some other way).

Another possibility is some kind of “rollback UI”. If you know vaguely when the censorship attempts started, you can only trust certifications made before that date. This is a somewhat difficult feature to implement in a way that makes sense to users, though. The best case scenario is one in which the user can clearly distinguish between a censored and uncensored page. In that case, if the page appears censored they can hit a “go back a month” button and the system will only trust certifications made more than a month prior to the certification it’s currently using. The user can hit this button repeatedly until they get an uncensored version of the page.

Step two: Web page authentication

Next the owner of the website will need to sign statements of the form “The content of [URL] had the hash [HASH] on [DATE].” (Let’s call this an *authenticator*.) Now given a page, a corresponding valid authenticator, and a corresponding valid certificate (call this trio an *authentic page*), browsers can safely display a page even if it can’t access the actual web server. The digital signatures work together to prove that the page is what the website owner wanted to publish. If a browser gets back multiple authentic pages, it can display the latest one (modulo the effects of the “go back a month” button).

Step three: Getting authentic pages

Set up a series of domain-to-certificate servers. These servers take a domain names (e.g. `pentagonpapers.com`) and returns back any certificates for it. Certificates can be obtained by [crawling the Web](#) or by being submitted by website owners or by being submitted by the CAs themselves.

Set up a series of URL-to-hash servers. These servers take a URL and return back any valid authenticators for that URL. Authenticators are very small, so each URL-to-hash server can probably store all of them. If spam becomes a problem, a little bit of hashcash could be required for storage. Website owners submit their authenticators to the URL-to-hash servers.

Set up a series of hash-to-URL servers. These servers take a hash and return a series of URLs which can be dereferenced in the normal way to obtain a file with that hash. People can submit hash-to-URL mappings to these servers and they can attempt to automatically verify them by downloading the file and seeing if the hash matches.¹² Again, these mappings are very small so each server can probably store all of them.³

Then there are a series of servers that host controversial files. Perhaps they saved a copy before the site was censored, perhaps they received it thru some out-of-band channel⁴. However they got it, they put them up on their website and then submit the URL to the hash-to-URL servers. Meanwhile, the site publisher submits an authenticator to the URL-to-hash servers.

Now, if a browser cannot obtain the `pentagonpapers` page through normal means it can:

1. Ask each domain-to-certificate server it knows for certificates for `pentagonpapers.com`
2. Ask each URL-to-hash server it knows for authenticators for the URL
3. Ask each hash-to-URL server it knows for alternative URLs
4. Download from the alternative URLs⁵

This can be implemented through a browser plugin that you click when a page appears to be unavailable. If it takes off, maybe it can be built in to browsers. (While I've been assuming the worst-case-scenario of censorship here, the system would be equally useful for sites that are just down because their servers couldn't handle the load or some other innocent failure.)

This system should work unless our adversary can censor every well-known CA, every well-known URL-to-hash server, every well-known hash-to-URL server, or every alternative URL.

Step four: Beyond the Web

We can help ensure this by operating at least one of each as a Tor hidden service. Because the operator of the service is anonymous, they are immune to legal threats.⁶ If the user doesn't have Tor, they can access them through tor2web.org.

Similarly, if you know your document is going to get censored, you can skip steps 1 and 2. Instead of distributing a `pentagonpapers.com` URL which is going to go down, you can just distribute the hash. For users whose browsers don't support this system, you can embed the hash in a URL like:

`https://hash2url.org/sha1/284219ea93827cdd26f5a697112a029b515dc9a4`

where `hash2url.org` is a hash-to-URL server that redirects you to a valid URL.

And, of course, if you somehow have access to a working P2P system, you can just it to obtain authentic pages.

Conclusions

What's nice about this system is that it gets you censorship resistance without introducing anything wildly new. There are already certificate authorities. There are already hash-to-URL servers. There are already mirrors. There's already Tor. (There's already tor2web.) The only really new thing specific to censorship resistance is URL-to-hash servers of the form I described, but they're very simple and hopefully uncontroversial.

There is some work to be done stitching all of these together and improving the UI, but unlike with some other censorship-resistance systems, there's nothing you can point to as having no good purpose except for helping bad guys. It's all pretty basic and generally useful stuff, just put together in a new way.

If you're interested in helping build something like this, please send me an email: me@aaronsw.com.

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1. Any server will have finite bandwidth, so an attacker could try to fool the hash-to-URL server by submitting a URL which when dereferenced never stops sending the data. The hash-to-URL servers should stop after a certain limit and mark the URL as unverified due to max file size. If the server ever obtains a file whose size is under the limit with that hash, it can toss all such URLs.
 2. URLs can go out of date so perhaps upon receiving sufficient complaints about a URL being “bad”, the server should attempt to reverify. Again, hashcash can be used throughout to avoid spam.
 3. A possible protocol for the above two servers is provided in [RFC 2169](#).
 4. I have ideas on how to automate this, naturally, but this essay is already far too long.
 5. *Optional bonus*: Use HTTP Range headers to download 1/n of the file from each of the n URLs. There are some circumstances where this could speed things up. Or maybe it's just annoying.
 6. This moves the censorship weak link to the distribution of introduction points to hidden services.⁷ But instead of being published by a DHT, introduction points can be distributed through a flood protocol⁸. Or maybe the DHT can be modified so that there's no obvious censorship point?
 7. The introduction points themselves can't be censored because they don't know who they're talking to. (I think they do in the current implementation of Tor, but this doesn't seem necessary. The hidden service can generate a new keypair for each introduction point and send the public key to the introduction point and to Alice.)

8. Is this too chatty? Probably. But remember, it's a last-case resort in some kind of insane police-state world where every country prevents people from running servers that give out the IP addresses of other servers that let you talk to a third server which will give you illegal content.

2010 Review of Books

January 3, 2011

[Original link](#)

Previously: [2009](#), [2008](#), [2007](#), [2006](#)

Unlinked means I recommend against getting it. Linked and italicized means it's actively recommended. Linked but not italicized is somewhere in between. The ordering is not entirely accurate.

1. [*Secrets*](#) by Daniel Ellsberg

A fantastic book. Ellsberg turns out to be an incredible writer and he tells not only his own incredible story of the fight to release the Pentagon Papers (did you know the *New York Times* actually stole them from his house?), but, even more interestingly, recounts a great deal of fascinating personal experience about what it was like working with McNamara and Kissinger and trying to maintain your sanity in the highest levels of government.

With the WikiLeaks cables in the news, this book is more relevant than ever. And personally, I can't wait until Ellsberg's next book, *The American Domsday Machine*, comes out. ([Here's an excerpt](#) from back when he planned to publish it online; since then [Bloomsbury snapped it up](#).)

Also, be sure to check out [these comments](#) from Davies and Galbraith.

2. [Bright-Sided](#) by Barbara Ehrenreich

A principled opposition to positive thinking has always been a common Ehrenreich theme and here she expands it to book-length, delivering exactly what you'd expect. The good news is that it's trenchant and witty, the bad news is that if you read a lot of Ehrenreich you probably know just what's coming.

3. [Scientist in the Crib](#) by Allison Gopnik, Andrew N. Meltzoff, Patricia K. Kuhl

Gopnik et al. summarize the findings of their wave of infant research — namely that infants are trying to puzzle things out through experiments rather than just sitting there waiting for their brains to grow. Gopnik, as you'd expect, is a good writer, but their attempts to link their research with philosophy are a bit strained and the research is still weak enough that the book doesn't quite feel like it pays off the title.

4. Predictably Irrational by Dan Ariely

Everybody's reading it, but that doesn't mean you have to. A collection of fairly mundane behavioral psychology experiments. If you're really so

deluded as to believe people aren't predictably irrational, it's not clear to me how a mere book could possibly help you.

5. [A Bee Stung Me So I Killed All The Fish](#) [PDF] by George Saunders

I love Saunders. I read [pretty much everything he's written](#) this year. This collection features some of his sillier pieces.

6. [The Braindead Megaphone](#) by George Saunders

Saunders is great, but he hasn't quite honed his nonfiction talents the way he has with his fiction. Some fantastic pieces, some fascinating ones, and some that don't quite work.

7. [Prince of the Marshes](#) by Rory Stewart

I occasionally have this fantasy, while reading the news, that whatever person I'm reading about has been fired and, through some miraculous fluke, I have been given their job. Would I make a hash of it? Or, would by naive mind and outsider's expertise allow me to do it in a fascinating new way?

In this book, Rory Stewart describes what happened when he was made a colonial governor of a province in Iraq. Brilliant fellow that he is, he does a remarkably good job all things considered, but also writes a questioning, soul-searching, fascinating book about the experience that highlights what an impossible task it really is.

8. [False Profits: Recovering from the Bubble Economy](#) by Dean Baker

A short, clear book on why the economy failed, who did it, and how to set it right by someone who was absolutely right about it all along. If you only want to read one book about the economic crisis, this would be an excellent choice.

9. [The Accidental Theorist](#) by Paul Krugman

A collection of Krugman's columns for *Slate*. It was before he really came off his neoliberal high, but after he learned to write, so while they're not always right they're almost always delightful (and *Slate* gave him a lot more freedom to be playful than the *Times* does). A very fun book about a wide range of issues in economics. (Here's [a nice review](#) from Brad DeLong.)

10. [The Political Brain](#) by Drew Westen

A decent book that could have been great if it had a real editor. There are really three things in here: 1) some fantastic examples of what Democrats *should* say if they have any spine (they're the kind of political propaganda Lakoff would write if Lakoff could write political propaganda), 2) some pretty bogus fMRI experiments to give the text in (1) the illusion of being backed in hard science, 3) several hundred pages of pointless rambling and repetition. If only an editor could have at least removed (3).

11. [Get Out The Vote](#) by Donald Green and Alan Gerber

Every year, thousands of Americans head out onto the streets to knock on their neighbors' doors and remind them to vote. Does any of it have any effect? Green and Gerber had the bright idea of running an experiment to see: Randomize the houses and ask the canvassers to knock on half of them and ignore the other half. Then, check the voting records (which are public) to see how many people in each group voted. The difference can tell you if you made a difference.

This brilliant idea sparked a whole field of experimental research about getting out the vote, which Green and Gerber summarize in this short book, aimed at some mix of scientists and political professionals.

12. [Eating the Dinosaur](#) by Chuck Klosterman

Absolutely fantastic. Could hardly put it down. Chuck Klosterman is definitely in the running for greatest living essayist. The book is a collection of essays, but not, as far as I can tell, essays that were ever published anywhere else. They're each just magical gems that fit together just perfectly. I even liked the stuff about football (and I've never seen a game of football).

I liked this so much I went on to read all his other books in reverse chronological order:

13. [Chuck Klosterman IV](#) by Chuck Klosterman

Great, but not quite *as* great.

14. [Killing Yourself in Order to Live](#) by Chuck Klosterman

Merely interesting.

15. [Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs](#) by Chuck Klosterman

Pretty good.

But I could not read either *Downtown Owl* (his novel) or *Fargo Rock City*. The rest I couldn't put down. I guess start with *Eating the Dinosaur* and see how far you get.

16. [Doubt is Their Product](#) by David Michaels

There are a vast array of government agencies, like the EPA and OSHA, whose job is to protect Americans by examining the science and outlawing things that hurt people. But what if the bad guys get to make up the science? David Michaels examines the whole industry of scientists-for-hire that try to manufacture doubt about the harms that big business commits. The title comes from a tobacco company memo and the tobacco companies are infamous for trying to shed doubt on the studies attacking their products, but the tactics they invented have now spread to every little chemical additive.

Michaels is now head of OSHA. On the one hand, it's great that such a corporate critic has such an influential position. On the other hand, this book is written in the style you'd expect from someone who could become head of OSHA: it's cautious, not polemical, and obsessed with proving the details, rather than the bigger picture.

17. [Why Not Socialism?](#) by G.A. Cohen

A great little book from the late philosopher Jerry Cohen. Not quite as great as [his comments about the shmoos](#), but a wonderful (and, sadly, all too rare) attempt to get people thinking about what socialism really means and whether it would be practical.

18. [Free Schools](#) by Jonathan Kozol

An angry little book not about how bad the school system is, like Kozol's usual beat, but about the people trying to change it. Both the folks, like Kozol, going into the inner city and trying to start new schools and the others running away to the land to frolic in freedom. Certainly a time capsule from the 1970s, but a fascinating one.

19. [Making Movies](#) by Sidney Lumet

A fairly self-absorbed book about what it means to make a movie. Some decent details about the practicalities in here, but mixed in with a lot of random musing and personal reflection.

20. [The Persistence of Poverty](#) by Charles Karelis

I feel like I've written so much about this book, but none of it appears to have made it to this blog. A great little book, just enough to explain one big idea and how it overturns what you think about classical economics and poverty and much else besides. Here's [a quick bit](#) from Matt Yglesias on it.

21. *Caught Between Two Worlds: The Diary of a Lowell Mill Girl*

22. *Mill* by David Macaulay

I don't understand why everyone loves Macaulay so.

23. *Belles of New England*

24. [The Industrial Worker](#) by Norman Ware

A fascinating history about how mill girls and shoemakers invented socialism and fought for it in the early days of the republic, before Jefferson's dream of independent men was crushed by the onslaught of industrialization.

25. [Acme Novelty Library, #19](#) by Chris Ware

Chris Ware is magic. This book consists mostly of a chapter from the work-in-progress *Rusty Brown*, which I was initially skeptical about, but

turns out to be just amazingly great. And *Building Stories* is incredible too.

Ware's method is to publish a page each week or so in a weekly paper (the Sunday *New York Times*, the *Chicago Reader*), then redraw the entire chapter and send it out as an edition of the *Novelty Library*, then redraw it a third time when the entire book is published. So this is a way of getting intermediate results, but you could just wait for the final books themselves (if they are ever finished).

26. [The Art of Lobbying](#) by Bertram Levine
A guide by a practitioner, for practitioners. Not great, but you can pick up a little bit of the flavor of the job from reading what the insiders say.
27. [Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization](#) by John Searle
Brilliant. [My review is here](#).
28. [The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger](#) by Wilkinson and Pickett
Not as good as I was hoping, but still a compelling case for equality with a vast array of data.
29. Women at Work
30. [Loom and Spindle](#) by Harriet Jane Hanson Robinson
A fantastic memoir of a fantastic time. Shows how radical even the moderate mill girls were.
31. [Priceless: The Myth of Fair Value and How to Take Advantage of It](#) by William Poundstone
Poundstone is one of the great science writers of all time. Here he takes on behavioral economics at the very top of his game. Full of fascinating ideas.
32. [Influence](#) by Robert Cialdini
Covers the usual results of the science on persuasion in a decent and clear way.
33. [Education and the Cult of Efficiency](#) by Raymond E. Callahan
Proof that business has been trying to take over education for over a century.
34. [On Writing](#) by Stephen King
Nothing earth-shattering, but it turns out Stephen King is actually a good writer. I honestly had no idea.

35. [Schooling in Capitalist America](#) (reread) by Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis
The best book on the real meaning of school.
36. [Becoming Attached](#) (reread) by Robert Karen
One of my favorite books of all time. Probably the best work of science writing I've ever read.
37. [Moral Politics](#) (reread) by George Lakoff
The best book on American politics.
38. [Unconditional Parenting](#) (reread) by Alfie Kohn
39. [How Children Fail](#) (reread) by John Holt
An amazing book on education.
40. [The Lobbyists](#) by Jeffrey Birnbaum
41. [Dumbing Us Down](#) by John Taylor Gatto
42. [Winning Your Election the Wellstone Way](#) by Jeff Blodgett and Bill Lofy and others
Really just a more-detailed version of *Politics the Wellstone Way*.
43. [Bonfire of the Vanities](#) by Tom Wolfe
Absolutely fantastic. A rare must-read novel — packed full of information about society, journalism, activism, race, etc. I can't convey just how good it really is. It's like *The Power Broker* of fiction.
44. [The Checklist Manifesto](#) by Atul Gawande
Not a bad book by any means, but its constrained focus means it's not quite as thrilling as Gawande's other books. It ends up mostly being a series of stories about how great checklists can be. Checklists are interesting, but they're a very small piece of the institutional change that this book should really be about. You get a few hints at other pieces through the well-researched examples, but they're only hints.
45. [The Revisionists Revised](#) by Diane Ravitch
Eminently skimmable — Ravitch barely even tries to mount an argument. Instead she just sort of fumes for a hundred pages or so at the radical scholars who dared to point out the invention of school wasn't so nobly motivated. Well, she's come a long way — now she's basically one of them. ([See this piece on her reversal.](#))
46. [Free at Last: The Sudbury Valley School](#) by Daniel Greenberg
Sudbury has some aspects of magic and nothing conveys them better than this book.

47. [Learning all the Time](#) by John Holt
48. [Political Polling](#) by Jeffrey Stonecash
Has some decent stuff on the business side of things — how to write polling reports and get clients and so on.
49. [The Big Short](#) by Michael Lewis
Oh, what to say about this book? It's well-written, as you'd expect, though no knockout. It tells a fascinating story about some aspects of the crisis, but goes far from unravelling the whole thing.
50. [How to Win Friends and Influence People](#) (reread) by Dale Carnegie
There's a reason this is a classic. It articulates a way of dealing with people, founded on concern and empathy, and convincingly argues that this kind style is actually the more productive one for getting things done. Instead of yelling at people to do things, you make them *want* to help you. And the book itself is a genius exemplar of this practice. Instead of berating you for being a jerk, like most people would, it persuades you to *want* to change.
51. [The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks](#) by Rebecca Skloot
Everyone has praised this book, and for good reason — it deftly interweaves an incredible story of science with the heartbreaking tragedy of the people science studies. Nothing earthshattering, but a great piece of writing.
52. [The Design of Design](#) by Fred Brooks
No deep lasting insights, but it is fascinating to watch Brooks struggle with these questions and it helps you struggle as well.
53. [REDACTED]
54. [The Case Against Standardized Tests](#) by Alfie Kohn
If you need more reasons to hate standardized tests, this book is full of them.
55. [When You Were a Tadpole and I Was a Fish](#) by Martin Gardner
In memoriam. In the same way that the spirit of Lenny Bruce passed through Bill Hicks and now Louis CK, the ghost of Feynman passed to Martin Gardner. His wit and curiosity, combined with a gift for explanation, did more than almost anyone to promote a genuine appreciation for math and science. This essay collection was his last book. (Although I'm sure many, many more will come posthumously.)
56. [Class War?: What Americans Really Think about Economic Inequality](#) by Benjamin Page and Lawrence Jacobs

If the state of politics gets you down about your fellow man, this well-researched scientific book will persuade you that even Americans are egalitarians at heart.

57. [Getting to Yes](#) by Roger Fisher and William Ury
This book is full of alternate strategies to try, but has very little on the key negotiation question of what to do about distributing the surplus.
58. [Expert Political Judgment](#) by Philip Tetlock
This book is kind of a bore to read, but the story it tells is fascinating, so [just read Louis Menand's summary](#) instead.
59. [101 Things I Learned in Business School](#) by Michael W. Preis with Matthew Frederick
A sweet, short book with cute pictures. Smart idea for a series.
60. [The Way We Were?](#) [\[online\]](#) by Richard Rothstein
A fantastic debunking of the “kids were so much smarter back then” myth.
61. [The Matthew Effect](#) by Daniel Rigney
Short and unmemorable.
62. [Taking Economic Seriously](#) by Dean Baker
A nice little summary of Dean's big ideas.
63. [The Meaning of David Cameron](#) by Richard Seymour
A short book on what's happened to British politics from a radical perspective.
64. [Managing to Change the World](#) by Allison Green and Jerry Hauser
The best book on the practicalities of management I've ever read. Whereas most books focus on vague and meaningless advice, this book is clear about the nuts and bolts.
65. [Workers in a Labyrinth](#) by Robert Jackall
Not as great as my favorite book of all-time, Jackall's *Moral Mazes*, but a fascinating look at how normal people make sense of their daily work lives.
66. [Disconnect](#) by Morris Fiorina
Fiorina has no idea what he's talking about in this one; it's completely ridiculous. There was a long period in American politics where, to prevent blacks from voting, southern whites excluded blacks from the Democratic party primary and then always voted for the Democratic nominee in the general. Blacks could legally vote, but only in the general, when it didn't make any difference.

The result was that a whole lot of racist, conservative politicians ended up in the Democratic Party and so politics appeared less polarized — there were conservatives Democrats (and some liberal Republicans) and the conservatives and the liberals could work “across party lines” to get things done.

Eventually the Supreme Court outlawed this noxious practice and the south started sending Republicans to Congress instead. That led to the conservatives leaving the Democratic party (and then the liberal Republicans getting kicked out too) and now when liberals or conservatives all work together, they only need to do so within one party. The result is what appears to be an increase in party polarization. Instead of a couple Democratic liberals and a couple Republican liberals writing a bill, you just get a bunch of Democratic liberals writing a bill.

This is such an obvious explanation and MoFi does his best to ignore it, looking everywhere but the obvious place so he can wonder about the dangers of polarization.

67. [The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo](#) (1 of 3) by Stieg Larsson

This book has no deep point to make, Nora Ephron has [ably chronicled its stylistic oddities](#), and the plot is more bizarre than compelling. Yet I couldn't put it down. Indeed, I dare say I enjoyed it.

68. [The Girl who Played with Fire](#) (2 of 3) by Stieg Larsson

69. [The Girl who Kicked Over the Hornet's Nest](#) (3 of 3) by Stieg Larsson

These two tell a different, and in some ways more interesting story than the first one, but it's not enough to change my fundamental evaluation.

However, I do much prefer the original titles, which translate roughly to: *Men Who Hate Women*, *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, and *The Exploding Social Safety Net*. I guess it's nice when that sort of thing can be a bestseller.

70. [The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them](#) by Elif Batuman

Hilarious, brilliant, fantastic. There's no justification for this book being as good as it is. Even I wasn't interested in reading a book about Russian literary scholars, but it's just incredible good and I'm glad I did.

71. [This is Your Country on Drugs](#) by Ryan Grim

I would not have thought the world needed another book on drugs, but this one turns out to be basically perfect. Comprehensive, erudite, funny, and realistic — Grim definitely inhales.

72. [Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Life](#) (1 of 6) by Bryan Lee O'Malley

73. [Scott Pilgrim vs. The World](#) (2 of 6) by Bryan Lee O'Malley

74. [Scott Pilgrim and the Infinite Sadness](#) (3 of 6) by Bryan Lee O'Malley
75. [Scott Pilgrim Gets It Together](#) (4 of 6) by Bryan Lee O'Malley
76. [Scott Pilgrim vs. The Universe](#) (5 of 6) by Bryan Lee O'Malley
77. [Scott Pilgrim's Finest Hour](#) (6 of 6) by Bryan Lee O'Malley
- You should *definitely* see the movie and then, if you do see it, it's worth reading the books. The books are much deeper and darker than the movie otherwise lets on. You realize that the film you saw as an example of joy and exuberance is actually incredibly depressing.
- By contrast, we will just forget that someone made a movie of *Bonfire of the Vanities*. Yeek.
78. Rework by Jason Fried and David Heinemeier Hansson
79. [Delivering Happiness](#) by Tony Hsieh
- This book is more the story of Hsieh's insane journey toward creating Zappos than the business advice book it looks like, but that's OK because it's an incredible story and Hsieh's exuberant retelling makes it impossible to put down.
80. [Meta Math!](#) by Gregory Chaitin
- Chaitin makes an obscure field you've never heard of like Algorithmic Information Theory sound interesting and fun, even if you don't know any math.
81. [Philosophy in a New Century](#) by John Searle
- A collection of some great essays by Searle.
82. The Essential Drucker by Peter Drucker
- Drucker sounds like the kind of person I should like, but I've never actually liked him.
83. Socks by Beverly Cleary
84. Beezus and Ramona by Beverly Cleary
85. Ramona the Pest by Beverly Cleary
86. Ramona the Brave by Beverly Cleary
- I read these to the seven-year-old, at her insistence. They weren't great, but they were at least tolerable, unlike some of the other stuff she likes.
87. XKCD, vol. 0 by Randall Munroe
- You no doubt already read xkcd online. Yet apparently many people also bought this paper copy. And they said print was dead!

88. [The Promise: President Obama, Year One](#) by Jonathan Alter
No great revelations, but it is shocking how little actual thought goes on in the Obama White House.
89. [Microeconomics](#) by Samuel Bowles
A textbook that totally upends the field of classical economics. Sadly, it can be a bit hard to follow, but I wrote [summaries of it here](#).
90. [All Art is Propaganda: Critical Essays](#) by George Orwell (with introduction by Keith Gessen)
Orwell is magic.
91. [Toyota Production System](#) by Taiichi Ohno
It's hard to find a better book that describes what lean production, in its original sense, is all about than this translated work from its creator. I hope that Ohno one day gets the recognition he deserves: as one of the world's first pioneers in what is undoubtedly the greatest human art form (with sex running a close second).
92. [Freedom](#) by Jonathan Franzen
Flashes of greatness mixed with strings of ridiculousness. (This is Franzen's Great American Novel, in case you hadn't heard.) Could have been truly great if Franzen had a great editor, but instead all his indulgences were left in. It's certainly no competition for DFW. (Sorry, Franzen!)
93. [The Machine that Changed the World: The Story of Lean Production—Toyota's Secret Weapon in the Global Car Wars That Is Now Revolutionizing World Industry](#) by James P. Womack, Daniel T. Jones, and Daniel Roos
Not bad, but feels a bit like reading a book by a bunch of blind men trying to explain the elephant charging toward them.
94. [Conscience of a Liberal](#) by Paul Krugman
Did I really read this book? I don't remember it at all.
95. [How to Become a Scandal](#) by Laura Kipnis
Kipnis' writing is fun, as always, but there's no real insight here.
96. [Poisoned for Pennies: The Economics of Toxics and Precaution](#) by Frank Ackerman
A fantastic book on the serious trouble with using mathematical cost-benefit analyses to try to decide when to protect the environment.
97. [Exit, Voice, and Loyalty](#) by Albert O. Hirschman
A disappointment. Perhaps all its insights have become common knowledge since then.

98. REDACTED

99. [Beyond the Hoax](#) by Alan Sokal

Alan Sokal returns again with a book collecting and integrating his papers on the philosophy of science (although there is still some repetition). Sokal's clear thinking on difficult philosophical issues is always appreciated, but this time around I'm convinced that [he's wrong about the Edinburgh set](#). The rest of it is great, though, especially if you haven't read it before. (There's also some good newish stuff too, including some stuff about *Prophets Facing Backward*.)

100. [Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy](#) by Barbara Ehrenreich
Ehrenreich makes a convincing case for the ecstatic tradition in American life. My only regret is that it lacks a chapter on raves.

101. [The Mind-Body Problem](#) by Rebecca Goldstein

A nice book about the problem with marrying a genius. See also: the film *Whatever Works*.

102. REDACTED

103. [The \\$12 Million Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art](#) by Don Thompson

This is another book about a weird subject that goes into too much detail. Thompson gives a decent overview of the art market, but then spends too much time getting into obscure detail about the people involved. Modern art sure is weird, though.

104. [The Cartoon Introduction to Economics](#) by Grady Klein and Yoram Bauman

Funny (especially the intro) and some basic economics, but nothing stupendous on either front.

105. [When Brute Force Fails](#) by Mark A. R. Kleiman

A fantastic book. More gushing [in my review](#).

106. [Money for Nothing](#) by John Gillespie and David Zweig

A quick read on why corporate boards suck so very much.

107. [Ha'Penny](#) (2 of 3) by Jo Walton

108. [Half a Crown](#) (3 of 3) by Jo Walton

A good fun detective story combined with interesting speculative fiction. (I read the first book, *Farthing*, years ago.)

109. [Reason and Rationality](#) by Jon Elster

Very, very short.

110. [An Object of Beauty](#) by Steve Martin
More on the art market. Martin is not a bad novelist, considering everything else he is, but I doubt I would have read the book if it had a different author's name on the cover.
111. [Shopgirl](#) by Steve Martin
Turns out to be basically the same book, except much creepier since you realize Martin's basically just using the book to work through his guilt about screwing over younger women.
112. [Good to Great](#) by Jim Collins
Most business books consist of a bunch of wacky ideas dressed up with even wackier names and presented as the Next Big Thing. Jim Collins greatly improves the genre, by replacing the wacky ideas with actual science. (Unfortunately, he continues the tradition of wacky names.)
Collins and his team picked out all Fortune 500 companies that sustained 4x market returns for more than 15 years (the great companies) and went back to find the transition point where they went from earning normal-market returns to their 4x returns. Then they found the most similar company at that transition point and used it as a control. They examined what differed between the great companies and the controls and describe it here. Of course, you have to trust Collins to pick out the right lessons, but the ones he chooses seem like very good ones.
113. [Good to Great and the Social Sector](#) by Jim Collins
A short little appendix describing how to apply these principles to non-profits.
114. [Built to Last](#) by Jim Collins and Jerry Porras
This book is very similar to *Good to Great* except it uses even worse science and even worse names. (Clock building? Really? Can't we just call it institution building?) Just read *Good to Great* — the important stuff from this book is presented in its last chapter anyway.
115. *Beyond Entrepreneurship* by Jim Collins and William C. Lazier
This book has pretty much no science (although fewer silly names as well). It's just a lazier version of *Built to Last*.
116. [You Lost Me There](#) by Rosencrans Baldwin
I knew Rosencrans had a novel out, but I was shocked to see it at the checkout counter. But it's great!
117. *Bigfoot: I Not Dead* by Graham Roumieu
Not funny.

118. [The Thick of It: The Missing DoSAC Files](#) by the writers of *The Thick of It*
Not that funny. (*The Thick of It* is one of the top 5 great TV shows of all-time, though.)
119. [The Lifecycle of Software Objects](#) [\[online\]](#) by Ted Chiang
Read it! Even people who know much more about sci-fi than me agree this is one of the great science fiction books of all time. It's a novel about the ethical issues with AI.
120. [Dr. Horrible and Other Horrible Stories](#) by Zack Whedon
Definitely funny, though not as great as the show.
121. [Wrestling With Moses](#) by Anthony Flint
A decent attempt at a biography of Jane Jacobs, though I would have wanted more detail on how she actually did what she did. Caro he is not — either in writing or research.
122. [Short: Walking Tall When You're Not Tall At All](#) by John Schwartz
Surely you've heard about the studies showing short people don't make as much as tall people. John Schwartz set out to write a book to cheer kids up about this fact, but looking into them he found it wasn't a fact at all. The result is a model of self-help through science and media criticism. Schwartz playfully teaches you enough math and science to be able to debunk the studies and enough personal advice to make a life on your own terms.

Disclosures: I know Rory Stewart, Dean Baker, John Schwartz, Ryan Grim, Randall Munroe, and Charles Karelis. Baker and Karelis provided me with free copies. Ryan Grim and John Schwartz have written about me in other forums.

In the future, I think I should probably do this monthly instead of one huge yearly installment.

My Twitter Viewer

January 4, 2011

[Original link](#)

I published this [on Twitter](#), but here's a blog post as well:

I made a little [Twitter viewer](#) that takes a Tweet ID (you can find them in the URL of a tweet's page on twitter.com) and shows you the whole conversation for that tweet.

Some examples:

- [Glenn Greenwald on the insurance file](#)
- [The epic Ptacek-Kaminsky debate](#)
- [Kevin Poulsen explains what's not in the logs](#)

The idea is to a) make it easier to read these conversations, b) make it easier to provide replies, c) provide a permanent link to what's becoming an increasingly-important conversation space.

Let me know what you think.

Squaring the Triangle: Secure, Decentralized, Human-Readable Names

January 6, 2011

[Original link](#)

When using computers, we like to refer to things with names. For example, this website is known as “www.aaronsw.com”. You can type that into your browser and read these words. There are three big properties we might want from such names:

- **secure:** that when you type the name in you actually get my website and not the website of an imposter
- **decentralized:** that no central authority controls all the names
- **human-readable:** that the name is something you can actually remember instead of some long string of randomness

In a classic paper, my friend Zooko argued that you can get at most two of these properties at any one time.

Recently, DNS legend Dan Kaminsky used this to argue that since electronic cash was pretty much the same as naming, Zooko’s triangle applied to it as well. He used this to argue that [BitCoin](#), the secure, decentralized, human-meaningful electronic cash system was impossible. I have my problems with BitCoin, but it’s manifestly not impossible, so I just assumed Kaminsky had gone wrong somewhere.

But tonight I realized that you can indeed use BitCoin to square Zooko’s triangle. Here’s how it works:

Let there be a document called the scroll. The scroll consists of a series of lines and each line consists of a tuple (name, key, nonce) such that the first N bits of the hash of the scroll from the beginning to the end of a line are all zero. As a result, to add a line to the scroll, you need to do enough computation to discover an appropriate nonce that causes the bits of the hash to be zero.

To look up a name, you ask everyone you know for the scroll, trust whichever scroll is the longest, and then start from the beginning and take the key for the first line with the name you’re looking up. To publish a name, you find an appropriate nonce and then send the new line to everyone you know.

OK, let’s pause there for a second. How do you steal names in such a system? First, you need to need to calculate a new nonce for the line you want to steal and every subsequent line. Second, you need to get your replacement scroll to

the user. The first is difficult, but perhaps not impossible, depending on how many lines ago the name you want to steal is. It requires having some large multiple of the rest of the network's combined CPU power. This seems like a fairly strong constraint to me, but apparently not to Dan. Luckily, we're saved by the second question.

Let there be a group of machines called the network. Each remembers the last scroll it trusted. When a new valid line is created it's sent to everyone in the network and they add it to their scroll.¹ Now stealing an old name is impossible, since machines in the network only add new names, they don't accept replacements for old ones.

That's fine for machines already in the network, but how do you join? Well, as a physical law, to join a network you need the identity of at least one machine already in the network. Now when you join, that machine can give you a fabricated scroll where they've stolen all the names. I don't think there's any way to avoid this — if you don't know anyone willing to tell you the correct answer, you can't will the correct answer out of thin air. Even a centralized system depends on knowing at least one honest root.

You can ameliorate this problem by knowing several nodes when you connect and asking each of them for their scroll. It seems like the best theoretically-possible case would be requiring only one node to be honest. That would correspond to trusting whichever node had the longest scroll. But this would leave you vulnerable to an attacker who a) has enough CPU power to fabricate the longest scroll, and b) can co-opt at least one of your initial nodes. The alternative is to trust only scrolls you receive from a majority of your list of nodes. This leaves you vulnerable to an attacker who can co-opt a majority of your initial nodes. Which tradeoff you pick presumably depends on how much you trust your initial nodes.

Publishing a false scroll is equivalent to fragmenting the namespace and starting a separate network. (We can enforce this by requiring nodes to sign each latest scroll and publish their signature to be considered members-in-good-standing of the network. Any node that attempts to sign two contradictory scroll is obviously duplicitous and can be discounted.) So another way of describing scenario (b) is to say that to join a network, you need a list of nodes where at least a majority are actually nodes in the network. This doesn't seem like an overly strenuous requirement.

And we're actually slightly safer than that, since the majority needs a fair amount of CPU to stay plausible. If we assume that you hear new names from some out-of-band source, for them to work on the attacker's network, the attacker must have enough CPU to generate lines for each name you might use. Otherwise you realize that the names you type in on your computer are returning 404s while they work on other people's computers and begin to realize you've been had by an attacker.

So there you have it. The names are secure: they're identifiable by a key of

arbitrary length and cannot be stolen. They're human-meaningful: the name can be whatever string you like. And they're decentralized: no centralized authority determines who gets what name and yet they're available to everyone in the network.

Zooko's triangle has been squared.

UPDATE: I'm gratified by all the feedback and I've put up [a Frequently Asked Questions page](#) in response to comments here and elsewhere.

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1. What happens if two people create a new line at the same time? The debate should be resolved by the creation of the next new line — whichever line is previous in its scroll is the one to trust.

Individuals in a World of Science

April 6, 2011

[Original link](#)

We are all the same, we are all different—this is the great modern dilemma. At the same time science and technology lets us see our patterns (guess what books we'll like without ever meeting us, predict the probability with which a certain drug will have a certain side effect) our social independence encourages us to believe we cannot be so easily controlled (thus millions of people watching the same TV ad insisting they “think different”).

The tension can be felt most acutely in medicine, where a long and storied tradition of individualism (each patient is unique, with their own symptoms and history and makeup) confronts the most expensive products of modern megascience (every pill of a drug is the same, its workings validated through a test on thousands of people). And then you have doctors, caught in the middle: what are they to be—brilliant individuals, cunningly solving problems on their own (or, more realistically, with a small team) or dutiful cogs, administering the treatments shown most effective by large experiments?

For every individual person, you can come up with a story about why the larger results may not apply (most of the people in that study were young and healthy, but you are old and frail). But that just replaces hard science with educated suspicion. On the whole what was proven true on the whole must work better, right?

This is the position of evidence-based medicine, which says that doctors can't be trusted to make these decisions by themselves. Unduly swayed by whim and bias, bribed in endless ways by the manufacturers of expensive drugs and tools, incentivized to give themselves more business, EBM proponents say we must take these choices out of their hands and give them to a panel of experts, who can review with time and distance what solid scientific studies say actually works and does not.

I've made it sound like I'm on the side of the scientific mass, but I'm really not. Is there any evidence that evidence-based medicine really works? Everything I've seen is shockingly inconclusive.

There have been big benefits from smaller interventions—giving doctors tools to encourage them to do the right things. Atul Gawande has been the greatest chronicler of such programs, from forceful [reminders to wash your hands](#) to careful [checklists before surgery](#). But for the most part such programs aid doctors, not overrule them. This is good politics, but it's also good science: everyone rebels against direct instruction.

I think we have a choice to make. Doctors can be simply told what to do—in which case, why require all those years of med school? why not write down all the rules and instructions and let any random nurse follow them?—or they can be taught the lessons of the science but allowed to practice it on their own. They can be show their own human frailties and biases, the huge value that comes from following the proven rules, trained in the common fallacies of probability and statistics, but in the end, allowed to make the final judgment for themselves. We can screen out those who fail to learn these lessons, but if we can't, at the end of the process, trust them to make their own decisions, why even bother to have doctors at all?

Medicine is the field where this is clearest, but the same tension has come to teaching as well—every student is the same, every student is different. We once allowed each teacher to direct their classroom in their own way, but high-stakes tests and “value-added” measurements now force all of them into the same mold.

Isn't this a good thing, demands Matt Yglesias? We have science that shows good teaching can make a huge difference in people's lives—doesn't everyone deserve the benefits that come from having a good teacher? He dismisses the stories of the individual horrors that result from this process as mere anecdote—inevitably in imposing a one-size-fits-all solution there will be some negative side effects for a few, but the benefits for the many outweigh the costs. Again, I have tried to put this position in its most favorable light (I hope Matt will correct me if I've failed) but I'm flabbergasted by its callous naiveté. The problem with allowing hard incentive systems to squeeze out individual judgment is inevitably that people begin trying to game the system—they cheat on the tests, they coach students on the answers, they cut recess and art for more drill-and-skill. To dismiss [the on-the-ground evidence](#) of how badly these tests hurt kids, in favor of some Olympian view of the benefits of rising test scores, is ludicrous when the on-the-ground view is telling you *the test scores are actually bogus*.

Fine, Matt says, that just means we need to crack down on cheating. (This is always the first response of the incentive designer—we just need to improve the incentive system!) The fact that a couple teachers cheat on their students' tests is no reason to give up on all the benefits better teachers can bring. And that's true, but blatant cheating is just the tip of the iceberg.

In medicine, we can at least measure whether people get healthy. A doctor with some radical new treatment can prove she's right by testing it against the previous best answer and showing it works better. And we want brilliant teachers to do the same: to come up with innovative new ways of teaching students and prove they work better than the old stale system. But the ultimate goal of school is much less clear and more disputed—is it to create orderly little capitalist worker bees or curious independent thinkers?

Matt says *please, we don't need to enter into this debate. I'm only talking about the fundamentals—basic literacy and arithmetic.* But I don't think that really helps. What good is learning to read if, by the end, you hate doing it?

One solution is to measure students by real results, rather than artificial tests. Can a child read and understand? Ask them to tell you about the books they've read lately. (This was how my library's summer reading program tested whether you actually read the books you claimed. Apparently I didn't understand most of *Snow Crash* as a kid, but I loved reading it anyway.) Or, better yet, ask them a question that involves doing some research and see if they can look up and read the answer.

For math, ask them to build something that involves a little calculation, or make change, or any of the real-world activities these isolated skills are supposed to be actually useful for. What you learn from that will be much more revealing than which bubbles kids fill in on a sheet.

The other alternative is to put your trust in teachers, to assume they can tell the difference between a class that's learning and a class that isn't, and then give them a chance to do better. Take them to some of the best-run classes in the world and let them absorb the lessons for themselves. Have them meet regularly with their fellow teachers and discuss how they can make their teaching better. This is the humane response to those who want to reduce teaching to a rote question of merely reading off a script (no joke—this is literally what happens in the most test-driven schools...because, after all, science shows the script is best for test scores).

In both cases, I sympathize with the humane aims: I don't want doctors to become shills for pharmaceutical companies, I don't want poor kids to grow up unable to read. But I blanch at the inhumane means proposed to carry them out. As *Seeing Like a State* describes, the history of high modernist utopian projects has not been a pretty one. The quest for policy designers, then, is how to promote huge positive changes without crushing the individuals involved underfoot.

New Homepage

June 22, 2011

[Original link](#)

Sorry for the quiet here, but I've [updated my home page](#) for the first time in five years. Take a look at it if you're looking for basic background info on me.

Also, we've been doing regular blogging over at [the Demand Progress Blog](#) so you may want to check that for interesting new things instead.

Goods, Services, and Delegations

July 18, 2011

[Original link](#)

Things you can buy are typically divided into tangible things (goods) and intangible actions (services). But recently I've realized there's a much more interesting type of thing to buy: delegations.

A delegation is like a service, except instead of asking someone to do a specific thing, you ask them to achieve some goal. Hiring someone to paint your wall white would be a service, hiring someone to make your house pretty is a delegation.

Delegations are a *lot* harder than services. In the same way you can be pretty sure that when you buy a pen it will write, you can be pretty sure that when you hire someone to paint your wall white, she'll actually do it. And if she doesn't, you can just not pay her.

But if you want to hire an interior designer, it's a mess. Let's say you pick one by looking through their portfolio and concluding that you like their work. But when they come to design your place, you hate the result. What can you do? You say that what you got looks nothing like the stuff in the portfolio and they'll just say that every space is different and so has a different result. There's no way to ever prove they did a bad job.

And that's something fairly inconsequential. Imagine you're [wrongly charged with murder](#) or stricken with a potentially-fatal illness. Picking the right lawyer or doctor could make the difference between life and death.

But now there's not even a portfolio for you to look at. Sure, you can see if the lawyer's won a lot of cases or if the doctor's kept most of her patients alive, but that doesn't tell you much — it probably just means they're either very lucky or mostly choose easy cases.

Perhaps instead of looking at outcomes, you could look at the decisions they made along the way. But even if you could get your hands on those records, how could you possibly learn enough about law or medicine to evaluate them? And even if you somehow tried, there's probably all sorts of relevant specific details about the circumstances that could never make it into even the most detailed histories.

But it's not just hard for the delegator — for the same reason, it's hard for the delegatee. If you want to be great at painting walls white, it's easy to get pretty immediate feedback about whether you did the job correctly. But if you're an elementary school teacher, you'll really just never know. You hope you're helping your kids succeed in life, but there's no way for you to check

that. And what are the chances that you started doing everything right just by intuition?

No, the expert performance movement has shown the only way to get really good at something is to practice, continually comparing what you did against the results it achieved. But in any sort of delegated job this is practically impossible: the uncertainties are too great, the feedback loops take too long, the opportunities to practice much too rare.

Traditionally, we solve these problems by having an academic discipline figure out the right thing to do using scale. If doctors were just on their own, they'd still be no better than witch doctors: people would come in with problems and they'd pick a random herb or spell to try and pray it made the patient feel better. They'd never really know whether they were helping or hurting. But they're not on their own: because medical schools can conduct randomized trials with hundreds of people, they can just read the results and learn what actually works.

A lot is still left to individual judgment — there's not a medical study for every scenario and even if there was, you'd still have to choose how to interpret the results — but there is definitely a trend toward knowing more. And some of the most exciting developments in medicine come from replacing human judgment with [checklists](#) and [decision trees](#).

But medicine is probably the best-case scenario. I've never heard of lawyers reading up on the results of [statistical trials](#) and aesthetics is so subjective and fashion so temporary that I doubt anything like this could ever be possible for interior designers. (Education is probably somewhere in the middle.) How do people ever get good at these things?

Part of why running a nonprofit is so hard is that pretty much all nonprofits are delegation. Donors aren't buying a particular thing they know they want, they're buying a chance to help others, without knowing exactly what it is *they* want. And that's why [randomized controlled trials](#) have been transformational for the nonprofit sector — they've converted a delegation into a service. [Great nonprofits](#) don't have to guess at what will help people the most; they just need to look up the most helpful service and then purchase more of it.

[Poor Economics](#) is a remarkable book if only because it shows how crucial this is. It's full of tales of small-scale experiments where well-intentioned do-gooders try hard to help some people and fail catastrophically. But they only notice because there are academics there collecting data; in the typical nonprofit, where the decisionmakers are far removed from the evidence on the ground, they'd probably never know that much was going wrong ([assuming that they even cared](#)).

But “political” nonprofits don’t get off so easily. It’s fairly impractical to do randomized controlled trials of things like lobbying, public campaigning, white papers, investigative journalism, public relations, strategic litigation, electoral campaigns, and the rest. There are [brave and noble efforts](#) to try to improve some of the details most amenable to testing, but while you can test which direct mail flyer makes people more likely to vote, it’s hard to test whether GOTV mail is a good use of campaign funds at all.

Now you can get a lot out of [combining all these things](#) so you can make big-picture decisions about how to allocate resources. And you can get a lot out of having the same team do them over and over so they can build up institutional expertise. But there’s also a lot of room for learning within each one as well. Just as randomized controlled trials have revolutionized development nonprofits, I think political nonprofits will be revolutionized by developing institutional structures to formalize the process of learning from campaigns.

What would this look like? A good first step would be developing a series of case studies of major campaigns, successful or unsuccessful, to get some sense of big picture stories. From this, you could distill a toolbox of various tactics, with some notes on which seem to be more and less effective and some open questions or avenues of exploration for each. Then within each tactic, you could bring together practitioners to swap best practices and try to improve the state of the art.

Interviewing people right after campaigns also seems like a fruitful avenue. As they look back on what happened, what do they see as the big mistakes? The big successes? What do they wish they’d had?

These might all seem like minor, parochial concerns, but when you stop to realize that the world is full of huge problems that can only be solved by collective action, figuring out how to inspire coordinated action most effectively doesn’t just seem interesting — it seems essential.

Watch That Space

July 18, 2011

[Original link](#)

There's a major statement [at the Demand Progress blog](#).

How Apple Works

July 22, 2011

[Original link](#)

Who takes over for Steve Jobs?¹ [John Gruber recently posted](#) his argument for thinking it will be COO Tim Cook. The biggest point in Cook's favor is simple: "He's already run the company while Jobs has been on leave." That's true, but it's less meaningful than it sounds. But to understand why, you need to understand how Apple works.

In the same way that Google is a company driven by engineering or Amazon is driven by operations, Apple is driven by taste. Here's how Apple products are created: a team of designers decide exactly what a product should do and how it should look and feel, their work is ruthlessly edited by Steve until he approves, and then the entire rest of the company is given the task of moving mountains to make that dream real.

Tim Cook is in charge of that third step. And he's done a masterful job of it, accomplishing endless miracles never seen by the public. Apple engineers have invented entirely new chips to fit the specified processing power into the tiny cases required by the spec; they build entirely new factories with entirely new production processes just to perfectly match the shade of pink in the original design; they've created a revolution in logistics to ensure these amazing products get into customers' hands on launch day. Cook runs this process, and there's no doubt he's brilliant at it.

But it's about fulfilling Jobs' dreams, not forging new ones. He can continue to run the company while Jobs is away because he's continuing to ensure the execution of designs that Jobs has already approved. But Apple can't run indefinitely on old plans. The only reason it works for Cook to be in charge while Steve is away is because Steve is still around, doing ruthless critiques of yet-to-be-invented products from his sickbed.

The only person with the credibility to helm Apple in the long run is a person who can do those critiques. And for all Cook's brilliance, I've seen no evidence he's a master of great taste. His creativity is at achieving a predetermined goal, not about deciding what goal to achieve.

As Gruber says, whoever takes Steve's place will be someone already at Apple. Not just because all the other options are absurd, but because Steve has spent the past decade or so carefully training his top lieutenants about how to do every aspect of his job. It makes no sense to hire from outside that elite group. But within that group, there's only one person who makes any sense as tastemaker-in-chief: Jony Ive.

This becomes obvious if you just watch the keynotes. Steve Jobs is well known for raising the product keynote to an art form. But the others who have taken over the speaking job in recent years — Scott Forstall, Phil Schiller, Tim Cook — seem like clumsy kids trying to fill the shoes of the master. There’s only one person at Apple who gives talks with the elegance and style of Steve: Jony Ive.

Now the big criticism of Ive is that while he is clearly one of the most brilliant industrial designers in the world, he’s shown no aptitude for software design. It’s hard to know whether this is true. The [Mobile Design Awards credited Ive](#) with the iPhone’s user interface, but [the patent](#) credits Jobs and Forstall and a dozen others, but not Ive.

But even if Ive never designed a piece of software in his life, it’d be beside the point. I can’t imagine Jobs has either. What’s needed atop Apple is not creative brilliance — they have a design department full of that — but editorial taste. Like [the director of a film](#), Apple’s CEO needs to go through the thousands of creative ideas developed within Apple and decide which ones should be approved for production and which ones need to be sent back for more work.

It’s impossible to imagine Apple functioning without this role. (Would Apple splinter and start developing all sorts of random unapproved products like Google under Eric Schmidt?) It’s impossible to imagine Tim Cook filling this role. (How can he be tastemaker for the whole company if he can’t even pull off a decent keynote?) And it’s impossible to imagine this role being anywhere but at the top of the org chart. (It’d be like crediting a film to the producer instead of the director.)

No, if Apple is to continue, it will be with a tastemaker at the top. And there are no serious candidates besides Ive.

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1. This piece was written before Steve stepped down as CEO, but I think it still stands. I mean when Steve really leaves: it seems obvious that even as “Chairman of the Board” rather than CEO, he’s still tastemaker-in-chief at Apple.

Understanding Groupon Means Understanding ACSOI

August 18, 2011

[Original link](#)

Imagine you started a business that delivered people a box of cereal each week. Each week they pay you, you take their money and buy a box of cereal and some shipping, and keep what's left over. You learn that the average new customer brings in \$50 in profit over their lifetime, so you decide to spend some of that money to get new customers — say, by buying [web ads](#).

With web ads, you can say exactly how much you want to spend for each new customer. Now the future isn't necessarily like the past — things could go wrong — but it seems safe to, say, spend \$5 to get a new customer. If the future is like the past, you'll make \$45 each time you do this. And even if future customers are only half as good as current ones, you'll still be making \$20 each time you do this!

How much money should you spend on marketing? Well, others have started to notice you making money hand-over-fist and have decided to start competing. Best to get people hooked on your service than on theirs, right? And each dollar you spend now is going to bring in ten times later, so it'd be crazy not to spend everything you could, right? You're only making \$10 million a year right now so you get your investors to put in another \$100 million and quickly spend it all on marketing.

Now by traditional accounting standards, you're \$90 million in the red. But that seems like a misleading way to count. After all, if you stopped marketing tomorrow you'd have a nice, profitable \$10 million a year business. Instead it makes sense to look at the \$10 million dollars a year you're making on the one hand and your aggressive expansion plan (in particular, how much it costs to get a new customer and the lifetime value expected from a new customer) on the other.

This, as best as I can tell, was the story of Groupon. They called that first number (the business you have now, aside from the expansion attempt) ACSOI.

But the press didn't seem to understand any of this. Groupon was pilloried for playing accounting games that turned a huge loss into a moderate profit. And when, in response, Groupon took the ACSOI numbers out of their prospectus, it was hailed as a victory over fraudulent accounting.

Which all strikes me as ridiculous. Groupon didn't hide the fact that they were losing money by traditional accounting standards. They said so up front, but then provided the additional data that they use internally. Just some additional

information, no pressure: “While we track this management metric internally to gauge our performance, we encourage you to base your investment decision on whatever metrics make you comfortable,” they said. How does taking this information out of the prospectus help anyone?

Now there are valid questions about this model. Perhaps the future won’t be like the past, perhaps Groupon’s cost-per-acquisition is way too high, perhaps trying to grow so fast is risky. Or maybe Groupon is presenting misleading ACSOI numbers and even if they stopped all marketing today they’d still be losing money. I’d genuinely like to know. But the discussion needs to start with understanding what they’re saying, not just pretending they’re making stuff up.

What Does Google Mean by “Evil”?

August 22, 2011

[Original link](#)

Pretty much ever since Paul Buchheit suggested “Don’t be evil” as a corporate values statement (and Amit Patel begun writing it on whiteboards around the office), any time Google does something people don’t like, they begin calling it “evil” and complaining that Google is violating its prime directive.

But surely “evil” means something more than just “wrong” or “bad”. If the girl across the street peers through your window to watch you undress, we might say that was bad and wrong and awful, but I don’t think anyone would try to claim it was evil. Evil is a really strong term!

Now part of the joke is that Google seems to be using it rather loosely. If you look at [their examples](#) of evil deeds, they seem rather mundane compared to cackling supervillains and mass murderers. They specifically name three: showing irrelevant ads, using pop-ups or other annoying gimmicks, and selling off actual search results.

Hardly the stuff of comic books. But what do these three have in common? **They’re all instances of refusing to make things worse for your users in order to make more money.** Perhaps that still seems like a mundane conception of evil, but I think it gets at something important. Evil isn’t just about doing terrible things — it’s about doing terrible things for bad reasons. The evil villain cackles and brags about how they’re on the side of evil — they explicitly oppose doing good. And this definition of evil is all about that: if you’re working against your own users, you must have crossed the line and joined the other side.

When you stop to think about it, it’s wild how many companies have done just that: Printer manufacturers who put chips on their ink cartridges, so you can’t refill or recycle them but instead have to buy a new full-price cartridge. Apple preventing the Kindle app from having any sort of ebook buying functionality. Web publishers who break articles up into 20 pages so that you have to load 20 different ads just to read one article. These are pretty banal evils, but it’s striking that I can’t think of any example where Google has done anything like that. (Perhaps someone will name one I’ve missed in the comments.)

There are lots of things I disagree with Google about — the most recent being their refusal to [let my friends with chosen names](#) use Google+ — but those things aren’t evil by this definition. For example, Google [defends](#) their real names policy by saying it’ll lead to better conversations. They still claim to be fighting for the user.

So if you want to argue with Google, that's the way to do it: don't say that they're hurting someone out there in the world or violating some rule or principle, say that what they're doing isn't serving their users. Because that's the line Google's afraid to cross.

Thanks to Krage Sitaker for [discussions](#) that inspired this post.

UPDATE: [Chris Soghoian observes](#) Google refuses to add Do-Not-Track support to its browsers or servers in order to maximize ad profits. [Scott Teresi suggests](#) Google's refusal to provide customer support (in order to save money) qualifies. [Tom Slee reminds me](#) of their infamous net neutrality deal with Verizon. [John Gruber argues](#) that having ads at all is evil in this sense. [Mark Heath points to](#) those infuriating YouTube ads.

A Better Travel Guide for Geeks

September 4, 2011

[Original link](#)

Pretty much anywhere you go, you can find some pretty scenery, a charming hotel, some decent restaurants, a couple of interesting museums. And the goal of most travel guides seems to be to tell you about these things. The result is a rather boring sort of tourism in which everywhere feels pretty much like everywhere else.

What I want is a travel guide that highlights the things that are absolutely different about this place than anywhere else you might go — the things you can't see anywhere else. For my hometown of Cambridge, it might be the window displays on Main St. that explain how to sequence DNA, or the architectural marvels of [Stata](#), [BCS](#), and [Simmons](#). In Boston, maybe it's the [Athenæum](#) or the [Globe factory tour](#). In West Virginia, maybe it's going to see mountaintop removal or some back-to-the-land communes.

And maybe the right thing to do is to head somewhere else. Normal guidebooks are separated out by city and state, so if the coolest thing in Boston is actually to commute up to Providence, you'd never hear about it. But you'd put this guidebook on the Internet, so you'd give it your location and it'd tell you what was awesome nearby no matter what political jurisdiction it happened to be in.

Anyone know anything like that?

Related things: Ben Goldacre's list of [Nerdy Day Trips](#) in the UK. jgc's [Geek Atlas](#) lists cool science and technology places. [Atlas Obscura](#) lists curiosities. [WikiTravel](#) lets you add places of your own. I'm told Lonely Planet has some stuff like this. [Smile When You're Lying](#) is an amusing account of the distortionary forces on the average travel guide.

Revolutions on the Internet

November 1, 2011

[Original link](#)

I hate to wade into such a sterile debate as whether social media helps revolutions, but I made a point about it recently at a conference and people seemed to like it, so I thought I'd put it up here for posterity.

Jon Elster has a four-phase theory of revolutions:¹

1. A hard-core of committed activists get together to do something completely crazy.
2. The regime cracks down, attracting people who are sympathetic to the cause to rally to the support of the crazy ones.
3. As the protests grow, it seems like they might have a reasonable chance of succeeding and it seems worth it even for just normal reasonable people to start joining in.
4. The protests become so overwhelmingly large that even their opponents pretend to be part of them, so as not to be on the wrong side of history.

It seems pretty clear that the Internet helps with 1 — after all, it's brought together groups of crazy committed people about every other topic, from *Smallville* slash fiction to high-energy astrophysics. It'd be very surprising if it didn't bring committed activists together too.

It's clearly helped with 2 — YouTube videos of protestors being mistreated by police have been a staple of the #occupy movement, even though they haven't gotten much coverage on traditional TV; We are all Khaled Said presumably reached some people in Egypt.

3 and 4 are when the cable news and satellite television stations start joining in and when people support the protest just because it's such a huge physical presence in their lives. Here, I agree, the Internet probably has less effect.

The problem is that you never get to 3 and 4 without 1 and 2 — I don't think it's a total accident that all of these protests are happening now. I think they're happening because 1 and 2 have been made much easier thanks to the Internet. It's just that most people don't hear about them until steps 3 and 4, which are carried much more by traditional media. They suffer from the understandable fallacy that just because they heard about it on TV, that must be how everyone else did.

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1. Outlined in the preface to his book *Political Psychology* (Cambridge; 1993).

Apple and the Kindle

November 3, 2011

[Original link](#)

The Amazon Kindle is full of all sorts of amazing, delightful touches — the sort of thing you’d expect from an Apple product. For example, when you first take your Kindle out of its (gorgeous!) box, it boots right up knowing your name and logged into your account. This is actually out-Apple-ing Apple: it’s possible because Amazon not only controls the hardware and the software, but the entire distribution channel; they know exactly who is going to get each Kindle.

And think about how the original Kindle came with a *lifetime unlimited world-wide* data plan. Imagine how much that must have cost! All so that you never had to think about syncing again: your Kindle was automatically synced, no matter where it was in the world.

Bezos must have spent tons of energy getting this stuff right. And he must be sitting there, pissed, that Steve Jobs gets all these laurels while no one ever recognizes the stuff he’s done. But I don’t think that’s because Jobs is a better marketer and showman than Bezos (that’s the easy way out); it’s because the small details that delight get buried under small details that annoy.

For example, if you download a sample of a book and get to the end and decide to purchase the whole thing, the sample doesn’t expand to download the remainder of the book — instead the full book downloads completely separately and you have to manually copy over all your highlights and annotations to the full one. (You can’t just keep them in the sample because sample’s don’t even sync; you have to download a sample manually to each of your devices and hand-synchronize the page numbers.)

Or (and this is incredibly aggravating) when you select a word in the Kindle, depending on how common a word it is, the option that comes up highlighted by default is either “full definition” or “start highlight”. Since e-ink’s refresh rate is so slow, you typically don’t see what’s actually come up until you’ve pressed the button for the second time. So I often “double click” on words to highlight them, but some percentage of the time this kicks me over into the dictionary and I have to hit back twice to get out.

And this is all before I’ve even got to the disastrous incompatibilities between the Kindle device, the Kindle for Mac app, the Kindle for iOS app, the Kindle Online Reader (read.amazon.com), and the kindle.amazon.com social network — all of which are full of gruesome interface annoyances of their own.

That’s the thing about delightful details: they’re not just another thing you can add on top. Unless you sweat the details all the way through the user experience,

the ones that delight quickly get drowned out by the ones that constantly annoy.
I hope someone at Amazon will take that to heart.

Steve Jobs and the Founder's Pain

November 3, 2011

[Original link](#)

After reading the new biography *Steve Jobs*, the person I most identify with is Jony Ive. Ive and Jobs became close friends and collaborators, but Ive, “so instinctively nice,” found himself puzzled about how his good friend could be so mean:

He’s a very, very sensitive guy. That’s one of the things that makes his antisocial behavior, his rudeness, so unconscionable. I can understand why people who are thick-skinned and unfeeling can be rude, but not sensitive people. [...And] because of how very sensitive he is, he knows exactly how to efficiently and effectively hurt someone. And he does do that. (462)

Steve’s fits are legendary. “He would shout at a meeting, ‘You asshole, you never do anything right,’” recalls his director of finance, Debi Coleman. “It was like an hourly occurrence.” (124) “This is shit!” he yelled after seeing the first draft of the “Here’s to the crazy ones” ad. “It’s advertising agency shit and I hate it.” (329)

Something was either “the best thing ever,” or it was shitty, brain-dead, inedible. ...Any perceived flaw could set off a rant. The finish on a piece of metal, the curve on the head of a screw, the shade of blue on a box, the intuitiveness of a navigation screen—he would declare them to “completely suck” until that moment when he suddenly pronounced them “absolutely perfect.” (561)

One way of reading this is that Steve Jobs is just a sociopath, someone who knows exactly where people’s weaknesses are and plays on them masterfully until they do exactly, precisely what he wants, without little concern about human consequences.

But there’s another, more sympathetic reading. I think Jobs really did feel this way. He had such an intense aesthetic sense that even something as minor as the curve on the head of the screw could cause him enormous pain. And, like anyone in pain, he responded by lashing out at the people around him. There are some people who, when they’re insulted, can’t resist punching the person who insulted them. Steve wasn’t much for physical violence, but when something looked off to him, he couldn’t help screaming.

I sympathize because I can see this in myself. Something that's perfect just feels much, much better than something that's almost right. When I'm doing something myself, I can just sit there and work at it until it's *exactly* right. It's embarrassing to launch a product with a bug in it! It physically hurts when I realize that's what I've done. But as projects and companies grow, there are more and more people in between me and those tiny details. And then I face a choice: do I keep complaining until something's perfect or do I just let go and consider it somebody else's problem?

Steve never let go. He continued to feel that founder's pain about everything in his life. When it was his project, he'd make people stay late until they got it right. When it was his company, he'd go right to the person responsible, even if they were 5 levels down in the org chart, and make them fix it. ("After looking at a bunch of screenshots, Jobs jumped up, grabbed a marker, and drew a simple rectangle on a whiteboard. 'Here's the new application,' he said. 'It's got one window. You drag your video into the window. Then you click the button that says "Burn." That's it.'") (382))

In fact, it didn't matter whose company it was. He once sent his fresh-squeezed juice back to the kitchen three times in a row until they got it right (527); when his cable box was frustrating him, he called the CEO of Comcast. ("I thought he was calling to say something nice about it," the CEO recalled. "Instead, he told me 'It sucks.'") (489))

And that's why I like Jony Ive. He too clearly feels that pain (he once insisted they hold up an entire product launch because he didn't like the polish on the screws) but he doesn't lash out at people about it. Instead, he sits down with the people involved and works to fix the problem until they get it just right.

Ask Jobs about his viciousness and he insisted it was all for the best: "I've learned over the years that when you have really good people you don't have to baby them...A-plus players like to work together, and they don't like it if you tolerate B work. Ask any member of that Mac team. They will tell you it was worth the pain." Even Debi Coleman agreed: "I consider myself the absolute luckiest person in the world to have worked with him."

But does it require so much pain? My hope is that I can be just as exacting, demand work just as good, without emotionally destroying people in the process. I want to be a perfectionist *and* a nice guy. I want to be Jony Ive. I hope it works — for my sake, and Apple's.

Thanks to Ben Wikler for suggesting this post.

Election Ballot 2011

November 8, 2011

[Original link](#)

It's like [2009 all over again](#).

Everyone seems to have moved to the middle since last time — the decent candidates have descended into vague blandness; the terrible have begun spouting the same rhetoric. But, fortunately, this time there's a candidate I actually quite like: Matt Nelson sounds awesome. **Vote Matt Nelson.**

1. Matt Nelson (grassroots organizing, pedestrian H²)
2. Larry Ward (inclusionary zoning)
3. Kenneth E. Reeves (Harlem Children's Zone)
4. Sam Seidel (bikes, TOD)
5. Leland Cheung (simplify regulation, bike share)
6. Minka vanBeuzekom (smart growth)
7. Marjorie Decker (no CCTV, banning trans fats)
8. Charles Marquardt (planning, sustainability)
9. James M. Williamson (no corporate money, slow development)
10. Tim Toomey (vagueness, fuel efficient vehicles)
11. David Maher (consensus building)
12. Henrietta Davis (healthy kids, green buildings)
13. E. Denise Simmons (bus shelters)
14. Tom Stohlman (do nothing)
15. Gary Mello (cut spending, insurance reform)
16. Gregg Moree (crazy blandness)
17. Pascual (psychic reform, poetry)
18. Craig Kelley (traffic enforcement, not campaigning)

School issues are inevitably depressing. Everyone says they oppose the achievement gap and so on, so, again, my first test was to see how people felt about standardized tests (ordered from opposition to support):

1. Alice Turkel (portfolios, high quality preschool)
2. Nancy Tauber (no teaching to the test)
3. Bill Forster (stop teaching to the test)
4. Marc McGovern (alternative assessments)
5. Patty Nolan (no more tests)
6. Richard Harding (not a fan, but it has its benefits)
7. John Holland (might interfere)
8. Joyce Gerber (dodged the question)
9. Mervan Osborne (dodged)
10. Charles Stead, Sr. (tight ship principal)
11. Fred Fantini (more assessment)

Happy Election Day!

On Intellectual Dishonesty

December 14, 2011

[Original link](#)

Dishonesty has two parts: 1) saying something that is untrue, and 2) saying it with the intent to mislead the other person. You can have each without the other: you can be genuinely mistaken and thereby say something false without intending to mislead, and you can intentionally mislead someone without ever saying anything that's untrue. (The second is generally considered deceit, but not dishonesty.)

However, you can be intellectually dishonest without doing *either* of these things. Imagine that you're conducting an experiment and most of the time it comes out exactly the way you expect but one time it goes wrong (you probably just screwed up the measurements). Telling someone about your work, you say: "Oh, it works just the way I expected — seven times it came out exactly right."

This isn't untrue and it isn't intentionally misleading — you really do believe it works the way you expected. But it is intellectually dishonest: intellectual honesty requires bending-over-backwards to provide any evidence that you might be wrong, *even if you're convinced that you are right*.

This is an impractical standard to apply to everyday life. A prospective employer asks you in a job interview if you can get to work on time. You say "Yes", not "I think so, but one time in 2003 the power went out and so my alarm didn't go off and I overslept". I don't think anyone considers this dishonesty; indeed, if you were intellectually honest all the time people would think you were pretty weird.

Science has a higher standard. It's not just between you and your employer, it's a claim to posterity. And you might be wrong, but what if you're not around for posterity to call you up and ask you to show your work? That's why intellectual honesty requires you show your work in advance, so that others can see if you're missing something.

When will experiences replace movie theaters?

February 14, 2012

[Original link](#)

When I was a kid, I remember my school putting on a production of *Peter Pan*. For the dramatic flying scenes, they rigged a special harness that would go under Pan's costume and hoist him around the stage. But what I remember most is sitting outside the theater, desperately wishing it was me who got to fly. I knew I had a long life ahead of me, but when do grownups get to fly as if by magic?

The world is weirdly disappointing that way. Billions of dollars are spent making and watching people explore mysterious tunnels, chase down alleys, and fly as if by magic, but there's hardly a single opportunity to actually do any of these things.

I know of two exceptions. In Boston, there is a company called [5 Wits](#). The experience is something like this: you enter an unassuming rug shop and when the salesman asks if he can help you, you tell him the secret pass code. He gets a funny look on his face, locks the door and pulls down the blinds. He pulls back the rug to reveal a television screen that briefs you on your secret mission.

Once briefed, he shows you a concealed door where you tiptoe down to an underground passage way, only to find [one of those arrays of laser-triggers](#), where you have to crawl underneath the lasers without setting them off. This leads to a whole underground lair, where you have to solve various puzzles to find the stolen plans, erase evidence of your intrusion, and disarm a bomb. It's enormous fun.

It's hard not to think this will be the future of in-person entertainment in the era of the Internet. Sure, movie companies are loading up on gimmicks like 3D to force people into theaters, but it's hard to see that working in the long-term. No, we should embrace the trend — let the Internet distribute every movie ever made and free up these physical spaces to provide the kind of experience that you can only provide in an actual physical space.

I feel (have always felt) the same way about museums. Go to a local museum and look around — how much do you see that actually couldn't be provided by a website or a book? That's why I was so excited to visit [the City Museum](#) in St. Louis.

In the dark days of St. Louis, when everyone with money had fled to the suburbs, an artist named Bob Cassilly bought a large abandoned shoe factory downtown. He and his friends begun using scraps and bargains to turn the place into a giant sculpture park. As you walk in, you enter the mouth of a giant whale, inside

there are dozens of passage ways to crawl through and climb on, each filled with its own surprises and sculptures. Crawl down and you're led through a network of caves which spiral upward and upward until you find yourself atop a giant eight-story slide. As you slide down, picking up speed, you literally ride through a giant classical organ, playing music so loud it shakes you to your bones. And that's just the beginning.

The City Museum has been so successful, it's led a renaissance of downtown St. Louis. Part of the building has been turned into offices and trendy lofts and the neighborhood now has some trendy restaurants and a shuttle. I flew to St. Louis just to visit it and I don't regret it one bit.

But I am mystified by why there aren't more places like these. There's definitely a universe where I work on building more. Instead we get bland amusement parks, pretentious performances like Punchdrunk, and dull museums and galleries. New York City worked itself into a tizzy when artist Carsten Holler exhibited a slide a quarter of the size of the one at the City Museum. Surely a city of that size can support a place like this of its own. What am I missing?

How Python 3 Should Have Worked

March 9, 2012

[Original link](#)

As a workaday Python developer, it's hard to shake the feeling that the Python 2 to 3 transition isn't working. I get occasional requests to make my libraries work in 3 but it's far from clear how to and when I try to look it up I find all sorts of conflicting advice, none of which sounds very practical.

Indeed, when you see new 3.x versions rolling off the line and no one using them, it's hard to shake the feeling that Python might die in this transition. How will we ever make it across the chasm?

It seems to me that in all the talk about Python 3000 being a new, radical, blue-sky vision of the future, we neglected the proven methods of getting there. In the Python 2 era, we had a clear method for adding language changes:

1. In Python 2.a, support for `from __future__ import new_feature` was added so you could use the new feature if you explicitly declared you wanted it.
2. In Python 2.b, support was added by default so you could just use it without the future declaration.
3. In Python 2.c, warnings begun being issued when you tried to use the old way, explaining you needed to change or your code would stop working.
4. In Python 2.d, it actually did stop working.

It seems to me this process worked pretty well. And I don't see why it couldn't work for the Python 3 transition. This would mean mainly just:

1. A Python 2.x release that added support for `from __future__ import python3`.

Putting this at the top of a file would declare it to be a Python3 file and allow the interpreter to parse it accordingly. (I realize behind the scenes this would mean a lot of work to merge tr 2 and 3 interpreters, but honestly it would always have been better to have a unified codebase to maintain.)

Then if I wanted my Python 2 program to use some 3 modules, I just need to make sure those modules have the import line at the top. If I want to do a new release of my module that works on Python 3, I just need to declare that it only works in Python 2.x and higher and release a version that's been run through

2to3 (with the new import statement). If my project is big, I can even port files to 3 one at a time, leaving the rest as 2 until someone gets around to fixing the rest. Most importantly, I can start porting to Python 3 without waiting for all my dependencies to do the same, parallelizing what until now has been a rather serial process.

Users know they can safely upgrade to 2.x since it won't break any existing code. Developers know everyone will eventually upgrade to 2.x so they can drop support for earlier versions. But since 2.x supports code that also runs in 3, they can start writing and releasing code that's future-compatible as well. Eventually the vast majority of code will work in 3 and users can upgrade to 3. (2.x will issue warnings to the remaining stragglers.) Finally, we can drop support for 2.x and all live happily having crossed the bridge together.

This isn't a radical idea. It's how Python upgrades have always worked. And unless we use it again, I don't see how we're ever going to cross this chasm.

**y the power of exponents, just five levels of
councils, each consisting of only fifty people, is
enough to cover over three hundred million
people.?**

April 18, 2012

[Original link](#)

The government of a republic, James Madison wrote in Federalist No.39 (Conformity of the Plan to Republican Principles, 1788), must be derived from the great body of the society, not from an inconsiderable proportion, or a favored class of it; otherwise a handful of tyrannical nobles, exercising their oppressions by a delegation of their powers, might aspire to the rank of republicans, and claim for their government the honorable title of republic.

Looking at our government today? a House of professional politicians, a Senate filled with multimillionaires, a string of presidential family dynasties? it seems hard to maintain that our officials are in fact derived from the great body of the society? and not a favored class? merely posing as representatives of the people.

Unless politics is a tradition in your family, your odds of getting elected to federal office are slim. And unless you're a white male lawyer, you rarely get to vote for someone like yourself in a national race. Nor, in reality, do we have an opportunity to choose policy positions: no major candidates support important proposals that most voters agree with, like single-payer health care.

Instead, national elections have been boiled down to simple binary choices, which advertising men and public relations teams reduce to pure emotions: Fear. (A bear prowls through the woods.) Hope. (The sun rises over a hill.) Vote Smith. Or maybe Jones.

Nor does the major media elevate the level of debate. Instead of substantive discussions about policy proposals and their effects, they spend their time on horse-race coverage (who's raised the most money? who's polling well in Ohio?) and petty scandals (how much did that haircut cost? was someone somewhere offended by that remark?)

The result after all this dumbing down? In 2004, voters who said they chose a presidential candidate based on the candidate's agendas, ideas, platforms, or goals comprised a whopping 10% of the electorate. So it's not too surprising when political scientists find that voters' decisions can be explained by such random factors as whether they like red or blue, whether the economy is good or bad, or whether the current party has been in office for long or not.

Aside from the occasional telephone poll, the opinions of "the great body of the society" have been edited out of the picture. Way back in Federalist No. 10 (The Utility of the Union as a Safeguard Against Domestic Faction and Insurrection (continued), 1787), Madison put his finger on the reason. "However small the republic may be," he noted, "the representatives must be raised to a certain number, in order to guard against the cabals of a few." But similarly, "however large it may be, they must be limited to a certain number, in order to guard against the confusion of a multitude."

The result is that the population grows while the number of representatives stays fixed, leaving each politician to represent more and more people. The first Congress had a House of 65 members representing 40,000 voters and three million citizens (they had a whopping 1.3% voter turnout back then). That's a representative for around every 600 voters or 46,000 citizens (the size of the average baseball stadium). A baseball stadium may be a bit of an unruly mob, but it's not unimaginably large.

Today, by contrast, we have 435 representatives and 300 million citizens—one for roughly every 700,000 citizens. There isn't a stadium in the world big enough to hold that many people. It's a number more akin to a television audience (it's about how many people tune in to watch Keith Olbermann each night).

Which is exactly what the modern constituency has become: the TV audience following along at home. Even if you wanted to, you can't have a real conversation with a TV audience. It is too big to convey a sense of what each individual is thinking. Instead of a group to represent, it's a mob to be managed.

I agree with Madison that there is roughly a right size for a group of representatives "on both sides of which inconveniences will be found to lie. By enlarging too much the number of electors, you render the representatives too little acquainted with all their local circumstances and lesser interests; as by reducing it too much, you render him unduly attached to these, and too little fit to comprehend and pursue great and national objects."

But what Madison missed is that there is no similar limit on the number of such groups. To take a technological analogy, the Internet is, at bottom, an enormous collection of wires. Yet nobody would ever think of it this way. Instead, we group the wires into chips and the chips into computers and the computers into networks and the networks into the Internet. And people only deal with things at each level: when the computer breaks, we can't identify which wire failed; we take the whole thing into the shop.

One of the most compelling visions for rebooting democracy adopts this system of abstraction for politics. Parpolity, developed by the political scientist Stephen Shalom, would build a legislature out of a hierarchical series of nested councils. Agreeing with Madison, he says each council should be small enough

that everyone can engage in face-to-face discussion but large enough that there is a diversity of opinion and the number of councils is minimized. He estimates the right size is 25 to 50 people.

So, to begin with, let us imagine a council of you and your 40 closest neighbors?perhaps the other people in your apartment building or on your block. You get together every so often to discuss the issues that concern you and your neighborhood. And you may vote to set policy for the area which the council covers.

But your council has another function: it selects one of its own to send as a representative to the next council up. There the process repeats itself: the representative from your block and its 40 closest neighbors meet every so often to discuss the political issues that concern the area. And, of course, your representative reports back to the group, gets your recommendations on difficult questions, and takes suggestions for issues to raise at the next area council meeting.

By the power of exponents, just five levels of councils, each consisting of only fifty people, is enough to cover over three hundred million people. But?and this is the truly clever bit?at the area council the whole process repeats itself. Just as each block council nominates a representative to the area council, each area council nominates a representative to the city council, and each city council to the state council, each state council to the national council, and so on.

Shalom discusses a number of further details?provisions for voting, recalls, and delegation?but it?s the idea of nesting that?s key. Under such a system, there are only four representatives who stand between you and the people setting national policy, each of whom is forced to account to their constituents in regular, small face-to-face meetings. Politicians in such a system could not be elected through empty appeals to mass emotions. Instead, they would have to sit down, face-to-face, with a council of their peers and persuade them that they are best suited to represent their interests and positions.

There is something rather old-fashioned about this notion of sitting down with one?s fellow citizens and rationally discussing the issues of the day. But there is also something exciting and new about it. In the same way that blogs have given everyone a chance to be a publisher, Wikipedia lets everyone be an encyclopedia author, and YouTube lets anyone be a television producer, Parpolity would let everyone be a politician.

The Internet has shown us that the pool of people with talent far outnumbers the few with the background, connections, and wealth to get to a place in society where they can practice their talents professionally. (It also shows us that many people with those connections aren?t particularly talented.)

The democratic power of the Net means you don't need connections to succeed. In a world where kids can be television stars just by finding a video camera and an Internet connection, citizens may begin to wonder why getting into politics is so much harder.

For many years, politicians had a ready excuse: politics was a difficult job, which required carefully weighing and evaluating evidence and making difficult decisions. Only a select few could be trusted to perform it; the vast majority of the population was woefully underqualified.

And perhaps in the era of a cozy relationship between politicians and the press, this illusion could be sustained. But as netroots activists and blogs push our national conversation ever closer to the real world, this excuse is becoming laughable. After all, these men and women of supposedly sober judgment voted overwhelmingly for disasters like the Iraq War. No one could have ever predicted this, TV's talking heads all insist. No one, that is, except the great body of society, whose insistence that Iraq did not pose a threat and that an occupation would be long and brutal went ignored.

New online tools for interaction and collaboration have let people come together across space and time to build amazing things. As the Internet breaks down the last justifications for a professional class of politicians, it also builds up the tools for replacing them. For the most part, their efforts have so far been focused on education and entertainment, but it's only a matter of time before they turn to politics. And when they do, professional politicians beware!

The 2011 Review of Books

April 19, 2012

[Original link](#)

Previously: [2010](#), [2009](#), [2008](#), [2007](#), [2006](#)

2011 was a stressful year, in many ways, and so for large parts of it I did not really read. [Instead, I tracked](#) how many books I started and how many pages I got through each, for a total of 112 books started, 70 finished, and over 20,000 pages read. Not up to my usual standards. Nonetheless...

Key: Books in bold are those that were so great my heart leaps at the chance to tell you about them even now. If you only have time to read some of this, read those.

1. [The Net Delusion](#) by Evgeny Morozov
Surprisingly well-written and well-researched.

2. *Managing Oneself* by Peter Drucker

3. [The Halo Effect](#) by **Phil Rosenzweig**

Last year, I recommended *Good to Great*, calling it “actual science”. [Dave Bridgeland quickly corrected me](#) and recommended this book, which is vastly better. Not only does it systematically debunk the pretensions to science in *Good to Great* and the other management bestsellers in an absolutely delightful manner, it provides a short but very thought-provoking discussion of strategy in its own right.

You can mock the banality of its recommendations, but there’s no question: this book is well worth it just for the way it encourages habits of genuine scientific thought. I knew I never should have fallen so low as to trust a business book!

4. [The Farnsworth Invention](#) by Aaron Sorkin

Clearly not Sorkin’s best, but short and fun. Also interesting to see how Sorkin plays with the fourth wall in a play format.

5. [The Trial](#) by **Franz Kafka (translated by Breon Mitchell)**

A deep and magnificent work. I’d not really read much Kafka before and had grown up led to believe that it was a paranoid and hyperbolic work, dystopian fiction in the style of George Orwell. Yet I read it and found it was precisely accurate — every single detail perfectly mirrored my own experience. This isn’t fiction, but documentary.

Spoilers follow.

The bulk of the book is about K trying to find someone to fight his case for him, and failing miserably. As an individual in a world of bureaucracies, he concludes [there's no substitute](#) but to do the work himself.

This is set against the backdrop of his “day job” at the bank — about as characteristic a bureaucracy as you can imagine. The bank, by contrast, has no difficulty finding people to do its work for it. Even when K slacks off or gets distracted, the bank continues chugging along just fine — as seen in the vice president who leaps to take K’s work from him. (Compare: The independent lawyer is under no such pressure to actually get K’s work done.)

A vivid illustration that bureaucracies, once they get started, continue doing whatever mindless thing they’ve been set up to do, regardless of whether the people in them particularly want to do it or whether it’s even a good idea. At the same time, individual people have an incredibly hard time executing long-term or large-scale tasks on their own, even when they’re quite motivated.

But what of the priest? The priest tells K a story about how as an individual in a bureaucracy, it’s a losing game to try to ask permission. You have to persuade your boss, your boss’s boss, and your boss’s boss’s boss (so terribly powerful that your boss can’t even bear to look at him). If you wait for your request to be approved by the chain of command, it won’t happen at all.

K argues with the priest about how horribly unfair this is: isn’t your boss (the individual) doing the wrong thing somehow? The priest maintains there are many different theories about this question of individual responsibility. But K is missing the larger point: this is just how bureaucracy works.

K takes the lesson to heart and decides to stop fighting the system and just live his life without asking for permission. It goes well...for a while. But it still seems a better option than the alternatives.

6. *The Great Stagnation* by Tyler Cowen

A dreadful little book, which boils down to nothing more than a vast tract of economic illiteracy. Take just the insanity that is chapter

2. Cowen takes as his dictum:

The larger the role of government in the economy, the more the published figures for GDP growth are overstating improvements in our living standard.

For example, as government-insured health care takes up a larger proportion of our country’s spending, we can’t accurately measure how our living

standards are improving since it's paid for at set rates by government instead of through a competitive market process to set accurate prices.

But, as any economist should realize, our standard of living is *never* appropriately measured through prices, because of consumer surplus. The *whole point* of a competitive economy is to create this disconnect. Let's say a chair greatly improves my standard of living and I would pay \$10,000 for one. In a competitive market, different chair providers compete for my money by offering a lower price, eventually driving the price of the chair down to the cost of production.

Has my 'living standard' [*sic*] thereby decreased? Of course not! In fact, it has increased since I can buy several chairs (while still getting thousands of dollars in consumer surplus!). It's insane to blame this on government.

Cowen's other arguments are similarly ignorant. For example, he tries to claim that the reason we're in a recession, "not filling government coffers or supporting many families", is because "our major innovations are springing up in sectors where a lot of work is done by machines, not by human beings. ... That is one reason why we have been seeing a 'jobless recovery.'" (L503)

Nonsense on stilts. [The Federal Reserve decides](#) how many people will have jobs, iPads have nothing to do with it.

This book's popularity is a sad sign of how ignorance triumphs when it benefits the powerful.

7. [Lifted](#) by Evan Ratliff ([iOS](#))

A fast, fun real-life heist story.

8. [Getting Things Done](#) by David Allen [reread]

Still good, though not worth starting a cult over. Its insights are more psychological than anything else.

9. [Private Firms Working in the Public Interest](#) by Abigail Bugbee Brown

Enron, WorldCom, Tyco, Olympus — why is there so much accounting fraud? Why isn't this stuff caught? In this serious but briskly-written work, Abigail Brown explains the incredible story of how accounting firms actually work. Paid by the people they're supposed to be auditing, accounting firms have developed an elaborate culture of corruption, letting them aid and abet the most egregious forms of dishonesty.

(Disclosure: Ms. Brown and I were lab fellows together at the Harvard Center for Ethics.)

10. [QED](#) by Peter Parnell

Not bad, by any stretch, but on the page, for anyone who's familiar with Feynman's actual writings, this can't help but feel thin.

11. *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself* with David Foster Wallace

After a great artist dies, there comes a point where the barrel of work that can be published posthumously seems like it's running dry (Elliot Smith's *New Moon*, Kafka's *Office Papers*). Publishing the transcript of a rambling conversation with DFW as a book would seem to be similarly stretching.

But, like the others, it turns out to be appreciated all the same. DFW is delightful and witty and it's fascinating to see how much of his linguistic creativity and charm wasn't the result of any special effort but simply his natural form to speech. He must have been such a delight to spend time with.

The problem is that the editor of this volume, David Lipsky, is apparently a dreadful writer who is deluded into thinking he's a great one. Taking DFW's polite words of support as deep praise, he is not shy about sharing his 'gifts' via overwrought introductions and interpolations. The result is an infuriating combination of glorious rants from DFW cut with ignorant and ill-written speculation by someone desperate to show off. (Though I don't recall Lipsky's recent piece about DFW being so bad, so maybe he merely needed an editor...or was told to pad the book out with random asides.)

12. *Inside WikiLeaks* by Daniel Domscheit-Berg

13. *Brainiac* by Ken Jennings

Who knew Ken Jennings was so funny? A witty and delightful book, though obviously not one that's anything more than trivial.

14. *From Dictatorship to Democracy* by Gene Sharp

A short but impressive guide to how to run a democratic revolution. Reportedly rather influential and certainly provides an interesting structure for thought.

15. *Kingpin: How One Hacker Took Over the Billion-Dollar Cybercrime Underground* by Kevin Poulsen

A fun and intriguing book. Poulsen writes in a restrained style, but the pace is fast and the images are vivid and the technology seems pretty right-on.

(Disclosure: Kevin Poulsen and I worked together at Wired.)

16. *Diary of a Very Bad Year: Confessions of an Anonymous Hedge Fund Manager* by Anonymous Hedge Fund Manager and Keith Gessen (with n+1)

An annotated transcript of a series of interviews between the brilliant literary writer Keith Gessen and a sympathetic and polymathic hedge

fund manager. The hedge fund manager tries to provide some insight into what his world is like, in real time as it's collapsing, but Gessen's questioning typically isn't detailed enough to get a very vivid picture. HFM's stories were thrilling as things happened but with distance they seem somewhat blurred; it's harder to fit them in now that we think we understand what happened. They're both delightful characters, though, enough to still make the book a decent read.

17. *The Watchman: The Twisted Life and Crimes of Serial Hacker Kevin Poulsen* by Jonathan Littman

Whatever else you want to say about Kevin Poulsen, he was certainly funny. Littman provides a vivid retelling of his strange story. I'm told Poulsen denies most of what's in this book, so it may not have much value as documentary, but as entertainment it's pretty good.

18. *Tourist Season* by Carl Hiassen

19. *Strip Tease* by Carl Hiassen

20. *Skinny Dip* by Carl Hiassen

Carl Hiassen writes murder mysteries with a political bent. They're fun airport reading but it's hard to justify them as much more than that.

21. *Scoop* by Evelyn Waugh

This book, the source of the name *The Daily Beast*, is a vicious satire of journalism. It has some quite witty and biting moments, including some I've found myself referring back to, but I'm not sure it holds together as literature.

22. *The Age of WikiLeaks* by Greg Mitchell

An good, well-written summary of the story so far, but nothing more than that.

23. *JSTOR: A History* by Roger C. Schonfeld

24. *Team Rodent* by Carl Hiassen

A very short book packed full of muck about the Disney Corporation. Fun stuff, but it comes off as very light — basically just a list of stories Hiassen seems to have picked up in his years of living nearby.

25. *Shots* by David Fenton

26. *At a Slight Angle to the Universe* by William Bowen

27. *The Honor Code* by K. Anthony Appiah

A collection of interesting stories about how social revolutions have happened. Appiah tries to tie them together with a story about honor, but I think that's ultimately less interesting and persuasive than just reading the stories themselves.

28. *The Case of the Speluncean Explorers: Nine New Stories* by Peter Suber
29. *The Story of Colors* by Subcomandante Marcos
Absurdly, a children's book by Subcomandante Marcos. As weird as you'd expect, but not as good as you'd hope.
30. *The New-York Historical Society: Lessons from One Nonprofit's Long Struggle for Survival* by Kevin Guthrie
A compellingly-written and fascinatingly-told story of how the New-York Historical Society, a grand old museum housing countless invaluable treasures, was so consistently financially mismanaged that despite its greatness it found itself constantly on the verge of financial ruin. Clearly written as a cautionary tale for those who would run a non-profit.
31. *The Pale King* by David Foster Wallace
In his notes, David Foster Wallace described this unfinished book about boredom as one where "something big threatens to happen but doesn't actually happen". As a result, it's probably less unfinished than it feels. It has the usual DFW virtuosity with language (including some truly poetic sections) and a tax-related premise that somehow captures the entirety of this political moment the same way *Infinite Jest* captured the cultural one, but there's certainly nothing in the way of a plot the way there was in *Infinite Jest*.
32. *Bossypants* by Tina Fey
This book is like a literary cupcake: a small bombshell of sugar without very much in the way of substance. I believe I read the whole thing while sitting in an airport terminal and while I enjoyed it and laughed, it's hard to claim I took anything away from the experience.
33. *Poor Economics* by Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo
God, what a book! *Poor Economics* is a series of tales of foreigners trying to save the far-flung poor, while failing to realize not only that their developed-country ideas are terrible disasters in practice, but also that everything they've learned to think of as solid — even something as simple as measuring distance — is far more fraught, and complex, and political than they ever could have imagined. It's a stunning feeling to have the basic building blocks of your world questioned and crumbled before you — and a powerful lesson in the value of self-skepticism for everyone who's trying to do something.
34. *The Filter Bubble* by Eli Pariser
35. *The Psychopath Test* by Jon Ronson
Another fun puff pastry of a book.

36. *Empire State* by Jason Shiga
Reads a bit like Shiga trying to do his own version of *Shortcomings*. Not a bad book, by any means, but it has none of the Jason Shiga magic.
37. *Bookhunter* by Jason Shiga
Words won't do it justice: an action-movie-thriller of a book, a hilarious adrenaline-fueled ride that's impossible to put down. I've never had this much fun with a piece of entertainment. Just sheer delight.
38. *Meanwhile* by Jason Shiga
Not his best, but still entrancing and strange and very, very good.
39. *He's Just Not That Into You: The No-Excuses Truth to Understanding Guys* by Greg Behrendt and Liz Tuccillo
40. *Mac OS X 10.7 Lion: the Ars Technica review* by John Siracusa
41. *Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality* by Eliezer Yudkowsky
This is a book whose title still makes me laugh and yet it may just turn out to be one of the greatest books ever written. The writing is shockingly good, the plotting is some of the best in all of literature, and the stories are simply pure genius. I fear this book may never get the accolades it deserves, because it's too hard to look past the silly name and publishing model, but I hope you, dear reader, are wiser than that! A must-read.
As it says at the beginning, you really need to give it a couple chapters to get started before passing judgment — the first bunch are quite silly and it doesn't seem worth sticking with until you've gotten past them.
42. *In the Plex: How Google Thinks, Works, and Shapes Our Lives* by Steven Levy
Levy again does what he does so well: make an alien culture visible and comprehensible. A great guide to Google.
(Disclosure: Levy once included me in an essay collection he edited.)
43. *How to Count* by Steven Frank
The first volume into what will surely be a wonderful introduction to programming. Certainly the best book on counting that I've read.
44. *The Inner Game of Tennis* by Timothy Gallwey
This book touched me deeply and made me rethink the entire way I approached life; it's about vastly more than just tennis. I can't really describe it, but I can recommend [this video with Alan Kay and the author](#) that will blow your mind.

45. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization* by Peter M. Senge

This book does not live up to its title — it has very little practical advice on how to create a learning organization — but still, it’s an important topic and I don’t know of anything better. It’s full of fascinating stories and provocations that will change how you think about business.

46. *House of Holes* by Nicholson Baker

I’m not normally one for filthy books, but Baker’s writing is so good that he somehow manages to make this one just utterly compelling despite the smut. I started reading and I couldn’t stop, he just draws you into his world of pure insanity.

47. *Rick Perry and his Eggheads* by Sasha Issenberg

Sasha Issenberg is a miracle-worker. This book (really an excerpt from his forthcoming book) is so very, very good that it just blows me away. Issenberg tells the tale of everything I’ve been trying to say to everyone in politics, but he does it in a real-life three-act morality play that’s so good it could be a model on how to tell a story.

48. *Haiti: After the Quake* by Paul Farmer

Farmer’s gripping personal story of returning to Haiti after the earthquake and seeing the devastation it had left, both physically and politically. It’s a personal narrative, not a work of investigative journalism, but it still provides powerful insight into what happened.

49. *Confessions of a “Rape Cop” Juror* by Patrick Kirkland

When I first heard that the “rape cop” had been acquitted, I took it as yet another instance of a “rape culture” in which crimes against women go unpunished. This book persuaded me that we were all wrong. It’s a fascinating real-life story of what it’s like inside a jury room and what it really means to have proof beyond a reasonable doubt.

50. *The End of Loser Liberalism* by Dean Baker

Dean Baker knocks it out of the park again — a must-read for anyone who cares about economic policy.

51. *The Lean Startup* by Eric Ries

Ries presents a translation of the Toyota Production System to startups — and it’s so clearly the right way to run a startup that it’s hard to imagine how we got along before it. Unfortunately, the book has become so trendy that I find many people claiming to swear allegiance to it who clearly missed the point entirely. Read it with an open mind and let it challenge you, so you can start to understand how transformative it really is.

52. *The Astonishing Secret of Awesome Man* by Michael Chabon, illustrated by Jake Parker
A short children's book with absolutely gorgeous illustrations by Parker and a cute little story by Chabon.
53. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone (Book 1)* by J. K. Rowling
54. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets (Book 2)* by J. K. Rowling
55. *Republic, Lost* by Lawrence Lessig
56. *Flat Earth News* by Nick Davies
I've read a lot of books of media criticism and they all tend to trod similar ground: sensationalism, political bias, etc., etc. Nick Davies has written what is, in many ways, the same book — except he write it as an insider, not an outsider. As a result, he explains *how* the media gets to be this way, *why* it is as bad as it is — and he tells lots of delicious insider stories of incredible things he discovered that got cut or buried or distorted beyond all recognition. Davies is now famous for bringing down the Murdoch empire, but if more people read this book, perhaps he will bring down the rest of corrupt journalism as well.
57. *Steve Jobs* by Walter Isaacson
Siracusa is right: they got the wrong guy. The book is compelling and readable, there's no doubt about that, but it tells a story that's basically already been told. Isaacson is so clueless and uncurious that pretty much all of his “exclusive interviews” were wasted; there's no insight in any of this, just weird lapses into authorial judgment.
Robert Caro has said there's one more biography he wants to write after he finishes LBJ. I dearly hope that it's Steve Jobs.
58. *Anything You Want* by Derek Sivers
I constantly find myself loving Derek Sivers' blog posts, and while they feel eerily insubstantial collected together here, they're still full of enough insight and good humor to make them well worth reading.
59. *CODE: The Hidden Language of Computer Hardware and Software* by Charles Petzold
A magnificent achievement. Charles Petzold starts with the story of two kids across the street who wish to communicate with each other and, from this simple beginning, builds up an entire computer without ever making it seem like something that should be over your head. I never really felt I understood the computer until I read this book.
60. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban (Book 3)* by J. K. Rowling

61. *Masscult and Midcult: Essays Against the American Grain* by Dwight Macdonald (edited by John Summers), with an introduction by Louis Menand

Dwight Macdonald is one of those delightful cranks that you can't help but love watching. Summers has collected a magnificent listing of things to watch — plus included an introduction that's the incredible Menand at his best.

62. *The Ghost [Writer]* by Robert Harris

It's hard to shake the feeling that a big part of the appeal of this book is watching Tony Blair get arrested for war crimes, but that doesn't change the fact that it's a first-rate political thriller.

63. *What It Takes: The Way to the White House* by Richard Ben Cramer

Were this just the story of how George H. W. Bush got elected, it'd be one of the few biographies that belonged in the same league as Robert Caro. But it's so much more than that: Richard Ben Cramer gives the same treatment to dozens of candidates in the 1988 presidential election: Gary Hart, Bob Dole, Joe Biden, Dick Gephardt, and on and on. Even if you didn't care about politics, this book would be worth reading simply because the writing is so good. But if you do, there's never been a better exposition of what drives these men who wish to be our leaders and what they have to go through to get there.

64. *Joan: Forty Years of Life, Loss, and Friendship with Joan Didion* by Sara Davidson

It's hard to shake the feeling that this book is merely the author attempting to cash in on their minor friendship with Joan Didion, but I love Didion so much that I'm just grateful for the stories.

65. *How a Book is Born: The Making of The Art of Fielding* by Keith Gessen

Gessen is an incredible writer and here he has the gift of getting to observe, first-hand, a heartwarming tale. A good story and a great introduction to the modern book business.

66. *I'm Feeling Lucky: The Confessions of Google Employee Number 59* by Douglas Edwards

There were many, many times in this book that I couldn't help but wonder: How did he get away with writing this? Google apparently approved of the project and had chaperones in all his interviews, but nonetheless the book is just full of revelations and shockers that it's hard to imagine Google would ever want to see the light of day.

There are a lot of books written about Google, but this has got to be one of the best. Edwards is uniquely suited to the task: his talents as a writer

allow him to craft a compelling read, his insider's view of the very early days give him a detailed knowledge from which to tell his story, but his total lack of cultural chemistry with the rest of the Googlers allows him to find mysterious all the crazy things which they all take for granted. A fantastic read.

67. *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* by Christopher Hitchens

Mother Teresa is a byword for saintliness, but have you ever stopped to ask why? Christopher Hitchens makes a convincing case that she's something closer to a monster. Everyone I've told about this book is shocked by the concept, but it's a short book with a pretty compelling argument.

68. *The Gated City* by Ryan Avent

69. *Books I Did Not Read This Year: An Ebook* by Kieran Healy

Healy is hilarious; this collection of blog posts was a delight.

70. *The Devil and Sherlock Holmes* by David Grann

Grann is a masterful nonfiction writer; this is a collection of his pieces.

Perfect Institutions

June 8, 2012

[Original link](#)

In pretty much every major city in this country, there's a Hollister Co. clothing store — there are over 500 of them in all. Walk inside and it's like being transported: the windows are shuttered so they control the light, the entrance has an L-shaped route so that you don't catch a hint of the outside world, the floors and ceilings have been replaced with new patterns, thumping music controls the sound, special scents are pumped into the air to control what you smell. An attractive young person greets you at the door. You're in a different world.

And, to a first approximation, this new world is perfect. Sure, if you search hard, maybe you can find a ruffled edge on a shirt somewhere, but it's hardly enough to spoil the illusion. And this is what strikes me: that in every major city, in this deeply-flawed country, you can find a little bit of perfection.

No one person, I am sure, can accomplish this kind of perfection. Think about yourself being responsible for creating such a place. Surely there's some part of it you're not capable of doing — do you know where to find the perfect music and the perfect scent and someone to tile the ceiling and someone to take a perfect photograph for the wall and on and on? And even if you are that kind of heroic generalist, who can handle all of that, could you maintain it without flagging, day after day, without loosening your standards, without giving in to the exhaustion that maintaining such a perfect appearance takes? OK, perhaps you have more willpower than I — but unless you're Amy Goodman, even you must take ill sometimes, must have a family emergency to attend to, or *something!* Nobody's perfect, right?

And yet, here they are, five hundred stores of perfection. (You may detest what they are perfect at, but that's not my point. The point is that they have a vision and make it stick.) How do they do it?

"It's obvious," you say. "They don't just have one person — they have a whole bunch. When one falls down on the job, or skips out sick, the others pick up the slack." But those others are imperfect too. It seems far from preordained that a bunch of imperfection combines to create the perfect — it seems just as plausible that combining imperfect people causes the imperfections to multiply, that the whole is far less than the sum of its parts (I'm sure we've all been in such situations).

The difference between these two fates — between people's imperfections canceling each other out versus amplifying each other — is institutions, the social structures that guide people in their actions. Hollister seems gifted with an

amazing set of institutions. I don't know the details, but we can imagine them: Everyone must show up for their shift an hour early. If you don't show, a manager calls in a replacement. The managers keep an eye on your performance and if you don't do a good enough job folding shirts, you're reprimanded or replaced. Perhaps a roving "brand protection squad" goes around ensuring local managers are upholding the high national standards. And on and on. Every failsafe has a failsafe.

If you've ever tried building an organization yourself, you know how hard it is to get something like this right. And yet the world is filled with organizations that seem to do it effortlessly. This is the paradox [at the heart of Kafka's *The Trial*](#) and it's one that continues to astonish me. How do they do it? And how come no one else is curious about the details of their success?

America After Meritocracy: Chris Hayes' *The Twilight of The Elites*

June 20, 2012

[Original link](#)

[crossposted from Crooked Timber]

In his new book, *The Twilight of the Elites: America After Meritocracy*, Chris Hayes manages the impossible trifecta: the book is compellingly readable, impossibly erudite, and — most stunningly of all — correct. At the end, I was left with just two quibbles: first, the book's chapter on "pop epistemology" thoroughly explicated how elites got stuff wrong without bothering to mention the non-elites who got things right, leaving the reader with the all-too-common impression that getting it right was impossible; and second, the book never assembled its (surprisingly sophisticated) argument into a single summary. To discuss it, I feel we have to start with remedying the latter flaw:

Our nation's institutions have crumbled, Hayes argues. From 2000–2010 (the "Fail Decade"), every major societal institution failed. Big businesses collapsed with Enron and Worldcom, their auditors failed to catch it, the Supreme Court got partisan in *Bush v. Gore*, our intelligence apparatus failed to catch 9/11, the media lied us into wars, the military failed to win them, professional sports was all on steroids, the church engaged in and covered up sex abuse, the government compounded disaster upon disaster in Katrina, and the banks crashed our economy. How did it all go so wrong?

Hayes pins the blame on an unlikely suspect: meritocracy. We thought we would just simply pick out the best and raise them to the top, but once they got there they inevitably used their privilege to entrench themselves and their kids (inequality is, Hayes says, "autocatalytic"). Opening up the elite to more efficient competition didn't make things more fair, it just legitimated a more intense scramble. The result was an arms race among the elite, pushing all of them to embrace the most unscrupulous forms of cheating and fraud to secure their coveted positions. As competition takes over at the high end, personal worth resolves into exchange value, and the elite power accumulated in one sector can be traded for elite power in another: a regulator can become a bank VP, a modern TV host can use their stardom to become a bestselling author (try to imagine Edward R. Murrow using the nightly news to flog his books the way Bill O'Reilly does). This creates a unitary elite, detached from the bulk of society, yet at the same time even more insecure. You can never reach the pinnacle of the elite in this new world; even if you have the most successful TV show, are you also making blockbuster movies? bestselling books? winning Nobel Prizes? When your peers are the elite at large, you can never clearly best them.

The result is that our elites are trapped in a bubble, where the usual pointers toward accuracy (unanimity, proximity, good faith) only lead them astray. And their distance from the way the rest of the country really lives makes it impossible for them to do their jobs justly — they just don't get the necessary feedback. The only cure is to reduce economic inequality, a view that has surprisingly support among the population (clear majorities want to close the deficit by raising taxes on the rich, which is more than can be said for any other plan). And while Hayes is not a fan of heightening the contradictions, it is possible that the next crisis will bring with it the opportunity to win this change.

This is just a skeletal summary — the book itself is filled with luscious texture to demonstrate each point and more in-depth discussion of the mechanics of each mechanism (I would call it Elster meets Gladwell if I thought that would be taken as praise). [So buy the book already](#). Now, as I said, I think Hayes is broadly correct in his analysis. And I think his proposed solution is spot on as well — when we were fellows together at the Harvard Center for Ethics, I think we annoyed everyone else with our repeated insistence that reducing economic inequality was somehow always the appropriate solution to each of the many social ills the group identified.

But when talking to other elites about this proposal, I notice a confusion that's worth clarifying, about the *structural* results of inequality, rather than the merely quantitative ones. Class hangs over the book like a haunting spectre (there's a brief comment on p. 148 that "Mills [had] a more nuanced theory of elite power than Marx's concept of a ruling class") but I think it's hard to see how the solution relates to the problem without it. After all, we started by claiming the problem is meritocracy, but somehow the solution is taxing the rich?

The clue comes in thinking clearly about the alternative to meritocracy. It's not picking surgeons by lottery, Hayes clarifies, but then what is it? It's about ameliorating power relationships altogether. Meritocracy says "there must be one who rules, so let it be the best"; egalitarianism responds "why must there?" It's the power imbalance, rather than inequality itself, that's the problem.

Imagine a sci-fi world in which productivity has reached such impressive heights that everyone can have every good they desire just from the work young kids do for fun. By twiddling the knobs on their local MakerBot, the kids produce enough food, clothing, and iPhones to satisfy everyone. So instead of working, most people spend their days doing yoga or fishing. But scarcity hasn't completely faded away — there's still competition for the best spots at the fishing hole. So we continue to let those be allocated by the market: the fishing hole spot is charged for and the people who really want it earn the money to pay for it by helping people with various chores.

In this sort of world, inequality doesn't seem like much of a problem. Sure, some people get the best fishing hole spots, but that's because they did the most chores. If you want the spot more than they do, you can do more work.

But the inequality doesn't come with power — the guy with the best fishing hole spot can't say “fuck me or you're fired”.

This sci-fi world may sound ridiculous, but it's basically the one [Keynes predicted](#) we'd soon be living in:

Now it is true that the needs of human beings may seem to be insatiable. But they fall into two classes – those needs which are absolute in the sense that we feel them whatever the situation of our fellow human beings may be, and those which are relative in the sense that we feel them only if their satisfaction lifts us above, makes us feel superior to, our fellows. Needs of the second class, those which satisfy the desire for superiority, may indeed be insatiable; for the higher the general level, the higher still are they. But this is not so true of the absolute needs – a point may soon be reached, much sooner perhaps than we are all of us aware of, when these needs are satisfied in the sense that we prefer to devote our further energies to non-economic purposes.

[...] But, of course, it will all happen gradually, not as a catastrophe. Indeed, it has already begun. The course of affairs will simply be that there will be ever larger and larger classes and groups of people from whom problems of economic necessity have been practically removed.

And that's what a reduction in economic inequality could achieve. The trend in recent decades (since the fall of the Soviet Union and the ruling class's relief that “There Is No Alternative”) has been for the people at the top to seize all the economic gains, leaving everyone else increasing insecure and dependent on their largesse. (Calling themselves “job creators”, on this view, is not so much a brag as a threat.) But with less inequality, it could be otherwise. Instead of a world in which there are a handful of big networks with the money to run television shows, everyone could afford to have [their Sunday morning conversations](#) filmed and livestreamed. Instead of only huge conglomerates having the capital and distribution to launch new product lines, everyone could make and market their own line of [underwear](#) or [video games](#) ([instead of just elite Red Sox pitchers](#)).

Even on strict efficiency grounds, this strikes me as a more alluring view than the usual meritocracy. Why put all your eggs in one basket, even if it's the best basket? Surely you'd get better results by giving more baskets a try.

You can argue that this is exactly where technology is bringing us — [popular kids on YouTube](#) get made into huge pop sensations, right? — and the genius of Hayes' book is to show us why this is not enough. The egalitarian demand shouldn't be that we need more black pop stars or female pop stars or YouTube sensation pop stars, but to question why we need elite superstars at all. I hope Hayes' next book shows us what the world without them is like.

New: The Pokayoke Guide to Developing Software

June 26, 2012

[Original link](#)

I've put together a new guide for developing software, from idea to architectural details. The idea was to combine all the good ideas I'd heard from various areas of software development into a single, concise document. I've also added some new stuff — I think my need/idea model is actually a pretty good way to generate startup (and other) ideas.

[The Pokayoke Guide to Developing Software](#)

I'm eager for suggestions and feedback.

Thinking Clearly About Piece-Work

July 5, 2012

[Original link](#)

My friend Jonathan Zittrain has been working on a book about how the return of piece-work will destroy America. As someone who kind of misses piece-work, it made me want to think through the issues involved.

Because, in the real world, competition is imperfect, when a company sells something it earns a surplus. That surplus then must be divided between capital and labor, or more concretely, the company and the employee. The terms of distribution are determined by the employment agreement (i.e. how much the employee will get paid).

If labor has all the power, it will want almost all of the surplus, so it'd demand an employee agreement where it gets paid a big chunk per good produced — this is basically piece-work. If capital has all the power, it will want to pay employees barely enough to stay alive and be able to show up for work — this is basically wages. So, to a first approximation, wages are what you get when capital is in charge and piece-work is what you get when labor is in charge.

But there are some additional considerations. The transaction costs for capital are relatively low — you can invest in a whole bunch of companies at a time, whereas you can really only do a couple jobs at a time (or usually just one) and it's quite painful to find another one. So employees also want insurance — they want to guarantee they'll keep getting paid even when the market for the stuff they produce declines. Again, we can imagine two extremes: if labor is in charge, it'll want a job for life, where getting downsized is inconceivable; if capital is in charge, it'll want to employ people for exactly as long as their marginal product is profitable — which means staffing up in booms and downsizing freely in busts (and not just business cycle booms and busts — companies want to hire lots of temporary workers for Christmas, for example).

Now obviously a job for life doesn't make a ton of sense in a piece-work world. If AT&T has guaranteed you a job for life with steady wages, then it makes sense for it to invest in retraining you for some different part of the business when mechanical telephone switches get replaced by computer servers. It's less clear how this would work in a piece-work deal. But the fact is there's no reason the insurance part should be tied to the wages. In Denmark, for example, if your job disappears the government simply pays you 90% of your old salary until you find a new one (up to some cap, of course). There's no reason piece-work can't coexist with this kind of social insurance system, which would seem to be the choice of our all-powerful labor.

But that's treating labor as a monolithic entity. The third thing wages do is collapse differences in pay *between* workers. For example, it's well established that programmer productivity varies by an order of magnitude — the best programmers at a company can be *ten times* as productive as the worst programmers — but I've never heard of a company where programmer pay varies by anywhere near that much. Really great programmers might be paid double or perhaps even triple the worst programmers, but I've never heard of anything close to a 10x difference.

The one place where you do see these really huge differences is in CEO pay, but even this isn't really a counterexample since CEO is a job with no intra-company reference class. That is, it's not like companies will have one CEO getting paid \$1.2M and another getting paid \$12M (indeed, I'd guess companies with co-CEOs find them getting paid the same amount) — instead, the order-of-magnitude differences are all found across companies.

But order-of-magnitude differences are totally possible with piece-work, especially the kind of intellectual piece-work that Zittrain is concerned with. Krugman has bragged that he “writes faster than anyone in journalism” and it's quite possible to imagine him turning out columns in a tenth the time of Barbara Ehrenreich (who turned down the NYT op-ed columnist job because it was too time-consuming). So wages might be a way of quietly redistributing money from the speedy Krugmans to the dawdling Ehrenreichs. But just as with social insurance, you can imagine this role being taken up by the government instead: through progressive taxation.

Now according to classic economic theory, these changes wouldn't just be details of style, but would increase the size of the overall pie. And, on the squishy side, they'd provide much greater scope for human freedom. Assuming I was guaranteed a decent wage either way, I'd far rather be able to stay up late working one night in exchange for blowing off work the next. Not to mention getting to work the hours I want, from the place I want, in the way I want, etc.

Now the practical fact is that most jobs don't have a concrete enough product to be amenable to piece-work. They're a mixture of all sorts of different tasks, require interaction with a specific group of other people, and have all sorts of other features that kind of force them to be your usual office job. But none of that applies to Zittrain — he's talking about jobs that are *already* piece-work and arguing that they shouldn't be. But it seems to me like, if you're on the side of labor, your preferred solution should be more social insurance and progressive taxation instead.

Libertarianism and the State

July 6, 2012

[Original link](#)

This is a parody of a post by Alex Tabarrok defending employer tyranny.

Over at Marginal Revolution, Alex Tabarrok and Tyler Cowen are upset about what they call lack of freedom in the country. They give a grab bag of peculiar examples such as how people can be arrested for smoking drugs, [not paying debts](#), and, once in prison, can be [forbidden from reading books](#), and more.

In other words, the MRers have discovered that the most basic governments are sovereign which means that citizens can be put in jail for just about any reason. Simply put, an government can arrest you if they don't like you. This is a surprise?

The MRers do not adequately acknowledge that citizens have the same rights as politicians. Citizens can leave the country for any reason and they can refuse to enter any country. If you don't like the politics of the United States, or Australia or Venezuela you don't have to live there or even visit. Indeed, citizens have more rights than politicians since citizens are not subject to judicial review; that is, politicians are typically prohibited from passing laws against certain political viewpoints but citizens are not prohibited from only entering countries where those viewpoints are marginal.

If you think that the freedom to leave is without value, bear in mind that under dictatorships and totalitarian states governments could prevent citizens from leaving and from moving. The freedom to leave was hard won. We should not disparage the liberation brought by the right to exit.

Turning to the economics, the MRers are so outraged by an government's legal possibilities that they fail to notice that most governments do not in fact arrest people for smoking drugs or for failing to pay debts. Why not? The reason is that these rights are often more valuable to the citizen than to the politician and thus both citizen and politician can be made better off if the citizen keeps the rights. If the politician values the right more than the citizen then the politician buys the right with lower taxes or less regulation in other areas. If the citizen values the right more than the politician then the citizen retains the right at an otherwise higher tax rate. The politician gets the right only when the politician pays.

This is not to say that abuses do not occur, they do, as in all relationships and on both sides, but the MRers lump abuses and mutually profitable exchanges together—that's dangerous because in regulating abuses it is very easy to do away with mutually profitable exchanges.

The greater the productivity of citizens and the higher their incomes the less citizens will be willing to sell rights for lower taxes (i.e. the more willing they will be to pay for better regulatory conditions). Citizens gain more autonomy as they and their society become more productive. Thus, the best protector of citizen autonomy is high productivity and economic growth.

To understand freedom and true coercion let us remember that American citizens have the freedom to leave and visit other countries, a freedom that gun, barbed wire and electrified fence deny to many millions of less fortunate citizens from around the world.

Thoughts on Citizen Kane

July 8, 2012

[Original link](#)

In *Three Uses of the Knife*, Mamet quotes Stanislavsky as saying there are two kinds of play. The kind where the thing is absolutely perfect, the film ends and you shout “Bravo!” and you’re elated walking out to the car and then have forgotten the thing entirely by the time you get home. And the kind where something’s not quite right and so it sticks with you, gnaws at you, because the notes don’t quite resolve.

Citizen Kane is definitely the second kind of movie.

To be sure, it had its moments of sheer genius. Number one, in my mind, is juxtaposing Welles’ performance as the young Kane gracefully dancing with a showgirl at an office party against him as a much older Kane stumbling in the effort to trash a room in his Florida mansion. In both cases, there’s an absolutely beautiful physicality to the performance and the notion that the same actor was capable of doing both at the same age is nothing short of stunning.

The film is widely-hailed for the cinematographic innovation of *deep focus*, using tricks with projections and lenses to keep foreground and background in focus at the same time. But the effect is even more interesting than the technique: the film is filled with long shots where tons of action goes on through staging but the camera never cuts away. A character in the foreground talks to a character in the background, they pace, they swap places, and the camera might pan a bit (but usually not) but it never cuts.

And when it does cut, it always cuts in a sort of overlapping way. The standard modern movie shot is the over-over-two-shot: characters A and B are talking, facing each other; the screen alternates between a shot of A filmed over the shoulder of B and vice versa. You can clearly see the people but you lose all sense of the space that they’re in, since your perspective is constantly flipping back and forth.

Kane does pretty much the opposite, almost every new shot overlaps in some way with the previous one, so you never lose your place. A shot might go from wide to tight or tight to wide or, in some cases, shift slightly to the left or right, but it almost never completely flips direction, and when it does (as when Kane enters the newsroom for the first time) it flips around a very noticeable piece of the set, so it’s extremely obvious what happened.

This may have been the result of some deep insecurity about confusing an audience mostly used to watching plays from fixed seats, but I like it. The result is to give the film a tremendous physicality that makes it all feel much

more substantial. This sort of thing was apparently extremely common in the early days of film, which makes me wonder why it's so rare now. (The main modern exception is *There Will Be Blood*, which was intentionally a period piece.)

But even among older films *Kane* distinguishes itself: most films have clear staging because they're simply staged as plays, with a static camera watching a flat scene. *Kane*'s sets, innovatively, have ceilings and a full complement of walls and while action feels staged in them they never really feel like they're on a stage.

But in the scheme of things, it has to be admitted, these are small things. *Kane* suffers from far bigger problems. The first, and most blatant, is that aside from Welles the cast simply cannot act. Well, they cannot act in movies, at least. Were this a radio show, they would have been fantastic — close your eyes and you hear nothing but strong, stirring performances. Were they on stage, they likely also would have done just fine. But this was their first role in film and apparently no one stopped to tell them that in the movies, we can see your face.

Their faces are consistently either blank, as if they forgot they were supposed to move it to and not just their voice, or overwrought, as if they were exaggerating their features so they would carry through to the cheap seats. In either case, watching them destroys any sense of realism that the careful shot construction has built up and brings the whole thing to the verge of melodrama.

The other big problem is the script. The “spiraling” effect of overlapping tellings of Kane's life (a bit like the overlapping cuts, I suppose?) may have been a brilliant formal innovation, but it doesn't really add much to the film. Instead of following the through-line of a strong and compelling story, we're constantly bouncing back and forth in time, with interruptions at key moments. What do these interruptions get us? As far as I can tell, they just slow the film down.

(The best argument I can make for them is that they emphasize the fact that Kane drove those who were closest to him away. This makes some sense for Susan and Jed, but Bernstein is still loyal to him and Thatcher is dead, so what does that emphasize?)

The modern excuse for this kind of early flash-forward is to set up a big mystery which only the full story can resolve (*Damages* is an egregious example). *Kane* kind of does this with the famous “Rosebud” (although since we see this first-hand, it doesn't explain why the whole investigative-obituarist plotline is necessary). Perhaps it was just terribly spoiled for me, but Rosebud did not feel like a particularly compelling mystery. Especially with all the questions raised by the “News on the March” sequence, it was really the last of the things I was curious about. (And the notion that an editor would be so curious about it as to waste that much money on an answer really belies the presentation of journalism in the rest of the film.)

(I'm also upset that the film wasted a great opportunity for the ending. It currently ends with a speech by the investigative obituarist, saying that he

never figured out what “Rosebud” was but even if he did it was probably just another ill-fitting piece in the man’s great jigsaw puzzle. Then the camera pulls out and cuts to a wider shot and cuts again and eventually cuts to a whole new scene where someone pulls a sled out of a pile and throws into into a fire and then we cut to the sled and see the name “Rosebud” as it gets licked with flames. The obvious ending is to have the camera pull back in one steady shot as we hear the jigsaw puzzle speech until amidst this enormous pile of junk the sled is just in foreground, with “Rosebud” written on its side, as the gaggle of journalists wanders off in background. What’s all this *deep focus* stuff for if you’re not going to use it for a movie-making shot like that!)

The film does have some great bits about journalism, but it also has some weird lapses. There’s hardly anything of substance about the Spanish-American War, which I would have thought was the most interesting tale of Hearst’s life. The film is weirdly afraid to leave the country (it follows Kane to Chicago, but not to Europe) or even the building (I guess street scenes would have been too expensive), making it feel a bit cooped-up and claustrophobic.

But the most frustrating thing, script-wise, is that it raises the grand questions of ambition and money and power and answers them with just a giant muddle. Kane was incapable of loving but desperate to be loved, we’re told repeatedly, but what kind of sense does that make? There are some great moments: in an early precursor of “Fair and Balanced”, Kane prints a brave “Statement of Principles” promising to always tell the truth on his front page, just above a story about a murder he invented. But this is on day one! There is no sense that power corrupts or even, as Caro would have it, that power reveals. Kane just stay the same throughout and as his means allow him to grow the size of his gestures, he also grows the size of his failures. Maybe this is an interesting philosophical point (don’t count on scale to save you?) but a story so static doesn’t work particularly well as drama. Caro would have told it as an epic rise and fall. Kane would have told it as an epic rise. But Welles just tells it as a flatline. It’s like a Caro subject without the Caro, or the subject.

I put this criticism last because it’s the one I’m most uncomfortable about. Maybe Welles was just so far ahead of his time that he decided to critique the next century of biopics in advance. People don’t actually change, *Kane* tells us; they just play out the same mistakes on larger and larger scales, over and over again, in patterns big and small. And if so, I take it all back and this critique is actually a tremendous credit. But it sure doesn’t feel like it’s trying to be a deconstructionist film.

Is Awkwardness Avoidable?

July 23, 2012

[Original link](#)

In his brilliant book [Awkwardness](#), Adam Kotsko analyzes the US version of the television show *The Office*, concluding it, unlike its British counterpart, shies away from the emancipatory potential of awkwardness by concluding it's ultimately the result of inherently awkward individuals.

As his key example, he cites the arc of Charles Miner (*The Wire*'s Idris Elba), a high-powered Dunder Mifflin executive who visits the Scranton branch for a short while as part of his attempts to improve northeast sales. Miner's arrival forces Jim into a series of awkward comic mishaps, thus suggesting Jim's normal level of cool isn't just because he's a naturally cool person but only because he's particularly well-suited to his normal situation. But Miner ultimately reveals himself to be overly aggressive, thereby, Kotsko argues, showing Jim's awkwardness was merely a result of Miner being a fundamentally awkward person and thus withdrawing the tentative suggestion that awkwardness might actually be situational.

I think this is a misreading that shows the limits of a theory of awkwardness that lacks a notion of competence. For this arc shows precisely the opposite of what Kotsko says it does: it shows that awkwardness *is* fundamentally situational.

Miner's addition to the series marks the rare appearance of a character that is more competent than Jim. However much Jim may feel himself above the petty stressors of the Scranton office, Miner is far above that, executing with a similar level of suave at a much higher rung in the organization. When Jim comes face-to-face with a superior talent, it immediately reduces him to the level of gibbering awkwardness his coworkers are always finding themselves in, thereby demonstrating Jim's level of comfort isn't an innate character trait, but simply the result of being well-adapted to his absurd environment.

The reveal of Miner's aggression is not an undercutting but an emphasis of this theme. How did Miner get to be so cool? Was he just born with even more innate coolness than Jim and thus is able to be awkward in fewer situations? On the contrary, this coda reveals. Miner got to where he is through an aggressive ambition. His relentless striving has forced him to be competent in more and more business situations so he can move up the corporate ladder.

The Office operates under a sort of Peter Principle of awkwardness. [The Peter Principle](#) says employees are promoted to the level of their incompetence (since as long as they remain competent, they keep getting promoted). *The Office* demonstrates that being incompetent is awkward, so people are thereby promoted to the level of their awkwardness. Thus Michael Scott (Steve Carrell),

who is actually a quite talented and thoroughly comfortable salesman, gets promoted to regional manager, where he is an awkward and incompetent dolt. We can only assume that Miner is normally at the level of his awkwardness as well; he only seems cool when slumming it in Scranton, the same way that Jim only gets to seem cool by being unambitious enough to persist in a job he is obviously too good for. It is our ambition that makes us awkward, the show argues.

This is emphasized in the later plot where David Wallace (Andy Buckley), who appears as a confident corporate CFO in earlier seasons, gets made redundant in Dunder Mifflin's acquisition by Sabre and is forced to retire to his suburban mansion with his generous severance package. Without a corporate ladder to climb but with his ambition intact, he now finds himself working on a startup (producing a vacuum for children's toys called "Suck It"). But his competence as an upper executive is worthless as a startup founder and makes him so painfully awkward that even Michael can't stomach it. (Later, when Wallace returns to the corporate world, he's immediately unawkward again.)

The clear message is the opposite of Kotsko's reading: we are all awkward when we're out of our depth; our only escape from awkwardness is to develop a competence for a particular situation. But even that is short-lived: our ambition will drive us to leave such non-awkward comforts for the next challenge — and even if we don't, the vagaries of economic forces may still push us into a role we are ill-suited for. The only refuge from this pervasive awkwardness is the pervasive boredom of unambition.

P.S. Kotsko's followup, [*Why We Love Sociopaths*](#) is even better.

What Happens in The Dark Knight Rises

July 29, 2012

[Original link](#)

*Warning: Naturally, spoilers follow.*¹

The film begins by asking: what happens if conservative law-and-order policies actually worked? The answer, we quickly learn, is that it destroys the people behind them. Without anything to fight, Bruce Wayne is just a reclusive withered husk, while Commissioner Gordon is actually going to be fired. Given that these are two of the film's most sympathetic characters, we naturally tend to deplore this situation. And so the film's first key point: the champions of law-and-order do not truly want to succeed at their stated mission.

In a world without (street) crime, the police become merely the errand-boys for the wealthy, not bothering to refocus their efforts on corporate or economic criminals (like Daggett). Gordon sighs at having such quotidian assignments as tracking down wayward members of Congress; meanwhile no one even considers punishing the same Congressman for sexually harassing Selina Kyle. As a result, economic inequality grows unchecked and Gotham's citizens are saved from physical attack only to suffer economic depredation (some literally moving into the sewers in the desperate search for a job).

The whole thing is the mirror of the beginning of the first film, in which Wayne's Keynesian Supertrain project to boost the city's economy is felled by random street crime. Now the ending of street crime is ultimately felled by the failure to create an economy that works for all. ([Ra's al Ghul](#): "Over the ages, our weapons have grown more sophisticated. With Gotham, we tried a new one: Economics. ... Create enough hunger and everyone becomes a criminal.")

With the state having withered away to little more than a nightwatchman for the wealthy, private charity is all that's left to fill the widening gap between the horribly poor and the terribly wealthy. But this is ultimately a failure, because most of the wealthy philanthropists are more concerned with their own self-image than actual impact. Worse, those who are making a difference are forced to cancel their charitable programs when the downturn (and questionable business decisions) cause their profits to slump.

Into this Rawlsian nightmare walks Bane, a thug who escaped Middle Eastern extraordinary rendition to train with Arab terrorists before heading to Gotham. There he's building an underground vanguard party, constructing a new society literally underneath the decadent old one.

Bane's activists crash the Gotham Stock Exchange (which is exactly like the NYSE except with a gaudy ticker on the door), using their proletarian roles

(bike messenger, shoe shiner, cement mixer) to seize control of the markets and expropriate the wealth of Bruce Wayne, the city's richest man. Having a real enemy revitalizes Wayne, leading him to return to action as Batman and attempt to catch the criminals.

But with the Gordon Era on its way out, the police are more concerned with stopping the vigilante Batman than the expropriators, letting them get away. Thus just as Batman's success in stopping crime made himself unnecessary, his clumsy failure is what allows him to return.

The activists strike a tactical alliance with certain deluded members of the capitalist class, using their expropriation to engineer a hostile takeover of Wayne Enterprises, eventually allowing them (with a small amount of violence) to take possession of a nuclear weapon.

That way, when the vanguardists use proletarian sabotage to secede and declare independence, the US can't intervene and instead leaves the newly-independent city to its own devices.² (Once again, Wayne has made it possible for his enemies to succeed — they never could have done it without his nuke.) Bane quickly dismantles the repressive state, releasing the prisoners locked up without parole under the harsh law-and-order regime. In the resulting anarchy, the people quickly do what the old establishment wouldn't: string up the bankers (sometimes literally) and redistribute their wealth. (Their show-trials are the mirror to the establishment's treatment of organized crime under the Dent Act, harshly punishing the criminals and seizing their assets with limited due process.)

Emphasizing that all power ultimately comes from the force of the fist, the police try to reassert their control in a climactic street brawl against Bane's vanguardists. However, the situation only gets worse for them as it's revealed that Talia, the daughter of the Arab terrorist leader, has arranged the nuke to detonate unavoidably.

Batman apparently finally realizes that he's only creating the crime he tries so hard to stop (as [The Joker told him](#), "I don't want to kill you! What would I do without you?...you complete me"), so he fakes his own death as he disposes of the bomb. He ends the film in Italy, apparently leading a normal life with an attractive reformed catburglar.³

As Neil Kandalgaonkar [notes in comments](#):

If Bruce Wayne had never used his resources to 'improve' matters, Gotham would be a thriving (albeit often corrupt) city. Instead it has suffered from terrorist attacks killing prominent city officials, destroying most bridges, devastating several public buildings, giant smoking holes in the ground, and even ruined the real estate value of the more desirable neighborhoods.

The predictable result, not shown in the movie, is capital flight from a city which embraced law and order by any and all means, and

instead got anarchy and ruin. The billionaire vigilante himself flees the city, having secured his fortune with offshore banking accounts.

1. Thanks especially to [Aaron Bady's review](#) for clarifying my thinking on some of these points.
2. Unlike with Cuba, Vietnam, Nicaragua, etc.
3. Admittedly, this move is somewhat undercut by the fact that before he left he decided to set up a sequel series by sending a promising young cop (whose middle name turns out to be Robin) on a mission that ends with Robin watch a top policeman prefer to let the entire population of the city die rather than disobey outdated bureaucratic orders. Disgusted, Robin throws away his badge and sets off to continue Batman's tactics of vigilantism, inheriting the Batcave.

What do startup founders want?

August 5, 2012

[Original link](#)

To oversimplify greatly for a second:

People in New York want money. People in Los Angeles want fame. People in DC want power. People in Miami want to have fun. But what do people in San Francisco want?

It's not money. Sure, a startup that sells for a lot of money is nice, but it's clearly not the goal. I think few startup founders would feel good about building something worthless and then tricking a big company into buying it for a lot of money.

It's not fame. Sure, Mark Zuckerberg is famous now, but he actually seems more annoyed about that than anything.

It's not power, or else the founders of GitHub would look ridiculous for giving all their power away to their employees. Paul Buchheit didn't write Gmail because he wanted to control the actions of its users.

It's certainly not having fun. (Although, like most hard things, startups are actually surprisingly fun.)

No, I think the thing startup founders want is *importance*.

Importance is a bit like power, but heavily diluted. Power is about being able to make people do something they wouldn't otherwise do. The Instagram founders weren't in it for power: they have very little interest in making people take photos they wouldn't otherwise take. But nonetheless, their decisions had a great deal of importance for their users. If they decided to put ads in their app or remove a favorite filter, millions of people's lives suddenly get a little bit more annoying.

Because your tiny decisions have huge impacts on people, when you're important everyone wants to hear what you have to say. You can go to TED and WEF and the audience wants to come up to talk to you, not so much because they want something from you, but because what you think has a big impact on their lives.

This is why selling a startup is so hard. It gets you money and fame but it means losing a lot of your importance. Now when you go to TED, you're a has-been; you just answer questions about what the good old days are like.

Importance is different from impact. Tim Berners-Lee (inventor of the Web) had a huge impact in the world, but he's not particularly important. He decided long ago that the Semantic Web was the next big thing, but few people cared, because practically there was very little he could actually do about it.

Dick Costolo (CEO of Twitter), by contrast, is pretty important. If he decides that Twitter needs a "consistent user experience", he can shut down apps millions of people use each day, destroying the companies that build them.

We all know the dangers of wanting money or power. But the dangers of wanting importance are little-discussed. Importance tends to require centralizing things, which means restraining innovation and leaving yourself open to the demands of actual power.

Imagine Tim had built the Web the same way folks built Twitter. All our web pages would be would be hosted by a single company, accessed through an API that they defined and could change at whim. Web applications would be far weaker than they are today (since it would be hard to store anything interesting on TimCo's servers) and powerful corporations would constantly be knocking people offline permanently for various terms-of-service violations (no trademark infringement! no hate speech!).

Tim would be much more important in this world, but I don't think the rest of us would be better off.

Do I have too much faith in science?

August 10, 2012

[Original link](#)

We live in a society where it's almost impossible to give science too much credit. Ever since the atom bomb and the space race, it's just been taken for granted that civilization advances through the progress of science. Science—we are told—grows our food, cures our diseases, creates our new technologies, and just generally propels the human race forward.

If science is the engine of progress, then those who have not been captured under its spell must be dusty relics of prejudice and caprice. Fields under the sway of hidebound tradition must be bulldozed and renovated in the image of science. Thus doctors, instead of making decisions by random whim, must be forced to practice “evidence-based medicine” where all their prescriptions are backed by randomized controlled trials. Policymakers, instead of just being bleeding-heart do-gooders, must temper their enthusiasm for regulation by doing cost-benefit analyses to see if their proposals make sense. Managers, instead of following their intuition, must subject their strategies to rigorous experiment—through A/B tests in the market.

But what's weird about this mania for science is how unscientific it all is. As far as I know, no studies have shown that evidence-based medicine leads to better patient outcomes or that companies which practice comprehensive A/B testing are more profitable than those which follow their intuition. And the evidence that science is responsible for stuff like increased life expectancy is [surprisingly weak](#).

But there's such a mania for science that even asking these questions seems absurd. How could there possibly be evidence against evidence-based medicine? The whole idea seems like a contradiction in terms. But it is not.

Recent decades have seen science encroach on the kitchen, with scientific approaches to cooking and cuisine. Where other chefs might simply follow instructions they found on a yellowing scrap of paper, the new modernists seek to understand the physics behind their actions. This approach has led to some interesting new techniques, but it's also led us to understand that some of those silly traditions aren't so silly after all.

Eggs, for example, were often beaten in copper bowls. Why copper bowls? Chefs might have been able to give you some kind of reason, but it would have sounded silly to scientific ears. But the modernists discovered that the ions in the copper ended up forming complex bonds with the conalbumin in the eggs.

This was not something that chefs had ever established as scientific knowledge—no aproned Isaac Newton ever discovered this was the right way to cook the

eggs—but it was knowledge chefs had nonetheless. It was, in Polyani’s phrase, tacit knowledge, part of the things society genuinely knew but was never able to write down or clearly prove.

Scientism systematically destroys tacit knowledge. If chefs were forced to follow “evidence-based cooking”, not using anything special like a copper bowl until there was a peer-reviewed double-blind randomized controlled trial proving its effectiveness, the result surely would be worse food. So why is it crazy to believe the same attitude leads to worse medicine?

In business, too, scientism could be quite destructive. Can Steve Jobs provide a proof for the rightness of every iPhone feature? Can Doug Bowman do a scientific experiment to [justify his every shade of blue](#)? Forcing them to could well make their work far worse instead of better.

Scientism even fails just within our own heads. If you’re struggling with a decision, we’re taught to approach it more “scientifically”, by systematically enumerating pros and cons and trying to weight and balance them. That’s what Richard Feynman would do, right? Well, studies have shown that this sort of explicit approach repeatable leads to *worse* decisions than just going with your gut. Why? Presumably for the same reason: your gut is full of tacit knowledge that it’s tough to articulate and write down. Just focusing on the stuff you can make explicit means throwing away everything else you know—destroying your tacit knowledge.

Of course, there’s no guarantee that just trusting your gut will work either. Intuition and tradition are often just as wrong as scientific cluelessness. And in the cases where they genuinely have little to contribute, throwing them away (or quarantining it until it’s proven by scientific test) might not be such a bad idea. But I’ve always just assumed that this was *always* true—that tradition and intuition had nothing to contribute, unless carefully coached by scientific practice. That science was the only way to get knowledge, rather than just another way of codifying it. Now, instead of throwing it all away, I’m now thinking I ought to spend more time finding ways to harness all that tacit knowledge.

Believe you can change

August 18, 2012

[Original link](#)

This post is part two of the series [Raw Nerve](#).

Carol Dweck was obsessed with failure. You know how some people just seem to succeed at everything they do, while others seem helpless, doomed to a life of constant failure? Dweck noticed that too — and she was determined to figure out why. So she began watching kids, trying to see if she could spot the difference between the two groups.

In a 1978 study with Carol Diener, she gave kids various puzzles and recorded what they said as they tried to solve them. Very quickly, the helpless kids started blaming themselves: “I’m getting confused,” one said; “I never did have a good rememory,” another explained.

But the puzzles kept coming — and they kept getting harder. “This isn’t fun anymore,” the kids cried. But still, there were more puzzles.

The kids couldn’t take it anymore. “I give up,” they insisted. They started talking about other things, trying to take their mind off the onslaught of tricky puzzles. “There is a talent show this weekend, and I am going to be Shirley Temple,” one girl said. Dweck just gave them even harder puzzles.

Now the kids started getting silly, almost as if they could hide their failure by making it clear they weren’t trying in the first place. Despite repeatedly being told it was incorrect, one boy just kept choosing brown as his answer, saying “Chocolate cake, chocolate cake.”¹

Maybe these results aren’t surprising. If you’ve ever tried to play a board game with kids, you’ve probably seen them say all these things and more (Dweck appears to be missing the part where they pick up the game board and throw all the pieces on the floor, then run away screaming).

But what shocked her — and changed the course of her career — was the behavior of the successful kids. “Everyone has a role model, someone who pointed the way at a critical moment in their lives,” she later wrote. “These children were my role models. They obviously knew something I didn’t and I was determined to figure it out.”²

Dweck, like many adults, had learned to hide her frustration and anger, to politely say “I’m not sure I want to play this anymore” instead of knocking over the board. She figured the successful kids would be the same — they’d have tactics for coping with failure instead of getting beaten down by it.

But what she found was radically different. The successful kids didn't just live with failure, they *loved* it! When the going got tough, they didn't start blaming themselves; they licked their lips and said "I love a challenge." They'd say stuff like "The harder it gets the harder I need to try."

Instead of complaining it wasn't fun when the puzzles got harder, they'd psych themselves up, saying "I've almost got it now" or "I did it before, I can do it again." One kid, upon being given a really hard puzzle, one that was supposed to be obviously impossible to solve, just looked up at the experimenter with a smile and said, "You know, I was *hoping* this would be informative."³

What was wrong with them?

The difference, Dweck discovered, was one of mindset. Dweck had always thought "human qualities were carved in stone. You were smart or you weren't, and failure meant you weren't." That was why the helpless kids couldn't take it when they started failing. It just reminded them they sucked (they easily got confused, they had "a bad memory"). Of course it wasn't fun anymore — why would it be fun to get constantly reminded you're a failure? No wonder they tried to change the subject. Dweck called this the "fixed mindset" — the belief that your abilities are fixed and that the world is just a series of tests that show you how good you are.

The successful kids believed precisely the opposite: that everything came through effort and that the world was full of interesting challenges that could help you learn and grow. (Dweck called this the "growth mindset.") That's why they were so thrilled by the harder puzzles — the easier ones weren't any sort of challenge, there was nothing you could learn from them. But the really tough ones? Those were fascinating — a new skill to develop, a new problem to conquer. In later experiments, kids even asked to take puzzles home so they could work on them some more.⁴

It took a seventh-grader to explain it to her: "I think intelligence is something you have to work for...it isn't just given to you... Most kids, if they're not sure of an answer, will not raise their hand... But what I usually do is raise my hand, because if I'm wrong, then my mistake will be corrected. Or I will raise my hand and say... 'I don't get this. Can you help me?' Just by doing that I'm increasing my intelligence."⁵

In the fixed mindset, success comes from proving how great you are. Effort is a bad thing — if you have to try hard and ask questions, you obviously can't be very good. When you find something you *can* do well, you want to do it over and over, to show how good you are at it.

In the growth mindset, success comes from growing. Effort is what it's all about — it's what makes you grow. When you get good at something, you put it aside and look for something harder so that you can keep growing.

Fixed-mindset people feel smart when they don't make mistakes, growth-mindset people feel smart when they struggle with something for a long time and then finally figure it out. Fixies try to blame the world when things go bad, growthers look to see what they can change about themselves. Fixies are afraid to try hard — because if they fail, it means they're a failure. Growthers are afraid of not trying.

As Dweck continued her research, she kept finding this difference in all sorts of places. In relationships, growth-mindset people looked for partners who would push them to be better, fixies just wanted someone who would put them on a pedestal (and got into terrible fights when they hit problems). Growth CEO's keep looking for new products and ways to improve, fixies cut research and tried to squeeze profits from old successes. Even in sports, growth athletes got better and better through constant practice, while fixies blamed their atrophying skills on everyone around them.

But Dweck applied a growth mindset to the question of mindset — and discovered that your mindset could itself be changed. Even small interventions — like telling students they were doing well because they tried hard, rather than because they were smart — had huge effects. With more work, she could change totally fixed-mindset people into fervent growth-mindset ones.

She herself changed, converting from a fervent fixed-mindsetter, always looking for excuses to prove how smart she was, to a growth, looking for new challenges. It was hard: “since I was taking more risks, I might look back over the day and see all the mistakes and setbacks. And feel miserable. [You feel like a zero]... you want to rush right out and rack up some high numbers.” But she resisted the urge — and became a leading psychologist instead.⁶

The first step to getting better is believing you *can* get better. In her book, *Mindset*, Dweck explains how to start talking back to your fixed mindset. The fixed mindset says, “What if you fail? You'll be a failure.” The growth mindset replies, “Most successful people had failures along the way.”⁷

Now when I first heard about this work, I just thought: that's nice, but I already do all this. I believe fervently that intelligence can change and that talents can be learned. Indeed, I'd say I'm almost pathologically growth mindset. But even I began to notice there are some things I have a fixed mindset about.

For example, I used to think I was introverted. Everyone had always told me that you were either an extroverted person or an introverted person. From a young age, I was quite shy and bookish, so it seemed obvious: I was an introvert.

But as I've grown, I've found that's hardly the end of the story. I've started to get good at leading a conversation or cracking people up with a joke. I *like* telling stories at a party a story or buzzing about a room saying 'hi' to people. I get a rush from it! Sure, I'm still not the most party-oriented person I know, but I no longer think we fit into any neat introversion/extroversion buckets.

Growth mindset has become a kind of safe word for my partner and I. Whenever we feel the other person getting defensive or refusing to try something because "I'm not any good at it", we say "Growth mindset!" and try to approach the problem as a chance to grow, rather than a test of our abilities. It's no longer scary, it's just another project to work on.

Just like life itself.

Next in this series: [Look at yourself objectively](#)

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1. Carol I. Diener and Carol S. Dweck, "[An Analysis of Learned Helplessness: Continuous Changes in Performance, Strategy, and Achievement Cognitions Following Failure](#)," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **36**:5 (May 1978), 451—462.
 2. Carol Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (2007), 3.
 3. Carol S. Dweck and Ellen L. Leggett, "[A Social-Cognitive Approach to Motivation and Personality](#)," *Psychological Review*, **95**:2 (1988), 256—273.
 4. Claudia M. Mueller and Carol Dweck, "[Praise for Intelligence Can Undermine Children's Motivation and Performance](#)," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **75**:1 (July 1998), 33—52.
 5. *Mindset*, 17.
 6. *Mindset*, 225.
 7. Carol Dweck, "[How can you change from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset?](#)," *mindsetonline.com* (visited 2012-08-18).

Raw Nerve

August 18, 2012

[Original link](#)

This is a series of pieces on getting better at life.

1. [Take a step back](#)
2. [Believe you can change](#)
3. [Look at yourself objectively](#)
4. [Lean into the pain](#)
5. [Confront reality](#)
6. [Cherish mistakes](#)
7. [Fix the machine, not the person](#)

The best posts are probably 2 and 4.

Bonus pieces:

- [What are the optimal biases to overcome?](#)

Related reading:

- [The Flinch](#) (for part 4)
- [Everything is Obvious](#)
- Ray Dalio's [Principles](#)

Look at yourself objectively

August 18, 2012

[Original link](#)

This post is part three of the series [Raw Nerve](#).

In the 1840s, hospitals were dangerous places. Mothers who went in to give birth often didn't make it out. For example, at Vienna General Hospital's First Obstetrical Clinic, as many as 10% of mothers died of puerperal fever after giving birth. But there was some good news: at the Second Clinic, the number was just 4%. Expectant mothers noticed this — some would get down on their knees and beg to be admitted to the Second Clinic. Others, hearing new patients were being admitted to the First Clinic that day, decided they'd rather give birth in the streets.

Ignaz Semmelweis, an assistant at the First Clinic, couldn't bear it. He began desperately searching for some kind of explanation for the difference. He tested many things without success. Then, in 1847, Semmelweis's friend Jakob Kolletschka was performing an autopsy when a student accidentally poked him with a scalpel. It was a minor injury, but Kolletschka got terribly sick and ultimately passed away, with symptoms rather like the what the mothers had. Which got Semmelweis wondering: was some "deathly material" on the corpses responsible for the deaths?

To test this, he insisted the doctors begin washing their hands with chlorinated lime (which he found best removed the stink of death) before handling the pregnant women. The results were shocking. In April 1847, the mortality rate was 18.3%. Semmelweis instituted handwashing in mid-May and by June the mortality rate had crashed to 2.2%. The next month it was even less and later that year it reached zero — for the first time ever.

You'd think doctors would be thrilled by this incredible discovery. Instead, Semmelweis was ridiculed and attacked. He was fired from the hospital and forced out of Vienna. "In published medical works my teachings are either ignored or attacked," he complained. "The medical faculty at Würzburg awarded a prize to a monograph written in 1859 in which my teachings were rejected." Even in his native Vienna, hundreds of mothers continued to die every year.

Semmelweis turned to alcohol and his behavior became increasingly erratic. In 1865, he was committed to a mental institution. There he was beaten by the guards, placed in a straitjacket, and locked in a dark cell. He died shortly thereafter, at the age of 47, from an infected wound.¹

Why did doctors so stubbornly reject Ignaz Semmelweis? Well, imagine being told *you* were responsible for the deaths of thousands of your patients. That you had been killing the people you were supposed to be protecting. That you were so bad at your job that you were actually worse than just giving birth in the street.

We all know people don't like to hear bad news about themselves. Indeed, we go out of our way to avoid it — and when we do confront it, we try to downplay it or explain it away. Cognitive dissonance psychologists have proven it in dozens of experiments: Force students through an embarrassing initiation to take a class, and they'll insist the class is much more interesting. Make them do a favor for someone they hate, and they start insisting they actually like them. Have them make a small ethical compromise and they'll feel comfortable making bigger and bigger ones. Instead of just accepting we made a mistake, and shouldn't have compromised or done the favor or join the class, we start telling ourselves that compromising isn't so bad — and when the next compromise comes along, we believe the lies we tell ourselves, and leap at making another mistake. We hate hearing bad news about ourselves so much that we'd rather *change our behavior* than just admit we screwed up.²

It doesn't help much when our friends point out what we did wrong. If we're so scared of hearing from ourselves that we made a mistake, just imagine how much we hate hearing it from someone else. And our friends know this: the answer to “Does this outfit make me look fat?” is not supposed to be “yes.” We may joke about our friends' foibles behind their back, but we rarely do so to their face. Even at work, a lot of effort goes into making sure employees are insulated from their superior's most negative assessments. This is what we're taught: make five compliments for every criticism, sandwich negative feedback with positive feedback on each side, the most important thing is to keep up someone's self-esteem.

But, as Semmelweis showed, this is a dangerous habit. Sure, it's awful to hear you're killing people—but it's way worse to *keep on killing people*! It may not be fun to get told you're lazy, but it's better to hear it now than to find out when you're fired. If you want to work on getting better, you need to start by knowing where you are.

Semmelweis was defeated about as much as a man can be defeated. But nothing the other doctors could do to him would change the facts. Eventually scientists proved the germ theory of disease and Semmelweis was vindicated. Today, he's an international hero: universities and hospitals are named after him, his house has been turned into a museum, Austria even put his face on a €50 gold coin. Meanwhile, the doctors who opposed him are now seen as close-minded killers.

Try as you might, you can't beat reality. Semmelweis was right: those doctors *were* killing people. Firing him, driving him out of the country, writing long

books disproving all his claims — none of it could change that frightening fact. The doctors may have thought they were winning the argument at the time, but they were big losers in the long run. And so were all the families that lost a loved one because they refused to admit their mistake.

But imagine if they had. When you're being attacked, conceding you screwed up seems like the worst thing you can do. If even you won't stand up for yourself, how can anyone else believe in you? Admitting your mistakes seems like giving up; it just proves that your opponents were right all along. But is it really so bad?

When Oprah started defending fabulist James Frey, she was savaged by the press. So she invited her critics on the show and apologized, saying "You were right, I was wrong." It didn't destroy her reputation; it rescued it. When the space shuttle *Columbia* exploded, launch manager Wayne Hale took full responsibility: "The bottom line is that I failed to understand what I was being told...I am guilty of allowing Columbia to crash." He was promoted. When JFK admitted the responsibility for the Bay of Pigs fiasco was "mine, and mine alone," his poll numbers soared.³

Imagine the same thing in your own life. If your boss started taking responsibility for your organization's problems instead of blaming others, wouldn't you like him more? If your doctor told you honestly that she had screwed up a procedure, instead of trying to cover up the mistake, wouldn't you prefer that? If a politician came clean that their policy proposals had failed, wouldn't you be more likely to trust him?

In moments of great emotional stress, we revert to our worst habits: we dig in and fight harder. The real trick is not to get better at fighting — it's to get better at stopping ourselves: at taking a deep breath, calming down, and letting our better natures take over from our worst instincts.

Even if seeing ourselves objectively is the best option, all our natural instincts all point the other direction. Not only do we try hard to avoid bad news about ourselves, we tend to exaggerate the good news. Imagine you and Jane are both up for a promotion. You want it bad, so you stay late, you work weekends. Sure, some things still slip through the cracks — but even those mistakes have really good reasons! Jane never does anything like that.

But if she did — would you even know? We see the world from our own perspective. When we have to cancel hanging out with friends to do extra work, we always see that — and feel the sacrifice. But when Jane does it, we see and feel nothing. You only get to see your own perspective. And even our mistakes make sense from our perspective — we see all of the context, everything that led up to it. It all makes sense because we saw it happen. When we screw up, it's for a reason. When other people screw up, it's because they're screwups.

Looking at ourselves objectively isn't easy. But it's essential if we ever want to get better. And if we don't do it, we leave ourselves open to con artists and ethical compromisers who prey on our desire to believe we're perfect. There's no one solution, but here are some tricks I use to get a more accurate sense of myself:

Embrace your failings. Be willing to believe the worst about yourself. Remember: it's much better to accept that you're a selfish, racist moron and try to improve, than to continue sleepwalking through life that way as the only one who doesn't know it.

Studiously avoid euphemism. People try and sugarcoat the tough facts about themselves by putting them in the best light possible. They say "Well, I was going to get to it, but then there was that big news story today" and not "Yeah, I was procrastinating on it and started reading the news instead." Stating things plainly makes it easier to confront the truth.

Reverse your projections. Every time you see yourself complaining about other groups or other people, stop yourself and think: "is it possible, is there any way, that someone out there might be making the same complaints about me?"

Look up, not down. It's always easy to make yourself look good by finding people even worse than you. Yes, we agree, you're not the worst person in the world. That's not the question. The question is whether you can get better — and to do that you need to look at the people who are even better than you.

Criticize yourself. The main reason people don't tell you what they really think of you is they're afraid of your reaction. (If they're right to be afraid, then you need to start by working on that.) But people will feel more comfortable telling you the truth if you start by criticizing yourself, showing them that it's OK.

Find honest friends. There are some people who are just congenitally honest. For others, it's possible to build a relationship of honesty over time. Either way, it's important to find friends who you can trust to tell you the harsh truths about yourself. *This is really hard* — most people don't like telling harsh truths. Some people have had success providing an anonymous feedback form for people to submit their candid reactions.

Listen to the criticism. Since it's so rare to find friends who will honestly criticize you, you need to listen extra-carefully when they do. It's tempting to check what they say against your other friends. For example, if one friend says the short story you wrote isn't very good, you might show it to some other friends and ask them what they think. Wow, they all think it's great! Guess that one friend was just an outlier. But the fact is that most of your friends are going to say it's great because they're your friend; by just taking their word for it, you end up ignoring the one person who's actually being honest with you.

Take the outside view. As I said before, we're always locked in our own heads, where everything we do makes sense. So try seeing what you look like from

the outside for a bit, assuming you don't know any of those details. Sure, your big money-making plan sounds like a great idea when you explain it, but if you throw that away, is there any external evidence that it will work?

Next in this series: [Lean into the pain](#)

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1. “[Ignaz Semmelweis](#)”, *Wikipedia* ([visited 2012-08-13](#)).
 2. Carol Tavris and Elliot Aaronson, *Mistakes Were Made (but not by me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts*, (2007), ch. 1.
 3. *Mistakes Were Made*, ch. 8. A larger study of public companies also found that companies which admitted screwing up tended to have higher stock prices. Fiona Lee, Christopher Peterson, and Larissa Z. Tiedens, “[Mea Culpa: Predicting Stock Prices From Organizational Attributions](#),” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, **30**: 12 (December 2004), 1636–1649.

Take a step back

August 18, 2012

[Original link](#)

This post introduces a new series, [Raw Nerve](#).

For most of my life, I saw my job as just making good choices. I was the decider, tasked with making the best selection from the options life presented. I could play with this friend or that one, go to this college or that one, take this job offer or the other one.

Even my problems I dealt with this way. If someone was annoying me, I'd choose to avoid them. If something was bugging me, I'd choose to stop thinking about it. I mostly kept my eyes on what was in front of me.

But recently I've started appreciating the virtues of stepping back and trying to see the bigger picture. Instead of just picking the best option, I try to invent new ones. Instead of just avoiding the stuff that bugs me, should I start making plans to fix them.

It's given me a weird feeling. I feel more in control of my life, more able to cope with my problems. I feel like I'm charting my own destiny, instead of following some track. It's hard to explain, but it's a feeling like I'm getting stronger — not physically, but psychologically. It's a good feeling. I feel like I'm growing as a person.

So I started wondering: *Is there more where that came from?* I realized I've never stopped to ask whether I could get better at life. After all, in my day job, I'm constantly looking for ways to learn and grow — reading the latest books and articles about the field, talking to other people with similar jobs and hearing what's worked for them. Why aren't I doing the same thing for life?

It turns out to be surprisingly hard. Life comes with no instruction manual and the advice parents give is all over the place. TV and the newspapers don't offer much more than narrow Quick Tips and I never saw a course in this stuff at school. There are self-help books and self-improvement courses, of course, but they seem overly practical: they're usually less about working through tough problems and more about energizing you to Get Up And Go! And there's philosophy about The Good Life, but it seems to go too far in the other direction: there's very little in there for someone to practically apply.

The blogs are a weird mix. There are the blogs on “life hacks,” which are full of gadgets and gizmos that seem to cause more problems than they solve. There are the anti-procrastination blogs, where the author has a constant stream of epiphanies that all seem to amount to “just put away the distractions and get

stuff done.” And there are the charlatans, who tell you that all your wildest dreams can come true if you just follow their patented advice.

So instead of an obvious place to go, I’ve just been finding little bits and pieces in all sorts of strange places: psychology experiments, business books, philosophy, self-help, math, and my friends. But since there’s no community around it, it’s hard to discuss it with anyone (trying to persuade other people to be interested in what you’re interested in is a fool’s game).

So I figure I’ll just start writing about it here and see if anyone cares. Maybe it’ll grow into something, but even if it doesn’t at least I’ll clarify my thoughts and hopefully get a few good suggestions for further reading.

I don’t have a name for what I’m talking about or even a good sense of what it is. I’m hopeful that will become clearer with practice. But in the meantime, what’s helped you get better at life?—at thinking, deciding, working, thinking. Whether it’s a gadget or technique or book or person, I’d love it if you [posted what you’ve found most helpful in the comments](#).

Next in this series: [Believe you can change](#)

Edmund Burke Explains The Dark Knight Rises

August 19, 2012

[Original link](#)

From Corey Robin's fantastic book [The Reactionary Mind](#):

Great power, [Burke] suggests in *The Sublime and the Beautiful*, should never aspire to be—and can never actually be—beautiful. What great power needs is sublimity. The sublime is the sensation we experience in the face of extreme pain, danger, or terror. It is something like awe but tinged with fear and dread. Burke calls it “delightful horror.” Great power should aspire to sublimity rather than beauty because sublimity produces “the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.” It is an arresting yet invigorating emotion, which has the simultaneous but contradictory effect of diminishing and magnifying us. We feel annihilated by great power; at the same time, our sense of self “swell[s]” when “we are conversant with terrible objects.” Great power achieves sublimity when it is, among other things, obscure and mysterious, and when it is extreme. “In all things,” writes Burke, the sublime “abhors mediocrity.”¹

In the *Reflections*, Burke suggests that the problem in France is that the old regime is beautiful while the revolution is sublime. The landed interest, the cornerstone of the old regime, is “sluggish, inert, and timid.” It cannot defend itself “from the invasions of ability,” with ability standing in here for the new men of power that the revolution brings forth. Elsewhere in the *Reflections*, Burke says that the moneyed interest, which is allied with the revolution, is stronger than the aristocratic interest because it is “more ready for any adventure” and “more disposed to new enterprises of any kind.” The old regime, in other words, is beautiful, static, and weak; the revolution is ugly, dynamic, and strong. And in the horrors that the revolution perpetrates—the rabble rushing into the bedchamber of the queen, dragging her half-naked into the street, and marching her and her family to Paris—the revolution achieves a kind of sublimity: “We are alarmed into reflexion,” writes Burke of the revolutionaries’ actions. “Our minds ... are purified by terror and pity; our weak unthinking pride is humbled, under the dispensations of a mysterious wisdom.”²

Beyond these simple professions of envy or admiration, the conservative actually copies and learns from the revolution he opposes.

“To destroy that enemy,” Burke wrote of the Jacobins, “by some means or other, the force opposed to it should be made to bear some analogy and resemblance to the force and spirit which that system exerts.”³

Is it not all here, right down to the moneyed interests allying with the revolution and the revolution throwing the aristocrats from their bedchambers?

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1. Burke, *Sublime and the Beautiful*, 86, 96, 121, 165.
 2. Burke, *Reflections*, 207, 243, 275. Also see Burke, *Regicide Peace*, 66, 70, 107, 157, 207, 222.
 3. Burke, *Regicide Peace*, 184.

What Happens in Batman Begins

August 22, 2012

[Original link](#)

*Warning: Naturally, spoilers follow — for both Batman Begins and The Dark Knight Rises.*¹

We begin in the 1980s, when the global forces of evil have decided to institute a new economic policy on the world. Their nefarious plan dramatically exacerbates inequality, making the rich filthy rich while the poor suffer terrible levels of unemployment.

The difference is that in the Batman universe, Gotham's leading billionaire (Thomas Wayne) can't stand the suffering and begins investing in the city when the government won't. He builds a giant Keynesian supertrain in a desperate attempt to get the city back to work. But, in an ironic twist, he ends up murdered by one of the desperate poverty-stricken citizens he's trying so hard to help.

The murder of the billionaire shocks the surviving billionaires, leading them to reverse their neoliberal policies. Instead of getting tough on crime, they decide to indulge criminals, with a deep willingness to treat criminality as merely a mental health problem.

As the billionaires retreat from power, organized crime steps in, taking their place in buying off judges and unions and cops. Instead of being run by Wayne Enterprises, the city ends up being run by mob boss Carmine Falcone.

But a few rogue elements in the police and DA's office refuse to be bought off. They free the man who murdered Thomas Wayne in exchange for his testimony against Falcone. Bruce Wayne, the billionaire's son, is so haunted by his personal demons that he can't stand this trade-off. When his childhood-friend-turned-rogue-ADA points out the selfishness of his position, he confronts Falcone. When Falcone explains that Bruce will always live in fear of what he does not understand, Bruce sets off on a quest to understand criminals.

His search concludes in a far eastern terrorist training camp, which turns out to be backed by the same global forces of evil that invented neoliberalism. It's the year 2000 and they have a new plan: attacking Gotham with the hope of inspiring enough fear that the city will destroy itself.²

Bruce, still haunted by the execution of his parents, refuses to become an executioner himself and, instead of joining the plot, sets fire to the camp before returning to clean up Gotham his own way. He begins by putting together a case against Falcone and re-seizing control of Wayne Enterprises by buying up its shares on the public market.

In doing so, he begins a reversal of history that eventually culminates in *The Dark Knight Rises*. His attack on Falcone leads to a new era of tough-on-crime, which dethrones the organized criminals and allows the wealthy to seize power again. The wealthy quickly reinstitute neoliberalism and buy back Bruce's shares on the public market, putting Wayne Enterprises back in their hands. But the global forces of evil step in once again to "restore balance" by letting Bane to release the organized criminals.³ Bruce Wayne goes back to being an innocent child of privilege and the trilogy ends exactly where it started.⁴

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1. *Batman Begins* is very clearly the mirror image of *The Dark Knight Rises* (some scenes are almost word-for-word the same), so understanding one can help us understand the other.
 2. Yes, in this trilogy 9/11 really was an inside job, from the same folks who brought you Reaganomics.
 3. Democrats, Republicans, organized crime, or billionaire financiers — whoever tries to seize power, the global forces of evil continue to hold the reins from behind-the-scenes, making sure nobody changes the system too much.
 4. Exactly, right down to how Robin (who see as a small boy in the first film, the same way we see Bruce in flashbacks) ends the film frustrated by the system (the same way Bruce was frustrated by Rachel) and is about to head out in a quest of his own, following the same path Bruce Wayne took. Thus the cycle continues.

What are the optimal biases to overcome?

August 29, 2012

[Original link](#)

*This is a bonus post for my series [Raw Nerve](#). It originally appeared in [somewhat different form](#) on *Less Wrong*.*

I've noticed that some people have complimented my series [Raw Nerve](#) by saying it's a great explanation of cognitive biases. Which always amuses me, since the series grew out of frustrations I had with the usual way that term gets used. There's a group of people (call them the cognitive bias community) who say the way to be more rational — to get better at making decisions that get you what you want — is to work at overcoming your biases. But if you're overcoming biases, surely there are some lessons that will help you more than others.

You might start with the most famous ones, which tend to be the ones popularized by Kahneman and Tversky. But K&T were academics. They weren't trying to help people be more rational, they were trying to prove to other academics that people were irrational. The result is that they focused not on the most important biases, but the ones that were easiest to prove.

Take their famous anchoring experiment, in which they showed the spin of a roulette wheel affected people's estimates about African countries. The idea wasn't that roulette wheels causing biased estimates was a huge social problem; it was that no academic could possibly argue that this behavior was somehow rational. They thereby scored a decisive blow for psychology against economists claiming we're just rational maximizers.

Most academic work on irrationality has followed in K&T's footsteps. And, in turn, much of the stuff done by the wider cognitive bias community has followed in the footsteps of this academic work. So it's not hard to believe that cognitive bias types are good at avoiding these biases and thus do well on the psychology tests for them. (Indeed, many of the questions on these tests for rationality come straight from K&T experiments!)

But if you look at the average person and ask why they aren't getting what they want, very rarely do you conclude their biggest problem is that they're suffering from anchoring, framing effects, the planning fallacy, commitment bias, or any of the other stuff in these tests. Usually their biggest problems are far more quotidian and commonsensical, like procrastination and fear.

One of the things that struck me was watching Eliezer Yudkowsky, one of the most impressive writers on the topic of cognitive biases, try to start a new nonprofit. For years, the organization he founded struggled until recently, when Luke Muehlhauser was named executive director. Eliezer readily agrees that

Luke has done more to achieve Eliezer's own goals for the organization than Eliezer ever did.

But why? Why is Luke so much better at getting what Eliezer wants than Eliezer is? It's surely not because Luke is so much better at avoiding the standard cognitive biases! Luke often talks about how he's constantly learning new rationality techniques from Eliezer.

No, it's because Luke did what seems like common sense: he bought a copy of *Nonprofits for Dummies* and did what it recommends. As Luke himself [says](#), it wasn't lack of intelligence or resources or willpower that kept Eliezer from doing these things, "it was a gap in general rationality."

So if you're interested in closing the gap, it seems like the skills to prioritize aren't things like commitment effect and the sunk cost fallacy, but stuff like "figure out what your goals really are", "look at your situation objectively and list the biggest problems", "when you're trying something new and risky, read the For Dummies book about it first", etc. That's the stuff I'm interested in writing about.

Lean into the pain

September 1, 2012

[Original link](#)

This post is part four of the series [Raw Nerve](#).

When you first begin to exercise, it's somewhat painful. Not wildly painful, like touching a hot stove, but enough that if your only goal was to avoid pain, you certainly would stop doing it. But if you keep exercising... well, it just keeps getting more painful. When you're done, if you've really pushed yourself, you often feel exhausted and sore. And the next morning it's even worse.

If that was all that happened, you'd probably never do it. It's not that much fun being sore. Yet we do it anyway — because we know that, in the long run, the pain will make us stronger. Next time we'll be able to run harder and lift more before the pain starts.

And knowing this makes all the difference. Indeed, we come to see the pain as a sort of pleasure — it feels good to really push yourself, to fight through the pain and make yourself stronger. Feel the burn! It's fun to wake up sore the next morning, because you know that's just a sign that you're getting stronger.

Few people realize it, but psychological pain works the same way. Most people treat psychological pain like the hot stove — if starting to think about something scares them or stresses them out, they quickly stop thinking about it and change the subject.

The problem is that the topics that are most painful also tend to be the topics that are most important for us: they're the projects we most want to do, the relationships we care most about, the decisions that have the biggest consequences for our future, the most dangerous risks that we run. We're scared of them because we know the stakes are so high. But if we never think about them, then we can never do anything about them.

Ray Dalio writes:

It is a fundamental law of nature that to evolve one has to push one's limits, which is painful, in order to gain strength—whether it's in the form of lifting weights, facing problems head-on, or in any other way. Nature gave us pain as a messaging device to tell us that we are approaching, or that we have exceeded, our limits in some way. At the same time, nature made the process of getting stronger require us to push our limits. Gaining strength is the adaptation process of the body and the mind to encountering one's limits, which is painful. In other words, both pain and strength typically result

from encountering one's barriers. When we encounter pain, we are at an important juncture in our decision-making process.¹

Yes it's painful, but the trick is to make that mental shift. To realize that the pain isn't something awful to be postponed and avoided, but a signal that you're getting stronger — something to savor and enjoy. It's what makes you better.

Pretty soon, when you start noticing something that causes you psychic pain, you'll get excited about it, not afraid. *Ooh, another chance to get stronger.* You'll seek out things you're scared of and intentionally confront them, because it's an easy way to get the great rewards of self-improvement. Dalio suggests thinking of each one as a puzzle, inside of which is embedded a beautiful gem. If you fight through the pain to solve the puzzle, you unlock it and get to keep the gem.

The trick is: when you start feeling that psychological pain coming on, don't draw back from it and cower — lean into it. Lean into the pain.

In agile software development, there's a phrase: If it hurts, do it more often.²

For example, imagine Jane and Joan are working on a software project together. They both have a copy of the code; Jane is making the error messages friendlier while Joan is adding a new feature. They both work on their task for days and days until it's finally done. Now they face a problem: they need to *merge* their different changes back together.

Maybe you've had this problem, either with code or with text documents: you send a draft of a report to two friends, both suggest different changes, and you have to merge all their changes back into the original document. It's incredibly annoying — and doing it with software is way worse. So people put it off. Jane thinks "you know, let me just make the thank you messages a little nicer before we merge" and Joan thinks "you know, let me add just one more feature before we merge".

They keep putting the merge off, and every time they do the task gets bigger and more painful. But they have to do it eventually. By then, the merge is so big that it takes days of painstaking work just to piece together the already-written code. It's an arduous, painful process — which makes Joan and Jane just want to put it off even longer next time.

The agile approach, however, is to do the opposite: merging hurts, so we'll do it more often. Instead of merging every couple weeks, or every couple months, we'll merge every single day, or every couple hours. Even if Jane and Joan aren't even close to finished with their work, they'll check in what they have so far (maybe with some special code deactivating it until it's finished) so they don't end up in merge hell later on. These very small merges tend not to be painful at all, they're so easy that you hardly even notice.

The same principle shows up all across software development: from testing to releasing, your natural inclination is to put off painful things, when doing them more often actually is much easier.

And I don't think it's limited to software. I think the same principle would work even if, for some odd reason, you were required to touch a hot stove for an hour. Procrastinating and putting it off until you had no choice but to hold your hand to the stove for a full hour would end up being very painful. But if you did it in small frequent bits, just quick taps of the stove with your finger that eventually added up to an hour, it wouldn't be so bad at all. Again, the trick is not to run from the pain.

Of all the self-improvement tricks I've learned, this one was by far the most surprising — and by far the most impactful. I spent most of my life hemmed in by my talents. I knew I had strengths and weaknesses and it just seemed obvious I should find jobs that fit my strengths. It seemed crazy to take a job that probed my weaknesses.

Sure, there were somethings, over there, that I wished I was better at, but they seemed so far away. Meanwhile, there were lots of things over here that I was good at. Why not just keep doing them? Sure, I realized intellectually that [I could get better](#) at the other stuff, but it hardly seemed worth the pain of trying.

I'd learned [not to shrink from hard truths](#), so I'd literally have this conversation with myself: “Yes, I know: if I got better at selling things to people [or whatever it was], I'd be much better off. But look at how painful I find selling: just thinking about it makes me want to run and hide! Sure, it'd be great if I could do it, but is it really worth all that pain?”

Now I realize this is a bogus argument: it's not that the pain is so bad that it makes me flee, it's that the importance of the topic triggers a fight-or-flight reaction deep in my reptile brain. If instead of thinking of it as a scary subject to avoid, I think of it as an exciting opportunity to get better, then it's no longer a cost-benefit tradeoff at all: both sides are a benefit — I get the benefits of being good at selling and the fun of getting better at something.

Do this enough times and your whole outlook on life begins to change. It's no longer a scary world, hemming you in, but an exciting one full of exciting adventures to pursue.³

Tackling something big like this is terrifying; it's far too much to start with. It's always better to start small. What's something you've been avoiding thinking about? It can be anything — a relationship difficulty, a problem at work, something on your todo list you've been avoiding. Call it to mind — despite the pain it brings — and just sort of let it sit there. Acknowledge that thinking about it is painful and feel good about yourself for being able to do it anyway.

Feel it becoming less painful as you force yourself to keep thinking about it. See, you're getting stronger!

OK, take a break. But when you're ready, come back to it, and start thinking of concrete things you can do about it. See how it's not as scary as you thought? See how good it feels to actually do something about it?

Next time you start feeling that feeling, that sense of pain from deep in your head that tells you to avoid a subject — ignore it. Lean into the pain instead. You'll be glad you did.

Next in this series: [Confront reality](#)

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1. Ray Dalio, *Principles* (2001), part 2 ([visited 2012-09-01](#)). This whole section was inspired by his argument.
 2. I first heard this phrase at a ThoughtWorks training. See also Martin Fowler, "[FrequencyReducesDifficulty](#)," *Bliki* (28 July 2011).
 3. See, for example, Derek Sivers, "[Push, push, push. Expanding your comfort zone](#)," *sivers.org* (13 August 2012).

Confront reality

September 9, 2012

[Original link](#)

This post is part five of the series [Raw Nerve](#).

We are all capable of believing things which we know to be untrue, and then, when we are finally proved wrong, impudently twisting the facts so as to show that we were right. Intellectually, it is possible to carry on this process for an indefinite time: the only check on it is that sooner or later a false belief bumps up against solid reality, usually on a battlefield.

—George Orwell, “[In Front of Your Nose](#)”

If you want to understand experts, you need to start by finding them. So the psychologists who wanted to understand “expert performance” began by testing alleged experts, to see how good they really were.

In some fields it was easy: in chess, for example, great players can reliably beat amateurs. But in other fields, it was much, much harder.

Take punditry. In his giant 20-year study of expert forecasting, Philip Tetlock found that someone who merely predicted “everything will stay the same” would be right more often than most professional pundits.¹ Or take therapy. Numerous studies have found an hour with a random stranger is just as good as an hour with a professional therapist.² In one study, for example, sessions with untrained university professors helped neurotic college students just as much as sessions with professional therapists.³ (This isn’t to say that therapy isn’t helpful — the same studies suggest it is — it’s just that what’s helpful is talking over your problems for an hour, not anything about the therapist.)

As you might expect, pundits and therapists aren’t fans of these studies. The pundits try to weasel out of them. As Tetlock writes; “The trick is to attach so many qualifiers to your vague predictions that you will be well positioned to explain pretty much whatever happens. China will fissure into regional fiefdoms, but only if the Chinese leadership fails to manage certain trade-offs deftly, and only if global economic growth stalls for a protracted period, and only if...”⁴ The therapists like to point to all the troubled people they’ve helped with their sophisticated techniques (avoiding the question of whether someone unsophisticated could have helped even more). What neither group can do is point to clear evidence that what they do works.

Compare them to the chess grandmaster. If you try to tell the chess grandmaster that he’s no better than a random college professor, he can easily play a professor and prove you wrong. Every time he plays, he’s confronted with inarguable evidence of success or failure. But therapists can often feel like they’re helping

— they just led their client to a breakthrough about their childhood — when they’re actually not making any difference.

Synthesizing hundreds of these studies, K. Anders Ericsson concluded that what distinguishes experts from non-experts is engaging in what he calls *deliberate practice*.⁵ Mere practice isn’t enough — you can sit and make predictions all day without getting any better at it — it needs to be a kind of practice where you receive “immediate informative feedback and knowledge of results.”⁶

In chess, for example, you pretty quickly discover whether you made a smart move or a disastrous error, and it’s even more obvious in other sports (when practicing free-throws, it’s pretty obvious if the ball misses the net). As a result, chess players can try different tactics and learn which ones work and which don’t. Our pundit is not so lucky. Predicting a wave of revolutions in the next twenty years can feel very exciting at the time, but it will be twenty years before you learn whether it was a good idea or not. It’s hard to get much deliberate practice on that kind of time frame.

I’ve noticed very ambitious people often fall into this sort of trap. Any old slob can predict what will happen tomorrow, they think, but I want to be truly great, so I will pick a much harder challenge: I will predict what will happen *in a hundred years*. It comes in lots of forms: instead of building another silly site like Instagram, I will build an *artificial intelligence*; instead of just doing another boring experiment, I will write a *grand work of social theory*.

But being great isn’t as easy as just picking a hard goal — in fact, picking a really hard goal avoids reality almost as much as picking a really easy one. If you pick an easy goal, you know you’ll always succeed (because it’s so easy); if you pick a really hard one, you know you’ll never fail (because it will always be too early to tell). Artificial intelligence is a truly big problem — how can you possibly expect us to succeed in just a decade? But we’re making great progress, we swear.

The trick is to set yourself lots of small challenges along the way. If your startup is eventually going to make a million dollars, can it start by making ten? If your book is going to eventually persuade the world, can you start by persuading your friends? Instead of pushing all your tests for success way off to the indefinite future, see if you can pass a very small one right now.

And it’s important that you test for the right thing. If you’re writing a program that’s supposed to make people’s lives easier, what’s important is not whether they like your mockups in focus groups; it’s whether you can make a prototype that actually improves their lives.

One of the biggest problems in writing self-help books is getting people to actually take your advice. It's not easy to tell a compelling story that changes the way people view their problems, but it turns out to be a lot easier than writing something that will actually persuade someone to get up off the couch and change the way they live their life. There are some things writing is really good at, but forcing people to get up and do something isn't one of them.

The irony, of course, is that the books are totally useless unless you take their advice. If you just keep reading them, thinking "that's so insightful! that changes everything," but never actually doing anything different, then pretty quickly the feeling will wear off and you'll start searching for another book to fill the void. Chris Macleod calls this "epiphany addiction": "Each time they feel like they've stumbled on some life changing discovery, feel energized for a bit without going on to achieve any real world changes, and then return to their default of feeling lonely and unsatisfied with their life. They always end up back at the drawing board of trying to think their way out of their problem, and it's not long before they come up with the latest pseudo earth shattering insight."⁷

Don't let that happen to you. Go out and test yourself today: pick a task just hard enough that you *might* fail, and try to succeed at it. Reality is painful — it's so much easier to keep doing stuff you know you're good at or else to pick something so hard there's no point at which it's obvious you're failing — but it's impossible to get better without confronting it.

Next in this series: [Cherish mistakes](#)

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1. Philip Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?* (2006). I don't have my copy handy, so I checked this description against Philip Tetlock, "[Reading Tarot on K Street](#)," *The National Interest* (September/October 2009), 57–67.
 2. Robyn M. Dawes, *House of Cards: Psychology and Psychotherapy Built on Myth* (1996).
 3. Hans H. Strupp and Suzanne W. Hadley, "[Specific vs Nonspecific Factors in Psychotherapy: A Controlled Study of Outcome](#)," *Archives of General Psychology* **36**:10 (1979), 1125–1136.
 4. Tetlock, "Reading Tarot," 67.
 5. K. Anders Ericsson, Ralf Th. Krampe, and Clemens Tesch-Römer, "[The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance](#)," *Psychological Review*, **100**:3 (July 1993), 363–406.
 6. Ericsson, "Role," 367.
 7. Chris Macleod, "['Epiphany Addiction'](#)," *Succeed Socially* ([visited 2012-09-09](#)).

Cherish mistakes

September 17, 2012

[Original link](#)

This post is part six of the series [Raw Nerve](#).

This is a tale of two nonprofits.

At one, they hate making mistakes. How else could it be? “We’re not ever going to enjoy screwing up,” they told me. But this attitude has a lot of consequences. Everything they do has to go through several layers of approval to make sure it’s not a mistake. And when someone does screw up, they try to hide it.

It’s only natural — you know you’re going to get in trouble for screwing up, so you try to fix it before anyone notices. And if you can’t do, then your boss or your boss’s boss tries. And if no one in the organization can fix it, and it goes all the way to the executive director, then he tries to figure out a way to keep it from the press or spin it appropriately, so the world never finds out they made a mistake.

At the other nonprofit, they have a very different attitude. You notice it the first time you visit their website. Right in their navigation bar, at the top of every page, is a link labeled “Mistakes.” Click it and you’ll find a list of all the things they screwed up, starting with the most horribly embarrassing one (they once promoted their group under false names).

And it goes on to discuss mistakes big and small, core and peripheral. They previously used flaky phones that would cut out during a call, annoying people. They were insufficiently skeptical in some of the most important claims they made. At times, their admissions have the tone of a chastised teenager forced to write an apology, but together they provide a remarkable record of all the mistakes, both crucial and mundane, you might reasonably make when starting something new.

It’s not that this group likes making mistakes — you can feel the annoyance and embarrassment seeping through the page — but they don’t shirk from them either. They identify their mistake, admit them publicly, and devise steps to avoid them next time. They use it as an opportunity to get better.

I [wrote before](#) about Carol Dweck’s studies of successful and unsuccessful kids, but there’s one bit that really jumped out at me. Given a really tough puzzle to solve, one growth mindset kid just smiles and says “Mistakes are our friend.”¹

Mistakes are our friend. They can be an exasperating friend sometimes, the kind whose antics embarrass and annoy, but their heart is in the right place: they want to help. It's a bad idea to ignore our friends.

That's a hard attitude to take toward mistakes — they're so embarrassing, our natural instinct is to want to hide them and cover them up. But that's the wrong way to think about them. They're actually giving us a gift, because they're pointing the way toward getting better.

If we try to ignore them, they'll keep nagging at us. We'll run into them again and again in different guises. You'll say "Don't be silly, that wasn't a mistake — I meant to do that." And then you'll eagerly do the same thing next time ([cognitive dissonance again](#)). Or else you'll say "Yes, yes, of course that was a mistake — it won't happen again." But as you hurry to move on, you don't change anything, and so it does happen again.

The trick is to confront the mistake, fess up to what went wrong, and think about what you can change to keep it from happening again. Usually just promising not to do it again is not enough: you need to dig into the root causes and address those.

Sakichi Toyoda, the founder of the Toyota car company, developed a technique called "Five Why's" for handling this. For example, sometimes a car would come off the Toyota production line and not start. Why? Well, imagine it was because the alternator belt had come loose. Most car companies would stop here and just fix the alternator belt. But Toyoda understood that was dodging the mistake — it would just lead it to come back again and again. So he insisted they keep asking "Why?".

Why was the alternator belt loose? Because it hadn't been put on correctly. Why? Because the person putting it on didn't double-check to see if it had fit in correctly. Why? Because he was in too much of a hurry. Why? Because he had to walk all the way to the other side of the line to get the belts and by the time he got back he didn't have enough time to double-check.

Aha! There, on the fifth why, we find the real cause of the mistake. And the solution is easy: move the box of alternator belts closer. But if we'd stopped at any earlier point (say, by just yelling at the alternator belt guy to always remember to double-check), we wouldn't have actually fixed the problem. The same mistake would have happened again and again. Only by digging all the way to the root cause did we realize we needed to move the box of belts. The mistake pointed the way to the solution.

The last time I wrote about two nonprofits, someone commented to say they were "outright nauseated" by my post. "[T]he website is not the place to signal humility and argue against your own conclusions. All that would demonstrate

is naivety and incompetence,” they insisted. And maybe they’re right: maybe having a mistakes page at the top of your website goes much too far.

I’ve [written before](#) why I disagree, but even if they’re right that you shouldn’t tell the world about your mistakes, you need to at least tell yourself. It’s much too easy to conveniently forget about all the stuff you screwed up. And so even though it happens again and again, you never notice the pattern.

By forcing yourself to write it down, to keep a log of the problems you’ve run into, you begin to see patterns. You start seeing the things you get better at and the things you keep flubbing. And then you know what to work on for next time.

Next in this series: [Fix the machine, not the person](#)

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1. Carol Dweck, *Self-Theories: Their Role in Motivation, Personality, and Development* (2000), 10.

Fix the machine, not the person

September 25, 2012

[Original link](#)

This post is part seven of the series [Raw Nerve](#).

The General Motors plant in Fremont was a disaster. “Everything was a fight,” the head of the union admits. “They spent more time on grievances and on things like that than they did on producing cars. They had strikes all the time. It was just chaos constantly. ... It was considered the worst workforce in the automobile industry in the United States.”

“One of the expressions was, you can buy anything you want in the GM plant in Fremont,” adds Jeffrey Liker, a professor who studied the plant. “If you want sex, if you want drugs, if you want alcohol, it’s there. During breaks, during lunch time, if you want to gamble illegally—any illegal activity was available for the asking within that plant.” Absenteeism was so bad that some mornings they didn’t have enough employees to start the assembly line; they had to go across the street and drag people out of the bar.

When management tried to punish workers, workers tried to punish them right back: scratching cars, loosening parts in hard-to-reach places, filing union grievances, sometimes even building cars unsafely. It was war.

In 1982, GM finally closed the plant. But the very next year, when Toyota was planning to start its first plant in the US, it decided to partner with GM to reopen it, hiring back the same old disastrous workers into the very same jobs. And so began the most fascinating experiment in management history.

Toyota flew this rowdy crew to Japan, to see an entirely different way of working: The Toyota Way. At Toyota, labor and management considered themselves on the same team; when workers got stuck, managers didn’t yell at them, but asked how they could help and solicited suggestions. It was a revelation. “You had union workers—grizzled old folks that had worked on the plant floor for 30 years, and they were hugging their Japanese counterparts, just absolutely in tears,” recalls their Toyota trainer. “And it might sound flowery to say 25 years later, but they had had such a powerful emotional experience of learning a new way of working, a way that people could actually work together collaboratively—as a team.”

Three months after they got back to the US and reopened the plant, everything had changed. Grievances and absenteeism fell away and workers started saying they actually enjoyed coming to work. The Fremont factory, once one of the worst in the US, had skyrocketed to become the best. The cars they made got near-perfect quality ratings. And the cost to make them had plummeted. It wasn’t the workers who were the problem; it was the system.¹

An organization is not just a pile of people, it's also a set of structures. It's almost like a machine made of men and women. Think of an assembly line. If you just took a bunch of people and threw them in a warehouse with a bunch of car parts and a manual, it'd probably be a disaster. Instead, a careful structure has been built: car parts roll down on a conveyor belt, each worker does one step of the process, everything is carefully designed and routinized. Order out of chaos.

And when the system isn't working, it doesn't make sense to just yell at the people in it — any more than you'd try to fix a machine by yelling at the gears. True, sometimes you have the wrong gears and need to replace them, but more often you're just using them in the wrong way. When there's a problem, you shouldn't get angry with the gears — you should fix the machine.

If you have goals in life, you're probably going to need some sort of organization. Even if it's an organization of just you, it's still helpful to think of it as a kind of machine. You don't need to do every part of the process yourself — you just need to set up the machine so that the right outcomes happen.

For example, let's say you want to build a treehouse in the backyard. You're great at sawing and hammering, but architecture is not your forte. You build and build, but the treehouses keep falling down. Sure, you can try to get better at architecture, develop a better design, but you can also step back, look at the machine as a whole, and decide to fire yourself as the architect. Instead, you find a friend who loves that sort of thing to design the treehouse for you and you stick to actually building it. After all, your goal was to build a treehouse whose design you like — does it really matter whether you're the one who actually designed it?²

Or let's say you really want to get in shape, but never remember to exercise. You can keep beating yourself up for your forgetfulness, or you can put a system in place. Maybe you have your roommate check to see that you exercise before you leave your house in the morning or you set a regular time to consistently go to the gym together. Life isn't a high school exam; you don't have to solve your problems on your own.

In 1967, Edward Jones and Victor Harris gathered a group of college students and asked them to judge another student's exam (the student was a fictional character, but let's call him Jim). The exam always had one question, asking Jim to write an essay on Fidel Castro "as if [he] were giving the opening statement in a debate." But what sort of essay Jim was supposed to write varied: some of them required Jim to write a *defense* of Castro, others required Jim to write a *critique* of Castro, the rest left the choice up to Jim. The kids in the experiment

were asked to read Jim's essay and then were asked whether they thought Jim himself was pro- or anti-Castro.

Jones and Harris weren't expecting any shocking results here; their goal was just to show the obvious: that people would conclude Jim was pro-Castro when he voluntarily chose write to a pro-Castro essay, but not when he was forced to by the teacher. But what they found surprised them: even when the students could easily see the question *required* Jim to write a pro-Castro essay, they still rated Jim as significantly more pro-Castro. It seemed hard to believe. "Perhaps some of the subjects were inattentive and did not clearly understand the context," they suspected.

So they tried again. This time they explained the essay was written for a debate tournament, where the student had been randomly assigned to either the for or against side of the debate. They wrote it in big letters on the blackboard, just to make this perfectly clear. But again they got the same results — even more clearly this time. They still couldn't believe it. Maybe, they figured, students thought Jim's arguments were so compelling he must really believe them to be able to come up with them.

So they tried a third time — this time recording Jim on tape along with the experimenter *giving him the arguments* to use. Surely no one would think Jim came up with them on his own now. Again, the same striking results: students were persuaded Jim believed the arguments he said, even when they knew he had no choice in making them.³

This was an extreme case, but we make the same mistake all the time. We see a sloppily-parked car and we think "what a terrible driver," not "he must have been in a real hurry." Someone keeps bumping into you at a concert and you think "what a jerk," not "poor guy, people must keep bumping into him." A policeman beats up a protestor and we think "what an awful person," not "what terrible training." The mistake is so common that in 1977 Lee Ross decided to name it the "fundamental attribution error": we attribute people's behavior to their personality, not their situation.⁴

Our natural reaction when someone screws up is to get mad at them. This is what happened at the old GM plant: workers would make a mistake and management would yell and scream. If asked to explain the yelling, they'd probably say that since people don't like getting yelled at, it'd teach them be more careful next time.

But this explanation doesn't really add up. Do you think the workers liked screwing up? Do you think they enjoyed making crappy cars? Well, we don't have to speculate: we know the very same workers, when given the chance to do good work, took pride in it and started actually enjoying their jobs.

They're just like you, when you're trying to exercise but failing. Would it have helped to have your friend just yell and scream at you for being such a lazy loser? Probably not — it probably would have just made you feel worse. What worked wasn't yelling, but changing the system around you so that it was easier to do what you already wanted to do.

The same is true for other people. Chances are, they don't *want* to annoy you, they don't like screwing up. So what's going to work isn't yelling at them, but figuring out how to change the situation. Sometimes that means changing how you behave. Sometimes that means bringing another person into the mix. And sometimes it just means simple stuff, like changing the way things are laid out or putting up reminders.

At the old GM plant, in Fremont, workers were constantly screwing things up: "cars with engines put in backwards, cars without steering wheels or brakes. Some were so messed up they wouldn't start, and had to be towed off the line." Management would yell at the workers, but what could you do? Things were moving so fast. "A car a minute don't seem like it's moving that fast," noted one worker, "but when you don't get it, you're in the hole. There's nobody to pull you out at General Motors, so you're going to let something go."

At the Toyota plant, they didn't just let things go. There was a red cord running above the assembly line, known as an andon cord, and if you ever found yourself in the hole, all you had to do was pull it, and the whole line would stop. Management would come over and ask you how they could help, if there was a way they could fix the problem. And they'd actually listen — and do it!

You saw the results all over the factory: mats and cushions for the workers to kneel on; hanging shelves traveling along with the cars, carrying parts; special tools invented specifically to solve problems the workers had identified. Those little things added up to make a big difference.

When you're upset with someone, all you want to do is change the way they're acting. But you can't control what's inside a person's head. Yelling at them isn't going to make them come around, it's just going to make them more defiant, like the GM workers who keyed the cars they made.

No, you can't force other people to change. You can, however, change just about everything else. And usually, that's enough.

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Or just [follow me on Twitter here](#).

1. This story has been told several places, but the quotes here are from Frank Langfitt with Brian Reed, "[NUMMI](#)," *This American Life* 403 (26 March

2010; [visited 2012-09-23](#)). Quotes are taken from [the show's transcript](#) which sometimes differ slightly from the aired version.

2. Some of the concepts and terms here were inspired by Ray Dalio, *Principles* (2001), part 2 ([visited 2012-09-01](#)).
3. Edward E. Jones and Victor A. Harris, “[The Attribution of Attitudes](#),” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* **3**:1 (January 1967), 1–24.
4. Lee Ross, “The Intuitive Psychologist and His Shortcomings: Distortions in the Attribution Process,” *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* **10** (1977), 173–220.

How Looper Works

October 8, 2012

[Original link](#)

First off, go see *Looper*. One of the best movies I've seen. Spoilers follow.

OK, let's start by explaining how a looper's career is supposed to look. You get hired as a looper, spend your time sitting in a corn field shooting people, eventually shoot yourself and get a big payday, live off of it for thirty more years, then get kidnapped and sent back in time and shot by yourself. Notice that this is a stable timeloop: young you grows old, goes back in time, gets shot by young you, who grows old, goes back in time, gets shot by young you, who grows old ... etc.

But time travel doesn't eliminate free will. We see this with the case of Seth (Paul Dano / Frank Brennan). Instead of shooting Old Seth, Young Seth decides to let him escape. This too is a stable timeloop: young Seth grows old, goes back in time, escapes, lives in hiding while young Seth grows old, goes back in time, escapes, lives in hiding while

But other characters have free will too: young Joe (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) decides to give young Seth up. The gang cuts off one of young Seth's fingers, pushing him into a new timeloop: young Seth gets caught, loses one of his fingers, goes back in time, escapes, while young Seth gets caught, loses one of his fingers, goes back in time, escapes, etc. With each new choice by the gang to let old Seth change young Seth's future (and thus old Seth's past), we head into a new timeloop, where old Seth has a different past (and thus different memories and different missing limbs).

In the first main timeloop (shown second in the movie, via a flashback), young Joe shoots old Joe, goes to China, becomes an unusually-talented agent of violence, finds true love, is kidnapped and sent back in time, and gets killed by young Joe, who goes on to do the same thing. This too is a nice stable timeloop.

But on one of these runs through the loop, old Joe manages to overpower the guards and, while he does go back in time, he manages to keep young Joe from killing him. He escapes into the field, finds the location of young Cid, then comes back to shoot Cid's mother while Cid escapes into field and stows away on a train. Cid grows up to be the Rainmaker and Joe grows old. Cid's henchmen murder old Joe's wife but are overpowered by old Joe, who goes back in time to try again to kill Cid, who again escapes to become the Rainmaker and kill Joe's wife. This too is a stable timeloop, although we see some of it only in speculative flash-forwards (I'll explain why in a moment).

Which timeloop are we watching? Well, we're watching the story of a particular instance of Joe, who we'll call Movie Joe. Movie Joe only exists, however,

because of a choice made by Flashback Joe (the Joe we see in the flashback that begins when Movie Joe is falling from his apartment). Flashback Joe is born, grows up, decides to give up Seth, closes his own loop, grows old, overpowers the henchmen, goes back in time, knocks out Movie Joe, hunts down Cid, and is about to kill Cid's mother.

But Flashback Joe is not the protagonist of the film. The protagonist is Movie Joe. Movie Joe is born, grows up, decides to give up Seth, fails to close his loop, goes to protect Cid. Normally, young Joe fails and heads into a timeloop where Cid stows away on the train and becomes the Rainmaker. But Movie Joe somehow is able to foresee this future and concludes the only way to prevent it is to kill himself. Since he dies there, he never grows old and never goes back in time, leading to a timeline where Flashback Joe doesn't ever exist. Note, this is not a stable timeloop (because Movie Joe only kills himself to stop Flashback Joe, who can't exist if Movie Joe kills himself) but instead just a garden-variety timeline. In this timeline, presumably, Sarah keeps Cid from growing evil and everything ends happily ever after.

Next week we'll explain *Primer*.

What Happens in The Dark Knight

November 1, 2012

[Original link](#)

Spoilers, obviously.

As we've discussed, in *Batman Begins* 1960s-style full employment and anti-poverty programs lead to skyrocketing crime while in *The Dark Knight Rises* 1980s-style tough-on-crime policies and neoliberal economics lead to a revolt of the economic underclass. The films are mirror images, one about the failure of liberal policies; the other about the failure of conservative policies. In this sense, *The Dark Knight* is truly the final film in this nihilistic trilogy, documenting the hopelessness of anything outside that usual left-right struggle.

From the start, the city is torn about how to handle the Batman, who has inspired a wave of second-rate imitators. Some believe it's wrong to be idolizing a masked vigilante, but most (including the new DA, Harvey Dent) approve of his results.

Dent is doing his own part to lock up the criminals, working inside the system. He's arrested all the mob bankers (except Lau) and is now going after the gangsters themselves, starting with mob boss Maroni (who took over for mob boss Falcone). But while the prosecutions bring him a great deal of political attention, they don't seem to achieve much in the way of concrete results — new gangsters spring up to take the place of whoever Dent arrests.

Dent decides the only way to win is to go big — really big. He arrests everyone at once, on charges that are unlikely to stick. Dent doesn't care that he's breaking the rules, as long as it solves the problem. He cites the Romans who suspended democracy to protect their city. (Although, as Rachel points out, they ended up losing democracy.) "You either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain," Dent explains. He hopes to take up Batman's mantle, but do it from inside the system.

But, as the mayor explains, Dent isn't just taking on his own sense of ethics, he's taking on the entire system: "the mob, politicians, journalists, cops — anyone whose wallet's about to get lighter". If he fails, both of their careers are over.

Just as Dent is frustrated with the justice system, the Joker is frustrated with the criminals. He tells them they need to go big: they need to kill the Batman. He offers to do it for a sizable sum of money, which the gangsters eventually agree to. The Joker is obsessed with the *homo economicus* of game theory (from whence his name?): when the gangsters ask why he needs the money to kill the Batman, he explains "Like my mother used to tell me: if you're good at something, never do it for free."

The film opens with the Joker hiring five men to rob a mob bank: Dopey silences the alarm, Happy shoots him and drills through the vault, Grumpy shoots him and empties the cash into duffel bags, a bus runs him over, Bozo shoots the bus driver. Finally, Bozo pulls off his mask to reveal he's the Joker. This is a classic [pirate game](#) and, just as in the theory, the Joker gets to keep almost all the cash.

Batman eventually tries to track down the Joker by threatening the gangster Maroni. But it's no use, as Maroni explains: "No one's gonna tell you anything—they're wise to your act—you got rules. The Joker, he's got no rules. No one's gonna cross him for you." This is a straightforward application of game theory's [Davies-Folk theorem](#): the rational thing is to seem irrational so your opponents can't count on you doing the rational thing.

Alfred sees this quickly, because it reminds him of a story from his own past:

I was in Burma. A long time ago. My friends and I were working for the local government. They were trying to buy the loyalty of tribal leaders, bribing them with precious stones. But their caravans were being raided in a forest north of Rangoon by a bandit. We were asked to take care of the problem, so we started looking for the stones. But after six months, we couldn't find *anyone* who had traded with him. ... One day I found a child playing with a ruby as big as a tangerine. ... The bandit had been throwing the stones away. ... Some men just want to watch the world burn.

Note the parallels. In Alfred's story the entire status quo (including the local government and tribal leaders) is totally corrupt: *the official plan* is to bribe people. But the plan is defeated by someone even crazier, someone willing to steal the money but not interested in keeping it for himself.

Sure enough, when the Joker finally does get his hands on the money, he merely lights it on fire.

Meanwhile, Dent's ethical compromises begin to grow and grow. When he kidnaps one of the Joker's thugs, he tries to threaten information out of him. This is something Batman does routinely, but Batman reminds Dent that Dent can't get away with that sort of thing — it'd destroy his credibility as an insider.

In a climactic scene, the Batman finally confronts the Joker in the middle of the street. The Joker knows Batman lives by just one rule ("I will not be an executioner") and encourages him to break it and kill him. But Batman can't bring himself to do it, he swerves at a key moment and ends up smashed while the Joker survives. (Yep: the Joker has just won the game of [chicken](#).)

When he comes to, the Joker tells Batman that despite nominally working outside the system, he's actually just the system's pawn:

To them you're a freak like me. They just need you right now.
... But as soon as they don't, they'll cast you out like a leper. ...
Their morals, their code... it's a bad joke. Dropped at the first sign
of trouble. They're only as good as the world *allows* them to be.
You'll see—I'll show you...

You have these rules. And you think they'll save you. ... [But t]he
only sensible way to live in this world is *without* rules.

Gordon arrests the Joker and takes him to the major crimes unit, only to find the Joker claiming Gordon does not actually control the unit — his people actually working for mob boss Maroni. “Does it depress you, Lieutenant, to know how alone you are?” he asks (a classic [principal-agent problem](#)).

The Joker has kidnapped both Dent and Rachel and set them both to blow so that Batman can only rescue one ([opportunity cost](#)). Batman goes to rescue Rachel but the Joker has switched their addresses and he actually ends up rescuing Dent¹. Rachel dies and Dent loses half his face, becoming Two-Face.

Reese, one of Bruce Wayne's employees goes on TV and threatens to reveal the identity of the Batman, but the Joker calls in and asks him to stop. “I had a vision,” he says. “Of a world without Batman. The mob ground out a little profit and the police tried to shut them down, one block at a time... and it was so... boring. I've had a change of heart.” He threatens to blow up a hospital unless someone kills Reese. (He has thus constructed a [trolley problem](#): people must decide whether it's better to let the 100 die or kill the 1.)

At the hospital, the Joker explains things to Dent:

Do I really look like a guy with a plan, Harvey? I don't have a plan... The mob has plans, the cops have plans. ... Maroni has plans. Gordon has plans. Schemers trying to control their worlds. I'm not a schemer, I show the schemers how pathetic their attempts to control things really are.

It's the schemers who put you where you are. You were a schemer. You had plans. Look where it got you. ... Nobody panics when the *expected* people get killed. Nobody panics when things go according to plan, even if the plan is horrifying. If I tell the press that tomorrow a gangbanger will get shot, or a truckload of soldiers will be blown up, nobody panics. Because it's all part of the plan. But when I say that one little old mayor will die, everybody loses their minds! Introduce a little anarchy, you upset the established order and everything becomes chaos. I'm an agent of chaos. And you know the thing about chaos, Harvey? ... It's *fair*.

This pushes Dent over the edge. He starts going after everyone responsible for killing Rachel: He starts with Weurtz, who kidnapped him. Weurtz gives

up Maroni, who points to Ramirez, who helps him get Gordon's family, who naturally gets Gordon.

Batman, meanwhile, is also crossing lines. In his attempt to find the Joker, he has turned every cell phone into a spy device. Even he admits this might be too much power for one man to have.

The Joker scares the city onto its two ferries. Once the ferries are in the middle of the water, he cuts their power and gives them both a button to blow up the other ferry, thereby constructing a [prisoner's dilemma](#) (one boat is filled with real prisoners). The passengers discuss and vote. One of the prisoners makes a [Ulysses pact](#) and [credibly commits](#) by tossing the detonator overboard.

The Joker also took a busload of people from the hospital to the Prewitt Building where, through the window, you can see Joker's thugs with guns holding hospital people hostage. Gordon rushes in to get the thugs, but Batman discovers the thugs are hostages and the hostages are the thugs. (The Joker is illustrating "The Market for Lemons": if the Joker is making it easy for you to kill his henchmen, why should you believe they're actually his henchmen?)

(Batman saves the hostages (dressed as thugs) and stops the SWAT team and takes out the thugs (dressed as hostages). Neither of the boats decides to blow up the other and Batman prevents the Joker from triggering the failsafe.)

He then goes to rescue Gordon, who is trying to stop Dent from killing his family. Dent explains his new philosophy:

You thought we could be decent men in an indecent time. You thought we could lead by example. You thought the rules could be bent but not break...² you were wrong. The world is cruel. And the only morality in a cruel world is chance. Unbiased. Unprejudiced. *Fair*.

Throughout the film, we've seen various desperate attempts to change the system by ignoring the usual rules: Batman originally thought he could inspire change by being a cultural exemplar, but only ended up causing a bunch of kids to get themselves hurt by dressing up as him. Dent thought he could clean up the system by pushing righteously from the inside, but ended up cutting more and more ethical corners until his own personal obsessions ended up making him a monster. The Joker had by far the most interesting plan: he hoped to out-corrupt the corrupters, to take their place and give the city "a better class of criminal".

And the crazy thing is that it works! At the end of the movie, the Joker is alive, the gangsters and their money launderers are mostly dead, and their money has been redistributed (albeit through the deflationary method of setting it on fire). And, as we see from the beginning of the third movie, this is a fairly stable equilibrium: with politicians no longer living in fear of the gangsters, they're free to adopt tough anti-crime policies that keep them from rising again.³

The movie concludes by emphasizing that Batman must become the villain, but as usual it never stops to notice that the Joker is actually the hero. But even though his various games only have one innocent casualty, he's much too crazy to be a viable role model for Batman. His inspired chaos destroys the criminals, but it also terrorizes the population. Thanks to Batman, society doesn't devolve into a self-interested war of all-against-all, as he apparently expects it to, but that doesn't mean anyone enjoys the trials.

Thus Master Wayne is left without solutions. Out of options, it's no wonder the series ends with his staged suicide.

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1. I'm actually not sure which game this is supposed to be. It's a bit like the poisoned goblets game in *The Princess Bride*, but I can't find a name for it in the literature.
 2. These two sentences are in the shooting script but got cut from the film version: "You thought we could lead by example. You thought the rules could be bent but not break..."
 3. This also explains why the law-and-order crowd seems so miffed about succeeding — it wasn't actually their policies that succeeded.