The Internet Does Not Exist

Von Julieta Aranda

Introduction

The internet does not exist. Maybe it did exist only a short time ago, but now it only remains as a blur, a cloud, a friend, a deadline, a redirect, or a 404. lf it ever existed, we couldn't see it. Because it has no shape. lt has no face, just this name that describes everything and nothing at the same time. Yet we are still trying to climb onboard, to get inside, to be part of the network, to get in on the language game, to show up on searches, to appear to exist. But we will never get inside of something that isn't there. All this time we've been bemoaning the death of any critical outside position, we should have taken a good look at information networks. Just try to get in. You can't. Networks are alt edges, as Bruno Latour points out. We thought there were windows but actually they're mirrors. And in the meantime we are being faced with more and more – not just information, but the world itself. And a very particular world that has already become part of our consciousness. And it wants something. It doesn't only want to harvest our eyeballs, our attention, our responses, and our feelings. It also wants to condition our minds and bodies to absorb alt the richness of the planet's knowledge.

There is something we used to call the internet that had an infrastructural base. And it worked a bit like its unconscious, storing alt the things the glowing promises of free flow must repress in order to function. Looking under the hood, it turns out that its infrastructure was mostly based in the United States, mostly owned and operated by the United States. lt was ARPANET that implemented the first successful packet switching network for the US Department of Defense in the late 1960s. From there the nodes slowly grew throughout the '70s and '80s until the network was decommissioned in the early '90s to make way for commercial internet service providers. Even though significant parts of the regulatory infrastructure over information exchange still falls under the oversight of the US government, whether directly or indirectly, the real shift in the 1990s came in realizing the commercial and economic potential of information exchange, placing it at the center of the era of globalization and acceleration in the financial sector.

Of course, the early 1990s also saw the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and it is no coincidence that information networks in the United States were transitioned from a military to an economic function at the same time. This was also the time of US right-wing philosopher Francis Fukuyama's famous declaration of the triumph of Western free market liberal democracy as the most just and emancipatory non-ideology to encompass an entire world finally free of communism. But when we look more closely, we start to see that information networks actually do have an ideological structure.

Here it becomes interesting to note how Soviet attempts under Khrushchev and Brezhnev to develop a nationwide computer network are largely considered to have failed due to Soviet bureaucracy's inability to fully internalize what Norbert Weiner and the American cyberneticists celebrated as the inherently liberal and libertarian values of networks. ln the end, most attempts at a Soviet internet were never able to resolve the question of whether computers and cybernetic concepts were to be used as tools to manage a planned economy or to simply automate information processing tasks. And in the meantime, attempts to establish networks in many cases mirrored and even bloated existing managerial bodies with often secretive and isolated administration systems built specifically not to communicate with others for security reasons. All this in spite of the fact that one of the possible applications of a Soviet internet for a planned economy was the creation of a digital currency that would realize the Marxist dream of eliminating money, supposedly replacing it with a mechanism for registering and allocating resources-a strange reflection of contemporary forms of digital currency such as Bitcoin, or even financial instruments for that matter.

Still, as the story goes, the massive territorial and functional expansion of information networks in the 1990s came to be set up as not only an ideological triumph but also the technical application of liberal democratic concepts onto a planetary-scale economic system. For instance, networks produce, and are produced, by connectedness and free flow between nodes. They enjoy freedom from rigid structure, but only while inside the network and its exchange protocols – emancipation without end, but also without exit. Networks are often assumed to be democratic because they supposedly exist without central command, allowing non-hege-

monic, noncoercive, individualistic freedom of movement, and encouraging some kind of distributed representation. All fine and well, but aren't we now a little suspicious of the all-encompassing inclusivity of these claims? Don't we know now that networks also produce stoppages, closures, dark spots, and their own particular forms of control and governance? In order to understand how these forms of control materialize over networks, it might help to forget this thing we used to call the internet and look at just what it is that travels over the lines. Because what we once called the internet has unleashed something that we don't yet have a name for –possibly because it is made out of language itself. Language has increasingly become a primary currency for exchange-both as a way of explaining how money or financial assets function when they are no longer pegged to material assets that sta- bilize their value and float free, but also to explain the basic substance giving information its spin and its kick. From ones and zeroes moving between terminals to likes and pokes to manifestos and love letters to stock prices, the condition for anything-to enterthe network to become information is that it must first be abstracted into language.

But then how does language work? What is it pegged to? It is pegged to its own ability to create meaning, to its ability to refer to something. But language traveling over networks is not only about expression; it is also about addressing and location. As it was put elegantly in a 1981 DARPA Internet Program Protocol Specification: „A name indicates what we seek. An address indicates where it is.
A route indicates how to get there." This might sound straightforward enough, but it's really not. Because when a location or address – which over a network is an ontological issue of whether something exists, or calls up a blank screen – doubles as a human expression, the ability to orient oneself in a meaningful way starts to melt. Furthermore, when words are put to auction and left to the highest bidder to determine where they point, what they will refer to, we face a scenario where just like with homes in the United States before the market crash, financial speculation will seek to squat a symbolic asset, whether a home or a name, regardless of its function or substance in physical or cognitive domains alike. With this, not only the names of countries start pointing to different laundry detergents, but linguistic meaning in general starts to liquidate and become noise.

It is strange to think how, in spite of so many young artists now playing with digital aesthetics, it was actually Warhol who saw it coming most clearly. The massive shift from depth to surface that Warhol explained with celebrity culture and advertising has now taken hold of language itself and spread across the planet. It's no wonder that since the 1990s the political, social, and economic aspects of artistic production have become increasingly interchangeable and hard to distinguish from one another. Planetary networks have become places of profound confusion and dislocation. We know from the start that we probably won't find what we're looking for, so we learn to search sporadically and asymmetrically just to see where we end up. This might look and feel like drifting, and traditional or conservative notions of substance will always try to dismiss its noise, its cat videos and porn, bad techno and bombastic contemporary art, but one should be careful not to underestimate the massive distances being crossed in the meantime.

These distances are themselves very quickly reformatting our consciousness and cognitive capacity to absorb entire worlds made of contradiction – not only in language but far beyond language as weIl. Some people might already be there: scammers and tricksters, the frazzled post-studio artist and the post-institutional independent militia, political dissidents and unruly journalists who know never to trust their maps. They know that contradictions don't resolve, rather you surf across them using empathy and solidarity, emotional blackmail, jokes, pranks, and vanguardism as norm. Our ability to traverse these contradictions may very well become the backbone of the global telecommunications network we used to think was an internet.[1]

Anmerkungen

[1]Dieser Text erschien erstmals als: Julieta Aranda, Julieta/Wood, Brian Kuan/Vidokle, Anton (2015): Introduction. The Internet Does Not Exist. New York/ Berlin: e-flux and Sternberg Press. Wiederabdruck mit freundlicher Genehmigung der Autor*innen und e-flux.