Deluded Dragon Slayers: Why We Need a Better Debate About the Net

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As we all angst about the impact of the Internet there is a danger of generalising the issues. I know this, because it's a crime I must plead guilty to. Another offender is the independently-minded Bryan Appleyard.

In a bold article in The Times, "Break Free Of This World-Wide Delusion" he claims that 'the Web is in trouble' because people say 'it will change everything.'

I am interested in what Appleyard writes because those two rather broad assumptions lie behind the *Recasting The Net* series of debates that Polis is helping to create with Channel 4. [They start on June 1st so email us at pollis@lse.ac.uk for more information – we're looking for more people to take active part] I would agree that the Internet is both important and mature enough to deserve critical reappraisal. I am delighted that someone like Appleyard is engaged, but I fear he is creating imaginary dragons to slay.

Judith Townend has already written an excellent review of Appleyard's article but here's my attempt to chart a way forward.

Yes, David Egerton was right to point out that the Internet is just 'media' and that we have had media change before. But that is hardly a novel thesis. My colleague Robin Mansell has been teaching the history of new media for a long time and has shown how the Internet fits previous patterns of new communication technologies and their impact on society. But, importantly, she also points out how it is unique and different. It is so complex and multi-layered that it does not function in the same ways that other media have done before.

This does not mean that it is innately virtuous, just different. As I have argued, we will make of it what we want.

Appleyard falls into a logic about the Internet and its failings that I am familiar with from the more pure academics and political idealists. It hasn't transformed politics says Appleyard:

> " it doesn't have the intended hyper-democratic consequences"

So because it has not brought world peace and prosperity then it must be flawed? Flawed, yes, but it is possible to believe it has the potential to facilitate political transformation without saying that it have 'hyper-democratic consequences'. This quote from Manuel Castells soon-to-be-published book on Communications Power puts the case for the Internet's positive political role much better than I can :

> "technology per se does not produce cultural and political change, although it does always have powerful effects of indeterminate nature. Yet, the possibilities created by the new multimodal, interactive communication system extraordinarily reinforce the chances for new messages and new messengers to populate the communication networks of society at large, thus reprogramming them around their values, interests and projects. In this sense, the construction of communicative autonomy is directly related to the development of social and political autonomy, a key factor in fostering social change."

But the Internet also lets Bryan down when he considers the whole history of human innovation:

> *"The wheel…did change the world, as did steam power. The web is not in that league."*

This is an odd way to argue about a very real and complicated part of modern life. It's like those games my kids play. 'Would you rather be blind or deaf' 'Would you rather have fire or water?' The only person I can see overclaiming here is Bryan Appleyard.

Then we move on to Appleyard's critique of the Internet which he sees as destructive of healthy institutions (such as good journalism at newspapers):

> *"Institutions — publishers, newspapers, museums, universities, schools — exist precisely because they can do more than individuals. If web 2.0 flattens everything to the level of whim and self-actualisation, then it will have done more harm than good."*

But institutions were not created simply to do more good than harm. Most were set up to exercise power and create wealth. The fact they do good is a product of democracy and liberal civil society. Is there any reason why those values are incompatible with the Internet? Well, only if you assume that institutions can't adapt.

This is really important stuff, but I think that we are wrong to see this as simply about the effects of the Internet. I think that 'whim and self-actualisation' were coming along quite nicely before the Internet. Education, capitalism and Western philosophy combined with market individualism were producing the circumstances for the Internet, not the other way around. The Internet is itself a remarkable new form of institution or networked entity. It is incredibly efficient and powerful and yet does not have the standard form of ownership or regulatory body.

And then we come on to the cultural accusations against the Internet, as if the Internet was a one-dimensional cultural space. Appleyard makes the fatal mistake of quoting Andrew Keen (who is actually much more complex in his current views than his polemical books and contrarian stage appearances suggest). Appleyard argues that:

> *"The slightly more sinister aspect of this is that excessive individualism leads with astonishing rapidity to slavish conformity. "*

I just find this totally puzzling. In what way is culture less diverse now than the pre-Internet Age when we had expensive books, a few TV channels, limited access to University, elite cultural institutions etc? The evidence Appleyard gives is Flashmobs. How are Flashmobs (even if you think they are typical of the Internet Culture – whatever that is) so different to the conformist mass culture of going to art galleries to see a hot show? or gathering on the lawns of Glyndebourne for a picnic along with hundreds of other people in DJs? Flashmobs might be silly, but no-one claimed that they were anything but a bit of fun.

In an excellent article Andy Beckett (no relation and much cleverer) has examined whether serious book publishing is in decline in the UK. Despite talking to loads of people with a vested interested in crying cultural wolf, Beckett concluded that both the quality and quantity of serious publishing has not declined and that the Internet may have benefits as well as negatives for the elite book trade. Of course, it is far too early to judge the real cultural impacts of the Internet and so it is vital to keep this debate going. But the evidence is that increased individualism and choice is not necessarily a bad thing, even when exercised through the Internet.

Unfortunately, there can be a lack of open-mindedness on all sides. Apparently, if you disagree with Appleyard then you are a 'cultist'. This is the only bit of the article that makes me cross:

> *"I know that this article — it always happens — will be sneered at all over the web by people who cannot think for themselves because they are blindly faithful to the idea that the web is the future, all of it. I will be called a Luddite."*

So anyone who has another view is 'sneering' and 'blindly faithful'? Is he really saying that I can't think for myself if I am optimistic about the Internet? That is weirdly rude and rather silly. Even Andrew Keen sees lots of good things about the Internet. He's a great Twitterer for example. And do you know, the only people I hear using the word 'Luddite' are people expressing their fears about the Internet. I don't know anyone who is 'blindly faithful to the idea that the web is the future, all of it'. Literally, no-one. And funnily enough, Appleyard doesn't seem to either. He doesn't quote a single example, although he refers sinisterly to 'the Californians'.

I actually agree with part of his final thoughts:

> *"In the real world, [the Internet] is wonderful, certainly, but it is also porn, online brothels, privacy invasions, hucksterism, mindless babble and the vacant gaze that always accompanies the mindless pursuit of the new. The web is human and fallen; it is bestial as much as it is angelic."*

But one could say the same about any kind of media or culture throughout human history. Newspapers are also about lies, bias, sex, marketing, and blather. So what is Appleyard so frightened of when it comes to the Internet? What is this frightening Internet cult he talks about? Yes, we should all be thoughtful of the dangers as well as delights of the Internet, but the first thing to understand is that the Internet is a plural not singular noun.

Instead of deluded dragon slayers we need a better debate about the Internet. I hope you, and Bryan Appleyard will join us to help recast the argument.