

Astra Taylor, *The People's Platform: Taking Back Power and Culture in the Digital Age*

Fourth Estate: London 2014, £12.99, paperback

277 pp, 978 0 0 0752 5591

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CULTURE AFTER GOOGLE

Literature on the social impact of the internet has always struggled to keep up with the breakneck pace set by its subject. First-generation thinking about the net took form in the early 1990s, when usage was rapidly expanding with the dissemination of early browsers; it grew out of a pre-existing thread of technology advocacy that ran back to 60s counter-cultural consumerism. *Wired* magazine, founded in 1993, was its chief vehicle; key figures included tech-enthusiasts Stewart Brand, Kevin Kelly and Howard Reingold, with their 'patron saint' Marshall McLuhan. This euphoric perspective dominated throughout the 'new economy' boom: the internet was changing everything, and for the better, heralding a new age of freedom, democracy, self-expression and economic growth. Grateful Dead lyricist John Perry Barlow's 1996 'Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace', delivered from Davos, set the tone: 'Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone.' Pitted against this, there had long existed a minor current of critical left writing, also running back to at least the early 70s; this included 'left McLuhanite' figures such as *The Nation's* Neil Postman. More overtly political, Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron's classic 1995 essay, 'The Californian Ideology', skewered *Wired* in its early days, while on the 'Nettime' listserv and in the pages of *Mute* magazine, writers such as Geert Lovink attempted to forge a real 'net criticism'. But these voices were mostly confined to the dissident margins.

With the 2000–01 dot.com crash there came something of a discursive shake-out. It was in the early post-crash years that Nicholas Carr's *Does*

IT Matter? (2004) was published, puncturing ‘new economy’ hype. But with the Greenspan bubble and massive state-intelligence funding after 9.11, American tech was soon on its feet again. Tim O’Reilly’s coining of the ‘Web 2.0’ buzzword in 2004 captured the returning optimism. The blog craze, Wikipedia and the first wave of social media all came into play during these years, and it was now that the landscape of tech giants was consolidated: Google, Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft. The technology discourses of this phase echoed the developing shape of the Web: with ‘open source’ (another O’Reilly buzzword) and Wikipedia, it was argued that undefined crowds could be superior producers of content and code than named (or paid) individuals.

When a second, much deeper crisis erupted in 2008, American tech was one of the few sectors to remain relatively unscathed, already moving into new lines of production: smartphones, tablets, e-readers. The uptake of these devices brought a qualitative expansion of internet use, blurring the boundary between everyday life and a ‘cyberspace’ that had hitherto been conceptualized as a separate sphere. Suddenly it was evident that all the talk of the internet’s capacity to instigate far-reaching social change was no mere talk. It was in these years that a set of more pessimistic and critical voices started to come to the fore, worrying about the dangers of the Web’s expanding use: Nicholas Carr’s *The Shallows* (2010), Jaron Lanier’s *You Are Not A Gadget* (2010), Sherry Turkle’s *Alone Together* (2011), Evgeny Morozov’s *The Net Delusion* (2011). Carr’s book in particular became the key expression of a mounting anxiety, even before the Snowden revelations in June 2013 brought home some of the darker implications of these developments. But now that the internet was so plainly entangled in so much of everyday life, and so much of the structure of capitalist society, it was becoming increasingly meaningless to isolate a singular technological entity, ‘the internet’, as either simply good or bad. The main object of net criticism was increasingly coextensive with society itself, thus making a more social mode of critique plainly the most pertinent one.

This is the context for Astra Taylor’s *The People’s Platform: Taking Back Power and Culture in the Digital Age*. Taylor presents herself as neither a ‘cheerleader of progress at any cost’ nor a ‘prophet of doom’, condemning change and lamenting what has been lost. She aims to provide a more nuanced mode of net criticism than either of these standard rhetorical poles. She is by no means the first to do so: Evgeny Morozov is another figure who would locate himself here, taking up a third rhetorical position that distinguishes itself against the other two and offering less techno-determinist, more socio-political modes of explanation. But if the occupants of this third position are right to place themselves here, it might be said that it is easy now—in the

third decade of the Web's existence—to be right in this way. What matters is the detail of the diagnosis and what we can do.

Taylor's ambition, as her subtitle suggests, is to make the case for a new cultural politics of the digital age. How Web 2.0 affects the production and distribution of culture touches her in a direct sense. She is a documentary filmmaker and editor of two books, one on philosophy, the other on the Occupy movement in the US. She has no parallel university job to shield her from the growing structural inequalities she describes; nor for the most part do the musicians, film-makers, photographers and investigative reporters whose stories she recounts, working at the coal face of a culture industry that has been transformed by the internet—but not in ways that *Wired* predicted. Taylor's personal background might make her seem an ideal candidate for Web enthusiasm. She has written in *n+1* magazine about her enlightened home-schooling by counter-cultural parents. *The People's Platform* opens with the story of how in 1991, the twilight of the pre-Web era, the 12-year-old Taylor brought out her own environmentalist magazine, copying it with the help of a friend's father who managed the local Kinko's and distributing it to bookstores and food co-ops around Athens, Georgia, in her parents' car. She notes how much easier it would have been to get her message out today, when 'any kid with a smartphone' has the potential to reach millions of readers with the push of a button. In 2011 Taylor helped produce five crowd-funded issues of the Zuccotti Park broadsheet, *Occupy! Gazette*, distributed free in print and online. This background is important; she is coming from a position of high expectations and dashed hopes, not sceptical resistance to technological change.

The People's Platform looks at the implications of the digital age for cultural democracy in various sectors—music, film, news, advertising—and how battles over copyright, piracy and privacy laws have evolved. Taylor rightly situates the tech euphoria of the late 90s in the context of Greenspan's asset-price bubble, pointing out that deregulated venture-capital funds swelled from \$12bn in 1996 to \$106bn in 2000. Where tech-utopians hailed the political economy of the internet as 'a better form of socialism' (*Wired's* Kevin Kelly) or 'a vast experiment in anarchy' (Google's Eric Schmidt and the State Department's Jared Cohen), she shows how corporations dominate the new landscape: in 2013 Disney and TimeWarner's shares were up by 32 per cent, CBS's by 40 per cent and Comcast's by 57 per cent. The older tech and culture-industry corporations have 'partnered' with the new: AT&T with Apple, Disney and Sony with Google. The major record labels have stakes in Spotify, as has Fox in Vice Media, while Condé Nast has bought up Reddit. In contrast to the multiple distribution grids that once purveyed telephony, TV, radio and film, nearly everything is now carried on cable or wireless

'unichannels', monopolized in the US by a handful of giants: AT&T, Verizon, TimeWarner, Comcast.

Their scale is matched by the newcomers. Google, which accounts for 25 per cent of North American consumer internet traffic, has swallowed up a hundred firms since 2010. With over a billion users, Facebook has enrolled more than a seventh of the world's population. A third of global internet users access the Amazon cloud on a daily basis. As Taylor pointedly notes, the main source of Facebook's and Google's profits is other firms' advertising expenditure, an annual \$700bn in the US; but this in turn depends on the surplus extracted from workers who produce 'actual things'. The logic of advertising drives the tech giants' voracious appetite for our data. In 2012 Google announced it would be collating information from its multiple services—Gmail, maps, search, YouTube, etc.—to combine the 'knowledge person' (search queries, click-stream data), the 'social person' (our email and social media networks) and the 'embodied person' (our physical whereabouts, tracked by the phones in our pockets) into a single '3D profile', to which advertisers can buy access in real time. Facebook, which is now bundling users' offline purchases with their profiles, 'to make it easier for marketers to reach their customers', as Mark Zuckerberg put it, had a market value of \$104 billion on the day of its IPO. Without our 'likes' and comments, our photos and tweets, our product ratings or restaurant reviews, these companies would be worth nothing.

Online and offline are not separate worlds, Taylor insists; the internet in her account has a distinctly 'earthly' reality. Broken down into its three different layers—physical infrastructure (cables and routers), software (code, applications) and content—it turns into something more controllable, potentially vulnerable to harnessing. The current battle over 'net neutrality' in the US is a marker of this—a struggle over the dilution of regulation preventing cable companies and service providers from slowing traffic down to stifle competition, or charging extra fees to speed it up. A further question is whether the principle of equal access could be extended from wired broadband to wireless connections—not just mobile phones but cars, watches, fridges, clothes, as the internet-of-things looms ever closer.

If the corporations have prospered in the digital age, what of the relationship between creative labour and technological innovation? For the tech-utopians, the Web would be a paradise of collaborative creativity, with art and knowledge produced for sheer pleasure. Richard Florida's *Rise of the Creative Class* (2002) hailed the advent of the 'information economy', in which workers already controlled the means of production, as these were inside their heads. The tension between Protestant work ethic and Bohemian creativity would be dissolved, as profit-seeking and pleasure-seeking, mainstream and alternative morphed together. In reality, Taylor notes, the

ideology of creativity has become increasingly useful for a profit-gouging economy. In a cruel twist, the ethos of the autonomous creator—the trope of the impoverished but spiritually fulfilled artist—has been repurposed to justify low pay and job insecurity. The ideal worker matches the traditional profile of the creative virtuoso: inventive, adaptable, putting in long hours and expecting little compensation in return. ‘Money shouldn’t be an issue when you’re employed at Apple’, shopworkers are informed. Graduate students are encouraged to think of themselves as comparable to painters or actors, the better to prepare themselves for impoverishment when tenure-track jobs fail to materialize.

In Henry James’s ‘The Lesson of the Master’, a young writer listens with growing alarm to the future mapped out for him by his mentor, pursuing the path of total dedication to his art. No children, no material comforts, no marriage—all this would tarnish ‘the gold’ he has the capacity to create. He resists: ‘The artist—the artist! Isn’t he a man all the same?’ Taylor’s investigation of ‘free culture’ arrives at a similar, if gender-neutral, position. She recognizes that ‘the fate of creative artists is to exist in two incommensurable realms of value, and be torn between them’: on the one hand, cultural production involves ‘the economic act of selling goods or labour’; on the other, it entails ‘that elevated form of value we associate with art and culture’. What she shows is that, for cultural workers, conditions in the first realm have worsened quite drastically, while the promise of the digital era—a level playing field of universal, democratic access—turns out to offer scant compensation; to add one’s shout to the digital cacophony doesn’t create an intelligible debate. A songwriter tells Taylor that it takes 47,680 plays on Spotify to earn the royalties of the sale of one LP, while iTunes can take a cut of 30 per cent or more. The ‘free culture’ internet ideology disguises sharply unequal social relations: the digital giants offer free apps, email and content as bait to hook an audience to sell to advertisers; struggling independent artists are supposed to provide their work on the same terms.

Taylor ruefully describes the experience of discovering that her documentary film, *Examined Life*—interviews with philosophers, two years in the making—had been posted online by strangers before it had even opened in theatres. When she wrote to those responsible, explaining that she would like a few months to recover the film’s costs before it went free online, she was told (with expletives) that philosophy belonged to everyone. ‘I had stumbled into the copyright wars.’ She has no doubt that existing US copyright law is indefensible. In 1978, authors’ exclusive rights to their work were extended for seventy years after their death, making a mockery of the original principle of copyright as a reward or incentive for cultural production. Instead, she argues, it gave a handful of conglomerates an incentive ‘not to create new things, but to buy up tremendous swathes of what already exists’.

The People's Platform argues strongly for a reformed copyright system, in essence as a defence of labour, and calls for a relationship of 'mutual support' between 'those who make creative work and those who receive it'. Taylor quotes Diderot's splendid fulmination:

What property can a man own if a work of the mind—the unique fruit of his upbringing, his studies, his evenings, his age, his researches, his observations; if his finest hours, the most beautiful moments of his life; if his own thoughts, the feelings of his heart, the most precious part of himself, that which does not perish, that which makes him immortal—does not belong to him?

Contrary to tech-enthusiasts' hopes for new forms of creative collaboration, the majority of online cultural content is produced by commercial companies using conventional processes. The internet has steepened the 'power curve' of cultural commodities, Taylor notes, with a handful of bestsellers ever more dominant over a growing 'tail' of the barely read, seen or heard. Netflix, which occupies 40 per cent of US bandwidth most evenings, reports that the top 1 per cent of its inventory accounts for 30 per cent of film rentals; YouTube's ten most popular videos get 80 per cent of total plays. Taylor laments the hollowing of the middle strata—less conventional works that nevertheless resonate beyond a specialist niche.

The 'missing middle' is particularly relevant when she turns from film and music to journalism. The news industry is another ravaged environment in the digital age, with local and rural papers in the US hit especially hard; the number of reporters covering state capitals halved between 2003 and 2009. Even in the booming Bay Area, the *Oakland Tribune* shrank from two hundred reporters in the 1990s to less than a dozen today. As Taylor points out, while you can now access the NYT, British *Guardian* and Canadian *Globe & Mail* with a single click, your home-town papers have likely shut down. Her defence of the profession is a classic one, based on the idea that journalists should act as democracy's watchdogs against ignorance and corruption, calling politicians to account and bringing events from around the world out of potential obscurity and onto front pages—paper or digital. In modern newsrooms, however, in-depth international reporting is all but extinct: by 2006, she writes, American media, both print and broadcast, supported a mere 141 foreign correspondents overseas. Budgets are channelled into developing digital editions and online magazines, like *The Huffington Post*; news aggregators such as Gawker or 'contagious media' sites like BuzzFeed proliferate. Yet the time-bomb hanging over foreign correspondents was ticking long before the Web. Here again, new problems are generally old problems with a different face: trends already evident in the 90s underwent a dizzying acceleration as the digital era took hold. The original newspaper model

had used profits from print advertising to fund its most expensive but often least read international pages by bundling audiences together—crossword aficionados and business-page readers with sports and celebrity-gossip fans. Online, a newspaper's sections are split and audiences unbundled, allowing readers to go directly to the news they want without having to glance at—or pay for—anything else.

AOI's guidelines for the new-model *Huffington Post* suggest the orientation of the future: editors are to keep their eyes glued to social media and data streams to determine trending topics, pairing these with search-engine optimized titles—often barely literate, but no matter if they top results lists—and drawing on thousands of bloggers as well as staff writers to push out a non-stop stream of condensed, repurposed articles. Those determining the content of the magazine are already locked in a 'most popular' feedback loop. Meanwhile, the rapid-fire output of news agencies that run to a 'hamster wheel' tempo—wire-copy writers may be expected to churn out ten stories a day—is becoming the only source from on-the-ground reporters around the world. Agency journalists may be good reporters, but their remit is to stay faithful to the neutrality commitment of their employer and only say what someone else, usually in an official position, has said already.

The ascendant model for news in the advertising-driven digital era is to offer us what we've read about before, whether this is the price of oil or the latest tennis results; major internet services shape content according to algorithms based on past behaviour. We can personalize the news, 'curate' and share content, but in the process, 'what we want winds up being suspiciously like what we've got already, more of the same—the cultural equivalent of a warm bath.' News aggregation is about 'capturing eyeballs'. As one young toiler in 'the salt mines of the aggregator' explains: 'I have made roughly 1,107 times more money linking to thinly sourced stories about Lindsay Lohan than I have reporting any original news.' Independent online news sites can be starved of funds. After the *Baltimore Examiner* shut down in 2009, journalists tried to set up a web-based in-depth reporting site, *Investigative Voice*, along the lines of *Voice of San Diego*, *MinnPost* or *ProPublica*. It seemed, Taylor writes, 'a shining example of what many hope our new-media future will be', combining 'the best of old-school shoe-leather journalism' with the internet as 'a quick and affordable distribution platform'. The reporters pioneered 'episodic investigative journalism', posting and updating revelations of government and police department malpractice, inviting reader input. After barely a year, they were broke. Taylor's contact took a job with a local Fox affiliate, so he could see a doctor.

The People's Platform ends with a manifesto—in itself a more ambitious move than those of most books on digital culture, even if Taylor's demands

seem disappointingly limited after what has gone before. She shrinks from the thought of nationalization—there is no equivalent here to Evgeny Morozov’s ‘Socialize the data centres!’—and disparages the free-software movement pioneered by Richard Stallman and others as ‘freedom to tinker’. Instead she calls for more regulation of the service providers and major platforms; improved broadband provision; introducing a kind of Glass–Steagall of new media, to force a separation of content creation from communication and thus prevent a new round of vertical integration; levying a tax on the advertising industry; pressuring Silicon Valley to pay tax at higher rates; more public spending on the ‘cultural commons’, the arts and public broadcasting (the education system gets no mention). In the ‘copyright wars’, she opts for reform rather than abolition or ‘copyleft’. More broadly, Taylor argues that the ideology of ‘free culture’ promoted by Web enthusiasts has centred on distribution, obscuring and ultimately diminishing the people and social supports that underlie cultural production. She seeks to redress the balance by way of a more ‘ecological’, long-term mentality, drawing on the politics of ethical consumption and ‘fair trade’ to call for culture that is ‘sustainable’ and ‘fair’, as opposed to ‘free’.

In many ways, *The People’s Platform* is strongest on the detail, nailing highly specific targets (such as the myth that e-readers are a boon to the environment; according to a *New York Times* report, one Kindle consumes the resources of four dozen books and has the carbon footprint of a hundred). Taylor provides a valuable and demystifying account of the current American cultural landscape. Strong on empirical documentation, the book is weaker on conceptualization or structural analysis. There is a sense that much of the material here remains on the surface. Though her stated aim is to uncover ‘the socio-economic forces that shape technology and the internet’, all we are given on this front by way of explanatory causes is a passing mention of shareholder value. Politically, Taylor situates herself as ‘a progressive’—the book abounds in phrases beginning ‘progressives like myself’—which would seem to refer to that section of American opinion located around the left of the Democrats, *The Nation* and *Democracy Now!*. She shares its strengths—a powerful sense of moral indignation and hatred of injustice—and weaknesses, not least a parochialism that can be blind to the world beyond America’s borders and a failure to analyse the Democratic Party’s functional role for Wall Street and Silicon Valley.

The People’s Platform never confronts the fact that the Obama Administration has not only presided over the continuing expansion of the global surveillance state but has been exceptionally cosy with the Valley elite. While Google, Facebook *et al.* have been enthusiastic backers of the Democrats, a revolving door has seen staff and ideas continue to pass

between tech and intelligence ‘communities’. There is surprisingly little in Taylor’s book on the digital heroes who have incurred the Silicon President’s wrath: Manning, Snowden, Swartz. Yet their actions have done more than most tomes of net criticism to reveal the power relations of the digitalized world. Similarly, Taylor’s manifesto might have been stronger had she looked across the Rio Grande. That so much of the global infrastructure of the Web, both hardware and software, is owned by American corporations has different implications outside US borders. In pursuit of what Stallman has called ‘computational sovereignty’, the Lula government in Brazil began funding free-software projects—‘free’ in the sense of *libre*, rather than *gratuit*—over a decade ago. The Correa government in Ecuador has taken the same path. A more comparative, internationalist approach might also have shed greater light on what conditions allow online investigative journalism to succeed; in France, the subscription-based *Médiapart* has flourished since its foundation by former *Le Monde* editor Edwy Plenel in 2007, breaking some of the country’s biggest stories of political corruption.

While Taylor’s dismissal of free software as ‘freedom to tinker’ captures something real about its *prima facie* narrowness as a political programme, she misses the peculiar way in which this very narrowness gives rise to significant implications when we broaden the frame and examine a more social picture. While the individual user may not be interested in tinkering with, for example, the Linux kernel, as opposed to simply using it, the fact that it can be tinkered with opens up a space of social agency that is not at all trivial. Since everyone can access all the code all the time, it is impossible for any entity, capital or state, to establish any definitive control over users on the basis of the code itself. And since the outcomes of this process are pooled, one does not have to be personally interested in ‘tinkering’ to benefit directly from this freedom. With non-free software one must simply trust whoever, or whichever organization, created it. With free software, this ‘whoever’ is socially open-ended, with responsibility ultimately lying with the community of users itself.

While this issue of trust might have seemed narrowly geeky a few years ago, as our lives become increasingly mediated by software infrastructures, and especially post-Snowden, it is quite apparent that such things can have major political ramifications. For example, it is not unusual for non-free software to come with secret ‘backdoors’ that can enable third parties to collect information about users. Intelligence agencies can turn on the microphone or camera on your phone to find out what you’re doing or saying. With free software, the problem is significantly reduced, since there is a world of users out there attentive to such risks, ready and able to fix them when they are found. These questions—and the ability to avoid

surveillance or subtle forms of technological interference by third parties—have an obvious relevance for journalists, activists, committed intellectuals and cultural workers, the subjects at the heart of *The People's Platform*.

It is apparently still quite possible to live mostly beyond the purview of Big Tech and the surveillance state, and a truly vast 'commons' exists that can support that independence. The use of non-tracking search engines such as DuckDuckGo, instead of Google, can significantly shorten the trail of one's data footprints, as can a security-conscious email provider like Kolab (especially when combined with encryption), or a free activist one such as Riseup or Inventati/Autistici, rather than an ad-based service such as Gmail, which feeds on its ability to analyse your inbox. A federated social network such as Diaspora can replace Facebook; instead of Google's Android, smartphones and tablets can run the free-software Replicant operating system; Owncloud can provide the same functionality as Dropbox. The list could be expanded: prism-break.org, run by one Peng Zhong and based, perhaps only virtually, in northern France, offers a wealth of suggestions.

The major obstacles to a large-scale exodus in that direction are, first, the self-reinforcing tendency towards consolidation, which makes it very easy to join, for example, Facebook, and quite hard to leave; and second, the straightforward temptation of corporate services that are free and easily accessible, while the alternatives tend to cost time or money, or both. Still, a cultural politics of the internet should be grateful for the work of free-software programmers and would do well to draw upon the possibilities it opens up. Since WikiLeaks and the Snowden revelations, there have been signs of an emerging alliance between hackers and journalists, as evidenced by *The Intercept*, the online platform launched by Glenn Greewald, Jeremy Scahill and documentary-maker Laura Poitras. Taylor is surely right that we need to address the underlying socio-economic forces that shape digital technologies. Yet against such powerful foes, an effective strategy will aim to open multiple fronts; real advances, however small, should be welcomed. The twist to James's story was that the Master, having dispatched his epigone to Switzerland in the name of art, promptly married the young man's beloved. The lesson, in other words, was entirely worldly. Today's young cultural workers may have learned that already.