THE FUTURE OF THE INTERNET

In 1989, Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web (WWW). He created it as a digital commons, which means that it is a resource that is available to everyone without payment. This culture of the commons partly also shapes online platforms. Think of the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia where volunteers co-create encyclopaedic knowledge about the world that is available to all without payment.

The internet and the WWW are today dominated by digital capitalism – that is by companies that want to sell something in order to make more and more money. Apple, Microsoft, Google, Amazon and Facebook are the world's largest internet and software companies. They have been criticised for setting up digital monopolies, violating privacy, implementing the mass surveillance of users and turning the internet into a realm of commerce that threatens the public sphere.

Recently Cambridge Analytica paid Global Science Research (GSR) for conducting fake online personality tests in order to obtain personal Facebook data of almost 90 million users. This data was used for targeting political ads and fake news on Facebook in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. Facebook allowed this data breach to happen because it makes money out of big data flows on its platform.

What should the internet look like in the future? What kind of internet do we want to have in the future? What potential is there to organise the internet as alternative system to Microsoft, Google, Amazon and Facebook? What might an alternative to Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram look like if it were operated by Wikipedia?

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KEY IDEAS

There are a number of important concepts that help us to better understand how the internet works today and how it could look in the future: two of them are digital capitalism and the digital commons.

Capitalism is a dominant principle, it concerns the amassing of ever more capital in the hands of privately-owned companies. Capital is money that is invested in order to create commodities that are sold in order to yield a profit, i.e. more money than was invested. A commodity is a good or service that is sold on the market.

Digital capitalism is the organisation of digital resources based on the logic of commodities and capital. Large transnational corporations dominate the world of the internet, social media, data, telecommunications, hardware, software, and the media. They sell digital commodities: Google and Facebook sell targeted online advertisements. Microsoft sells software licences (Windows, Office). Amazon is the world's largest online shop that sells all sorts of physical and intangible goods. Apple sells hardware such as iPhones and MacBooks.

KEY READINGS

Fuchs, C. (2017). *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed. London: Sage.
  Chapter 7 – Facebook: Surveillance in the age of Edward Snowden. Available from: bit.ly/2Pg0uSI
  Chapter 2 – What are Social Media and Big Data? Available from: bit.ly/39QVopF

Fuchs, C. (2018). *The Online Advertising Tax as the Foundation of a Public Service Internet*. London: University of Westminster Press. Available from: bit.ly/3fkwjEt

Fuchs, C. (2018). *Digital Demagogue: Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter*. London: Pluto.

Cadwalladr, C. and Graham-Harrison, E. (2018). Revealed: 50 million Facebook profiles harvested for Cambridge Analytica in major data breach. *The Guardian*, 17 March. Available from: bit.ly/3fvuh4J

A common good is a good that is available to everyone and benefits everyone, such as our everyday language. A private good is the opposite of a common good – typically a commodity. On the internet, we mostly find commodities. You do not pay for watching or uploading a video on YouTube, searching on Google or uploading an image to Facebook and Instagram. But these services use targeted advertisements to generate an income. These are ads that are, with the help of mass surveillance, personalised to the users' interests. Whatever we do on the internet, Google and Facebook watch us, record and analyse it.

Wikipedia in contrast to Google and Facebook does not sell anything. It is a digital common. There is no advertising on Wikipedia. Articles published on Wikipedia are collectively controlled and created by its users. Wikipedia is the best example of an alternative, non-capitalist internet platform.

What will the internet look like in ten, twenty and fifty years time? Or are there potentials for the advancement of the digital commons? What should the future of the internet look like?

ACTIVITIES

1. Google/Facebook

i. Make a list of all the type of data that Google/Facebook collects about users.
ii. Why do Google/Facebook collect all of this data?
iii. How do the two companies use this data?
iv. What are the dangers of data surveillance and the commercial use of data?

2. Cambridge Analytica

i. Think about the following: what happened in the Cambridge Analytica scandal? What was the role of Facebook in the scandal?
ii. What does the scandal tell us about the status of the Internet today?
iii. How do we have to change the Internet so that such a scandal cannot repeat itself?

3. Alternative Futures for the internet

i. What could potential futures of the Internet look like?
ii. What is the worst-case scenario?
iii. What is the best-case scenario?
iv. What kind of Internet do you want?
v. What are the problems of the Internet today?
vi. How would alternatives look like that overcome these problems?
vii. How could an alternative Internet look like?

Use these sources, and the key readings to help you

policies.google.com/privacy
en-gb.facebook.com/policy.php
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Facebook%E2%80%93Cambridge_Analytica:
contractfortheweb.org/;
www.ted.com/talks/tim_berners_lee_a_magna_carta_for_the_web