

## THE INTERNET IS NOT THE ANSWER

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There are too many examples to mention where the Internet and access to the Internet is lauded (sold?) as the answer. Recent examples include [Facebook's scheme](#) to provide access to some services in India, of course through Facebook as platform. Despite the claims that this will provide millions with 'free' access, there is ample evidence that it will be anything but free. [See for example the critique by [Vlad Savov](#) (2015)]. Not only does millions see Facebook and Google as the Internet, Facebook increasingly promotes itself as the Internet through [Internet.org](#) focusing on providing access to "the Internet" to millions in developing world contexts. One example is Facebook's attempt to roll out its 'free' access also the [100 million users](#) on the African continent. For many concerned that students in developing world context lag behind due to a lack of access to the Internet, initiatives like the above are often too attractive to decline. Against this backdrop and the uncritical acceptance of promises and claims from



Silicon Valley, the book by Andrew Keen- "The Internet is not the answer" (2015) is a must read.

[Andrew Keen](#) has been [described](#) as the [Christopher Hitchens](#) of the Internet – and most probably like Christopher Hitchens, Keen is hated and lauded. Amidst the hype and the Silicon Valley narrative that everything is broken and the Internet can fix it, Keen's book "The Internet is not the answer" provokes, unsettles, possibly infuriates and can only be ignored with peril.

Central to the book is Keen's proposal that "Rather than the answer, the Internet is actually the central question about our connected twenty-first-century world" (p. xiii). On buying the book I was reminded of other skeptical approaches and disruptions of the Silicon Valley narrative, such as the work by [Audrey Watters](#) – the Cassandra of #edtech; [Neil Selwyn](#), [Evgeny Morozov](#) and many others. Late in 2015 Watters delivered a [keynote](#) titled "[Technology imperialism, the Californian ideology, and the future of higher education](#)" at the 26<sup>th</sup> ICDE World Conference hosted by the University of South Africa. (See my [blog post](#) on her keynote).

These authors have profoundly shaped my own sensitivities and assumptions about the potential of (educational) technology. For example, Selwyn (2014) suggests that educational technology is "a value-laden site of profound struggle that some people benefit more from than others – most notably in terms of power and profit" (p. 2).

Selwyn (2014) also proposes that we need to see and engage with educational technology as a political tool and construct and an increasingly commercial field. We need

to understand educational technology as “a knot of social, political, economic and cultural agendas that is riddled with complications, contradictions and conflicts” (p. 6). Understanding and scoping the potential of educational technology is therefore much “messier” (p. 9) than what Silicon Valley, governments and educational institutions would make us believe. Against the backdrop of the “truthiness” (p. 10) and “techno-romantic” (p. 13) assumptions in much of the discourses surrounding educational technology, Selwyn suggests that “a pessimistic stance is the most sensible, and possibly the most productive, perspective to take” (p. 14). Such a pessimistic and sceptical approach “is at least willing to accept that digital technology is not bringing about the changes and transformations that many people would like to believe” (p. 15).

Selwyn’s approach does not result in despondency, but rather in “an active engagement with continuous alternatives” (p. 16). As such “The Internet is not the answer” engages very critically and pessimistically (in the sense that Selwyn and Watters uses the term) with the promises and realities surrounding the Internet.

Keen summarizes his book in the Preface and in attempting to provide a review of the book, I cannot summarize the main gist of this book better than Keen himself.

The more we use the contemporary digital network, the less economic value it is bringing to us. Rather than promoting economic fairness, it is a central reason for the growing gulf between rich and poor and the hollowing out of the middle class. Rather than making us wealthier, the distributed capitalism of the new networked economy is making most of us poorer. Rather than generating more jobs, this digital disruption is a principal cause of our structural unemployment crisis. Rather than creating more competition, it has created immensely powerful new monopolists like Google and Amazon.

Its cultural ramifications are equally chilling. Rather than creating transparency and openness, the Internet is creating a panopticon of information-gathering and surveillance services in which we, the users of big data networks like Facebook, have been packaged as their all-too-transparent product. Rather than creating more democracy, it is empowering the rule of the mob. Rather than encouraging tolerance, it has unleashed such a distasteful war on women that many no longer feel welcome on the network. Rather than fostering a renaissance, it has created a selfie-centered culture of voyeurism and narcissism. Rather than establishing more diversity, it is massively enriching a tiny group of young white men in black limousines. Rather than making us happy, it’s compounding our rage (pp. xiii-xiv).

The preceding two paragraphs almost read like a manifesto of what the Internet is not. Like these two paragraphs, the book often left me breathless, as Keen produces one piece of evidence after the other, like a passionate prosecutor who knows that s/he only has limited time to capture the imagination of the jury, and increasingly, the TV audiences and social media streams. The pace and amount of evidence can, however, also be the book’s drawback – there is almost too much and the fervour with which Keen presents his case that the Internet is not the answer, can be a mind-numbing experience.

As Keen builds his argument that the Internet is not the great equalizer, and that the Internet has, so far, not delivered on the initial promise, the thoroughness of the book may also be its drawback? Keen agrees that “the Internet is not all bad” (p. 8), but he claims that “the hidden negatives outweigh the self-evident positives” (p. 9) and that those who think there is more positive to the Internet “may not be seeing the bigger picture” (p. 9).

It is interesting, that while I thoroughly enjoyed Eli Pariser’s book “[The filter bubble](#)”, Nicholas Carr’s “[The shallows](#)” and more recently Dave Egger’s “[The circle](#)”, the pace and

almost religious fervor with which Keen charges and destroys the myth that the Internet is the answer becomes, at times, almost too much.

Despite feeling out-of-breath following Keen as he races through the history of the Internet and several industries that were destroyed as a result of this, there are many, many brilliant analyses of the impact and forces behind the reality that every place is connected to everywhere else in one big and ever-increasing distributed network. The legit motif throughout the book is the proposal that the "Internet has created new values, new wealth, new debates, new elites, new scarcities, new markets, and above all, a new kind of economy" (p. 33).

This new kind of economy is anything but cooperative in nature, or result in more equal and just distribution... In stark contrast to the hype and the claims to the contrary, the "Internet is dominated by winner-take-all companies like Amazon and Google that are not monopolizing vast swaths of our information economy" (p. 36). Keen proposes that "the rules of this new economy are thus those of the old industrial economy – on steroids" (p. 47).

Keen's analysis shies away from easy answers and steers clear of some of the other unenhanced (in my opinion) critiques of the 'self' in a networked age. For example, Keen states that "our contemporary obsession with public self-expression has complex cultural, technological, and psychological origins that can't be exclusively traced to the digital revolution" (p. 106). Despite the complex and mutually constitutive factors shaping public self-expression in our current age, there is little doubt that the statement "I update, therefore I am" (p. 106) cuts deep into our personal and collective digital practices. It would seem as "if we have no thought to Tweet or photo to post, we basically cease to exist" (p. 107; Keen quoting Malkani, 2013). Not only has "shameless self-portrait... emerged as a dominant mode of expression" it may have become "proof of our existence in the digital age" (p. 107).

The Internet does not, despite the claims, "empower the weak, the unfortunate, those traditionally without a voice" but the Internet "has... compounded hatred towards the very defenseless people it was supposed to empower" (p. 149). The Internet heralds "Big hatred meets big data" (p. 151, Keen quoting Seth Stephens-Davidowitz).

Throughout Keen's book there is an ominous refrain of the role of Silicon Valley creating a new medieval world – "a jarring landscape of dreadfully impoverished and high-crime communities like East Palo Alto, littered with unemployed people on food stamps, interspersed with fantastically wealthy and entirely self-reliant tech-cities..." (p. 206). As antidote to the hype and the unwarranted claims that the Internet provides equal opportunity for all and contributes to a more just and equal world, Keen suggests that history as opposite of forgetting is the answer. "It's particularly through the lens of nineteenth – and twentieth-century history that we can best make sense of the impact of the Internet on twenty-first-century society. The past makes the present legible" (p. 215).

Throughout the book Keen refers to not only the history of the Internet, but also relates other dramatic changes such as the demise of Kodak, the clothing industry in London, and the music industry – to mention but a few. If I understand Keen correctly, it would seem as if he suggests that understanding not only how technological advances disrupted these industries, but also the reasons for these disruptions, may allow us to not have too many stars in our eyes considering the impact of the Internet.

The basic claim is that none of these technological revolutions or disruptions "transformed the role of either power or wealth in the world" (p. 216). Keen strongly

suggests that the Internet in its current form will definitely not “translate into a less hierarchical or unequal society” but it will, instead of “openness and the destruction of hierarchies” compound “economic and cultural inequality” and create “a digital generation of masters of the universe” (p. 218).

Keen furthermore bemoans the fact that the main role-players in the Internet not only enjoy higher profitability margins than ever before, but they are also “less harassed by governments that their predecessors” (p. 218).

The sum total of the current grip the new masters of the universe (think Amazon, Google, Facebook, Instagram...) is the fact that these masters not only acts in the dark but are also unaccountable to the public and governments. Keen seems to propose that stronger and more extensive regulation and transparency will go a long way to realize (some of) the early ideals of the Internet.

Despite this proposition, Keen (p. 223-224) quotes Ignatieff who asks “whether elected governments can control the cyclone of technological change sweeping through their societies.”

I, for one, doubt it. It is not that I don’t think that regulation and legislation can steer the Internet towards more accountability and transparency, but I somehow suspect that we underestimate the power multinational corporations and the corporate-military-government industry have over politicians and governments.

Keen recognizes that the answer cannot be only more regulation and he proposes not only to have a Bill of Rights but also a Bill of Responsibilities “that establishes a new social contract for every member of networked society” (p. 226).

Keen (p. 227) concludes and agrees (p. 227) with Jarvis that central to our conversations about the role and impact of the Internet should be the question “What kind of society are we building here?”

Therefore the “Internet may not (yet) be the answer, but it nonetheless remains the central question of the first quarter of the twenty-first century” (pp. 227-228). In an interesting addition to the paperback version, Keen added an “After word”, written a year since the first publication of the book in 2014.

In the After word, he is much more hopeful that “the Internet can indeed become a successful operating system for the twenty-first-century connected life” (p. 234).

I hope he is right, but I don’t hold my breath.

## REFERENCES

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**Reviewer's Note:** This review was also published on January 11, 2016 by in opendistanceteachingandlearning (<http://opendistanceteachingandlearning.wordpress.com>)

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