

Sue Gardner – LaFontaine-Baldwin Lecture 2018

Someone said on Twitter the other day that living through this is remarkably disorienting and made that person realize how little major historical stuff has happened in our lifetimes. Like, the fall of Communism. The end of apartheid? What else compares to what's happening now? And so OF COURSE it feels noisy and confusing. We are living through a historic time.

What I'm going to try to do today is to pull together a couple of distinct threads of what I see as factors that are contributing to the dangerous moment that we're in.

I'm going to talk about:

- some of the stuff that is happening in Silicon Valley
- what's been happening in the news media landscape
- and then more broadly, the decline in trust in democratic institutions throughout much of the world

And then I'm going to point towards what I think needs to happen for us to get on a better path.

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So for the past 11 years I've lived in the San Francisco Bay Area.

And I feel like, in San Francisco, I've had an extremely privileged window onto how things are changing. The Bay Area is, I believe, five or ten or 20 years ahead of other places in terms of hurtling towards the future. It is reminiscent to me of the William Gibson quote: that THE FUTURE IS HERE, IT'S JUST NOT EVENLY DISTRIBUTED YET. I feel like when you look at the Bay Area, you can see a lot of what's coming for us all.

So I am going to start by describing how I experienced Bay Area tech culture, when I moved there from Toronto in 2007.

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So. It's 2007.

I have just taken over the Wikimedia Foundation, which is the San Francisco-based nonprofit that operates Wikipedia, the people's encyclopedia. Wikipedia is very much an anomaly in Silicon Valley. It's a nonprofit. It's a mission-driven organization: its job is to make the sum total of all human knowledge available to everyone in the world in their own language, for free. It is built on open source software. It is rooted in a vision of what the world could look like and what the internet could help it to be. A world where people communicate across vast differences, where they write an entire encyclopedia for free, and other people get to read it and learn from it, also for free.

I am going to read you a couple of quotes describing Wikipedia.

“Wikipedia represents a belief in the supremacy of reason and goodness of others.” — Daniel Pink, “The Book Stops Here,” Wired magazine, March 2005

“Wikipedia works because those who know the truth are usually more numerous and committed than those who believe in a falsehood.” — Cass Sunstein, *Infotopia: How Many Minds Produce Knowledge*, Oxford University Press 2006

“Wikipedia flourished because it was a shrine to altruism – a place for shy, learned people to deposit their trawls.” — Nicholson Baker, “The Charms of Wikipedia,” March 2008, *The New York Review of Books*

I read you those quotes because I want you to remember that there was a time when THAT WAS HOW WE FELT ABOUT THE INTERNET IN GENERAL. That it was going to be transformative. It was going to be a force for good.

And because I want you to inhabit the headspace that I was in.

I had just taken the job at Wikimedia, and I was getting to know the Wikipedians, the 100,000 volunteers around the world who write Wikipedia in their spare time. We would have meetups and occasional conferences; I would fly around the world meeting with them. I would talk with them all on IRC and on email mailing lists. And I was having strong warm positive loving feelings about them and about what they were doing. We talked about sharing and the power of education and information and how the internet was making access to knowledge easier and better than ever before. It was awesome.

And at the same time I was getting to know Silicon Valley. And what was really interesting was that a lot of the rhetoric I was getting exposed to in Silicon Valley was EXACTLY MIRRORING the conversations I was having with Wikipedians. Everyone said their goal was to make the world a better place. Everyone talked about the internet as revolutionary, transformative, disruptive. We are changing the world for the better. La la la.

And yet.....

Here are a couple of things I noticed.

- I spent three months having meetings with prominent people in Silicon Valley, because I ran a nonprofit and I wanted them to support us. In those dozens of meetings, I never sat in a room with a woman. The only women I saw were escorting us to the boardroom and offering us drinks. That was the first red flag.
- I started to notice this relentless drumbeat of money talk everywhere. You'd be in line at the coffeeshop or sitting in a cafe and the people around you were wearing jeans and hoodies and graphic t-shirts .. but their conversations sounded like Wall Street. Everybody looked like a software engineer, but they sounded like bankers. Talking about stock options and IPOs and vesting periods. It was bizarre.
- Living in Canada no-one ever asked me where I went to school. In Silicon Valley people were constantly asking where I went to school, and to be polite I would then ask where THEY went to school. Mostly the answer was Yale. Stanford. Harvard. CalTech. Princeton.
- And I began to slowly slowly realize that Silicon Valley was very much a monoculture. A mix of white and Asian people, almost all of them male, many of them extraordinarily privileged, and

almost all of them under 40. There is nothing wrong with any of that. But there is something very wrong with the absence of everybody else.

- And very very very slowwwwwly I started to notice that although we TALKED big.. what we were actually making was mostly pretty small. This later became a common joke in Silicon Valley. Silicon Valley was full of men in their early twenties, straight out of school, who had only fairly recently left their parents' homes. And the products and services those people were building, in the Bay Area, were honestly really just very often replacing the labour that their moms used to do for them. An app to bring you dinner. An app to drop you at the gym. An app to pick up your dirty clothes and bring them back clean and neatly folded. We talked big, but our works were small.

CHAPTER TWO - MEANWHILE IN THE MEDIA SPACE

Okay so that was all kind of creepy and disconcerting.

And at the same time while I was meeting all these people and doing all this stuff, THE NEWS INDUSTRY WAS STARTING TO DIE.

when the internet first came into popular use we thought it would be transformative in terms of people's access to news and information. And in the beginning it was.

Newspapers and magazines started publishing online for free, and suddenly people in places like Fredericton and Regina, and even in Port Hope, Ontario (where I'm from) — could now get easy free access to the New Yorker and the New York Times.

And in authoritarian countries it suddenly became a lot harder to censor news and information.

So that was super cool. But at the same time as news audiences were expanding, the journalism business model was starting to break. Advertisers used to spend their money on newspapers and TV broadcasters because they were pretty much the only game in town. But as the internet took off there was an explosion of other places to advertise .. and so journalism found itself just bringing in pennies on the dollar, compared to the revenue it had previously had.

So for the past 10, 15, 20 years ago, news organizations -- which had been doing financially REALLY WELL for much of the 20th century they have been struggling to survive.

Many have gone out of business. I'll give you an example of one that has not. The San Jose Mercury News. At its peak it had 440 newsroom employees: someone told me the other day today it has 39. It still exists! There is still the same familiar logo at the top of the page! That's comforting! But it's a shell of its former self.

This decline has led to a kind of Potemkin Village situation.

We still have lots of journalistic institutions. But many of them are quietly, invisibly, gutted. The MARKERS, the signifiers, are still there.

But the institutions themselves are vastly weakened and smaller and less powerful. That's how we got — I believe — the kind of coverage we're seeing today. There's less money for investigations and holding power to account. There is more clickbait and garbage news, even at proud old organizations. And of course we've had a new rise — a kind of tidal wave — of totally garbage news, that's really not news at all but is instead propaganda. And all of that is corrupting our ability as ordinary people to be informed. We can still seek out quality news, if we try really hard. But for many people, they are just awash in garbage.

And the other thing that's worth noting here is specific to smaller countries like Canada, and especially to countries with large English-speaking populations. Those countries have typically historically tried to protect their distinctive national cultures against being overwritten or overly influenced by the culture of the United States. That's no longer the case. Most transmission of culture now happens through the internet, and the internet is pretty much entirely unregulated from the perspective of cultural protectionism. That's changing a little in some places, mostly in Europe, but it's still largely true. So there's an additional wrinkle here for small countries, which is that they newly — in the past 20 years — have become exposed to the full range of American cultural expression on a large scale.

I don't live in Canada so I haven't seen the effects of that first hand. But I was in Canada after the Gerald Stanley verdict, after he was found not guilty in the shooting death of Coulton Boushie, and I heard Saskatchewan farmers talking on Cross Country Checkup on the CBC. And some of their arguments about guns sounded like rural Canada to me, but some of them sounded like the NRA. So there's that. That influence is also fairly invisible but it's nonetheless real.

CHAPTER THREE - WE BUILD THE PANOPTICON

MEANWHILE, the internet itself has been growing and changing.

We'll all remember that in its early days the internet didn't have a business model. But gradually a business model has developed. For most of the internet, that business model is this: companies collect information about us, so they can help companies to target us with specific messages. There is a beautiful quote that describes this really nicely that comes from a person on the website Metafilter, who had the username Blue Beetle. In 2010 on Metafilter Blue Beetle said this: "If you're not paying for it, you're not the customer; you're the product being sold."

Here are some implications of that that I find pernicious.

First, our personal privacy has massively eroded. This is obvious, we all know it. Where were you on this night 10 years ago? You probably don't remember. But Google does. That's dangerous in a bunch of ways that are probably fairly obvious. Companies can lose our data, it can be stolen, it can be used against us in a variety of ways.

Second. In order for companies to collect information about you -- which is fundamental to their business model -- they need you to be constantly generating information. Which means they want you on their site. That means that the internet -- which used to be this kind of Garden of

Eden for access to information -- has turned into something else. Tim Wu wrote about how this happened in his book *The Attention Merchants*. "By 2015," he wrote, "the internet had become thoroughly overrun by commercial junk, much of it directed at the very basest human impulses of voyeurism and titillation." End quote. He calls this THE CASINO EFFECT. Your phone is always buzzing, apps are always calling you back, you lose yourself online for hours and have nothing to show for it.

And third. If selling microtargeting is your business model, you want to as many people DOING microtargeting as possible. It used to that targeting specific audiences was expensive. Today, companies like Google and Facebook have made it super cheap, which means that sophisticated microtargeting techniques are broadly available to anyone. I have bought ads on Facebook; it's really easy. That means that today, ordinary people can be narrowly targeted by anyone -- not just to sell them shoes, but to sell them ideas. Like the idea --as has been happening-- that immigrants are bad. Garbage like that.

So this was all terrible. This thing --the internet-- that had seemed designed to open up whole new worlds of access to information and discovery has turned into a kind of shopping mall meets the Panopticon. We have squandered its potential and turned it to the most pedestrian possible uses, as well as to uses that are actually dangerous.

So let's zoom out now. I've talked about the news media and about the internet. Now I'm going to talk about trust and democracy.

CHAPTER FOUR - ZOOMING OUT TO THE REST OF THE WORLD AND THE DECLINE IN TRUST

Tomorrow Yascha Mounk is going to be here, and if he were here right now I would just briefly turn over the mic to him. But we'll hear from him tomorrow and you can consider this a kind of small foreshadowing or homage to him.

So.

Survey after survey tells a story about the public sphere, and that story is bleak. I am going to read you some statistics.

- 53% of people around the world believe "the current system is failing them" -- "that it is unfair and doesn't offer them hope for the future." The number was lower in Canada for a long time, and then last year for the first time a majority of Canadians said the same thing.
- Globally, only 15% of people believe "the system is working."
- Over the past 30 years, people living in long-standing democracies have become less likely to agree that it's essential to live in a democracy. The number of people who say that they would rather have a "strong leader who doesn't have to bother with elections" has risen in Germany, New Zealand, Norway, the United Kingdom, the United States, and many other countries.
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- The younger you are, the less likely you are to believe living in a democracy is important. Here are the U.S. numbers. Of people born during the interwar years: 90% say it's important to get to choose your leader in a free election. Of baby boomers: 86%. Of millennials: 74%. That's the United States -- the trend is the same in liberal democracies across Europe and elsewhere.
- Support for authoritarianism is rising. In the past 30 years, the number of people in the US who believe army rule 'would be a good thing' is rising. In 1995 only one person in 16 believed that. Today it's 1 in 6. The trend is the same in most mature democracies, including Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

So we are a culture that has seen a decline in trust overall. For real reasons. Governments lied to their people, there is real corruption, black people get killed by the police and no-one is held accountable .. people got tired of being spun all the time and frankly fucked over ... and they have lost their faith in the system.

But none of this is entirely new, and so there's a question around why the decline in trust is happening now, and why in so many places that are quite different from each other, when arguably the lying and corruption and breaches of trust .. are maybe not at an actual peak, in all the places where trust has rapidly crumbled.

There are probably endless possibilities and we'll never know for sure. But there's a good argument to be made, I think, that it's the internet.

- The internet did destroy the news business. It didn't do it on purpose, but it did it.
- The internet did open the floodgates to give a megaphone for any crackpot idea --propaganda, lies, hate speech-- that somebody wanted to push out.
- And worst, the business model of the internet -- the attention economy -- means the internet makes money by algorithmically shovelling onto users whatever material is most exciting, most outrageous, most thrilling. Very few people are actually seeking Holocaust denialism or conspiracy theories about chemtrails or garbage clickbait about Jack Dorsey wearing a popped color when he testified to Congress the other day. It's a myth that the internet gives us what we want. It gives us garbage and it tricks us into accepting it.

Here's sociologist Zeynep Tufekci.

"Our new era is marked by the multitude of people and institutions with the capacity to broadcast, each with different normative standards – and some with no concerns about accuracy even as a standard that is not always upheld. We have a polarized public with little trust in any intermediary, which is drawn to information that confirms its preexisting biases. The result is a frayed, incoherent and polarized public sphere”.

CHAPTER FIVE - THE SOLUTION IS A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT

So I have said a lot of stuff here today, and I'm assuming you've made some observations and drawn some conclusions and have your own thoughts and ideas. That's what I think we're going to be talking about over these next several days.

Here's my attempt at summing up, for now.

There has always been a social contract. The king let you have a bit of land and protected you against warlords, and in exchange you gave him some of your harvest. General Motors gave you a job that paid a living wage, and you both paid taxes so the government could look after people who were old or sick or couldn't find work. My grandfather was a soldier so my dad could be a farmer so I could be a poet.

That's how it used to work. it didn't always work well, and it certainly didn't work for everybody. And to some degree there have always been folks profiting unfairly from the labour and the loss of freedoms and opportunities of others. But there was a contract, and to some degree it worked.

But ever since the 1970s, the 1980s, we seem to have stopped trying to improve that contract, as we had previously been doing. Instead, for ever-increasing numbers of people, we've been letting that contract wither and die. Income inequality and wealth inequality are skyrocketing. It's been DECADES since we've seen real wage growth. Frivolous things are getting cheaper, and basics like education and healthcare are getting much much much more expensive. The system, for increasing numbers of people, is NOT WORKING.

And I will tell you as a bit of an aside, that I believe this is starting to become visible even to people who are extremely privileged. Older people are starting to see it in their adult children. They're seeing that their kids are taking a lot of pharmaceutical medications; that they're unhappy and unfulfilled and are suffering from depression. I can see my older friends struggling with this. They all think it's just their kid, that something is wrong with THEIR KID. But it's not. It's broader than that.

So what do we need? We need a new social contract. That's my argument here.

The broken social contract is at the root of the problems we've been having, and if we fix it we fix everything. The alt right withers. People become less susceptible to propaganda because they are less desperate and unhappy. We use the power of regulation to rein in the internet's worst excesses and to create incentives for better. We never get another Trump.

That's the world I want to live in, and that's the world I hope we'll be talking about building, during these next few days. Thank you :)