

what's next?

4. new communica- tion era

4.1 distribution is power.

4.2 imaginary property.

4.3 we amuse ourselves to death.

There are now two parallel distribution systems: the digital version is free to use in most cases (or at least it appears to be); which is why it is so seductive; the other, the one with vans and trucks and roads, is not free. But materiality and a desire to own objects (furniture, clothes, gadgets, books) remains stubbornly impervious to digital billionaires who want us to live in a frictionless world in which everything flows through their networks, but in which they take zero responsibility for the impact of their delivery systems and their effects on the health, well-being and happiness of the citizenry.

Whichever way we look at it, distribution is power. Distribution is a control mechanism that governs everything, from the food we eat to the entertainment we consume. The more you control the method of distribution, the more power you accrue. We only have to look at the music business to see how control is determined by distribution. I designed record covers for many years, and had dealings with numerous record labels, large and small. The small ones - which were usually the ones making the most interesting music - were always at the mercy of distributors.

A failed distributor almost inevitably meant disaster for a tiny label. And so the Internet seemed to herald a utopian future for the little guy. Here was a low-cost way to get music into the hands of music fans around the world - from producer to consumer with a few clicks. Utopia!

Except, it hasn't worked out like that. Firstly, the Internet facilitated unpaid downloading, and the peer-to-peer exchange of audio files became the equivalent of a failed distributor. And now, paid-for streaming, of which I'm an avid user, has simply resulted in the cake getting smaller. Instead of control resting with cultural producers, it now rests with the new immaterial distributors - Spotify, Apple, Amazon, et al. It seems that we have meekly exchanged one set of gatekeepers for another. Music may now be cheap, and labels may no longer be at the mercy of distributors with trucks and warehouses, but the only thing that has changed is that the control has shifted to the owners of online distribution systems. Vinyl discs may be enjoying a welcome resurgence, but not on a scale that can adequately fund the makers of music, or sustain the music industry (although this is not a bad thing in the eyes of some).

distribution is power.

Books, as with frozen peas and other essentials of modern living, have to be distributed; this means a return to the realm of vans and trucks, with all their attendant problems: poorly paid drivers, congestion and harmful emissions. There are no easy answers to the question of distribution, or so it seems. (...)

The Internet is the first system to challenge the traditional distribution networks that control so much of our lives. And although it has been largely taken over by the oligarchs of Silicon Valley, every system, every regime, has within it the seeds of its own subversion and its own corruption.

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imaginary property.

The difficulty in fully grasping today's property relations—conceived as increasingly immaterial—through traditional conceptions of selfhood and objecthood is generally acknowledged. It has almost become a truism that the proliferation of "new technologies" has come along with substantial reinterpretations of the meaning and the effects of ownership and control. (...).

The concept of "imaginary property" takes a different route. Rather than denouncing the private and therefore "private" character of property while leaving the general abstract concept of property more or less intact—as is the case in the concept of Creative Commons—the focus has to be shifted to the very idea of property and its problems as such. (...).

Property as the mirror image of a self-owning self may no longer be reserved for the reciprocal production of a responsible subject in the legal realm of bourgeois society; instead the illusionary character of property is set free as a spectre, a ghostly force that seems to constantly mirror everything. Due to their endless mirror effects, postmodern economies have often been perceived as a funhouse where you can bet on anything, for, like in a hall of mirrors, reality is just the image of an image. (...)

In its simplest form, the problem that is at stake in imaginary property is articulated as the absence of the object that is owned. The immaterial, intangible expressions of a creative mind is an issue the moment when it starts to circulate and proliferate in an uncontrolled

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fashion, when it escapes traditional forms of arrest and becomes fugitive. (...)

In fact the concept of imaginary property presupposes no essential distinction between analog and digital, material and immaterial. Instead, it marks the intersection or collision of two vectorial lines, two modes whose crossover characterizes contemporary means of production. (...).

In the digital, networked economy, a copy (no matter whether it is text, sound, image) appears as a mirror image that is not isolated, but refers to another.

Traditional forms of ownership are applied to new types of digital imagery, while the seemingly immaterial character of production and networked distribution has long

undermined the vulgar concept of property as a somewhat stable relationship between persons and objects. We might sense intuitively that things themselves cannot be owned, only their social relationality. What one owns, when one owns, is always the imagined efficacy of an acclaimed ownership within a given social environment as long as the effects of that ownership remain subject to manipulations.

In order to make things ownable, to enforce a claim, things need to be turned into images. (...)

One has to forget that one can own things only by assigning or providing them with a self. (...) Property therefore is the appropriation of that activity as the self of the thing and not as the thing itself.

In a mediacracy, politics submits to the logic of the mass media. The principle of amusement determines how political matters are conveyed and undermines rationality. (...). The highest priority is to provide entertainment, and this also becomes the priority in politics: efforts at gaining knowledge and being perceptive are removed by the business of distraction. As a consequence, we see a rapid decline of the human power of judgment. The business of distraction represents a clear threat: it makes people immature or keeps them in a state of immaturity. And it corrodes the social foundation of democracy. We amuse ourselves to death.

The news begins to take on the form of the story. The distinction between fiction and reality becomes blurred. (...).

Politics is reduced to a series of staged events in the mass media. (...). What counts in televised debates is not the quality of the argument but the performance. The speaking time for presidential candidates is severely limited. They change the way they speak. The candidate with the better self-presentation wins the election. Discourse degenerates into show business and commercial slogans. Political substance becomes

less and less important. Politics is hollowed out, reduced to telecratic image-politics. (...)

Today, telescreens and television screens have been replaced by touchscreens. The smartphone is the new medium of domination. Under the information regime, people are no longer passive spectators who surrender to amusement. They are all active transmitters. They constantly produce and consume information. Communication has become a form of addiction and compulsion, and the frenzy of communication ensures that people remain in a new state of immaturity. The information regime's formula for domination is: we communicate ourselves to death. (...)

The democratic crisis begins at the cognitive level. Information is relevant only fleetingly. Because it lives off the 'appeal of surprise', information lacks temporal stability, and because of its temporal instability, it fragments our perception. It draws reality into a 'permanent frenzy of actuality'. It is not possible to linger on information. This makes the cognitive system restless. (...).

Because of its fleeting relevance, information pulverizes time. Time disintegrates into a mere sequence of point-

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like presences. In this respect, information differs from narration, which generates temporal continuity. Today, time is fragmented on every level. (...). The generally short-term nature of the information society is not conducive to democracy. Discourse is characterized by a temporality that is incompatible with accelerated, fragmented communication. Discourse is a time-intensive practice.

Rationality is also time-intensive. Rational decisions require a long-term perspective.

They are based on reflections that extend beyond the present moment into both past and future. This temporal expansion characterizes rationality. In the information society, we simply do not have the time for rational action. The compulsion of accelerated communication deprives us of rationality. Under temporal pressure, we instead opt for intelligence. Intelligence has a totally different temporality. Intelligent action aims at short-term solutions and successes.