Surveillance & Society

Doctorow's The Internet Con: How to Seize the Means of Computation

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The one thing you can always count on when Cory Doctorow publishes a book is that it is written for the widest audience you can imagine. The themes and topics he explores in his non-fiction writing primarily deal with our lives as digital citizens but are always communicated in a very accessible way. This is the primary benefit of this book, *The Internet Con: How to Seize the Means of Computation* (2023). No matter your understanding of the internet landscape, be it neophyte or decades old veteran, what is at stake is clearly laid out.

Take, for instance, the primary thesis of this book, which centres around the development of antitrust measures against monopolistic internet platforms (think here of Facebook for communicating with friends, Amazon Prime for purchasing consumer goods, and Google for searching) that have abused their position for nefarious gains. Doctorow takes on this task by first chronicling the history of how these platforms became dominant players by bending the rules in their favour and then advocating for a series of measures he describes as *interoperability*. This idea of interoperability can be achieved through various means: technical, regulatory, and legislative. This triad then provides the mechanisms for how interoperability can be realised.

The book begins with a description of the ascendancy of these monopolistic platforms in the early aughts when tech exceptionalism was the dominant worldview. Think "Move Fast and Break Things." Coupled with vast amounts of venture capital, these platforms grew to monumental proportions and invariably began to rest on their laurels once monopoly status emerged. Why do consumers allow this to happen? Two possible solutions are offered: *network effects* and *switching costs*. We stay with Facebook because all of the people we know are already there, and moving to another platform requires a conscious move to a different platform that requires that you convince everyone you know to move along with you. No simple feat in any online environment.

Herein is the crux, and interoperability is the proposed way that the logjam is to be broken. The description of what this means and why one should care is where Doctorow shines. Through an almost matter-of-fact choice of language, the reader is presented with a series of stories plucked from everyday life where slight tweaks to the way things are set up would bring about monumental changes that would provide meaningful challenges to monopolistic powers. The case study of John Deere tractors is demonstrative of this. John

Deere as a company began its history trying to understand how farmers modified and fixed their equipment when isolated on farms when it just "had to work" in order to make better equipment. Fast forward to the present day where the company no longer sells tractors in the traditional sense but more or less sells a licence to use the software that powers the tractor, which of course can only be serviced and upgraded by official company technicians. A restriction Doctorow refers to as *VIN locking*. In this case, right to repair laws would ameliorate this monopolistic practice via a legislative application of interoperability.

Perhaps the most market motivated of the suggestions advocated in the book is something dubbed *competitive compatibility*, or *comcom*, in a more net friendly abbreviation. When you purchase a generic printer cartridge at less than absorbent prices compared to OEM options, you are participating in the comcom marketplace. By explicitly allowing and growing these types of markets through the aforementioned triad of mechanisms, we have yet another prong of interoperability that can be unleashed. This comcom treatise is also described in Doctorow (2021) and is compelling as a potential solution even for those more compelled to market-based solutions over policy-driven equivalents.

This book shares common characteristics seen in other Doctorow works in that an actual plan of action is presented within the pages of the work and not just a dour forecast about life as we know it. In recent work co-authored with Rebecca Giblin, the same pattern is followed (Giblin and Doctorow 2022). In that case, a study of monosophy is presented in a very readable way alongside a concrete plan of action to make meaningful changes that would restore consumer protections. Monosophy refers to the opposite of monopoly and describes the situation where there is only one buyer in a particular marketplace. For example, if Amazon is the only purchaser of a good you produce, the price will tend to favour their bottom line. Giblin and Doctorow (2022) also utilise the template of concisely describing what is at stake that is characteristic of *The Internet Con*.

The least compelling portion of the work is found in "Part II, What About." Here, an attempt is made to rationalise some contentious ideas around things such as harassment, privacy, and algorithmic radicalization in this future world of enacted interoperability. These chapters are the least developed and open more venues than they narrow. The chapter about blockchain is a notable exception to this, however, as it presents a great takedown of the unassailable proclamation that "putting it on the block chain" will take care of everything.

All told, Doctorow is successful in developing his thesis and his seething commentary comes through in the writing to let you know exactly how he feels about the situation, which is refreshing as it clearly shows his positionality. What is perhaps the best part of this book is that it gives the reader the vocabulary to describe the malaise they feel from using substandard tools that stopped caring about user experience years ago and instead switched to maximising oppressive surveillance tactics in order to maximise revenue.

References

Doctorow, Cory. 2021. Competitive Compatibility: Let's Fix the Internet, Not the Tech Giants. *Communications of the ACM*
Giblin, Rebecca, and Cory Doctorow. 2022. *Chokepoint Capitalism: How Big Tech and Big Content Captured Creative Labor Markets and How We'll Win Them Back*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.