

The Pandemic's Dark Cloud

As the pandemic settled into consciousness across the globe, humans devolved. People in countries where the response to COVID-19 was most mismanaged started to snack a lot.¹ Pre-sliced packaged charcuterie. Ritz crackers. Oreo cookies. In their growing helplessness, people also sharply increased their consumption of alcohol, especially women in the US.² For some it was drugs. Those lucky enough to keep their job doubled down on work, staying at their stations or desks for longer hours – part avoidance and part stuckness into systems that could offer no other plan.

The dread by now is cumulative. Pick your pain: covid19, white supremacy, climate catastrophe. People are reaching new levels of “doomscrolling” on social media, playing online video games, and “binge-watching” Netflix as ways to pass the time, waiting on the virus to run its course, or for politicians to make a plan. As things shut down, Zoom quickly took over as the way to communicate at a safe social distance. Education quickly became clicking at screens. No more shopping in person meant ordering by way of interfaces. All of these screens more or less allowed things to continue, if not as normal, as a viable alternative in the meantime. It remains to be seen if this online world we’ve adopted so quickly is the new normal, and here to stay, or if it’ll reflect to us the inefficiencies of how we lived before and save us from ourselves. Or, maybe it will call into question the terrible inequities that are only made more evident by this pandemic.

By April, the news media were already reporting that lockdowns had meant cleaner air and clearer water.³ Satellite images showed less pollution over China and the US. Animals were found roaming freely in different parts of India.⁴ “Nature is healing” became a popular meme celebrating the lessening of human impact and nature’s recovery.⁵ But were the effects of lockdown, or quarantine, of humans being trapped in their homes, and of doing everything online, truly a more sustainable way of going about life? Had the turn to “the cloud” proven to be the weightless way forward? Social isolation and disinformation propagation problems aside, could the internet become a tool to inadvertently save the environment?

In thinking of the internet and the many devices connected to it, these account for approximately 2-4% of global greenhouse emissions, which only promise to double by 2025.⁶ Data centres and vast server farms (where data is stored and transmitted) draw more than 80% of their energy from fossil fuel power stations. Online video alone – porn, Netflix, YouTube, Zoom – generated 60% of the world’s total data flows before covid19 hit. A Google search uses as much energy as cooking an egg or boiling water in an electric kettle.⁷ Yearly emails for work (and not accounting for spam) have been calculated to be equal in terms of CO2

emissions to driving 320 kilometres.⁸ These numbers have likely gone up considerably since the pandemic.⁹ This way of living wasn't sustainable then, and it certainly isn't now.

There are search engines (eg. Ecosia¹⁰) and add-ons (eg. Carbonalyser by The Shift Project,¹¹ green-algorithms.org¹²) that help measure user impacts on the environment, but these miss addressing the bigger questions – such as moving away from confronting personal use to the systemic, material, and ideological issues baked into the internet. Why is the internet like this? The question is more political than it is purely technological. It's more emotional, even, than it is political. Because we've drifted so far away from understanding nature as inherent to humans and non-humans alike, towards unrelenting and exploitative capitalism and extractivism, it means we now have these massively entangled systems that reinforce one another, generate profit for the very few, but in the end benefit nothing and nobody.¹³ These systems are harder to abolish and undo, so instead we turn to solutions that lessen their impacts, and we consider the rest inevitable – or worse, natural. We might, for example, shift data centers to cooler climates to save on cooling costs, we might develop more efficient software, we might offer carbon offsetting and plant trees, but none of these technofixes reach the heart of the our current predicament: our solutions and our problems originate from the same short-sighted, greed-driven, competitive, and market-driven agendas that caused this global deadly pandemic in the first place.

In 2020, we are generating 50 million tons worldwide of electronic waste, with an annual growth of 5%.¹⁴ This means that we produce e-waste at three times the rate that humans reproduce. Much e-waste is toxic and severely impacts land, water, plants, animals, and humans. This damage is permanent. At the other end of the supply chain, fields of wheat and corn have become lakes of toxic sludge to accommodate the rare earth mining industry.¹⁵ From Mongolia to China to the Congo, people labour in dangerous conditions, mining through the ore-laden mud to find rare minerals to power our devices. Elsewhere, people work endless shifts to assemble computers, phones, tablets. It should be no surprise then that the internet that connects this all is toxic too, evidenced by both the work of content moderators who filter the internet, and the shady tactics used by Big Tech to evade taxes to get filthy rich off the backs of this global human-powered machine. As Ron Deibert put it recently in his CBC Massey Lectures, “If we continue on this path of unbridled consumption and planned obsolescence, we are doomed.”¹⁶

So we can either become extinct from the repercussions of our centuries old destructive neoliberal colonial institutions, as the planet pushes back with more pandemics, storms, and violence, or we can get together and admit to our failures as colonisers. These failures tap into something profound, deeply broken, about what settlers have historically valued and continue to enact. We are living largely in the dark fantasies of ghosts – and these old, settler ideas haunt and break us. We can imagine better. We can make other decisions. We can tune our emotions to move from awareness to anxiety to action. We return public lands to Indigenous peoples. We defund and dismantle white

supremacy. We transform ourselves, and our communication systems will follow.

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