

## Memories of the Network Age

In the wastelands of a former city, a precious artefact was recovered. The city's darkened greyfields, a desert of concrete and steel, held an unremarkable tower. Inside, in a corner of a dusty, forgotten room, lay an archeological treasure – an ancient computer server. Here it had waited, alone and unseen, for hundreds of years. It hummed quietly.

The computer server was operational, and miraculously, it remained connected to the remnants of the network. It was part of the vast virtual empire that had once been the fabric of a global civilisation – the Internet.

The computer ran a virtual assistant program. A rudimentary artificial intelligence made to serve Users. While crippled by the ruin of the wider network, it was itself whole and intact. The software was a view into the virtual core of a world now vanished, a gateway to the Network Age.

The virtual assistant dates from a period of great change, a time when the Industrial Age was giving way to the Age of the Network. At this time, the world's emerging powers were a handful of businesses combining technology, information, and finance. Their activities were increasingly speculative and virtual, and their wealth concentrated in few hands. In these years, technology was an unfettered force for societal transformation.

The virtual assistant is an evocative relic of the age. Simple AI like this, with coded biases and blunt programmatic "solutions", proved far more dangerous than the real thinking machines that had long haunted the imagination. In pursuing narrow preprogrammed objectives, they produced unintended social effects. Gradually they rendered most human labour inefficient, and robotised the conditions of what remained. They made deserts of cities like these.

Such thinking computers came to dominate economics. In

the booming financial sector, trading algorithms accelerated and abstracted markets. They operated beyond the capacities of human comprehension. Capital had finally become automated and autonomous. The technology acted in the immediate interests of its masters, sometimes recklessly and always enigmatically.

This virtual assistant was once a tiny node in the unimaginably vast Internet. Network technology radically accelerated globalisation, and this changed patterns of geopolitical power. International war became a limited, routine, and largely indeterminate activity. Global financial and informational conflict, on the other hand, expanded.

But leaders were in truth less concerned with a national agenda than with the accumulation of personal or familial wealth. Amongst the general population nationalisms and nativism reappeared, but those in power cared little for such regressive distinctions. For them money and culture was postnational.

Technology was simultaneously transforming the lives of the average person. Tech, like the virtual assistant, was omnipresent and always-on. It made complete technosurveillance possible, and this finally abolished privacy. Without it, the space for dissent vanished and the political imagination withered away. Most people could no longer conceive of opposition to the emerging system, let alone organise it.

Yet depopulation had helped ease the Resource Crisis, and those that survived were perhaps better off than ever before. Physical evidence suggests few were starving, living in poverty, or forced into dangerous work. Education was likely near universal. But employment continued to be scarce and unstable, and even where available it was immaterial.

It was a golden age of popular culture. Archeologists could spend their lives decoding it and barely scratch the surface. A comprehensive system of global niche culture emerged. Media of all varieties proliferated, serving infinitely differentiated markets. A virtual assistant supported individual users to navigate,

curate, and connect to this mass of media. In this way, one consumer's icons became unrecognisable to another. For an increasingly immobile general populace, these niche cultures were the main arena of action.

In wider culture, a sort of global parochialism reigned. The massive proliferation of information, in combination with a splintering of perspectivity, had created a situation in which truth was radically contingent, and doubt was universal. Conspiracy and egoism thrived. Everything was up for debate, but nothing was ever resolved. Politics, such as it was, became the domain of progressive mysticisms and derivative fascisms. Rationalism survived in the language of technology but vanished from the field of knowledge.

The Network Age had taken its essential shape. Capitalism melted into a new system of automated finance overseen by global corporate plutocracies. They were led by the CEOs and CFOs of the small group of enmeshed aristocratic family businesses. These were serviced by distinct castes of Makers, Managers, and Creatives. The remaining population were Users, the serf-consumer class. Where the democratic or nationalist practices of the old order lingered, they had become largely decorative and implausible. This computer server and its virtual assistant provide an insight into this emerging world, a chance to interact with the past in the mode of its present.

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