

An Ethical Internet?

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Bailey, Moya. "An Ethical Internet." Just Tech. Social Science Research Council. February 15, 2022. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35650/JT.3025.d.2022>

As a so-called elder millennial (though I prefer the term Oregon Trail generation) I hold the distinction of being in the last cohort of kids to know life without the ubiquity of the internet. I remember life before cell phones became smartphones, or when payphones still worked and jumped from 10 cents to a quarter. This straddling of epochs has shaped my questions about the internet and its presence in everyday life, prompting me to consider the ethics of our use of this technology as well as the ethics of the infrastructure that supports it.

How can we ethically engage a military-derived technology that has infiltrated every aspect of our lives from refrigerators to furniture? The weaponizing potential of the internet was part and parcel to its initial conceit. Yet, this history is often forgotten and therefore remains unconnected to the current violence that this life-changing technology has enabled around the world.

The question of an ethical internet literally keeps me up at night and animates one of the first classes I am teaching as an associate professor at Northwestern University. While there can be no ethical engagement with the internet under capitalism, I do think there is a less harmful path for our web wandering to take, one that my students and I will begin to explore in the classroom in the winter of 2022. As a member of this elder millennial micro-generation, I am a unique tour guide for this experimental reimagining of the internet at the end of the anthropocene.

How can the internet be a just, democratizing tool if it relies on oppression to exist?

When I was in the fifth grade, I asked my parents for the internet for Christmas. Remarkably, I got it and marveled at the whirs, beeps, and static of the dial-up connection. I made friends, did research, looked at websites, and chatted with strangers I shouldn't have. The freedom the digital space provided, and the sense that I could connect with people beyond my hometown of Fayetteville, Arkansas opened up the world to me. Little did I know that this access was afforded to me because of my western, class, and educational privilege. I did not know about the child labor of girls who looked like me and who would also have been in the fifth grade, mining for the minerals that made my internet connection possible in what we now recognize as the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I did not know about the Foxconn workers in Shenzhen, China, who made Apple products under exploitative conditions for little wages. But not knowing did not make these oppressive conditions any less real for those who experience them. Now that I do know, I want to answer the question: How can the internet be a just, democratizing tool if it relies on oppression to exist?

My scholarly focus on the ethics of the digital humanities redirected my attention to the digital supply chain that makes my digital research possible. As I researched the important social justice organizing that social media platforms make possible, I had to consider all the hidden human labor that went into creating those platforms and the infrastructure through which Twitter, Tumblr, etc., operate. My second book, *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance*, attends to the labor of online organizing but not to the labor of those who build the digital infrastructure that makes this organizing possible. So the questions became: Can this military-derived, exploitatively built, capitalistically driven, entity of the internet be reconfigured from the ground up in a way that doesn't exploit human or natural resources? Can the internet be just? Can we have an ethical internet?

These are big questions with multiple answers that beget even more questions. On what land could one build a server, with ethically-sourced minerals and water to cool said servers? With planned obsolescence built into the tech we consume, can we recycle and refurbish old electronic parts to create the computers, servers, and hubs we need to build our own network? Can we solve problems of e-waste on land, in the sea, and in space? And who will monitor these servers and tend to them when they inevitably crash after being reanimated from their facilitated and fated early ends?



Photo by Vilmar Simion

I think the answers to these questions require a bit of “fictional science,” which allows us to first imagine alternative futures so that we might realize them. Banu Subramaniam deploys such fictional science in her compelling text, *Ghost Stories for Darwin*. In Chapter 3, “Singing the Morning Glory Blues,” Subramaniam tells the fictional story of three childhood best friends and their love for a field of morning glories near their homes as a way to explore what a *just* scientific practice could be. The girls are inadvertently inspired to be interdisciplinary scholars by the strict disciplinary boundaries observed by the adults who study the field of flowers via their own strict fields of study. In the book, Kahani of Rasayni collected soil samples with grad students to do his research, while the Pundit of Poojyam used math to make sense of the flowers. The dozen or so researchers don’t talk to each other and when they do it doesn’t go well. The girls hatch a plan to bring the investigators together, but after a night of food and fun, the sated scientists attempt to talk to each other only to storm off upset by their ideological differences.

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However, the girls take the scientists’ different approaches to heart. Ultimately, they become scientists

themselves and work collaboratively with each other and with their community to create research that transforms their world. Thirty-five years later, they establish a center to study their beloved morning glories, created with the town's cooperation and input. As one of the girls says, "We were not interested in creating an institute as an Ivory Tower, removed from the lives of the people with little meaning. We wished to involve them in the work." Collaboration is a central tenant of ethical science, not simply between academics but also the communities in which said research happens. The girls work toward integrating disparate disciplines and fallow fields of study through their eventual achievement of the first-ever joint Ph.D., culminating in multimodal studies of morning glories. By envisioning scientific study as collaborative and community-centered, the chapter provides a window into what science can be, positing that an ethical practice involves the participation and collaboration of researchers and communities. In what follows, I attempt to do the same, by asking and answering: What might an ethical internet look like?

I imagine a future life on a server farm/commune where I tend to the whirs and beeps turned flashes of light, powered by the sun and wind. The community of server farmers exists on land in right relation with the traditional stewards of the region. I envision one such server farm outside the city limits of Detroit, where the Anishinaabe, Odawa, Ojibwe, and Potawatomi have navigated the land for centuries. Our presence was sanctioned by the indigenous communities that traditionally used the land and they have access to all the servers they want and need. We work together to make sure our disruption of the regular coming and goings of flora and fauna are minimized, finding natural clearings and erecting structures that fit the landscape and diffuse the energy and heat generated by the power required to run the servers. To that end, there are internet quiet hours, where the internet sleeps as we do, light pollution is eradicated, and electrical waves are reduced. We can communicate with similar such communities around the world by essentially writing letters back and forth that may reach our (pin) pals instantly but are only opened in the light of day in the time zone received.

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Given the taxing nature of internet use on the environment, we make every effort to limit our internet connectivity and to use it judiciously. We also work to harness natural energy sources through new technology like lightning collectors and ambient energy harvesters. We move at the speed of trust, and the speed of our circadian rhythm, remaining conscious of the pace at which we want our lives to proceed. The farm is not only for servers, but also for food, and we reuse the bits of e-waste that cannot be refurbished or recycled for fences or planters. Kids learn to code as they learn to plant. We learn how to solder our servers, creating the technology we need at a sustainable pace. We eat well and have digital dance parties. It's a different way of relating to the world, IRL and online.

We may never have a truly ethical internet but we can definitely reduce the harm that our use of the internet engenders. If we are willing to slow down and move with intention, then we may be able to develop sustainable and non-exploitative internet infrastructures that attend to the people and resources throughout the digital supply chain. Then maybe—just maybe—a just technological future becomes more possible.