

# Tending the Digital Commons

## A Small Ethics toward the Future

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*Those of us who live much of our  
lives online have a new responsibility  
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Facebook is unlikely to shut down tomorrow; nor is Twitter, or Instagram, or any other major social network. But they could. And it would be a good exercise to reflect on the fact that, should any or all of them disappear, no user would have any legal or practical recourse. I started thinking about this situation a few years ago when Tumblr—a platform devoted to a highly streamlined form of blogging, with an emphasis on easy reposting from other accounts—was bought by Yahoo. I was a heavy user of Tumblr at the time, having made thousands of posts, and given the propensity of large tech companies to buy smaller ones and then shut them down, I wondered what would become of my posts if Yahoo decided that Tumblr wasn't worth the cost of maintaining it. I found that I was troubled by the possibility to a degree I hadn't anticipated. It would be hyperbolic (not to say comical) to describe my Tumblr as a work of art, but I had put a lot of thought into what went on it, and

sometimes I enjoyed looking through the sequence of posts, noticing how I had woven certain themes into that sequence, or feeling pleasure at having found interesting and unusual images. I felt a surge of proprietary affection—and anxiety.

Many personal computers have installed on them a small command-line tool called `wget`, which allows you to download webpages, or even whole websites, to your machine. I immediately downloaded the whole of my Tumblr to keep it safe—although if Tumblr did end up being shut down, I wasn't sure how I would get all those posts back online. But that was a problem I could reserve for another day. In the meantime, I decided that I needed to talk with my students.

I was teaching a course at the time on reading, writing, and research in digital environments, so the question of who owns what we typically think of as “our” social media presence was a natural one. Yet I discovered that these students, all of whom were already interested in and fairly knowledgeable about computing, had not considered this peculiar situation—and were generally reluctant to: After all, what were the alternatives? Social media are about connecting with people, one of them commented, which means that you have to go where the people are. So, I replied, if that means that you have to give your personal data to tech companies that make money from it, that's what you do? My students nodded, and shrugged. And how could I blame them? They thought as I had thought until about forty-eight hours earlier; and they *acted* as I continued to act, although we were all to various degrees uneasy about our actions.

In the years since I became fully aware of the vulnerability of what the Internet likes to call my “content,” I have made some changes in how I live online. But I have also become increasingly convinced that this vulnerability raises wide-ranging questions that ought to be of general concern. Those of us who live much of our lives online are not faced here simply with matters of intellectual property; we need to confront significant choices about the world we will hand down to those who come after us. The complexities of social media ought to prompt deep reflection on what we all owe to the future, and how we might discharge this debt.

### *A New Kind of Responsibility*

Hans Jonas was a German-born scholar who taught for many years at the New School for Social Research in New York City. He is best known for his 1958 book *The Gnostic Religion*, a pathbreaking study of Gnosticism that is still very much worth reading. Jonas was a philosopher whose interest in Gnosticism arose from certain questions raised by his mentor Martin Heidegger. Relatively late in his career, though he had repudiated Heidegger many years earlier for his Nazi sympathies, Jonas took up Heidegger’s interest in technology in an intriguing and important book called *The Imperative of Responsibility*.

The book does not wholly succeed, but Jonas’s central idea is powerful and has not been given the attention it deserves. That idea arises from one governing insight: Under technocratic modernity, “the altered nature of human action, with the magnitude and novelty of its works and their impact on man’s global future, raises moral issues for which past ethics, geared to the dealings of man with his fellow-men within narrow horizons of space and time, has

left us unprepared.” Although Heidegger found it necessary, in his attempt to rethink metaphysics, to go back to the insights of the pre-Socratic philosophers, Jonas does not believe that *any* earlier thinkers hold the key to the ethical challenge posed by technocratic modernity, because *no* previous society possessed powers that could extend its reach so far in both space and time. A wholly new ethics is required, and is required simply because of the scope of our technologies.<sup>1</sup> Given that Jonas was writing in the Cold War era, one might expect to find nuclear weaponry at the heart of his concerns. Jonas certainly sees the threat of nuclear war as a real one, but he believes that nuclear war can be averted without making *structural* changes to the modern political order, whereas other dangers—for instance, large-scale environmental damage—cannot. (In this context, it’s fitting that *The Imperative of Responsibility* played a significant role in the emergence of the Green movement in Germany.)

What is required of a new ethics adequate to the challenge posed by our own technological powers? Jonas argues that the first priority is an expansion and complication of the notion of *responsibility*. Unlike our predecessors, we need always to be conscious of the effects of our actions on people we have never met and will never meet, because they are so far removed from us in space and time. Democratically elected governments can to some degree adapt to spatially extended responsibility, because our communications technologies link people who cannot meet face-to-face. But the chasm of time is far more difficult to overcome, and indeed our governments (democratic or otherwise) are all structured in such a way that the whole of their attention goes to

the demands of the present, with scarcely a thought to be spared for the future. For Jonas, one of the questions we must face is this “What force shall represent the future in the present?”<sup>2</sup>

I want to reflect on Jonas’s challenge in relation to our digital technologies. And though this may seem remote from the emphasis on care for the natural world that Jonas came to be associated with, there is actually a common theme concerning our experiences within and responsibility for certain *environmental conditions*. What forces, not in *natural* ecology but in media ecology, can best represent the future in the present?

### *Looking to Tolkien*

When we are exhorted to consider the future implications of our actions, we are often told to “think of the children.” But Lee Edelman, in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, characterizes such thinking as pernicious, simply because it is “impossible to refuse”—and, moreover, so universal that “the image of the Child invariably shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought.... That Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention.” The chief concerns of Edelman’s provocative book—whether queerness is nonprocreative and therefore necessarily excluded from this child-centered narrative of the future, and, if so, whether that exclusion should be protested or embraced—lie well beyond the scope of my inquiry here. I simply want to acknowledge that the “think of the children” move can indeed be coercive in effect, and prone to creating certain sentimental and limited fantasies about the future. If we are going

to embrace “the imperative of responsibility” but avoid such coercive sentimentality, we may need a different set of governing images.<sup>3</sup>

I will choose my preferred images from a source Edelman would scarcely find less sentimental or coercive than the “fantasmatic” Child of our politics: J.R.R. Tolkien. Late in *The Lord of the Rings*, after the great assault on the city of Minas Tirith has been unexpectedly repulsed, the wizard Gandalf encourages his companions to think about what work remains to them:

It is not our part to master all the tides of the world,  
but to do what is in us for the succour of those years  
wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields  
that we know, so that those who live after may have  
clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not  
ours to rule.<sup>4</sup>

Gandalf first urges his friends to remember the limits of their powers: They cannot “master all the tides of the world,” the world-historical forces that exceed the mental as well as the potential (as in the Latin *potentia*, “power”) grasp even of those whom characters in the novel refer to as “the Great.” Rather, responsible actors must direct their attention more locally, to “the fields that we know,” and even then must also remember what forces they cannot “rule.” Their task is simply to give “those who live after...clean earth to till.” This is an agricultural, ecological metaphor—and not just a metaphor. Sauron, the Dark Lord of Mordor, “can torture and destroy the very hills,” we are told, and his ally, the wizard Saruman, with his “mind of metal and wheels,” has transformed the woods

and glens of Isengard into a massive industrial powerhouse. But it is as metaphors that I want to consider these images. What, in media ecology, might count as “clean earth to till”? And how might it be cultivated by those who accept responsibility—the responsibility of *stewardship*, which disavows “rule” and “mastery”?<sup>5</sup>

### *Learning to Live Outside the Walls*

The first answers to these questions are quite concrete. This is not a case in which a social problem can profitably be addressed by encouraging people to change their way of thinking—although as a cultural critic I naturally default to that mode of suasion. It goes against my nature to say simply that certain specific changes in practice are required. But this is what I must say. We need to revivify the open Web and teach others—especially those who have never known the open Web—to learn to live extramurally: outside the walls.

What do I mean by “the open Web”? I mean the World Wide Web as created by Tim Berners-Lee and extended by later coders. The open Web is effectively a set of protocols that allows the creating, sharing, and experiencing of text, sounds, and images on any computer that is connected to the Internet and has installed on it a browser that can interpret information encoded in conformity with these protocols.

In their simplicity, those protocols are relentlessly generative, producing a heterogeneous mass of material for which the most common descriptor is simply “content.” It took a while for that state of affairs to come about, especially since early Internet service providers like CompuServe and AOL tried to offer proprietary

content that couldn't be found elsewhere, after the model of newspapers or magazines. This model might have worked for a longer period if the Web had been a place of consumption only, but it was also a place of creation, and people wanted what they created to be experienced by the greatest number of people possible. (As advertising made its way onto the Web, this was true of businesses as well as individuals.) And so the open Web, the digital commons, triumphed over those first attempts to keep content enclosed.

In the relatively early years of the Web, the mass of content was small enough that a group of people at Yahoo could organize it by category, in something like a digital version of the map of human knowledge created by the French Encyclopedists. But soon this arrangement became unwieldy, and seekers grew frustrated with clicking their way down into submenus only to have to click back up again when they couldn't find what they wanted and plunge into a *different* set of submenus. Moreover, as the Web became amenable to more varied *kinds* of "content," the tasks of encoding, unloading, and displaying one's stuff became more technically challenging; not all web browsers were equally adept at rendering and displaying all the media formats and types. It was therefore inevitable that companies would arise to help manage the complexities.

Thus the rise of Google, with its brilliantly simple model of keyword searching as the most efficient replacement for navigating through tree-like structures of data—and thus, ultimately, the rise of services that promised to do the technical heavy lifting for their users, display their content in a clear and consistent way, and



connect them with other people with similar interests, experiences, or histories. Some of these people have become the overlords of social media.

It is common to refer to universally popular social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Pinterest as “walled gardens.” But they are not gardens; they are walled industrial sites, within which users, for no financial compensation, produce data which the owners of the factories sift and then sell. Some of these factories (Twitter, Tumblr, and more recently Instagram) have transparent walls, by which I mean that you need an account to post anything but can view what has been posted on the open Web; others (Facebook, Snapchat) keep their walls mostly or wholly opaque. But they all exercise the same disciplinary control over those who create or share content on their domain.

I say there is no *financial* compensation for users, but many users feel themselves amply compensated by the aforementioned provisions: ease of use, connection with others, and so on. But such users should realize that everything they find desirable and beneficial about those sites could disappear tomorrow and leave them with absolutely no recourse, no one to whom to protest, no claim that they could make to anyone. When George Orwell was a scholarship boy at an English prep school, his headmaster, when angry, would tell him, “You are living on my bounty.”<sup>6</sup> If you’re on Facebook, you are living on Mark Zuckerberg’s bounty.

This is of course a choice you are free to make. The problem comes when, by living in conditions of such dependence, you forget that there’s any other way to live—and therefore cannot teach another way to those who come after you. Your present-day social-media

ecology eclipses the future social-media ecology of others. What if they don't want their social lives to be bought and sold? What if they don't want to live on the bounty of the factory owners of Silicon Valley? It would be good if we bequeathed to them another option, the possibility of living outside the walls the factory owners have built—whether for our safety or to imprison us, who can say? The open Web happens outside those walls.

### *A Domain of One's Own*

For the last few years we've been hearing a good many people (most of them computer programmers) say that every child should learn to code. As I write these words, I learn that Tim Cook, the CEO of Apple, has echoed that counsel. Learning to code is a nice thing, I suppose, but should be far, far down on our list of priorities for the young. Coding is a problem-solving skill, and few of the problems that beset young people today, or are likely to in the future, can be solved by writing scripts or programs for computers to execute. I suggest a less ambitious enterprise with broader applications, and I'll begin by listing the primary elements of that enterprise. I think every young person who regularly uses a computer should learn the following:

how to choose a domain name  
how to buy a domain  
how to choose a good domain name provider  
how to choose a good website-hosting service  
how to find a good free text editor  
how to transfer files to and from a server  
how to write basic HTML, including links to CSS  
(Cascading Style Sheet) files  
how to find free CSS templates  
how to fiddle around in those templates to adjust  
them to your satisfaction  
how to do basic photograph editing  
how to cite your sources and link to the originals  
how to use social media to share what you've created  
on your own turf rather than create within a walled  
factory

One could add considerably to this list, but these, I believe, are the rudimentary skills that should be possessed by anyone who wants to be a responsible citizen of the open Web—and not to be confined to living on the bounty of the digital headmasters.

There is, of course, no way to be completely independent online, either as an individual or a community: This is life on the grid, not off. Which means that anyone who learns the skills listed above—and even those who go well beyond such skills and host their websites on their own servers, while producing electricity on their own wind farms—will nevertheless need an Internet service

provider. I am not speaking here of complete digital independence, but, rather, independence from the power of the walled factories and their owners.

A person who possesses and uses the skills on my list will still be dependent on organizations like ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers) and its subsidiary IANA (Internet Assigned Numbers Authority), and the W3C (World Wide Web Consortium). But these are nonprofit organizations, and are moving toward less entanglement with government. For instance, IANA worked for eighteen years under contract with the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, a bureau of the US Department of Commerce, but that contract expired in October 2016, and IANA and ICANN are now run completely by an international community of volunteers.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the W3C, which controls the protocols by which computers on the Web communicate with one another and display information to users, is governed by a heterogenous group that included, at the time of writing, not only universities, libraries, and archives from around the world but also Fortune 500 companies—a few of them being among those walled factories I have been warning against.<sup>8</sup> In essence, the open Web, while not free from governmental and commercial pressures, is about *as* free from such pressures as a major component of modern capitalist society can be. And indeed it is this decentralized organizational model, coupled with heavy reliance on volunteer labor, that invites the model of *stewardship* I commended earlier in this essay. No one owns the Internet or the World Wide Web, and barring the rise of an industrial megapower like the Buy-n-Large Corporation of Pixar's 2008 movie *WALL•E*, no one will. Indeed, the healthy independence of the

Internet and the Web is among the strongest bulwarks against the rise of a Buy-n-Large or the gigantic transnational corporations that play such a major role in the futures imagined by Kim Stanley Robinson, especially in his Hugo Award–winning Mars trilogy.

Some of the people most dedicated to the maintenance and development of the open Web also produce open-source software that makes it possible to acquire the skills I listed above. In this category we may find nonprofit organizations such as Mozilla, maker of the Firefox web browser, as well as for-profit organizations that make and release free and open-source software—for instance, Automattic, the maker of the popular blogging platform WordPress, and Github, whose employees, along with many volunteers, have created the excellent Atom text editor. One could achieve much of the independence I have recommended by using software available from those three sources alone.

I am, in short, endorsing here the goals of the Domain of One's Own movement. As Audrey Watters, one of its most eloquent advocates, has observed,

By providing students and staff with a domain, I think we can start to address this [effort to achieve digital independence]. Students and staff can start to see how digital technologies work—those that underpin the Web and elsewhere. They can think about how these technologies shape the formation of their understanding of the world—how knowledge is formed and shared; how identity is formed and expressed. They can engage with that original purpose of the Web—sharing information and collaborating on knowledge-building endeavors—by doing meaningful work online, in the public, with other scholars. [The goal is that] they have a space of their own online, along with the support and the tools to think about what that can look like.<sup>9</sup>

Watters adds that such a program of education goes far beyond the mere acquisition of skills: “I think its potential is far more radical than that. This isn’t about making sure literature students ‘learn to code’ or history students ‘learn to code’ or medical faculty ‘learn to code’ or chemistry faculty ‘learn to code.’” Instead, the real possibilities emerge from “recognizing that the World Wide Web is a site for scholarly activity. It’s about recognizing that students are scholars.” Scholars, I might add, who, through their scholarship, can be accountable to the future—who, to borrow a phrase from W.H. Auden, can “assume responsibility for time.”<sup>10</sup>

### *Replacing Institutions with Platforms*

But why does it matter? Why should someone go to the trouble of downloading and learning to use those tools, rather than rely on the freely—or “freely”—available structures of walled factories? And why would anyone consider the skills required to work extramurally so important that they should be taught to everyone?

To answer these questions, we need to reflect on a metaphor widely used in computing: the *platform*. Properly speaking—as David S. Evans, Andrei Hagiu, and Richard Schmalensee explain in their authoritative book *Invisible Engines*—a platform is “a software program that makes services available to other software programs through Application Programming Interfaces (APIs). Those software platforms are at the heart of ‘economies’ or ‘ecosystems’ that consist of mutually dependent communities of businesses and consumers that have a symbiotic relationship with the platform.”<sup>11</sup> But the term is often used in a more general way that hearkens back to an older usage: A platform is a place from which to speak. It’s something to stand on so people can see and hear you who might otherwise not even know you were speaking. And in that sense Facebook and Instagram are platforms not just for developers and programmers, but for their ordinary users as well. They are where people *go to be heard*.

What Evans, Hagiu, and Schmalensee say about the “symbiotic relationship” developers and companies have with platforms, and the “ecosystems” thereby created, applies equally well to this more general and informal use of the word. But just as that relationship is governed and managed for developers—you can’t write code to be used on Windows or MacOS or Facebook that doesn’t comply with the relevant API—so too the relationship for users is managed, but

often in opaque ways. The “terms of service” the walled factories provide for their users can be, and typically are, evasive and vague in ways that APIs cannot be. This vagueness allows Facebook to conduct experiments on its users—for instance, tracking your keystrokes, including keystrokes you type but then delete without posting—and to shape its users’ timelines in ways that encourage them, for a great variety of reasons, to stay within the walls of Facebook rather than venture beyond, whether for pleasure or profit.<sup>12</sup>

The importance of this management can best be seen by comparing a platform like Facebook with traditional *social institutions*. I think what we have seen and will continue to see in our social order is the fragmentation of institutions and their effective replacement by platforms. As Astra Taylor explains in her vital book *The People’s Platform*, this process has often been celebrated by advocates of new platforms. Esther Dyson concisely summarizes this view: “The great virtue of the Internet is that it erodes power. It sucks power out of the center, and takes it to the periphery, it erodes the power of institutions over people while giving to individuals the power to run their lives.” But, after quoting Dyson, Taylor notes that

the problem, though, is that disintermediation has not lived up to its potential. Instead, it has facilitated the rise of a new generation of mediators that are sometimes difficult to see. As much as networked technology has dismantled and distributed power in more egalitarian ways, it has also extended and obscured power, making it less visible and, arguably, harder to resist.<sup>13</sup>



We may take education as an example. For much of American history, people were educated in a wide range of (often highly eccentric) settings. This was generally perceived as a problem, and efforts at standardization kicked in, reaching their peak in the 1960s. Since then we have seen increasing fragmentation, with ordinary public schools, charter schools, magnet schools, various kinds of private schools, homeschooling, unschooling—but all of these work on the same *platforms*; that is, they rely on the same communications technologies, using either the open Web or walled factories like Facebook in order to promote interaction and accomplish goals (e.g., the completion of projects and other assignments, remedial tutoring). More and more, we will be asking technological platforms to do the kind of unifying work educational institutions clearly can no longer do—and that, I believe, is asking platforms to do things that by their nature they're unsuited to do. But this is precisely the future Mark Zuckerberg envisions in his lengthy, utopian, and extremely dishonest manifesto, released in February 2017, called “Building Global Community.”<sup>14</sup>

Platforms of the Facebook walled-factory type are unsuited to the work of building community, whether globally or locally, because such platforms are unresponsive to their users, and unresponsive by design (design that is driven by a desire to be universal in scope). It is virtually impossible to contact anyone at Google, Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, and that is so that those platforms can train us to do what they want us to do, rather than be accountable to our desires and needs. A model of education tied to platforms rather than institutions may seem liberating at first—“I can learn everything I need to know on MOOCs!”—but that sense of

liberation will continue only insofar as users train themselves to ask the questions the platforms already know how to answer, and think the thoughts the platforms are prepared to transmit. To the extent that people accommodate themselves to the faceless inflexibility of platforms, they will become less and less capable of seeing the virtues of institutions, on any scale. One consequence of that accommodation will be an increasing impatience with representative democracy, and an accompanying desire to replace political institutions with platform-based decision making: referendums and plebiscites, conducted at as high a level as possible (national, or in the case of the European Union, transnational). Among other things, these trends will bring, in turn, the exploitation of communities and natural resources by people who will never see or know anything about what they are exploiting. The scope of local action will therefore be diminished, and will come under increasing threat of what we might call, borrowing a phrase from Einstein, spooky action at a distance. This is how nation-states become wholly owned subsidiaries of transnational corporations. This is how Buy-n-Large happens.

### *The Difference between Projecting and Promising*

Training young people how to live and work extramurally—to limit their exposure to governance via terms of service and APIs—is a vital hedge against this future. We cannot prevent anyone from trusting his or her whole life to Facebook or Snapchat; but to know that there *are* alternatives, and alternatives over which we have a good deal of control, is powerful in itself. And this knowledge has the further effect of reminding us that code—including the algorithmic code that so often determines what we see online—is written by human beings for purposes that may be at odds with our

own. The code that constitutes Facebook is written and constantly tweaked in order to increase the flow to Facebook of sellable data; if that code also promotes “global community,” so much the better, but that will never be its reason for being.

To teach children how to own their own domains and make their own websites might seem a small thing. In many cases it *will* be a small thing. Yet it serves as a reminder that the online world does not merely exist, but is *built*, and built to meet the desires of certain very powerful people—but could be built differently. Given the importance of online experience to most of us, and the great likelihood that its importance will only increase over time, training young people to do some building themselves can be a powerful counterspell to the one pronounced by Zuckerberg, who says that the walls of our social world are crumbling and only Facebook’s walls can replace them. We *can* live elsewhere and otherwise, and children should know that, and know it as early as possible. This is one of the ways in which we can exercise “the imperative of responsibility,” and to represent the future in the present.

If that recommendation still seems like a trivial one, we might remember how Mr. Miyagi in *The Karate Kid* teaches Daniel how to wax a car, and how that instruction (“Wax on; wax off”) proves also to be instruction in karate. But what is the deeper and more important craft that people acquire by learning to own and manage their own Internet domains? And what relationship does it bear to the future?

In a 1980 essay, “Standing by Words,” Wendell Berry describes a cultural moment— one of which we are now experiencing in a later and more fully developed stage—that militates against

accountability for words. One of the manifold ways in which one can fail to be accountable for one's words is to be a *futurist*. Berry shrewdly compares our futurists to the "Projectors" of the Grand Academy Lagado in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*: men who *appear* to be meaningfully related to the future but are in fact wholly self-absorbed. Their future is entirely imaginary and fictitious, and as Berry says of the Projectors' heirs, our contemporary futurists, their language "drifts inevitably toward the merely provisional.... It is not language that the user will very likely be required to stand by or to act on, for it does not define any personal ground for standing or acting. Its only practical utility is to support with 'expert opinion' a vast, impersonal technological action already begun." For Projectors and futurists, "all the grand perfect dreams of the technologists are happening in the future, but nobody is there." Their imagined world is devoid of actual persons and much of the rest of Creation as well.<sup>15</sup> But if one is not to be a Projector, what better attitude might one have toward the future? For Berry, the vital distinction is between *projecting* and *promising*: "The 'projecting' of 'futurologists' uses the future as the safest possible context for whatever is desired; it binds one only to selfish interest. But making a promise binds one *to someone else's future*." It is this distinction that points us toward means of fulfilling Jonas's "imperative of responsibility." And oddly enough, we begin to make promises to others by having "a domain of our own": It is a first step toward "standing by our words" in the digital realm. As Berry says, "We are speaking where we stand, and we shall stand afterwards in the presence of what we have said."<sup>16</sup> By taking back the responsibility of our words from the Headmasters, by ceasing to live on their bounty, we step away from the "merely provisional" uses of language and toward genuine accountability. We thereby make a small

promise to the future, and take a step toward giving those who come after us cleaner earth to till. We may also wish them good weather—but that, too, largely depends on the promises we make, and our fidelity in keeping them.

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