

# Digital Disconnect

A review by Cynthia Peters

In his book, *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism is Turning the Internet Against Democracy*, Robert McChesney argues that we need to understand the Internet in the context of our economic system – that is, capitalism. He starts by describing those who celebrate the Internet revolution and those who are more skeptical of it. He then goes on to describe how the pressures of capitalism are “turning the Internet against democracy.” This article is a summary of his ideas.

## Celebrants Love the Internet

Some people say that the digital revolution and the Internet are unequivocal forces for good. Various writers refer to the idea that new technologies will create a “cognitive surplus” or “collective intelligence” – which will allow people to collaborate on projects, share knowledge, and solve some of the key challenges we face today, including “poverty, malnutrition, child mortality, and the myriad social ills that blight our planet.” Another writer, Jeff Jarvis, wrote in his book, *Public Parts*, that the “publicness” of the Internet will disrupt powerful institutions. “Dictators, and politicians, media moguls and marketers try to tell us what to think and say. But now, in a truly public society, they must listen to what we say, whether we’re using Twitter to complain about a product or Facebook to organize a protest.”

## Skeptics Aren’t So Sure

Other commentators are more skeptical. Jaron Lanier argues, for example, that if millions of people contribute bits of knowledge to, say, a physics wiki, they are not likely to “replicate the achievements of even one mediocre physicist, much less a great one.” Eli Pariser worries that because of the way Google and other Internet sites track our preferences, we are not really challenged to reconsider our beliefs. Instead, we are unknowingly being held in a “filter bubble,” which keeps send-

ing us to sites and surrounding us with information that reinforce what we already believe. Meanwhile, psychologists and others note that social media might be leading us to more loneliness, fewer deep relationships, and changes in how our thought processes work.



## Understanding the Context

Robert McChesney, in his book *Digital Disconnect*, says that both the celebrants and skeptics are ignoring the “elephant in the room,” and that “elephant” is capitalism. He claims we cannot evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of the Internet without taking into account the political economic context that it functions in. Capitalism, as it currently exists in the United States, puts many pressures on how the Internet gets used, who has access to it, and what is available through it. Here are some examples of how capitalism affects our experience of the Internet.

### Too Much Power for Too Few Corporations

Capitalism tends to reduce competition by concentrating power in a few large corporations (p. 36). For example, currently Google holds nearly 70% of the search engine market; the Microsoft Windows operating system is used on 90% of all computers; Amazon sells more than 70% of regular books and e-books sold online; and eBay and Facebook hold virtual monopolies in their areas (p. 131). The richer these companies get, the faster they buy up smaller companies that may compete with them (p. 138). With little or no competition, these companies have total “pricing power” – meaning they can set and raise prices without worrying that

a competitor will underbid them. When a small group of mammoth corporations control so many aspects of how the Internet is used, they exercise a lot of power over our everyday choices.

### Extreme Inequality

Another feature of 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism in the U.S. is that it is marked by extreme inequality. Today, the richest fifth of the population owns 84% of the wealth. The poorest fifth of the population has just 0.1% of the wealth (p. 36). This extreme inequality leaves some people unable to use the Internet and other digital resources that are necessary for almost everything today – from education, to work, to leisure.

Furthermore, when wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few, those few have disproportionate power over government. How could this be true even in a democracy like the United States? The reason is that elections are often decided by who gets the biggest campaign contributions. Thus, the wealthy few can ensure that people are elected who will represent the interests of the wealthy few. Six out of the top ten most profitable corporations in the United States are in the business of technology; their power is drastically over-represented in the halls of congress and in the committees that regulate their businesses.

### Advertising

Early in its history, the Internet was not used for commercial purposes. In fact, the media used to refer to the Internet as “the information super-highway.” People thought of it as a way to exchange information in an environment that was free of sales pitches. This was upsetting news for people in the marketing business. In 1993, *Adver-*

*tising Age* magazine lamented the fact the culture of the Internet hated advertising (p. 102). But a key way that capitalism works is it needs people to buy things. And when we’ve bought everything we need, capitalism wants to convince us to buy things we *don’t* need. For that, advertising is very important, and the Internet has become a key way for marketers to reach potential customers – so much so that almost every site you visit is saturated with advertising.

And advertisers are going to extremes to figure out the best way to sell to you. For example, they track your habits and draw conclusions about your interests and change their ads to appeal especially to your “type” or your demographic. They can even deduce your mood (based on your Facebook posts, for example) and deliver an ad to your screen that will be especially meaningful to you at that moment. Say, you’re hungry or planning a trip or just changed jobs – advertisers can take this information and deliver an ad that would be more appealing. Another person might receive a completely different ad based on their profile at that particular moment.

Maybe you’re a very focused person and can ignore these ads and just focus on the content, but the problem is that more and more content is *driven* by advertising. In other words, web sites create content that will attract more advertisers. They shun content that is not advertising-friendly. This limits the range of content available. It’s not outright censorship, but it has a censoring effect.

### Conclusion

This is an important book because McChesney reminds us that the Internet exists in the context of a specific economic system – capitalism. Whether we celebrate all the potential of the Internet or remain skeptical of its offerings, we should consider the pressures put on it by a system that is based on profit, tends to concentrate wealth at the top, and perhaps unintentionally has a censoring effect on the content we get to see.

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## Explain the Key Ideas

**How does capitalism affect the Internet?**  
Cite specific details from the article.

**Are you a skeptic or a celebrant? Or something in between? Explain.**