

## On the failure of oracles: reflections on a digital life

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## On the Failure of Oracles: Reflections on a Digital Life

by David M. Berry

Across the globe, as the sun rises, people begin each day with a routine that marks 21st-century life as very different from any other century. Before they get dressed, before they are even fully awake, most people start their morning by gazing at rectangular oleophobic panes of illuminated glass. Every day, a new world is painted in millions of individual organic light-emitting diodes which are embedded in a substrate under a layer of glass that is harder and thinner than any previously created. The screen is brighter than any reading surface we have ever known. The first thing we do each morning is to point this blaze of dazzling light straight into our eyes which carries the retina-quality notifications of the digital straight into our foggy brains. Before we are even fully conscious, the digital has disclosed a world to us, a stream of information and data, rivers of news, rivulets of reminders and lists.

These new digital devices make possible a new kind of life which confuses private and public, digital and analogue. This device is privy to our most intimate thoughts and memories and grants access to a world of information and real-time communication. Like a digital assistant, it orders our private world to stand by, awaiting our command. We increasingly act through a swipe on our screens, and which, like magic, can bring the world to our fingertips, purchase things for our homes, pick the next romantic partner, make a song start or an alarm stop. The phone is now a smartphone, embellished with an intelligence that knows us better than we know ourselves. As it gradually learns our strengths and our weaknesses, our interests and our temptations, it overtakes us, telling us what we want to know before we even know it. The smartphone is a mirror that reflects back the you that you always wanted to be.

The phone works by means of a logic of distraction, a logic that collapses private into public so that our thoughts become increasingly blurred under digital capitalism. When we are in public, by the press of a home button, we are digitally whisked back into the private spaces of the digital - into our direct messages and private streams. Conversely, when we are at home we can be virtually at our favourite concert, watch the police beat a protester on the streets, or #rp (role-play) with strangers on Instagram. We are always on, always available, and always already being-digital.

Consequently, under the conditions of a digital society, the home is in ruins. It is increasingly a vestige, a series of scattered shards of a now broken and increasingly exhausted space. But even as it vanishes, everywhere one looks there is a nostalgic attitude towards its former splendour. Just as Greek and Roman ruins inspired the Romantics to recall the greatness of antiquity through a once dazzling antique whiteness, so an older sense of home infuses our imaginations. It is an artifice of gregariousness, warmth and comfort, still remembered as a bulwark against the creeping advances of industrial capitalism. This sense of home was memorably described by Richard Hoggart as having at its core a sense of the personal, the concrete and the local. It had an insistence on privacy; that outside change must be incorporated slowly to help build a solid resistance to what he described as potential destroyers from outside. This nostalgia is stronger and more ambiguous because it describes a home that was without modern conveniences, which required greater efforts of gendered labour to sustain it, and which was a place for simpler pleasures and necessity.

Home was contrasted with the common world, the world of work, the world of politics. The idea of home incorporated the notion that to enter the public realm one left one's private space. This was particularly important to the ancient Greeks whose notion of

home, the *oikos*, stood in contrast to the *polis*, the public realm. This is also from where we derive our notions of private and public space, a distinction that remains strong even to this day. But home for the Greeks was also a space of darkness and necessity. Indeed, the Greek and Latin words for the interior space of a house, *megaron* and *atrium*, have a strong connotation of darkness. Hannah Arendt argued that for the Greeks, the four walls of one's property served as a reliable hiding place from the common world, from being seen and heard. A life spent entirely in public would be a shallow life in contrast to a tangible, worldly place of one's own away from the glare of public life. Without this private world, as John Locke argued, the common world would be impossible. The boundaries between public and private were guaranteed by walls and fences which designated things that should be shown from things that should be hidden. This is because, in contradiction to Heraclitus, who claimed that the same person can never enter the same stream twice, in their homes, people receive a sense of sameness from the things they own. Home is a site of continuity, identity and memory from which to re-enter the public world outside. As Arendt argues, the objects of the home stabilize life, they are the very condition of human freedom and the capacity for being in public life.

The twin forces of the Enlightenment and Industrialism have transformed our societies beyond anything that the Greeks or Romans could possibly have imagined. Yet we remain indebted to them for this basic formulation of public and private. The 20th century was marked by the intensification of a new contrast, that of work and home, and therefore of labour and leisure time under industrial capitalism. Although the home has retained a sense of being a separate place distinct from the outside world, it has nonetheless been transformed by political and social change. From the declaration by women that the 'personal is political', to the social transformations of patriarchy, gender roles, children's rights and the family, the home has continued to be the place of the household, recuperation and privacy. Even the immense forces of the cultural industries and their methods of standardisation and quantification, which succeeded in lodging industrial society in people's minds, only partially colonised the home as a private place.

The home remained a space of relatively mute objects, and whilst it was nonetheless privy to the incorporation of a series of home automations, from the washing machine to the record-player, from the radio to the television, there was still a sense of a place different from the world outside. The best orchestras in the world - of which there were none under conditions of industrial capitalism as Horkheimer and Adorno sarcastically reminded us - were delivered free of charge to the home, along with entertainments flowing from newspapers and television. However, even at its most intense, the flow of cultural products did not return any messages from inside the home, which remained a receiver but not a transmitter of information back to the corporate giants. Although Horkheimer and Adorno well described the changes under late capitalism which created culture that was unidirectional and standardised, they overlooked the fact that the cultural industries could not fully capture the homes and minds of the population. People were not the helpless victims of what was offered to them nor were they fully captivated by the cunning of these authorities. The 'darkness' of the home again offered a defence against the onslaught of the public world, even if it was a realm saturated by the products of capitalism.

By feeling 'at home' we were located somewhere in someplace and therefore felt relatively safe from corporate control. This engendered a feeling of homeliness, from a specific geographic dwelling, located in a village or town, down a street or off a road, place as a feeling, as a physical and emotional anchor. This was a place where you could set down temporarily to feel that whilst you may be buffeted by the outside world, home was your place to rest, catch your thoughts, and step out of the public gaze. This was not a place that the cultural industry approved of, as it was not a space which they either controlled or could easily extract a profit from.

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This was captured in the film *The Wizard of Oz*, released in 1939, which delivered the immortal line, 'there's no place like home'. It told the story of Dorothy who lived her life in a sepia-tinted monochromatic world of Kansas of the 1930s and who through an elaborate dream sequence visits the colourful craziness of the Land of Oz. For Dorothy, Oz was a world full of colour and life, but rather like the dreams of a corporate world, it was an exaggerated, garish, cartoonish place. She returns when she utters the magic words, 'there's no place like home', which delivers her back to her family and friends. But home for Dorothy was lived, like its audience, in shades of grey. The subtext of the story for the people living in industrial capitalism was clearly underscored by a product of the cultural industry that tried to show the colourful world that could be found outside the domain of the home.

Today we live in a world transformed. Under conditions of digital capitalism, the home is now the scene of a major disruption. Moore's law, which has given us a doubling in computer power, whilst simultaneously delivering a reduction in the physical size of computer chips every two years, has made possible a computer in your pocket. We now live in the age of the smartphone, which is also an age of data. The power of the smartphone has given us new freedoms to connect, communicate and create culture in ways that we would have struggled to have imagined previously. But, ironically, a device designed to be carried and used in public is now the one that is throwing open the doors of the home and letting the public realm in. We stand on the precipice of a new colonisation by technology that gives us the means to project communication power onto the world around us. But as we use it, the phone records our actions, our movements and our thoughts. The great symbol of freedom under digital capitalism has become an inadvertent Trojan horse that has given the cultural industries a backdoor into our private lives and homes.

One could say that our phones are increasingly our homes. The phone has become the very condition for home, and by always carrying it means that our home is always already digitally with us. Our smartphones now contain our music, documents, diaries and messages, in fact, copies of all our most precious information. Trapped within the confines of a small screen, which is now more intimate than any other possession, our lives are more and more lived digitally. The very idea of being disconnected from it is captured today by the acronym FOMO, or fear of missing out, and which the smartphone does its best to ensure we never do. Our phones not only are our homes, comforting and intimate, but, at the press of a button, can call a car to take us to our physical abode too. From the latest news to our most intimate messages, we live in and through our phones. The smartphone has completely revolutionised the way we shop, watch, move and think. But our phones are not just passive tools for thought: whilst we are watching our smartphones, they, in turn, are watching over us, providing Delphic advice. In the homes we live in, the walls that used to shield the private from the public are now made of glass - the phone, the TV, the tablet and the computer are digital windows into the home. But these devices do not see as through a glass, darkly, but rather they see clearly, they see us as we are, and using this information they have the power to shape our behaviour and thoughts.

We are seen and known by our things. As a result, our physical homes are being turned into mansions of algorithms, subject to the whims of edge, core and cloud. When we spend time there it becomes another source of data about our wants and desires. Home has become a television studio in which we are the star, and where recording never ceases. Home as a fragmented space whose walls now stand in ruins. As it has been emptied of our cultural and personal memories, a sense of home nonetheless has remained necessary as a space of recuperation, as a place where we can lay down after a long day. Even if, on lying down, the first thing we do is fish out the smartphone and plug back into a public network. The transformation of the home over the past 15 years has intensified more recently. The question is no longer where is your home, but rather what does your home do?

This might be described as the softwarization of the home. Its conversion into an algorithmic space, a process which is now well underway, and which involves transforming dumb things into smart objects through the use of artificial intelligence. But AI cannot function without data, large amounts of data, to help them understand the world. Smart devices need to watch and record us, harvesting vast quantities of data so that our every activity can be captured by sensors and cameras embedded within them. Home today means to be in the middle of things, it is no longer an end, but rather a means, a passage-way between two points: from dumb to smart. In becoming smart, devices transform the home into what can be thought of as a vast oil field of data, awaiting extraction by a new set of digital cultural industries. It is of no surprise that FAANG (Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google), the leaders of the technology industry, are racing to create the technologies for their vision of the digital home. Clive Humby has described data as the new oil and we are in the middle of an oil rush at the centre of which lies the home. As Wired explains, 'like oil, for those who see data's fundamental value and learn to extract and use it there will be huge rewards'. Humby further argues that 'data is just like crude. It's valuable, but if unrefined it cannot really be used. It has to be changed into gas, plastic, chemicals, etc. to create a valuable entity that drives profitable activity; so must data be broken down, analyzed for it to have value'. But it is not just the one-off collection of data, it is the iterative gathering of data, repeated again and again that creates the conditions for these possible insights. The oil fields of the home will not soon be spent, instead, they will yield greater and greater quantities of data, from which more profit can be earned.

This extractive metaphor serves not only Silicon Valley but also inspires governmental policy. For example, Meglena Kuneva, European Consumer Commissioner, has, without blinking, described personal data as 'the new oil of the internet and the new currency of the digital world'. The UK Office for National Statistics has argued that 'if data is the new oil, open data is the oil that fuels society and we need all hands at the pump'. What makes data into open data, is that it is free of intellectual property restrictions that prevent it from being used by others due to publishing constraints, such as copyright, or that it is owned exclusively by its creators. Open data, like open access publications and open-source before them, grants a corporation the right to dice up and remix data. When you use your smartphone or a smart object, the first thing that has to be clicked is the agreement to let companies extract and use your data. This is now referred to as the potential for post-purchase monetization and is built on the foundation of spying on people's lives and homes.

So today the balance between public and private is being lost. A new kind of no-place we still call home is generated and sustained by digital corporations that weave smart technologies into our lives, and which tightens their grip on us with every click. Our homes become subject to the patterns of digital technology, subject to technical lock-in and network effects, to the power laws that now govern the distribution of power and wealth in society. Indeed, our homes and lives become desirable for their potential for value-extraction by the new digital monopolies that now rule in the digital economy.

As our private worlds become increasingly transparent, the corporate watchers that own the software and algorithms that manage the sensors, smartphones, and smart objects themselves become more obscure and hidden. It becomes hard for anyone to see what is going on and how and where vantage points to criticise these technologies and their corporate owners might be established. Without privacy, without a home, without being able to exit from the public sphere, the road to political action and thought is severely undermined. Without urgent challenge from society, FAANG companies have increasing power to shape the thoughts and beliefs of people across culture.

In response then, on the ruins of home, a new home must be built. The ruins must be uncovered to create new values, new standards, and new defences. Weapons for the weak

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to push back this colonisation of private space. The walls of the home must be refortified, the digital windows must be hacked so that they can be closed, and the door must be jammed firmly shut to keep out the increasing amounts of digital surveillance. The only way for there to be a place like home in a digital age will be if it is rebuilt on these ruins. This means that a political and technical campaign will need to be declared against the digital monopolies that invade our homes and lives. The first stages in that battle will be on the terrain of the home, the second on the smartphone, and it has only just begun.

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