

Losing Your Internet: Narratives of Decline among Long-Time Users

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Annette Markham's *Life Online* (1998) documents an historical conjuncture in which the visibility of the Internet in popular culture outpaced hands-on access for most Americans. At the time that Markham was completing her fieldwork, approximately one-third of Americans reported using the Internet, most of whom were white, wealthy, highly educated, and male (Rainie, 2017). Yet, for half a decade, news and entertainment media had been saturated with stories of the Internet as a technical marvel, economic opportunity, social revolution, and moral threat (Schulte, 2013; Streeter, 2017). Every few months, the cover of *Time* magazine added a new dimension to the Internet story, from the "info highway" in 1993, to the "cyberporn" panic in 1995, dot-com "golden geeks" in 1996, and the "death of privacy" in 1997. Beyond these sensational headlines, friends and coworkers gossiped about relationships and romances forming online. Early users of the Internet were similarly enthusiastic and many shared a sense that computer-mediated communication might transform the social world. Even Markham described her initial observations of the internet and its growing user population as "astounding" and "extraordinary" (1998, pp. 16–17). At the turn of the century, the Internet seemed charged with unknown possibility.

Twenty years later, the structure of feeling that characterized early encounters with the Internet has changed. For millions of people, computer-mediated communication is now an unremarkable aspect of everyday life. In comparison to the fantastical multi-user environments that Markham described in 1998, typical uses of the internet in 2017 seem quite dull: reading the news, solving a crossword

puzzle, shopping for household goods, or arranging meetings with coworkers. Furthermore, in popular media, the Internet seems to oscillate unpredictably from the mundane to the menacing. The same platform used to file income taxes is said to facilitate waves of terrorism, harassment, fraud, and propaganda. Returning to the *Time* archive, we find alarming cover stories about the “secret web where drugs, porn and murder hide online” in 2013 and a failed e-government initiative described as a “nightmare” in 2014. What is striking about these recent headlines, however, is how infrequently the Internet itself is an object of scrutiny. Unlike stories from the 1990s, the presence of the Internet in our homes is now taken-for-granted and the panic lies in its misuse or abuse.

Long-time users, the small group who have enjoyed continuous internet access since 1997, are in a unique position to reflect on the transformation of the Internet from ballyhoo to banality. While any American adult alive in the early 1990s would have been exposed to ideas and arguments about the Internet, only long-time users can compare these narratives with first-hand experience. Long-time users bore witness to several translations in the cultural position of the Internet: from voluntary to compulsory, peripheral to central, marvelous to mundane. For the long-time user, the interleaving of computer-mediated communication and human society is neither taken-for-granted nor natural. And while these transitions unfolded over the course of many years, long-time users are only occasionally prompted to reflect on the changes they have experienced. It is in these moments of self-reflection that we find clues regarding the changing meaning of metaphors over the past two decades.

This chapter focuses on discourses of nostalgia, loss, and decline among long-time users for whom the Internet of the 1990s became, in Markham’s analysis, “a way of being” (2003). Almost invariably, long-time users remember the early Internet as a kind of golden age, an electronic Eden in which anyone with a modem was free to play and experiment in relative safety. As one characteristic comment on an historical blog post reads, “[This] brings back some fond memories. [Back then,] the worst thing that would happen was that call waiting would knock me offline!” Undoubtedly, this nostalgia reflects an authentic longing for the excitement one felt standing on the threshold of cyberspace but it also obscures the substantial social barriers and material costs that prevented most people from sharing in that experience. To understand what is at stake in this tension between the nostalgia of long-time users and the on-going expansion and domestication of Internet access, this chapter examines both the contemporary accounts of Internet use captured by Markham in *Life Online* and the retrospective stories told by high-profile figures in the recent past. This comparison reveals the rhetorical power of narratives of decline to shape debates about Internet policy, technology, and culture. As we consider what it means to live online for another two decades, we must critically consider the stories that we tell about Internets of the past.

LOST WAYS OF BEING ON THE INTERNET

The Internet of today is cheaper, faster and more widely accessible than at any point in the past. But these developments have been achieved through a process of continuous change. The Internet is made and re-made as various components are adopted and abandoned, incorporated and disconnected. As the Internet evolves, long-time users mourn the loss of particular programs, practices, services, or interfaces. Favorite sites shut down, loose network connections fade away, daily habits are disrupted. As the technical systems that make up the Internet change, they unsettle the Internet as a way of being.

The consequences of technological change for long-time Internet users are clearest in the transition from desktop terminals to mobile devices. In the mid-1990s, a majority of online social activity unfolded in text-only environments. Even as faster modems, graphical operating systems, and the Web grew more common, the Net of the 1990s was composed of seemingly endless streams of text; row upon row of letters, numbers, and punctuation. In the decades since, text-only applications such as IRC were displaced by interactive video displays that interleave images and text, respond to taps, gestures, swipes, and voices rather than instructions typed out on a keyboard. Although these new interfaces contributed to the growing accessibility of the internet, the transition was not without costs for users accustomed to navigating by text. For several participants in Markham's *Life Online* fieldwork, the text-only interfaces of the 1990s afforded ways of being not available elsewhere in their lives. In the words of one interlocutor, text-only environments like MUDs and MOOs gave rise to "a much more complex life of relationships ... centered around being a part of a meaningful community" (p. 176). For some long-time users, the Internet was a way of being because the Internet was made of text.

Text-oriented interfaces also shaped the embodied experiences of users in the 1990s. Markham's interlocutors reported sitting at desks, day and night, in computer labs, offices, and bedrooms. Their hands played across a keyboard or moved a mouse, and their gazes focused on a screen fixed in place. Likewise, the textual environments they inhabited—MOOs, chatrooms, listservs, and newsgroups—maintained a material distinction between being online and offline. To enter one of these spaces required being in a particular place, sitting in front of a machine, and entering the proper sequence of commands to open a network connection. Although the predominance of text seemed to offer an "escape" from the body for some users, Markham found that the bodies of her interviewees stubbornly resisted abandonment, a phenomenon that Megan Boler later described as a "new digital Cartesianism" (2007). Embodiment persists, reflected Markham, even when bodies were rendered, enacted, and performed through text alone (1998, p. 209).

For those users who inhabited the Internet as a way of being in 1997, the Internet was, implicitly, a society of written texts. Though text-only interfaces and text-oriented applications may not have obliterated the flesh, they nevertheless privileged written communication over all other forms of social interaction. As mobile broadband and constant connectivity blurred the boundary between online and offline in the late 2000s, however, written communication lost its status as the principal form of computer-mediated communication. For some of the people profiled in *Life Online*, this transition must have been profoundly unsettling. Consider Sherie, Markham's obtuse interlocutor who insisted that life online is "very textual. very discursive and rhetorical. also poetic" (1998, p. 207). Could a user like Sherie, so committed to text, experience the always-on, broadband internet of 2017 as a way of being?

The growing, changing internet of the 2000s gave rise to new forms of creative expression and provided space for a much broader range of voices, but it also foreclosed the dreams of some long-time users whose way of being depended on the primacy of text. For these users, a text-only environment seemed to offer a form of communication free from the prejudices they experienced in embodied environments. Text-mode interaction granted these users a special kind of control, evidenced in their recurring references to the "delete" key, a synecdoche for the entire apparatus of the text-only internet. The most optimistic among them imagined that the spread of internet access—that is, text-mode internet access—would bring about a radical egalitarian society, a "civilization of the Mind" in the words of EFF co-founder John Perry Barlow (1996). But it turned out that the diffusion of access was not enough. As the internet became another medium for entertainment and office work, the paradigm shifting dream of the late 1990s began to sound naïve and out of touch. What could be so revolutionary about baby pictures, cute dogs, celebrity news, and TV dramas? For the cyber-romantic of the 1990s, the lived reality of ubiquitous internet access may be a bit of a letdown.

NOSTALGIA FOR INTERNETS OF THE PAST

Nostalgia shapes the memories of long-time users who have lost the Internet as a way of being. To paraphrase a characteristic recollection about the experience of exploring the online world of the 1990s: "Those were such great days, or should I say long nights." But there is more at stake in the nostalgia of long-time users than fond memories. The stories that long-time users share about the diffusion and domestication of the Internet reflect underlying beliefs about how the Internet ought to be. In the hands of people with power and influence, narratives that glorify the Internet of the past will have material consequences for people who rely on the Internet of the present for personal expression and community

support. Excessively sentimental attachment to the early Internet overlooks the most important change in the past two decades: the mutual visibility and increased access for people of different racial and gender identities, socio-economic classes, ages and abilities, geographic locations, and linguistic groups. Paradoxically, of course, the utopic structure of feeling of the 1990s motivated the work that opened the Internet to others.

Recently, two Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, each a long-time user, marshalled stories about the Internet's past to advocate for a particular vision of its future. While each articulated a narrative of decline, they differed in their diagnoses of the problem. One offered a hopeful account of paths-not-taken while the other blamed Internet newcomers and social media speculators for shortsightedness and a lack of ambition. Comparing the uses of history in these two rhetorical moments underscores the importance of memory in the experience of the Internet as a way of being.

In late 2012, long-time blogger Anil Dash published "The Web We Lost," lamenting a decline in "core values" that were once "fundamental to the web world" (2012a). Dash elaborated these values through a chronological series of examples of the design of social technologies and the collective behavior of industrial organizations. The blog post was widely read—Dash lists it among his personal favorite and most popular posts (2012b)—and, shortly after, Dash gave a talk on the topic at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University (2013). In the spoken version, titled "How We Lost the Web," Dash marshalled a narrative of decline to critique the enclosure of the Web by mutually incompatible social media systems, a process that Anne Helmond later characterized as "platformization" (2015).

In Dash's narrative, the "early social web" ran from 1999 to 2005, the period immediately following the conclusion of Markham's fieldwork. First, he acknowledged the scarce documentation of the period—"younger folks may not even know how the web used to be"—and, second, he established his credibility as a first-hand observer, "I got to witness it." In Dash's recollection, blogging was the preeminent activity of the period, a lingering effect of the privileged status of written communication during the 1990s. For Dash's crew of early bloggers, the internet was a way of being: "[blogging] distinguished you and who you were." This shared identity gave rise to a shared culture and a shared set of values involving openness, privacy, control, and creativity. In Dash's narrative of decline, the platform that dominates today's Internet offers no similar shared identity to its users: "Nobody's a 'Facebooker.'"

For Dash, the purpose of sharing this narrative of decline was to inspire an alternative vision of the future in his readers. His personal recollections of an earlier Internet suggest that the platformization of the internet was not pre-ordained, nor universally welcome. He describes the transition from self-hosted blogs to

centralized platforms as happening “really, really quickly with almost no public discourse about the implications” (2013). In setting up the present conditions as aberrant, he offers a potential remedy for the future: “The reality is public policy can be a really, really effective part of addressing the problems in the technology industry” (2013). In effect, Dash pitched a “battle” between the past and the present, characterizing the decline as temporary and appealing to readers to join his pursuit toward a different future.

In contrast to Dash’s focus on values, a manifesto titled “What happened to the future?” circulated by the venture capital firm Founders Fund in 2011, told a story of the Internet’s past characterized by failures of technological achievement (Gibney, 2011). (The manifesto was written by Founders Fund partner Bruce Gibney but authorship is often misattributed to his fellow partner Peter Thiel.) At the time of the essay’s publication, journalists covering the tech industry were especially likely to quote a sentence that did not actually appear in the body of Gibney’s essay: “We wanted flying cars, instead we got 140 characters” (2011). Coming from a firm closely associated with Facebook, industry insiders interpreted this quip as an attack on competitors and it led to a staged debate between Thiel and Twitter investor, Marc Andreessen (Horowitz, 2013). To the general public, however, the sentence neatly captured a feeling of bitter disappointment.

Reactionary narratives of decline mistakenly blame the loss of the Internet as a way of being on the growth in the size and diversity of the online population. In the 2013 debate with Andreessen, Thiel elaborated his dismissal of Twitter’s “140 characters” by targeting the players of casual games and users of social media:

You have as much computing power in your iPhone as was available at the time of the Apollo missions. But what [is it] being used for [?] It’s being used to throw angry birds at pigs[;] it’s being used to send pictures of your cat to people halfway around the world; it’s being used to check in as the virtual mayor of a virtual nowhere while you’re riding a subway from the nineteenth century. (Horowitz, 2013)

These examples reflect Thiel’s evaluation of certain Internet applications as low value and undeserving of “computing power.” By this logic, the decline of the Internet was caused by an overindulgence in technologies of pleasure, entertainment, community, and kinship.

The resentment evident in narratives such as Thiel’s have real consequences for people who have come to rely on the internet. Men like Gibney and Thiel invest financially as well as emotionally in the future of the internet. Their personal feelings, preferences and priorities shape the terms by which they deem new technologies worthy of support and enable them to flourish. For this milieu, the internet of the 1990s provided more than a way of being. Thanks to the irrational exuberance of the dot-com bubble, a mastery of arcane computer technology translated into political power and economic capital. As beneficiaries of that brief

moment, industry elites are uniquely positioned among long-time users to act on their narratives of decline.

Weaponized by capital and privilege, narratives of decline can empower dangerously regressive visions of the future. The embittered dotcommer—no longer part of a technical vanguard, bored by an early retirement, alienated by an internet population that better represents the full range of humanity—wants to recapture the openness and optimism they felt when the early internet was their way of being. When this nostalgia gives way to frustration and anger, long-time users may be drawn to arguments like Thiel's, convinced that the decline of the Internet is the fault of new users, new practices, new interfaces, and new techniques. Ironically, in grieving over the sense of novelty they felt on the Internet of the past, they risk missing out on what is exciting and new about the Internet of the present.

WAYS OF BEING ON INTERNETS OF THE FUTURE

At the conclusion of her fieldwork, Markham noticed that her own experience of life online had begun to settle down into the realm of familiar. After three years exploring the Net, she was surprised to touch the boundaries of a system that had once seemed so limitless. "I am amazed that I don't find more weird stuff and more exotic transmutations of the body and mind online" (p. 222). In this moment, Markham anticipated the challenge facing us today: to imagine a future for an unremarkable internet. In a final interview, interlocutor Terri Senft offered a concise portrait of a mundane way of being online: "Sometimes blown away. Sometimes bored. Sometimes angry. Often, I have to pee" (p. 223).

Every vision of the internet's future contains a vision of its decline. Since the publication of *Life Online*, the Internet has become the infrastructure of everyday life, suffused into the most quotidian social exchanges and financial transactions. More people in more places have more of their lives mediated by Internet communications. The predominance of young, white, English-speaking men from Europe and the U.S. with money and education has steadily waned. Yet, over the same period, as the Internet shed its exclusivity, it also lost some of its novelty. The mere act of getting online and interacting with other people through a screen no longer inspires the same popular fascination or moral concern that it once did. Long-time users who experienced the frisson of technological mastery or the industrialized hype of the Internet of 1997 may feel some melancholy at the Internet's transformation. But to carelessly remember that older Internet as a virtual Eden is to indict the millions of users who were structurally excluded from participation. The society of the Mind was a dream of computer-mediated colorblindness; an indifference to difference.

Facing down powerful narratives of decline, long-time users committed to justice must recover alternative memories of the internet's past. One small step in this direction is to narrate the past two decades in terms of a dramatic expansion in the size and diversity of the internet-using population. For many of these 21st century users, the Internet itself is a taken-for-granted feature of their media environment. Indeed, this mundane Internet may not inspire the same outrageous dreams as the Net of the 1990s but its infrastructural futures are not necessarily any less radical. We have language for the internet at its most mundane—an overgrown garden, or a ship in need of repair. But those who struggle for justice must also capture the internet at its most transcendent. How can the Internet of today—ubiquitous and mundane—inspire new senses of wonder, feelings of possibility, and sparkling visions of better tomorrows?

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Metaphors of Internet

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