

## # Free The Algorithms

# The Long-Term Future of Social Media

After a promising start during the Arab Spring in 2011, social media has in recent years emerged as a weapon of divide-and-rule attacks against the working class.

The good news is that, in the long run, social media will emerge as an invincible weapon that humanity will use to liberate itself from ignorance and oppression.

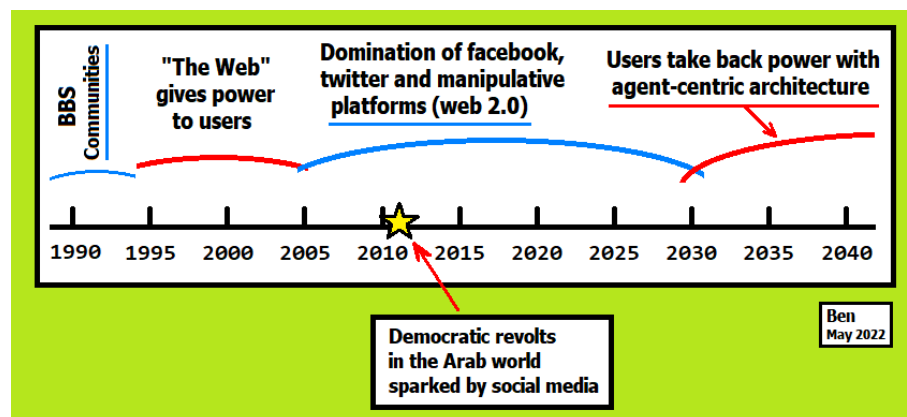
Ben Seattle -- December 2022

109.530.am -- 4570 words -- posted at: <http://communism.org/node/4027>

Recent news has been full of stories about how the richest man in the world, Elon Musk, has taken over Twitter and opened the gates of hell, unleashing white supremacists and other fascists on Twitter users. Previously, many thousands of Twitter accounts had been **deactivated** for racist abuse and threats. Musk now claims that he must reactivate these accounts in order to (supposedly) "protect free speech". At the heart of Musk's deceptive argument is one of the biggest lies of our time. The problem with social media is not that racists, fascists and spreaders of misinformation have platforms to spread their lies. Rather, the problem is that the **algorithms** of these platforms **amplify** this poison. Keep this in mind. We will see this again and again.

Misinformation is hardly new. Our ruling class has bombarded us with lies and manipulation from day one. My generation was drafted to fight in Vietnam on the basis of an invented incident in the Gulf of Tonkin. A younger generation was enlisted to invade Iraq on the basis of a similar fiction about "weapons of mass destruction".

What is new today is that a new generation of technology is being used to distract us with nonsense, manipulate our emotions and keep us ignorant and fighting amongst ourselves.



The great contradiction of our time is that billions of people now carry around mobile devices that (in theory) have access to nearly all the accumulated knowledge of humankind--but the result of this is a flood of misinformation and increasing ignorance about nearly everything important.

The primary reason for this is that we live in a class-divided society--and **our ruling class is afraid** of what will happen when the working class becomes **conscious** and **organizes itself**. The needs of our ruling class are reflected in how social media is regulated (and not regulated).

The evolution of social media, however, is still in its early stages. **In the long run, nothing will be able to prevent the development of a universal and democratic social media platform where the algorithms will be controlled by--and serve--the people who use the platform.** Our ruling class can use social media to open the gates of hell today, but we will use it to storm heaven tomorrow.

Let's quickly review the history of the internet and social media, as well as current efforts to create more democratic platforms that we will be hearing about more often in the decades ahead.

## The history (and future) of social media

### Chapter 1 -- 1970's through 1990's

The first 30 years of the internet's evolution saw the development of key principles. The most well-known of these principles was that a

network of computers, by using a common format, or protocol, could reliably pass messages to one another without the need for a centralized hierarchical structure. This gave rise to the slogan: "*The internet interprets censorship as damage, and routes around it.*"

Early efforts to create discussion forums and communities were based on something called "UseNet" (which was divided into thousands of topics, similar to the way Reddit functions today) and what were called "Bulletin Board Systems" (BBS's). These and similar systems were all free, and were maintained by hobbyists.

## Chapter 2 -- 1990's -- Walled Gardens collapse as Web emerges

Early attempts to make money on the internet led to the development of what were called "walled gardens". For example, if I wanted to send email to someone who had a Prodigy account--then I would be forced to pay a monthly fee to get a Prodigy account myself. I would also need to buy a CompuServe account to send email to CompuServe users. It was the same with user-created content: each company only allowed its own customers to access the content that its users created.

The invention of the "world wide web" in 1989 led to an eventual explosion of interest in the internet. The key idea of the web was that it was **universal** -- you could put a web page on the internet and people could see it from anywhere in the world without paying a fee to get inside some corporation's walled garden.

The first "web browser", named Mosaic, was announced in 1993. This was followed by browsers from Netscape and Microsoft in 1995 as the web became accessible to Windows users. **Thousands** of internet users soon became **millions**. Millions eventually became **billions**. The "walled garden" concept **collapsed** because there was no reason on earth to pay money to a **gatekeeper corporation** when millions of web sites were freely available.

This period is remembered today as the "**golden age**" of the internet, summed up by the popular slogan of the day: "*Information wants to be free.*" This was a time when people were **highly optimistic** about the potential of the internet to **roll back the forces of ignorance** and oppression and **bring light and consciousness** to humanity.

However, it was still difficult, at that time, for people to host their own web pages--as this usually required both technical knowledge as well as paying money for a web domain and hosting. One of the first efforts to solve this problem was taken by a company called "GeoCities", which offered free hosting and a user-friendly way of creating web pages. This was followed by early blogging sites, such as LiveJournal and WordPress, and by what would become the first "social media" companies, such as Myspace and Facebook.

The highlight of this period is probably the decisive role that social media played in **2011** in sparking the **mass democratic revolts in the Arab world**. A secret (and explosive) diplomatic cable was made public by Wikileaks, and was then spread by Twitter and Facebook and further amplified by Al Jazeera, the most popular cable network in the Arab world. Twitter and Facebook were then used to organize mass actions which brought tens and eventually hundreds of thousands into the streets. Echoes of this democratic movement emerged in Southern Europe as well as here in the U.S. (in the form of the Occupy movement) although it was eventually suppressed.

## Chapter 3 -- 2010's -- Facebook, YouTube and Twitter dominate

Over the last 10 years, the optimism of the early period has been replaced by a profound **pessimism**, as a result of two factors:

- (1) governments, corporations, and other oppressive forces, have become more **sophisticated** in managing the internet and
- (2) the biggest social media companies have grown to become (essentially) **monopolies gatekeepers** of our digital **connections** to others. Their algorithms are engineered to **manipulate** our emotions and keep us online as long as possible. The algorithms **amplify** our most **shallow impulses** (such as the need for a shot of social media **dopamine**). The result is that social media has devolved into an **addictive, toxic sewer** which often leaves us feeling **alienated** and **isolated**. This works to maximize the **profits** of the social media giants and is also in alignment with the need of our ruling class that we remain **ignorant** and **passive**.

Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube all have more than **2 billion users** and they (and a few other giants) have brought back their own form of **walled gardens**: you cannot reply to content or comments on any of these platforms except from within each platform. You can be **banned** from these platforms (for reasons they do not need to explain to you--since you have **zero rights**) as facebook banned academic researchers who attempted to study their how their algorithm worked. If this happens, **you will lose all contact with your network of hundreds of people** that you have carefully built up over many years.

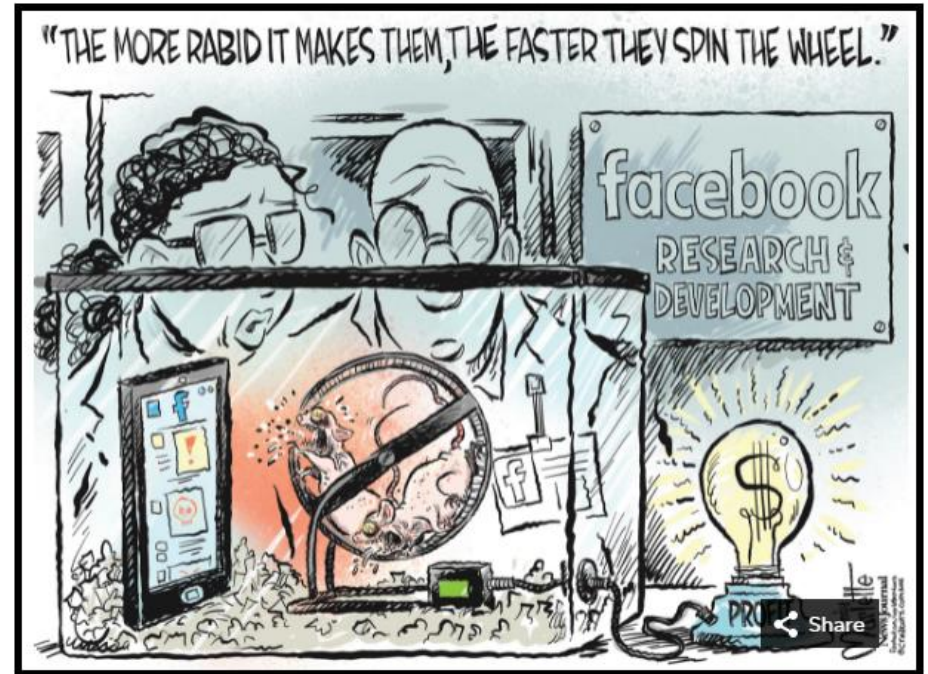
**Twitter** currently has less than **half a billion users**. This is far less than facebook or the larger platforms, but Twitter remains **the most influential platform**, because it is the closest thing to a universal platform used by journalists and other opinion leaders. This is why Elon Musk bought Twitter--as a means of influence. This is essentially the same reason that another billionaire, Jeff Bezos, bought the Washington Post.

Countless examples of the abuses of these platforms (and their algorithms) could be given. I can illustrate the problem with a small example from my own experience. One of my facebook friends commented that he no longer posts about events in **Palestine** because he has come to the conclusion that too many posts on this topic result in being "**shadow banned**" (ie: where facebook keeps your posts hidden from others without informing you about this). When I read this comment--I realized that there is no way of finding out whether or not this was really true: you can ask facebook a question about something like this--but you will never get a real answer. Everything about how the algorithms work is **secret**.

If you go to the store and buy a package of food, the manufacturer is required, by law, to list the ingredients. But **no similar law** exists to force the big platforms to reveal how they decide what you are allowed to see--or who is allowed to see what you post.

### **Why the algorithms are toxic**

The **algorithms** on these sites are **top secret**. Whistleblowers, however, have revealed that they **amplify** content that distorts things and gets people upset. There are two key reasons for this:



(1) If you get **outraged** by something you read--you are more likely to "engage" with it (ie: reply) and this will increase the **attention minutes** that the site can **harvest** from you and sell to advertisers. This kind of manipulation is what gave Facebook, not that long ago, a market valuation of a **trillion dollars**.

(2) Our ruling class needs people to be kept ignorant so that they can be more **easily manipulated** and kept fighting amongst themselves. Effective regulation of social media sites would, for example, require that all the secret algorithms be made **public**. Even such a simple (and obvious) first step as this, however, runs counter to the need to keep us, so to speak, barefoot and pregnant.

### **The TikTok War -- The impact of social media on a war with China**

Our ruling class has no problem with social media distorting the truth and manipulating our emotions--as long as this manipulation is not done by China. The U.S. and China are preparing to go to war with one another over who controls Taiwan and dominates East Asia. This war, if (or when) it happens, will not only be a military war fought



with missiles and submarines in the skies and seas--but a **war of ideas** fought with social media in the realm of **public opinion**.

This is why U.S. politicians have been in a panic over China's TikTok, the addictive "digital fentanyl" rapidly emerging as the most popular social media app in the world among the younger demographic. The U.S. has been considering a complete ban on TikTok (not only on government devices--but on everyone's desktop or phone). Such a ban is supposedly justified because of "data security" concerns--but the real issue has always been the potential of TikTok videos to influence **public perceptions**.

However there is a big problem with banning TikTok. Currently, the U.S. government is posing as the champion of **free speech** and freedom of thought, and can say that the Chinese government (which has banned Google, Twitter, Facebook and other Western social media and is notorious for heavily censoring the speech of its own citizens) is **afraid** of people having access to the truth. This would be revealed as shallow hypocrisy if the U.S. bans TikTok.

## Chapter 4 - 2020's -- Proliferation of experimental alternatives

The many abuses of the large social media platforms have given an incentive to many thousands of tech people and activists to create platforms that are less abusive. In particular, Musk's decision to re-open Twitter to racist and fascist trolls has sparked interest in Twitter alternatives, such as **Mastodon**.

### A federated platform

Mastodon is what is called a "**federated platform**", meaning that it is a collection of about 3 thousand independently managed platforms that cooperate with one another in various ways. There are also other federated platforms (including Pleroma and PeerTube, an open source alternative to YouTube) that interoperate with one another. And there is also work being done on a federated platform called **Holochain**, and a newer proposal (from Jack Dorsey, the former head of Twitter) called **BlueSky**.

### Take your friends with you

In addition, the guy who invented the web, Tim Berners-Lee, has proposed a new method (that he calls "**solid**") of hosting information in "**pods**", which would give users total control over all content (ie: posts, comments, likes, etc) they create as well as their connections to others [1]. This is significant because of what are called "network effects", "switching costs" and "interoperability". Basically, you got on facebook because your friends are there, and you can't leave facebook because you can't take your friends with you. TBL's proposal would change that--because you would be able to maintain contact with your facebook friends from any other platform. This would cut down the immense power of the social media leviathans.

### Early stages

It is too early to tell which of these platforms and ideas will grow. In contrast to Twitter's nearly half billion users, all of the Mastodon communities added together have **less than a million users**. So this story is still in its **early stages**. However, we can learn a lot from studying how these alternative platforms are solving various problems. Let's consider two key issues: (1) covering the cost of operation and (2) how moderation is done and the signal-to-noise ratio is defended.

### (1) Monetization is an obstacle -- not a necessity

One of the largest Mastodon communities has about 80 thousand users. It is run using a rented server that costs about \$400 a month. This breaks down to about **6 cents per user per year**. The guy who runs it pays for this expense out of his pocket (or through modest donations from users) and (most importantly) he also volunteers his time to keep it running.

We need to keep in mind the magnitude of these costs when the hot-button topic of **monetization** (ie: selling the attention of users to advertisers) comes up. This is important because monetization changes everything--as it shifts the purpose of the platform to **chasing dollars** rather than raising people's consciousness and serving people's needs.

Plenty of **clueless know-it-alls** preach to us that an alternative social media platform **would need billions of dollars of capital** to "keep the

lights on". But the reality of this is that what is needed is (a) about 6 cents per user per year to keep the electrons flowing and (b) volunteers who will donate their time to keep things running. This helps us understand that, if done in the right way, **monetization is simply not needed**. None of the thousands of Mastodon instances are based on selling ads or other form of monetization.

## **(2) Moderation needs to done by volunteers and communities**

Moderation on the Mastodon sites is done by unpaid human volunteers, not by paid staff or robot algorithms. Each Mastodon platform makes (and enforces) its own policy. If you have a problem with a moderation decision--you have a human you can talk to about it, and you also have the choice of easily moving to any of the thousands of other Mastodon platforms where the moderation may be more reasonable.

Moderation on a larger scale is also possible on Mastodon, as was shown by how Mastodon communities responded, in 2020, when right-wing assholes created their own Mastodon platform (called "Gab") from where they could abuse and harass users on other platforms by using the connections between Mastodon platforms. The eventual result [2] was that the thousands of Mastodon platforms *\*all\** "defederated" the Gab platform (ie: they all disconnected from it).

There are a thousand ways that cooperation between Mastodon moderators could be improved. But it is **already** better than facebook.

## **Give it time**

The clueless know-it-alls who preach the need for capital and monetization can harp on the fact that the alternative platforms still have less than a **million users**. But I think that number will be higher ten years from now than it is today. I remember when the early version of what we call the internet connected a total of 6 computers. That was a big thing at the time. Everyone knew this new thing would eventually grow. The know-it-alls remind me of the story of a woman who asked Ben Franklin, at a demonstration in Paris of one of the first manned flights in a hot-air balloon, "But of what use is this?" Franklin reportedly replied: "Of what use is a new born baby?"

## **Chapter 5 -- Consolidation of a Universal Democratic Platform**

In the long run, regardless of possible twists and turns ahead--whether through pandemics, inflation, economic collapse, fascist rule, climate catastrophe or world war--**the need for a universal and democratic social media platform will make itself felt**. When this need is felt widely and deeply enough--it will result in the platform we need.

## **When will this happen?**

I consider it likely that humanity will have made major steps toward such a universal and democratic platform by sometime in the middle third of this century. No one can predict a timeline for this--but we need to know that we have the ability to bring this day closer.

## **Sorting out the principles**

It is not too early to **begin to sort out the principles** that must guide the development of such a platform that will be based on algorithms that **we have the right to choose** (or to **create**) for ourselves. Such a platform will **serve the real needs of humanity** rather than simply be a way for (a) corporations to make **big piles of money** and (b) for our current rulers to keep us **stupid and divided**.

## **The right to control the algorithms**

In our current century of information war--the right to choose (or create and share) the algorithms that:

- (1) **connect us** to others, and
- (2) **give us news** about events in the world

is rapidly becoming an inseparable part of the right to speak the truth and hear the truth.

## **A common library of public information**

Everyone will have (1) the right to **contribute to a common library** of public information and (2) the **ability to view anything** they want from that library by (3) **using algorithms of their choice**.

-- (continued on next page) --

### **Beyond anyone's control**

Such a common platform will eventually reach the stage where it is **beyond the control** of any corporation, government or self-interested group of people.

### **A public square from which no force can evict us**

This will bring us closer to what we need--a platform where human attention will not be a **commodity** to be either **bought** or **sold**. This creates a **public square** from which **no force can evict us**.

### **No longer alone against the world**

Currently, social media presents us with a sorted list of content where everything has equal weight and we have few easy ways of knowing what is true and what is false: **marketing, journalism and propaganda are indistinguishable**. We are alone and surrounded by shit. This is why we are fucked--and this is what must change.

### **We will combine our intelligence**

In the future, when we have control over the algorithms, we will be able to **support one another** with our combined intelligence to reveal the truth about everything. If someone (or some company or organization) posts a message they want me to see, for example, I will have the ability to **filter out** their message based on their **reputation** (and the **complaints** that have been made against them--and on **who** has made these complaints).

### **Volunteers do it better than billionaires**

Instead of **moderation decisions** being based on the whims of billionaires, unpaid volunteer teams will attach tags or labels of their choice to messages (and/or the people or organizations which created these messages) -- and each user will be able to **filter out crap** on the basis of the labels attached by those teams that she has personally found to be **trustworthy**.

### **Building a second brain**

Also--instead of a single list of sorted content, the universal platform in humanity's future will give everyone countless ways to find, filter, organize, annotate, share, boost or veto information--similar to how an

**emerging generation** of apps for task management, writing projects or general **note-taking** (such as *Evernote*, *Notion*, *Roam* and, in particular, *Obsidian* [3] and *Milanote* [4]) are giving users the ability to create **notes, lists, tables, databases, corkboards, associatative clusters** or **recursive fractal structures** and (also) easily **link** or **embed** notes to or in one another. This is advertised as "building a second brain".

### **Steps we can take today -- TBL's call for action**

In discussing his solid/pods proposal, Tim Berners-Lee gave a call to "assemble the brightest minds from business, technology, government, civil society, the arts, and academia to tackle the threats to the Web's future". TBL invented the web, and his solid/pods proposal would be a huge step forward (if it gets off the ground). But his call to "assemble the brightest minds" strikes me as naive--and a liberal pipedream. We live in a class-divided society, and **the brightest minds have already been hired** to create the addictive toxic sewer that is social media today. I favor **another path** to help move things forward, which is related to something else TBL said:

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The current scholarly publication process assumes that an author uploads a scientific manuscript to a centralized platform, where a closed group of reviewers evaluates it. After acceptance, the manuscript is published as an article and then becomes accessible to the public . . . This process is rather slow, as the wider scientific community can only read the article at the end—if accepted. It is also non-transparent because valuable artefacts of the process, such as reviews and revisions, remain hidden. Further participation is typically only possible through a reply that has to undergo a similar slow process. A decentralized authoring application . . . instead allows researchers to self-publish their manuscripts . . . Their peers can annotate these manuscripts with comments and reviews . . . guaranteeing freedom of expression . . .

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If, instead of "scholarly publication", we substitute the idea of a **common journal open to all worker activists**--there is the seed of a powerful idea here. The interests of the working class are

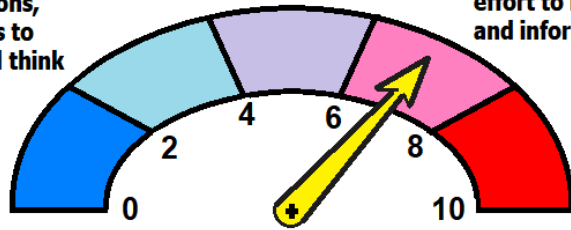
Clueless know-it-alls will quickly find out that stupidity results in low ratings and getting filtered out of visibility. Thoughtful comments, on the other hand, will result in expanded viewership. This is the opposite of how things work now.

## Signal to noise Rating Meter

Does this post or person reply in a thoughtful way?

Makes a lot of assumptions, often fails to listen and think

Makes a reasonable effort to reply in calm and informative way



Ben -- Dec 2022

Time-wasting, word-twisting, aggressively clueless hothead know-it-all

Listens and thinks about your comments before replying in a thoughtful way

## Jane's List of Jerks to Filter

Name	Reason	Reference Note
Jack	Troll	Note # 6002
John	Racist	Note # 6004
Charlie	Stupid	Note # 6006

Click [here](#) to use Jane's Filter

(Above) from Appendix B of "Spartacus Ex Machina" (2017). It will be easy to filter out timewasting jerks. Ben -- Dec 2022

(supposedly) represented by leftist activists, but the organized left has itself, unfortunately, also become a toxic sewer. The road to the **recovery** of the "left" requires **transparency**--and transparency is what TBL is calling for.

### A common journal for left activists

A common journal for left activists would do a lot to bring needed transparency to the left and to cast light on all the most important theoretical and practical questions. It would also help to illustrate (in microcosm) the **key democratic principle** that **must guide** the universal platform humanity needs.

### A level playing field

Any journal open to all left activists would need some way for users to **easily filter out** the opportunists, charlatans, reformists, sectarians and clueless know-it-alls which, unfortunately, saturate the left. And the only way to do this in a democratic way (ie: on a **level playing field** -- where everyone has **equal rights**) -- would be for all participants to have the equal right to attach tags or labels to articles and authors in this common journal, and for everyone to be able to use these labels as they see fit to **filter out deceptive shit** and **time-wasting crap**.

### A scenario -- filtering out apologists for Putin's invasion

One quick scenario may illustrate both the **problem** that needs to be solved as well as the **solution**. Currently, much or most of the organized left is, unfortunately, supporting Putin's criminal invasion of Ukraine. Most of the time, someone like me would need to simply filter out all posts and comments by people like this. To do so, I would be able (with a single click) to **filter out** everything authored by anyone who has been tagged as **#PutinApologist** by any person or group that I have decided is **trustworthy**. And (just to make sure I don't miss anything) I might (once a week, or once a month) flick that filter off for a few minutes and look around

Of course many activists could (in a similar way) filter out people such as me on the basis of tags that the Putin apologists might attach to me. However (without going into the details) this will tend to work out. While a few people may be inclined to maintain a hermetic seal on



their bubble of denial, **most activists** want to understand things and **will explore**.

### **Another scenario -- filtering out the assholes**

Users will find it easy to see how things look when **blacklist** and **whitelist filters** (ie: which either (a) recommend or (b) filter out) are combined, substituted, weighted, adjusted and shared. If you don't like Bob's list of assholes to filter out--you could try Jane's list instead. Over the course of time and bitter experience, activists will gain a better idea of who is trustworthy. **The truth will out.**

### **Missing: A critical mass of Recognition**

The technical means of creating such a **common democratic journal** are not a big deal. What is missing (at this time) is something simple: a **critical mass of activists and tech workers** who recognize that such a project is both:

- (1) exactly what is needed to bring transparency to the left, and
- (2) an example, to tech activists, of the kinds of features our future social media will need.

### **The Bridge**

What will happen once this critical mass is achieved? A picture is worth a thousand words. The answer to that question, I have concluded, is contained in the attached graphic I call "The Bridge".

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## # Free The Algorithms

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► This essay is posted at: <http://communism.org/node/4027> together with links to discussion on Reddit and facebook. Join me and others in discussing this essay. I look forward to your thoughtful questions, comments and criticisms. -- Ben

### **Links (and more to explore)**

[1] Re-decentralizing the Web, for good this time (2019)

<https://ruben.verborgh.org/articles/redecentralizing-the-web/>

[2] Decentralized social networks vs. the trolls (2020)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZoASOyfvGQ>

[3] How to choose a note-taking app - Zette Kasten - Notion vs Roam vs Obsidian --

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4MxI68kg8to>

► The Rise of Obsidian as a Second Brain Nick Milo

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nz99I7apNLI>

[4] Milanote - Getting Started (2 minutes) --

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OaWhH\\_5-XH8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OaWhH_5-XH8)

► How to Milanote (4 minutes) --

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w8ntfAxHTPI>

► How to get started with Milanote -

MASTERCLASS- (20 minutes)

-- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lt6FvvnLcY>

► Democratic Algorithms for the Proletarian Mind (2020)

-- <http://communism.org/node/4002>

► Spartacus Ex Machina (2017) -- <http://communism.org/node/3000>





The road forward, to the recovery of the independent movement of the working class, is simple: we will build a **bridge** between **tech activists** and **political activists** who are dedicated to independent working class politics.

This bridge will take the form of a common project to create a **democratic social media platform** that will give users the ability to **filter out time-wasting idiots** (and shallow and opportunist politics) by using the **tags** attached by people they have found to be **trustworthy**.

There may be **many efforts** in this direction. My best guess is that the most successful efforts will start small and remain small for the first few years, focusing on key principles that best represent the development of a **level playing field** (ie: where everyone has **equal rights**). Only after a **solid foundation** has been established will **gradual expansion** take place from hundreds (or possibly thousands) of users to much larger numbers.

The simple truth is that the political party with the ability to lead the working class will **coalesce out of the work** to create a democratic social media platform. And this social media platform will evolve to become the **information backbone** of the proletarian political party--and eventually of the entire working class.

