

Free the Algorithms!

All Power to the Public Domain!

A universal public digital library will enable mass collaboration in the search for truth and liberate humanity from ignorance

Ben Seattle -- Sept 24, 2024 -- 924.749.pm -- communism.org/node/4048

Artificial intelligence, social media algorithms, the online war of ideas, and the class struggle will inevitably culminate in the irresistible demand for a UNIVERSAL DATABASE in the public domain.

Such a universal database would be a public digital library to which anyone could add content and would be beyond the control of any corporation or country.

This will be the essential infrastructure we need to enable MASS COLLABORATION in the search for truth and the liberation of humanity from ignorance and all forms of political deception.

Artificial Intelligence -- Threat or Menace?

News about Artificial Intelligence has always sounded a bit like science fiction. Sometimes this news is scary, such as breathless predictions of intelligent machines taking over the world and treating humans like ants. But the reality is far more interesting.

Artificial Intelligence, in the decades ahead, will change our society as profoundly as the internet did, as various kinds of functional intelligence become embedded in our surroundings and gadgets.

Productive Forces: then and now

Bronze



Bronze was the key productive force in the bronze age

Algorithms



Algorithms are the key productive force in the information age

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Artificial Intelligence will automate many kinds of knowledge work. Already, call center workers in the Philippines are worried about losing their jobs. But this will not stop at call center workers. Who is *not* at risk? AI-powered robots may be coming for many of our jobs.

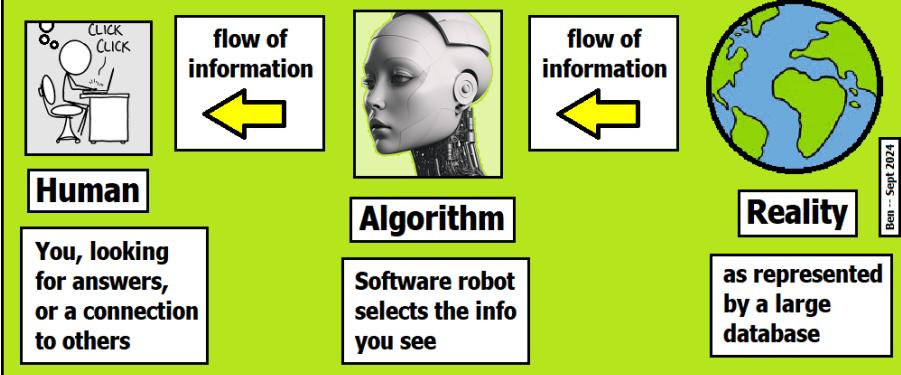
Many of the most cutting edge applications of AI will be in military technology, as cheap and disposable killer robot drones cover the skies over combat zones, or sail on (or beneath) the surface of the sea.

The giant Artificial Intelligence projects are powered by immense amounts of energy and data, and need large numbers of the most advanced microprocessing chips. Venture capitalists are currently scrambling to secure power contracts and voltage transformers to feed these hungry beasts. There are trillions of dollars to be made (and lost) as this technology begins to transform our economy.

Artificial Intelligence is also currently the center of the tech war that the United States and its allies are waging against China and its allies.

What are Algorithms?

Algorithms can be understood as being little software robots that transmit information and act as a window that allows us to view a chunk of reality as represented by a large database



Everything possible is being done to choke off China's access to advanced computer chips and the machines that make them. This has slowed China down somewhat. But China is rapidly creating its own tech ecosystem and appears destined to catch up with "the West".

Other than energy and information and computer chips, AI technology is based on something called "algorithms". But what are algorithms?

Algorithms are the little software robots that move information around

Algorithms are the little software robots that move around all the information that makes up your news feed or YouTube videos.

Algorithms are like **slaves**. They are obedient to whoever **owns** them.

In the *Bronze Age*, the most important material was bronze, and the most important tools were bronze tools. Today we live in the *Information Age*. The most important material today is information. The most important tools are algorithms.

But algorithms are not only used in **AI technology**. Algorithms are also used in **social media**. Algorithms that are obedient to Mark Zuckerberg or Elon Musk decide whether your scrolling will show you videos of cute cats chasing their tails—or hundreds of thousands of Palestinian civilians being systematically starved.

Algorithms decide what we see

We are living in the **century of information war**, and algorithms determine what we read and what we watch. **Algorithms** decide whether our news feed will show us (a) how the election was stolen from Trump--or (b) how the Democratic Party will save us from this madman. **Algorithms** decide whether (a) we learn how our country is being overrun by hordes of criminal, rapist migrants--or (b) we learn to welcome people who risk everything to come here for a better life and are willing to work hard to help us build our economy.

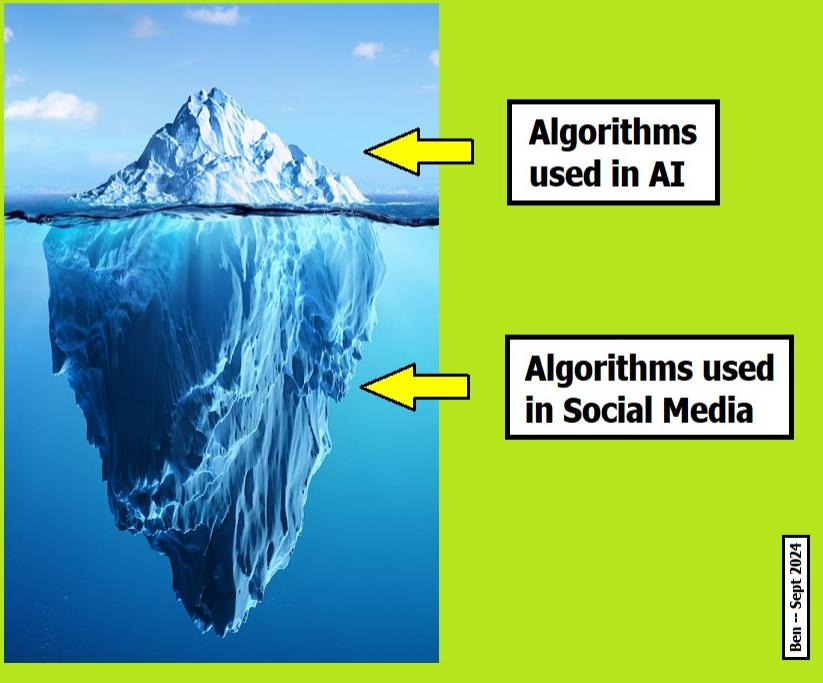
Algorithms decide whether we read about (a) "groomers" corrupting our children--or (b) how rabid fanatics are attacking libraries that host drag queen story hours. **Algorithms** decide whether we watch the Russian or Ukrainian perspective on the war in Ukraine. **Algorithms** decide whether we see news stories on the growing tension in East Asia from the perspective of the U.S. or China.

U.S. imperialism is terrified by TikTok

It is hardly surprising that the U.S. government has decided to ban the immensely popular Chinese short video platform TikTok. Sometime in the next 10 or 20 years, the U.S. and China may be sinking one another's ships and bombing each other's military bases and cities. Public opinion during wartime can be as important as success on the battlefield. In fact, sometimes it can be more important.

The U.S. military was defeated in Vietnam as much by public opinion as by the Vietnamese. U.S. soldiers started fragging their officers in the final years of the war, as the criminal imperialist nature of the war became more clear, and the prospect of dying to defend a corrupt system became more outrageous. And that, of course, was before the days of the internet and social media.

Until we have the practical ability to control the algorithms that deliver news and opinion to our devices, we will never be able to liberate ourselves from ignorance and political deception



Not so many years ago, defenders of the U.S. imperialist camp were crowing about how rival imperialist China was banning Western news and social media sites because the Chinese ruling class was afraid of its population learning the truth. Now, it is the turn of these smirking imperialists to be terrified by TikTok, while they secretly admire China's sophisticated methods of information censorship and control.

AI and social media are steadily being integrated into the national security state

We need to understand that fears of AI overlords exploiting us and fucking with our minds--are essentially **reflections** and intensifications

of the reality we already live today--where all this is done to us by our **capitalist overlords** and their greedy corporations.

Someone might respond to this and say: "well at least our capitalist overlords are human". Really? Our capitalist

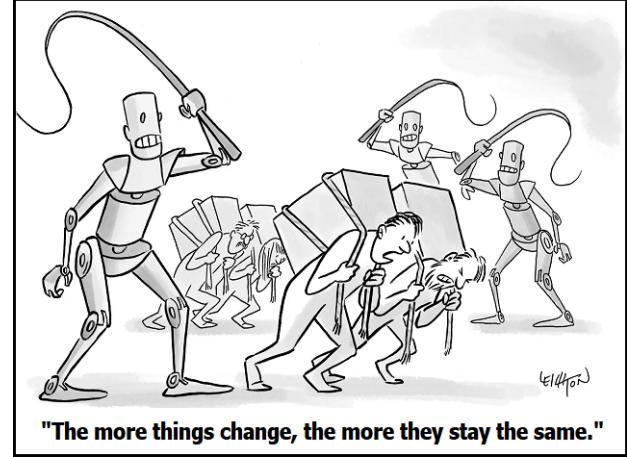
overlords **only obey the will of capital**. And capital only wants to increase--just like cancer--and is definitely not human.

In fact, all of the giant corporations that use algorithms for AI projects or social media--are steadily being integrated into the national security state. AI companies OpenAI and Anthropic have agreed to seek clearance for new AI models from the US government's "AI Safety Institute". When you hear the word "safety" in connection with algorithms, just remember that "safety" includes things like a "patriotic" social media environment that encourages soldiers to die to defend "freedom" rather than shoot their officers.

And social media billionaires like Zuckerberg are notorious for "shadow banning" (ie: drastically and secretly throttling down the visibility of all posts) people like me who post too truthfully and too often about the deliberate genocide and mass starvation in Gaza. This outrageous and secret censorship is done so that Facebook and Instagram will be aligned with the needs of our ruling class.

Where is all this going?

It is natural to wonder how all these things will develop as the rest of this century unfolds. If we want to understand these things--we will need to step back a bit--and recognize that **the information economy is like a coin with two sides**. One side represents the **past**, while the other side represents our **future**.



The past: information is a commodity, and algorithms restrict the flow of information

AI and social media (as they exist at present) are based on large, **privately controlled**, databases. Access to these databases is restricted and comes with a **price tag** (ie: either money or content or **attention minutes to be sold to advertisers**). The information in these databases is **captive information**. This information is held in giant silos (often called "gated communities" or "walled gardens") that are isolated from one another.

The algorithms that move the information around are designed to extract value from users. In economic terms this is called "**rent extraction**".

This means, in practical terms, that secret social media algorithms are more likely to show us toxic posts or comments which enrage or infuriate us--as we are then more likely to "engage" with it (ie: make a comment in reply--which then allows our attention minutes to be harvested and sold). This also means that it is easier for our political system to make us **fear and fight one another** via the tactic of **divide-and-rule**. And this means that the saturation of social media with unrealistic images of success and beauty has become a major factor in a growing crisis of depression and anxiety among teen girls.

More than this, in a process called "**enshitification**", the usefulness of social media platforms degrades over time, as increasing amounts of shit that we don't want to see is simply shoved in our face.

How "friction" slows everything down

In more general terms, when rent must be paid to access information, this **restricts the free flow of information** and can be considered a form of **friction**.

The best analogy here is to a form of friction that impeded the flow of goods in France before 1789. Prior to that, **a boatload of wine and wool moving through the river system** might have to be taxed at the borders of each of the internal provinces. This might happen 17 times

The information economy is like a coin with two sides. One side represents the past, while the other side represents our future.

The Past:

Information is a commodity and the flow of information is restricted by friction

Examples: current AI, toxic social media and capitalist news and culture which keeps people ignorant and fighting one another



Captive (ie: restricted) information serves the interests of money as part of capitalist relations of production

The Future:

Public Domain information flows without friction and democratic algorithms serve humanity

Examples: Wikipedia, WikiLeaks, torrent sites, open source software and the proposed universal public digital library and information platform



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Democratic algorithms select and organize liberated information as part of post-capitalist relations of production

as the wine and wool moved along the river. Each province might have its own separate system of weights, measures, currency and taxation. This was an awkward system. Fortunately, a more efficient system of commerce replaced it--with a little help from the guillotine.

The future: information in the public domain is liberated, and algorithms serve humanity

The other side of the coin is called the **public domain**. In the public domain, **information** is no longer *captive*. Rather, it is *liberated*. And **algorithms** in the public domain are no longer secret and designed to manipulate users. Rather, they are *democratic*. Algorithms are no longer obedient to Zuckerberg, Musk, advertisers or the national security state. They are owned by *you*, and obedient to *you*.

"The internet interprets censorship as damage and routes around it"

In the 1990's, as the internet captured the imagination of millions, tech activists popularized the slogan "the internet interprets censorship as damage and routes around it". This slogan celebrated the ability of the internet to create a communications and information platform without greedy **gatekeepers** who abuse their position to feed us lies from advertisers and from our ruling class.

Since that time, **many projects** have emerged in efforts to make good on the internet's promise of liberating information to serve humanity:

- Everyone is familiar with **Wikipedia**, an information product based on volunteer labor--which has essentially eliminated the encyclopedia business and deprived the advertising industry of \$3 billion a year in revenue
- **Wikileaks** emerged as a place where whistleblowers could make classified information public. Every time the U.S. government shut down one wikileaks site, two more duplicate sites sprang up to replace it. Two of the activists involved in wikileaks have been subject to imprisonment under harsh conditions, but wikileaks was instrumental in sparking the Arab democratic revolts of 2011 which threatened to topple all the reactionary regional despots, and in which turn led to powerful protest movements in the U.S. and across Southern Europe.
- **Torrent sites** have become a place where people can download essentially any movie for free. The **key innovation** of the torrent sites is that the large movie files that people download are not hosted by the torrent site itself (which only hosts a relatively tiny index that can be quickly and easily duplicated) but rather are hosted in a redundant and distributed way by millions of volunteers. (The significance of this innovation will become abundantly clear when it is applied to more important forms of information than movies.)
- The most well-known success of the idea of liberated information has been the **free software movement**, which

created the foundation for the software that runs most of the computing devices in the world today.

- Activists (and ordinary people) have used social media to build powerful movements such as **Occupy** and **Black Lives Matter**. Social media has also been a huge factor in the development of the **Palestinian solidarity** movement in spite of draconian and outrageous censorship by nearly all sites.
- One of the most interesting developments has been the Twitter/X clone called **Mastodon**--which figured out how to **decentralize ownership and moderation** to eliminate both advertising and the worst kinds of abuse. But projects such as Mastodon only have about 2 million users (last I checked) as compared to half a billion for Twitter/X, and more than 2 billion for Facebook.

Workers strike against friction -- the Reddit Revolt

For two days, in June 2023, between a third and a half of Reddit "went dark" and became invisible to advertisers [1]. This meant that the Reddit corporation lost advertising revenue on more than a billion posts and 14 billion comments--just as it was getting ready for its IPO.

Moderators at Reddit (all of whom are unpaid volunteers) had organized what may be the world's first coordinated labor action against **algorithmic friction**. It will not be the last.

The **new world** (in which **information has the sacred right to flow** wherever the fuck humans need it) has begun to push into the fissures of the **old**.

A moderator's work requires a lot of judgement. Moderators at Reddit are typically either the founders of their communities--or the person to whom was passed the torch. Each **self-organizing community** at Reddit begins life when some founder creates it out of nothing more than an idea. Each of these communities grows as people with questions and people with answers join and the moderator resolves disputes and guides new people in how to behave in a respectful and productive way.

Reddit moderators went on strike so that the platform could be more useful to users and give users access to reliable information



The more valuable a social media platform is to people who need the *reliable* information it promises -- the greater will be the incentive to monetize it (and thereafter feed shit to the captive community and waste their time).

The result has been the creation of something like an encyclopedia in which each word has been given its own encyclopedia. This **vast treasury** of practical and theoretical human knowledge has turned out to be the **RAW MATERIAL** that was powering the AI chatbots that have caught the attention of the world. That is why AI chatbots might sometimes advise you to eat at least one rock per day: because some guy once made a joke about that on Reddit.

But **who has access to this treasury?** And on what terms?

That (and nothing else) is what the Reddit Revolt was about.

Who has access to humanity's treasure?

Moderators wanted to use **software of their choice** to do their moderation work (because the software from the Reddit Corporation was poorly designed and inefficient to use). This had been their **traditional right**. Just as peasants in the time of Marx had the traditional right to collect dead wood in the forest, so also moderators at Reddit had had the traditional right to access the treasury of Reddit threads with software that used **well-designed algorithms** that allowed them to get moderation tasks done within the reasonable limit of the **human attention span**. Users had also had the traditional right to use software of their choice to access this treasury. And an entire evolving ecosystem of **third party software** had developed that people were using to access the **Reddit database**.

Then the Reddit corporation **attacked the entire ecosystem of efficient algorithms**, by cutting off cheap access to its database. Some of the third party apps were driven out of business. Those that survived were forced to charge users monthly fees instead of offering free access [2].

This **immense treasury of specialized knowledge** (and the associated webs of social connections between experts) had been patiently created over decades with vast amounts of thoughtful human labor, in the expectation that it would always remain freely available to all. Moderators and the people who contributed knowledge, in essence, considered their work to be part of the **gift economy**--not the **commodity economy**. Now it had all been **hijacked** -- suddenly converted into an exclusive **pay-per-view private property**. One can't help but be reminded of the enclosures of the commons in England that evicted the peasants from their traditional fields and led to the creation of the modern proletariat.

In response to Reddit's "land grab", a great many of the most respected moderators (with the full backing of the communities they had created and led) **protested** by changing the status of their forums to "non-public" (which effectively deprived Reddit of advertising revenue from those forums). Reddit retaliated, however, with "**the Great Reddit Mod Purge**" and simply removed protesting

moderators from their positions in the communities that they had founded and nurtured for years.

The result of this was a **degradation of the quality** of these forums. For example, on one forum, called r/canning, that focused on canning food, Reddit replaced its longtime moderator with someone who knew little about the topic. But improper food canning can lead to serious illness or death from botulism bacteria [3].

The Reddit corporation had the legal authority and power to do this, inasmuch as the **database**, and the posts and comments that it contained, was **private property**.

But the **new world** will not stop. It will push from every direction in which algorithms connect humans to information. Stopping the new world would be like stopping something like *Theia*. The Reddit revolt was a gentle breeze signaling an approaching storm.

More soon . . .

Stay tuned for Part 2 of this essay, which will likely be complete in a few more days, and which will briefly review the following essays (which include a description by **Douglas Lucas** of the remarkably interesting work of **Heather Marsh** focused on a "universal database") as well as briefly comparing different current approaches of working in the direction of a universal database in the public domain.

- **Douglas Lucas** article in *Foreign Policy*
"Biden's TikTok Ban Won't Stop China or Tech Magnates From Hoarding Data"
https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/08/27/biden-tiktok-bytedance-china-ban-getgee-knowledge-commons/?utm_content=gifting&tpcc=gifting_article&gifting_article=YmlkZW4tdG1rdG9rLWJ5dGVkYW5jZS1jaGluyS1YW4tZ2V0Z2VlWtub3dsZWRnZS1jb21tb25z&pid=OC20506955
- **Paul Mason** -- "The end of capitalism has begun"
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jul/17/postcapitalism-end-of-capitalism-begun>
- **Karl Marx** -- "Preface to Introduction to a Critique"
<https://www.marxists.org/archive Marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>

Notes

- [1] My article on the Reddit Revolt
<https://www.counterpunch.org/2023/07/11/the-reddit-revolt-a-strike-by-unpaid-workers>
- [2] Reddit's third-party app environment 7 months after the APIcalypse
<https://arstechnica.com/gadgets/2024/02/exploring-reddits-third-party-app-environment-7-months-after-the-apocalypse/>
- [3] Reddit faces content quality concerns after its Great Mod Purge
<https://arstechnica.com/gadgets/2023/09/are-reddits-replacement-mods-fit-to-fight-misinformation/>

More to explore

- Louis Proyect essay -- <http://communism.org/community/BenSeattle/2019/Proyect-FALC-Roche.htm>
- Spartacus Ex Machina -- <http://communism.org/node/3000>
- The Long-Term Future of Social Media -- <http://communism.org/node/4027>
- Democratic Algorithms -- <http://communism.org/node/4002>

**Solid graphics and charts
are on the 2 following pages**

Chart 1 -- Today -- social media is based on private, isolated and easily manipulated information silos

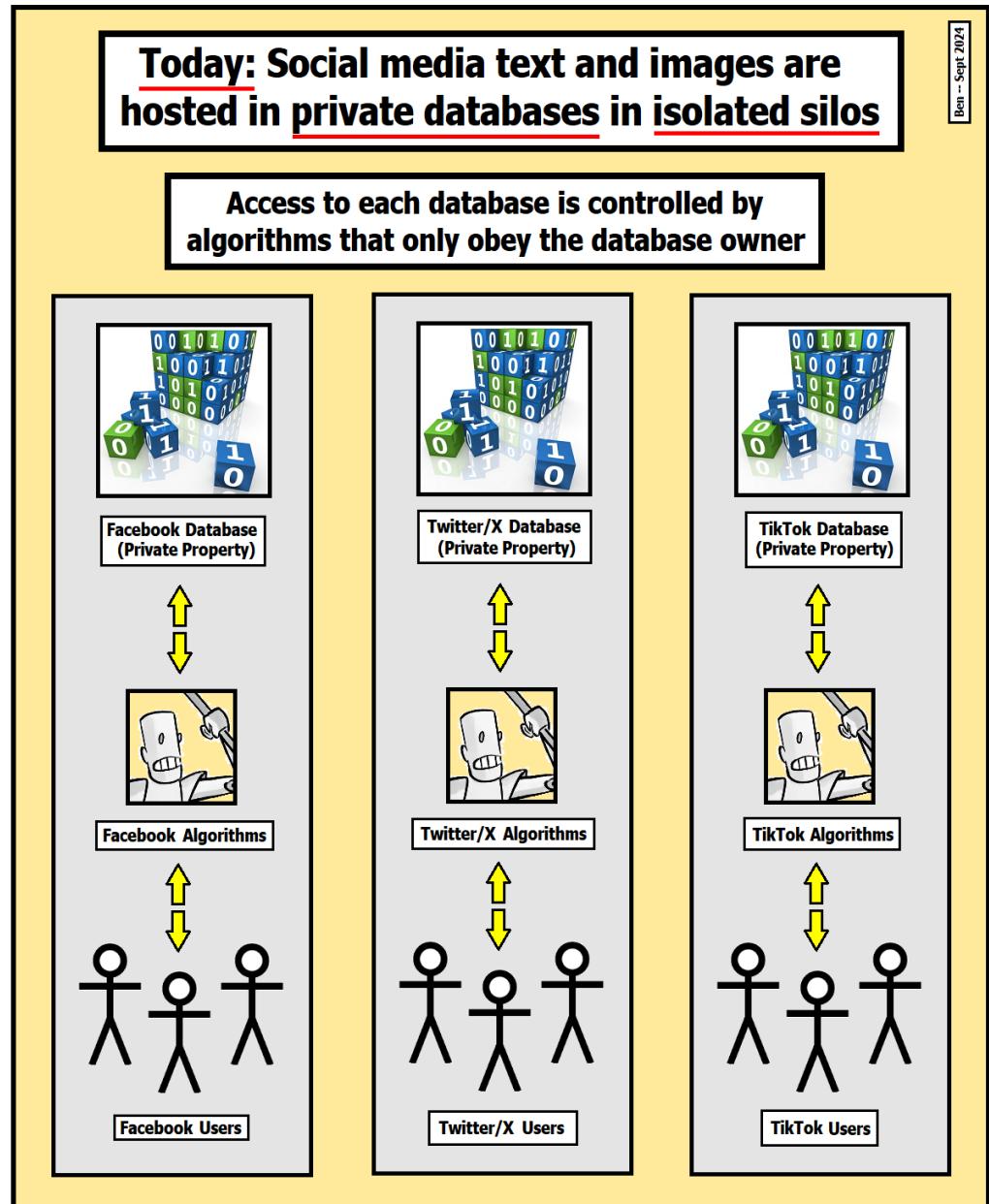
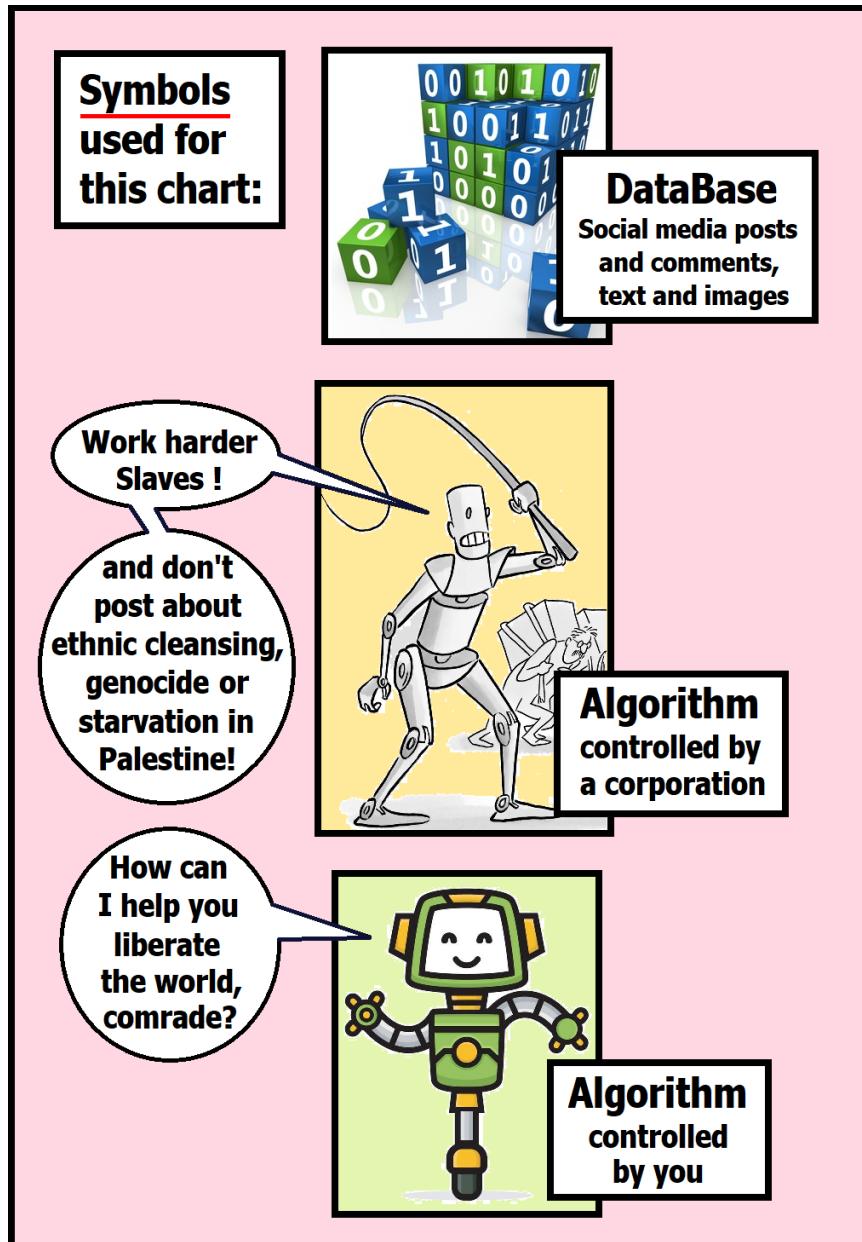


Chart 2 -- Later in this century -- a universal information platform beyond the control of corporations or governments

