

The Digital Society

An exploration of using data and the Internet in the endless pursuit of perfection.

By Joseph Ratliff

Independent Researcher
Olympia, WA
joe@josephratliff.com

ABSTRACT: We have access to enormous amounts of data. More data than we could ever possibly know what to do with. Personal data, scientific data, browsing habits, search data, profile data and more... we have access to all of this as a society. And for the most part, it (this data) is digital. We, in our recently formed "digital society," use this data in the endless pursuit of a dangerous idea called perfection.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Internet is a wonderful structure. The Web, born of the Internet, allowed and will continue to allow technological innovation at a pace we've never experienced. In short, even with the progress we've made thus far, we haven't seen anything yet. You could say the Internet was a perfect invention. And perfect Internet, as an idea, comes with both "good" and "bad" consequences.

The good? Connection, platform, open innovation (maybe, maybe not), transparency, big data, and much more. The bad? Narcissism, the "digital mob" mentality, invasion of privacy, big data, distraction, and much more. You get the point. There are both positive and negative aspects of the "perfect" invention we call the Internet. It also brought about our digital age. You probably know this already... so why another exploration of the Internet, data, and such? Because we are starting down a slippery slope as a society, one where the negative consequences need examination before we cannot turn back. This article will only serve as a conversation starter, a base piece of content if you will, along this necessary examination of our Digital Society. Let's begin...

II.

In 1967 a critical book was written on technology by Jacques Ellul. He called it *The Technological Society*. I highly suggest you read it. In the book, he examines how technology had made us so efficient (I believe he called it "technicized"), that technology actually diminished our capacity. Eventually, Jacques claimed our technology would overthrow our society as it became so efficient, so intelligent, that it might even replace us.

A little bit of a grim prediction eh? Kevin Kelly, once senior editor of *Wired Magazine* wrote a "lighter" book along the same topic, titled *What Technology Wants*. I suggest you read it too. But I digress. The title of this essay was inspired by the title of Jacques' book. I've always been interested in and have written about the impact of technology on society. So let

me define "The Digital Society." We have access to enormous amounts of data. More data than we could ever possibly know what to do with. Personal data, scientific data, browsing habits, search data, profile data and more... we have access to all of this as a society. And for the most part, it (this data) is digital. We, in our recently formed "digital society," use this data in the endless pursuit of a dangerous idea called perfection.

Think about it: The NSA and other government agencies are "legally" using meta-data and other forms of data to track us. This in the endless pursuit of perfect surveillance to allegedly thwart crime. We can use GPS data to understand our location, and follow a map to get where we need to go, perfectly. We can hunt for "dirt" on anyone or for positive data on anyone, with a simple web search (and sometimes, about \$50 depending on what you want to know). With perfect precision, we can find out almost anything about anyone... good or bad.

We are just beginning to dive into sensors and wearable technology (like Google Glass for example). We will be able to compile data that will enable us to improve our health, all in hopes of becoming the perfect human being. We can use data to help the surgeon dial in the perfect surgery. Using data, we perfectly profile ourselves online, to show off that profile to others (anyone have a social media profile?).

Bottom line, The Digital Society strives for perfection at every turn. Perfect shopping, perfect time management, perfect profiling, perfect law enforcement, perfect _____ etc... But, are we striving for something we cannot be? Are we stressing ourselves out trying to use our data to be "perfectly now," "perfectly behaved," and "perfectly managed"?

I think so.

III.

I get why we want to be perfect. It's "better" than not being perfect, right? It's better to have the perfect answer, to not make any mistakes, to operate our lives in precision... right? Wrong. And don't get me wrong, I like technology, and I respect our ability as a society to create things that solve real world problems. But, that said... We're human, and we make mistakes, we say the wrong thing (even, gasp, online), and we follow the wrong path at times.

As humans, we learn from mistakes, and usually we move in a more positive direction after making those mistakes (usually). So the question becomes, does the data we are working so hard to use, in the specific context of The Digital Society, actually reveal mistakes? Or does that data simply

point out what you already know, deep down? Does that data we rely on to help optimize our diet point out faults in our eating habits? Or is it simply revealing what we already know (that we're not eating right)?

I suppose another way to phrase this would be... Do we really need the diet data to constantly "refine" us, to "remind" us, to "regurgitate" the fact we are human? Would you, knowing all of this precise information, actually do something with it (harsh reality is most people won't)?

To what end... perfection (what gets measured gets done)? Data certainly allows the opportunity to be perfect... but is that really necessary? Have we factored in how difficult it will be to be perfect?

And, even if perfection itself isn't the goal, have we stopped long enough to think about how close to perfection we already are? Can we really get that last, little bit with the devices and data we are creating and using? If you've heard of the 80/20 rule... that is... that the majority (around 80%) of our results are derived from only a small (usually around 20%) of our efforts... then do we truly need to strive so hard to be perfect?

The bottom line is we're using data to micromanage our lives towards perfection. We need to stop, relax, and be human.

IV.

What about our online conversations? You're probably aware that what you publish, browse, or perform online leaves a digital data trail.

One example might be that rather creepy Amazon banner ad that "magically" displays what you are looking for, while you're on another website altogether. That's data which was recorded the last time you were on Amazon, and it's used in the banner ad to display or remind you what you were shopping for. We leave the same data behind us in our online conversations.

For example, when a politician uses their mobile phone to make improper texts, The Digital Society finds out, and that politician pays the price for doing so. But, they are a public figure, right? So this is OK, right? Is it? Perhaps in the specific case where a public figure uses technology to perform acts that are publicly and obviously heinous acts.

Are there any instances where a public figure (actor, politician, etc...) get the opportunity NOT to have everything they do in their lives disseminated online? What about private individuals?

There are people who have had their lives ruined, sometimes unnecessarily, because "rather vigilant" individuals in our Digital Society used data available (sometimes inaccurate data) and placed judgment on those individuals before the actual, real, and logical conclusion was reached.

The resulting online backlash generates more backlash as the mainstream media gets a hold of the story... then if the story is worthy... it goes viral, and then that individual's life gets ruined unnecessarily. (In the specific case of someone who didn't really do anything wrong, was in the wrong place at the wrong time, not all data available to correctly analyze the situation etc...)

The initial individuals who "exposed" an innocent person's life online could have thought a little bit more deeply, and went through other channels before putting another person's life "on stage"... but unfortunately this doesn't happen enough.

I'm not going to point to any specific instances of this happening, because it's more tabloid material than substance, and these instances are readily available with a simple search online.

What does this have to do with The Digital Society? The answer comes in the form of another question for you to ponder...

What exactly are we looking for here as a society, everybody to be perfect? Who is the judge in this "court" of The Digital Society? Why can't we simply use the already-established legal court system (as imperfect as it is) to apply whatever justice it will or will not (again, imperfect)? Again, are we expecting a perfect legal system, and when we don't get it, "create" one for ourselves online?

I think we're micromanaging ourselves to death with all of the data we have at our disposal. We aren't perfect, we make mistakes, and no amount of data (or the interpretation of that data) will change those facts. Plus, if everybody lives in fear of "doing something wrong" or having something "dug up on them" online... should we really continue pursuing this sort of online, digital "perfection" at all?

I don't think we need to. I think we can all slow down, be human, be imperfect, and enjoy life without the need to have our data analyzed, and for all of us to become public figures. Do you want the responsibility that comes with being a public figure?

V.

In other words... I guess I'm asking do we really need the current version of The Digital Society in the first place? Can we do better?

Do we need to analyze our health, wealth, and behavior to death with all of these sensors and data? Do we really need any more "homogenization," "pasteurization," "sealed for your protection" types of perfectionist attitudes, or can't we just be human (good or bad, whatever that means)?

Do we really have to take the attitude that "you'll be left behind if you don't UPGRADE" towards our fellow human being?

And one final thought... is perfection really the benefit we'll be getting from participating in The Digital Society... or like Jacques Ellul wrote about, is all the efficiency that data is providing us diminishing our capacity to truly be human?

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