

Virtual Hot Pots and Brain Rot

by G. Murphy Donovan (March 2015)

“Science is becoming more pervasive and invasive” – Susan Greenfield

Who says that peers of the realm are anachronistic? Who claims that the House of Lords is a vestige of privilege and indolence? The Baroness of Ot Moor has written a book, a practical tome too, indeed a rare vessel of common sense. Susan [Greenfield's](#) *Mind Change* is a courageous broadside at cyber culture, a dose of reality therapy for the Internet, social networks, video gaming, cyber gadgets, and the damage they might do to malleable, developing minds.

The key word is minds, not brains, mind you. You can think of your brain as a mind only if it has a personality. Clearly, cyber millennials have brains, but Susan's lament suggests the jury might still be out on adult personalities. Greenfield is concerned for the most part about the growth of self, not cells.



Phoebe

Traquair

The timing of the Greenfield book is auspicious. This is indeed the Year of the Goat, an appropriate moment to reflect on cyber herding and associated cultural, political, and religious recidivism. In short, the baroness uses child development as a cautionary tale about isolation, digital conformity, social retreat, and intimations of infantilism that might be nurtured in the virtual nursery that is Internet culture.

Much of Greenfield's analysis is anecdotal, a rare and refreshing approach for a neuroscientist practicing her trade at Oxford University. Back in the day, the Baroness of Finchley [chided](#) social engineers that “eventually you run out of other people's money.” Now another lady peer chastises cyber science about the cultural hazards of digital deficits, the electronic alteration of individual and collective consciousness.



As with Margaret Thatcher, London's loopy Left, the *Guardian* in particular, has unsheathed the

long [knives](#) for the Greenfield hypothesis. Alas, prudent arguments about restraint, especially those which feature common sense, are anathema to the progressive worldview.

The *Guardian* is a forum for much of the socialist flotsam of the late great Communist collapse. The *Guardian* is the gatekeeper of genuine progressive (nee Hegelian/Marxist) values in England in the same sense that Bonnie and Clyde were investment bankers in America.

Most recently, the *Guardian* was one of the journals that helped to popularize the “Arab [Spring](#)” and other sectarian bloodbaths. How fish wrap on the Left squares reason, science, and [antisemitism](#) with theocratic fascism is a mystery to logicians and political philosophers everywhere.

Angst at *The Guardian* seems to revolve superficially around peer review, as if Susan Greenfield had peers at the *Guardian*. Peer review in journalism and science is not unlike a panel in a judicial proceeding, a crew composed of underemployed tossers not smart enough to avoid jury duty. Lawyers and judges do not serve on juries for good reasons, more to do with time and money rather than justice.

The peer review [whining](#) is more than a bit of a straw man. The Internet and associated gadgetry have only been with us for a few years. Most available personal or social data concerns affectations and afflictions, not effects. All good science begins with hypothesis and Greenfield simply points to some obvious [hazards](#) that parents, the Press, teachers, scientists, engineers, and Internet moguls would rather not evaluate.

Clearly there’s more convenience and profit in Internet advocacy than there is in skepticism such as that offered by the Baroness of Ot Moor.

For parents, the virtual world, like television, serves as an electronic nanny or a surrogate companion. Teens are especially vulnerable. When your son retreats to his room with a smart phone in one hand and his joystick in the other, chances are he is not studying for medical school. When your daughter dumps her latest squeeze on Facebook, chances are she won’t be in the running for Miss Congeniality any time soon. And when either child tunes you out with headphones, you begin to understand why rap rhymes with crap.

Cyber commerce and digital culture is a lot like modern politics and government. More is never enough and bigger is always better. Few politicians get elected on a restraint platform. Pimps earn more than policemen for the same reason that lobbyists are more prosperous than parliamentarians. Allowing your child only a flip phone today might be considered deprivation, if not child abuse.

Still, pushback from the Left against Internet restraint probably has darker roots, a rationale that may be consistent with Susan Greenfield's concerns about digital infantilism and cultural recidivism.

The European Left is still smarting from the collapse of the Soviet phantasm. Socialist successors in the EU are now busy [dismantling](#) the sovereign nation/state system in favor of an imperial EU or NATO. The secular Left in the West and the religious Right in the East now make common cause as they dismantle borders and regimes with missionary zeal – albeit with variable visions of Utopia.

Susan Greenfield makes an interesting distinction between natives and immigrants, pre-internet and post-internet demographics, established and alien cultures if you will. Although Ms. Greenfield doesn't discuss the real world immigration crisis and related clash of civilizations, it's difficult not to think of her metaphor in that larger context.

Greenfield's argument is more concerned, however, with the tactical rather than global implications of Internet culture. Indeed, *Mind Change* is an echo of earlier speculations by psychologist Albert Ellis who coined the homonym "[musterbation](#)," one vowel removed from a similar compulsion. According to Ellis, musterbation is an irrational fixation on things "that must, should, or ought to be done."

Ellis might have been the first Internet seer. The musterbation basket captures most of the behaviors of concern to the Baroness of Ot Moor. Texting, liking, needing, isolating, updating, tweeting, twerking, surfing, shopping, gaming, gambling, trolling, exhibitionism, voyeurism, anonymous bullying, propaganda, and terror recruitment are just some of the potential "mind changing" memes facilitated by the World Wide Web.

Withal, the Internet seems to be fertile ground for new addictions, compulsions, neuroses, and psychoses too. Indeed, cyber culture could be rationalized as another job stimulus program – and another revenue stream for the psychobabble sector: school counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists.

Given a choice, most parents would prefer to believe that difficult children are victims of nature, not nurture. Believing that asocial or anti-social behavior is biological is the easy road out. Take those all vaguely diagnosed "deficit" ailments commonly anesthetized with drugs. "Take a pill and just chill," as teens like to say.

Adults are quick to dismiss or minimize environmental narcotics; video games are an example, a peril that has now been documented in dozens of studies. Parents who can't say no or set

limits are not likely to admit that they are part of the problem. Parenting takes time, effort, and moral courage. Ignoring the Internet minefield is perilously close to admitting to bad parenting at best and child abuse at worst. The cultural costs of ignorance and moral vacuity are open ended.

Information is not knowledge. Knowledge is not wisdom. And wisdom is not moral courage. The internet today is mostly about information and most of that is Kardashian: banal, insignificant, overwrought, and frequently ugly.

Regrettably, science and engineering on the Internet is an ethical black hole. The collaboration between governments, the telecoms, and the dot.com oligarchs at the expense of privacy speaks for itself. No amount of tinkering at the margins is likely to put any privacy sentiments or ethics above commercial or “security” interests.

Greenfield likes to compare the Internet hot pot to the global warming/climate change debate. If such comparisons are analogous, then there is little room for optimism. In 1968, Garrett Hardin [penned](#) *The Tragedy of Commons* for Science Magazine where he argued that there were no scientific solutions to “common” problems; air, water, and land depredations. Restraint requires a moral not scientific solution. Alas, morality is a quaint vestige of history for the school house, the laboratory, and commerce then and now.

Hardin, an environment scientist himself, concluded that over time, citizens, cities, and states are unlikely to put the needs of the planet above the selfish wants of ego or tribe. It’s difficult to imagine that Internet moguls will bring a higher standard to their marketplace.

The species may not care in any case. Clearly, the average Tweet twerp, indeed the English speaking world, might fret more about Prince Charles and Camilla outliving Elizabeth II than they worry about the environment, ISIS imperialism, or Internet mind rot.

A science profession that wrought nuclear/chemical weapons, smart phone pornography, Public Radio, ISIS on Twitter, the RAND Corporation, NSA, GCHQ, Jack Kevorkian, and Howard Dean is unlikely to provide a savior for the planet or the species.

Indeed, midst the modern neologism menagerie, Facebook, Twitter, Apple, Microsoft, Google, and Zoosk may have a lot to answer for. Indeed, a website hookup service that has “zoo” in its branding might not be above introducing comely livestock to our dating pool.

Mankind might be redeemed by a poet or a priest, but not by cyber commerce or digital science.

A brain does science, a mind does common sense, and a conscience knows the difference.

We can agree with Ellis and Greenfield on one phenomenon, cyber culture is at the very least the ideal marketplace for manipulators and musterbators. Flash mobs, [knock-out](#) assassinations, and terrorism are just three of the more ominous collective pastimes enabled by the Internet.

Utopian dreams have many incarnations. The United Nations, the European Union, an Islamic Caliphate, or [Twitter](#) are examples. The global village and associated one-world fantasies are the logical descendants of dubious prophets like Mohammed, Marx, Lenin, McLuhan, Fukuyama, and now Zuckerberg. The Internet *internationale* as envisioned by [Facebook](#) is of a piece with several post-Hegelian social chimeras.

At first glance, it might be a bit of a jolt to see Zuckerberg and *al Baghdadi* in the same argument, but surely all messianic communitarian prophets are similar to the extent that shepherds and butchers seldom share the fate of their flocks.

Utopian crusaders do not suffer critics gladly for good reason. Susan Greenfield is in the crosshairs because to expose the dark side of the Internet is to question the ethos of digital communitarian humbug. Truth is not just a bitch, today her handmaiden is member of the House of Lords too. Thank you, Susan!

Epilogue

Susan Greenfield's arguments are for the most part diagnostic, not prescriptive. However, she seldom misses the elephant in the room. When asked what might be done about electronic autism/recidivism, she often [suggests](#) that parents read to their children, [eat](#) with their children, and exercise with their children. Science may be necessary, but only common sense is sufficient.

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