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## Witch Hunts, Autocracy, and the Age of Algorithmic Empires

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*As cyber empires tighten control, digital platforms spread unseen violence that colonises the mind. Yet counter-movements are emerging—decentralised tools restoring openness, autonomy, and resistance to censorship. Can people reclaim peace and freedom from the very digital cages that confine them.*

### Violence Is My Birthright

To understand the destructive power of algorithms in India's fractured social landscape, we need to pay attention to the words of human rights activist, peace worker, and writer Harsh Mander, who started the Karwan-e-Mohabbat campaign in solidarity with the victims of communal or religiously motivated violence in the country.

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In a recent interview with *Chandrika*, a Malayalam weekly, Mander recounts an incident that occurred on 6 December 2017, the 25th anniversary of the demolition of the Babri Masjid. "A man in Udaipur, determined to mark the day with symbolic violence, decided to kill a Muslim. Not only that—he asked his nephew to record the entire act on video.

"He travelled to a nearby place where Muslim labourers from Bengal were working. He called one of them close, tortured him until he fell unconscious, and finally shot him dead. After the murder, he turned to the camera and delivered a long speech against Muslims."

Later, Mander visited the killer's family, who, it turned out, were Dalits. What he learnt there was sobering and complex. "The killer, deeply disappointed after failing to start a business post-demonetisation, had begun to consume anti-Muslim videos obsessively. Over time, his hatred intensified until it erupted into murder. The family's only concern? That the nephew had accompanied him.

"They said what he had done was right. When asked to explain why, they repeated the now-familiar myth of 'love jihad'. But when pressed for actual incidents, they had none to offer—only a vague story of a Hindu-Muslim relationship from 15 years ago. In fact, the relationship was entirely ordinary—both families had fully agreed.

"On a second visit, the scene was even more ghastly. The villagers had erected a statue to commemorate the murder. It depicted one person killing another by stomping him to death. Meanwhile, in the victim's village, his grieving family was struggling to raise his only daughter."

While discussing the rise in mob lynchings in India, the interviewer asks Mander about the options we have to stop the spread of false propaganda that fuels these violent mobs. Can we appeal to the public with facts and persuade them to act as good Samaritans?

Mander's response is revealing. "Although many progressives are sincerely trying to share facts with the public, these realities often fail to reach the masses because of the way social media algorithms are structured. What a Himalayan task lies before us—to build a parallel communication system capable of resisting the flood of toxic misinformation spreading through social media."

He draws our attention to a haunting question we have yet to confront—can the scattered, ordinary people of the world rise creatively to build immunity against the unseen, mutating pathogens of violence hidden within the glowing screens of multibillion-dollar cyber empires? Or is it still possible to liberate peace from the very same digital cages that confine them?

### Other Side of Printing

As media studies remind us, we are now living through the fourth great revolution in human communication—the digital age. This has followed the birth of language, the invention of writing, and the rise of print media. No other invention has been as widely praised as the printing press, often celebrated as the great dividing wall between the enlightened modern world and the so-called "dark" ages of humanity's past.

|| The story of Helena Scheuberin—an Austrian woman tried for witchcraft in 1485—reveals several underlying aspects of the history of witch hunts and their notorious connection to print capitalism.

Ever since the arrival of the printing press, the very technology hailed as the harbinger of reason and enlightenment has also served as a conspiratorial tool for the spread of irrationalism. For at least three and a half centuries, the print revolution in Europe was accompanied by widespread persecution campaigns—witch hunts, religious purges, and later, ideological scapegoating. The belief in monsters and witches, rooted in mythology, found new targets in secular dissenters, rebels, and radicals.

The idea of witchcraft—understood as the practice of supernatural magic—being part of a demonic conspiracy that employed human agents to wage war against the Christian faith was not dominant before the late 15th century. Many high-ranking clergymen openly resisted witch hunting during the Middle Ages, even when it was conducted in the name of the papal inquisition.

The story of Helena Scheuberin—an Austrian woman tried for witchcraft in 1485—reveals several underlying aspects of the history of witch hunts and their notorious connection to print capitalism. Scheuberin refused to attend a sermon by Heinrich Kramer, a Dominican inquisitor, and publicly denounced him as a “bad monk”. In response, she was accused of consorting with the devil, casting harmful spells, and challenging the spiritual authority of the church.

However, the local bishop, secular judges, and townspeople saw through Kramer’s fanaticism. Scheuberin was acquitted. The court not only dismissed the charges but also criticised Kramer’s conduct, questioning his credibility and motives.

Humiliated and enraged, Kramer withdrew from the region—but he was not defeated. Instead, he turned his personal failure into a literary crusade. Just two years later, in 1487, he published the *Malleus Maleficarum*—The Hammer of Witches—a chilling handbook that transformed witch-hunting into a systematised theology of terror. It portrayed women as inherently prone to sin, easily seduced by the devil, and in need of harsh control. Most significantly, it was mass printed, multiplied by the new printing press, and spread rapidly across Europe.

The irony is stark—Scheuberin’s victory in court became the seed of a greater defeat for women across Europe. What the courtroom rejected, the printing press amplified. Kramer’s manual would go on to justify the torture and execution of tens of thousands of alleged witches over the next two centuries—among them local healers, herbalists, midwives, widows, spinsters, single mothers, the poor, the elderly, the socially isolated, the outspoken, minorities, religious dissenters, and even children.

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Witch hunts in Central Europe—especially in what is now Germany, then the core of the Holy Roman Empire and home to Gutenberg’s printing press—began in the late 1400s and lasted nearly three centuries, with some 90,000 prosecutions and almost half executed. Research covering 553 cities between 1400 and 1679 shows a sharp rise in witch trials whenever new editions of the *Malleus Maleficarum* or similar texts appeared (Doten-Snitker et al. 2024).

This prompts a deeper question—why did men driven by fear and hatred of women seize on printing technology to destroy independent femininity and defiance of religious patriarchy? It seems like they had long awaited a tool of mass mesmerism, capable of shaping collective belief and fear. The press delivered that power—but only to elites who controlled its capital-intensive production and distribution. It became a weapon of domination, a brain-hacking machine cloaking violence in the authority of faith and reason.

The first three and a half centuries of print capitalism amounted to nothing less than the brutal suppression of global wisdom and freedom—forms of knowledge and autonomy that had long resisted the tyranny of centralised authority during the so-called “dark ages”. Across continents, print capitalism targeted vibrant systems that defied domination—the midwives and herbalists of early modern Europe, the Iroquois confederacies of the New World, the communal matriarchies and spiritual practices of African societies, and the grassroots resistances in Asia that challenged caste hierarchies embedded in Brahmanical ideology.

Who made the print-capitalist technology of the early printing press more democratic? Originally, the printing press was an instrument of power and wealth centralisation. It spread incendiary propaganda and bigotry, which shattered society into broken shards—like sharp, pointed glass. But eventually, someone transformed this technology. They turned it into a small, easily handled, room-sized machine.

Now, thousands of pamphlets, leaflets, and notices could be produced for the commons—the ordinary working people who suffered in the highly polluted workplaces of the early 19th century.

The rise of grassroots movements was not only radical in their politics—it was also deeply spiritual in its opposition to orthodox, power-centred, and rigid institutions. These movements urgently demanded more democratic forms of communication. This, in turn, inspired inventions such as the small, decentralised, village-industry-style jobbing presses. Without transforming giant print capitalism into a model of cottage-industrial simplicity—a true counter-technology—no working-class upheaval would have been possible.

Today, the decentralised, cottage-based system of grassroots media has been overtaken by an autocratic and subtly fatal form of communication in the current century—the digital platform empire.

The 500-year history of print media can be divided into two opposing ages. The first is the autocratic age of print capitalism. This era began with Gutenberg and lasted for more than three centuries. During this time, print served as a tool of centralised power, propaganda, and elite control.

The second age emerged with the rise of village-industrial printing. Small, decentralised jobbing presses appeared alongside labour movements in the mid-19th century. This era gradually faded by the end of the 20th century.

## Cyber Machines

Today, the decentralised, cottage-based system of grassroots media has been overtaken by an autocratic and subtly fatal form of communication in the current century—the digital platform empire. Across the world, each one of us is bound and tightened by the countless arms of a vast octopus empire, the algorithms of social media.

Compared to the black-and-white, mentally engaging demands of printed text, algorithmic media is a visual spectacle—an endless colourful exhibition of versatile images, sounds, and movements designed to captivate rather than challenge. In the capital-intensive era of printed texts used for bigotry, there was at least a visible human brain behind each line of hatred. But under social media, it is no longer a person directly producing content—it is the mind behind the machine, the one who sets preconditioned algorithms. These algorithms function like a self-sustaining nuclear fusion reaction, or a chain of firecrackers that explode from a single spark—automated, continuous, and increasingly beyond control.

Who owns these so-called democratic platforms that claim to promote equity and equality, while maintaining the illusion of individual identity? Today, social media is a unique digital space, controlled by a small group of corporate proprietors. They dictate the algorithms that govern our participation and shape our work on their platforms.

If anyone tries to escape this world of digital conflict, they find it impossible to shed the roles imposed by these platforms. Our destinies have been scripted by powerful algorithms. In the end, we become slaves to their code, much like a fisherman whose bait is swallowed not by a single fish, but by a giant whale.

Extremists exploit features like replicability, connectivity, and scalability to build communities, spread propaganda, and bend public discourse. The very design of social media feeds authoritarian mobs and manipulates collective thought.

During the Age of Enlightenment (roughly 1680s–1790s), England alone witnessed the emergence of 10 to 20 major book publishers, 10 to 20 regularly circulating newspapers, 20 to 30 influential periodicals, more than 100 provincial newspapers, and the publication of thousands of pamphlets every year. Further, the print industry itself was a highly competitive platform, fostering a diversity of forms and content.

What of the age of social media—drilling through space, time, and language like an invisible spirit? It offers a syrupy blend of entertainment, communication, and knowledge, a maze of endless choice, with a smiling servant refilling our glass without end. Its anti-democratic face hides behind the rhetoric of equality, where even a beggar is praised for the “privilege” of swimming freely in its boundless ocean.

But the real danger lies not just in content but in architecture. As Azade E. Kakavand's 2024 review shows, extremists exploit features like replicability, connectivity, and scalability to build communities, spread propaganda, and bend public discourse. The very design of social media feeds authoritarian mobs and manipulates collective thought.

Moreover, Kakavand identifies critical research gaps—notably the underexplored role of persistence, searchability, and identifiability. These features play a key role in how digital content continues to affect politics even after its initial posting.

Hate speech and incitement, once posted, are rarely erased; they persist, circulate, and resurface, often detached from original context. Searchability enhances the discoverability of extremist narratives, guiding users through algorithmic pathways into ideological echo chambers. Identifiability—or the lack thereof—enables anonymous accounts to orchestrate campaigns of harassment or disinformation without accountability.

These features collectively facilitate the construction of digital mobs, echoing earlier historical moments when new media technologies—such as the printing press—enabled mass hysteria and moral panic.

As Charles Zika (2007) observes, “In pre-modern societies, in which modes of communication were predominantly oral, visual objects exercised significant social and cultural power.” This power was dramatically mobilised in the printed literature on witchcraft, where centuries-old visual motifs found new life in printed woodcuts and pamphlets. These images did not merely accompany the text—they performed a crucial epistemic function. They allowed audiences to “see” evil, to imagine it as real and proximate, thus strengthening the psychological foundations of collective fear and enabling the social construction of the witch as a universal enemy (Zika 2007).

|| In today's digital imperialism, that same persecutory logic is retooled by ultra-nationalist forces in former colonies. New technologies identify, vilify, and punish internal “enemies”, all in the name of national purity.

In the empire of algorithms, the old power of visual imagery is resurrected and amplified, immersing people in hatred. Unlike the stark projections of fear or revenge in witch-hunt prints, today's algorithmic visuality works through humour, irony, and sarcasm. Violence is disguised as laughter, yet it delivers the same emotional payload—fear, anxiety, insecurity, and a thirst for retribution. The result is mob violence that drains empathy from the human mind.

In early modern Europe, print culture and witch hunts were bound to the ideology of imperial expansion. Witch-hunting was not only a domestic panic; it produced disciplined masses primed to embrace conquest. Images and narratives of witches fed into the construction of the “savage other,” a framework that justified genocide and dispossession under Christian civilisation and white supremacy.

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How ultra-nationalist Muslim-hunting politics strategically ascended to power by cleverly manoeuvring the pieces on the social media chessboard during the 2014 Indian elections is scrutinised in depth by Shirin Abbas and A.K. Singh (2014). They quote Harish Gupta, a key campaigner on Narendra Modi's PR team—“Early in 2014 itself, PM candidate Narendra Modi realised the potential of social media across the nation and decided to use it as a central tool in his campaign. Everyone talks only about the Internet, but it's mobile phones that have been the game changer in the Modi campaign.”

True democracy is, at its core, a continuous practice in peaceful and friendly dialogue—whether in parliament or on the streets. In stark contrast, under the false banner of democracy, people are now trained to respond with violence, armed not with arguments but with crude weapons and hatred. The training ground is the square-shaped, glowing, and colourful screen of social media, a digital arena where rage is sharpened and enemies are manufactured.

For example, according to a Reuters report, 63 cow vigilante attacks occurred in India between 2010 and mid-2017—most of them after Prime Minister Modi came to power in 2014. In these attacks, 28 Indians—24 of them Muslims—were killed, and 124 were injured. Anyone who holds even a small share of empathy, equity, or democratic values in their heart cannot help but feel a deep sorrow, mixed with anger and shame, upon reading such news. Our hearts should tremble with grief, fear, and despair when we think of the countless thousands living below the poverty line who are being transformed into self-sacrificing devotees of violence.

Could we—the commons—still invent a parallel digital world, one cottage-like in spirit? In this age of highly centralised technological empires, is there space left for a liberating digital force to be born?

Before you step into the digital land of social media, your individuality goes unnoticed. But here, a fertile field awaits you—offered freely—where you may plough, sow, and harvest the self you always wished to be. Since we are all individuals, social media invites us to fulfil our individuality. And what could resemble perfect democracy more than this sense of self-attainment? Its true function is to make us believe we are living in the land of freedom and democracy. It allows us to live in a fully fledged autocratic world without ever realising the tyranny it unleashes within our souls.

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## **Towards Digital Justice**

Yes, across the world, progressives are tirelessly working to lay down alternative highways of digital connectivity and to design autonomous, diverse applications for this cyber terrain. While full digital sovereignty is difficult for communities within nation states to achieve, several inspiring efforts show that partial digital autonomy is possible.

In Catalonia, Guifi.net has built one of the world's largest community-owned internet infrastructures using mesh networking. Projects like MaidSafe's SAFE Network, based in Scotland, are developing entirely decentralised alternatives to the internet itself—where data is not stored on centralised servers but distributed across user devices.

The first step toward creating an autonomous internet highway and self-governed app-vehicles is to tear down the empire's central illusion—that technology is neutral, much like the myth that liberal democracy guarantees equality and justice for all. It is upon this myth that the digital empires have set their throne, confident that their reign will endure forever.

So the issue is not merely the social effects of technology, but the need to ask deeper questions. What is the purpose behind a particular technological design? Who designed it, and for whom? What hidden values, interests, and assumptions circulate within its structure? We cannot strip values from technological design, because they are like ornamental, colourful figures embedded within a thick glass cube—sealed inside, inseparable from the structure itself. When the glass cube is shattered, the figure sealed within it will also be broken.

Though loosely affiliated, they share a common commitment—to challenge dominant design paradigms and re-imagine technology as a tool for justice, equity, and collective liberation.

Here we find counter-movements such as the Design Justice Network—a growing community of design practitioners committed to reshaping the values embedded in technology. Its members include designers, developers, technologists, journalists, community organisers, activists, researchers, and others—many of whom work alongside social movements and community-based organisations (CBOs) across the world. Though loosely affiliated, they share a common commitment—to challenge dominant design paradigms and re-imagine technology as a tool for justice, equity, and collective liberation.

In *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need*, Sasha Costanza-Chock (2020) captures the heart of the problem. “Design mediates so much of our realities and has a tremendous impact on our lives, yet very few of us participate in design processes. In particular, the people who are most adversely affected by design decisions—about visual culture, new technologies, the planning of our communities, or the structure of our political and economic systems—tend to have the least influence on those decisions and how they are made. Design justice rethinks design processes, centres people who are normally marginalised by design, and uses collaborative, creative practices to address the deepest challenges our communities face.”

In response to the growing dominance of digital empires, a diverse ecosystem of decentralised tools and platforms has emerged to restore the web's original ethos—openness, autonomy, and resistance to control. Technologies like IPFS, I2P, and ZeroNet enable peer-to-peer file sharing, hosting, and browsing, allowing users to publish and access content without relying on centralised servers. Similarly, blockchain-based platforms like Ethereum and the Internet Computer provide the infrastructure for decentralised applications (dApps), finance, and governance. These systems prioritise distributed data storage, user control over digital identities, and strong

resistance to censorship.

At this juncture, the true quest for global peace begins with confronting cyber imperialism, a force that perpetuates unseen violence and subjugates our most personal domains—the minds of each one of us.

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