

SERFING THE INTERNET

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This is the second of two short articles dealing with issues of technological centralization and social control. The first article, "[Alexandria and the Cloud](#)", concluded that in the context of cloud computing, and the concomitant centralization of information resources, it might be prudent to remember Lord Acton's admonishment regarding the consequences of absolute power. By coincidence subsequent to the publication of that article the Pew Research Center issued a study entitled "[The Future of Apps and Web](#)". The Pew article, although focusing primarily on the future of the Internet, nonetheless specifically addresses issues of centralization and personal freedom implicitly inhering in current technological trends.

Written by Janna Quitney Anderson, an associate professor of communications at Elon University, "The Future of Apps and Web" summarizes an attitudinal study of 1,021 technology experts. Each expert was asked to provide a narrative response to the statement "[The Web Is Dead. Long Live the Internet.](#)", which appeared as a title to an article in the August 2010 issue of *Wired* magazine, in which its authors Chris Anderson and Michael Wolff argued that the Web was "in decline" and "apps" were in ascendance – specifically:

As much as we love the open, unfettered Web, we're abandoning it for simpler, sleeker services that just workThis is not a trivial distinction. Over the past few years, one of the most important shifts in the digital world has been the move from the wide-open Web to closed platforms that use the Internet for transport but not the browser for display...Because the screens are smaller, such mobile traffic tends to be driven by specialty software, mostly apps, designed for a single purpose. For the sake of the optimized experience on mobile devices, users forgo the general-purpose browser. They use the Net, but not the Web. Fast beats flexible...This was all inevitable. It is the cycle of capitalism. The story of industrial revolutions, after all, is a story of battles over control. A technology is invented, it spreads, a thousand flowers bloom, and then someone finds a way to own it, locking out others. It happens every time....The wide-open Web of peer production, the so-called generative Web where everyone is free to create what they want, continues to thrive, driven by the nonmonetary incentives of expression, attention, reputation, and the like. But the notion of the Web as the ultimate marketplace for digital delivery is now in doubt (C. Anderson & M. Wolff; *loc.cit.*).

Thankfully, Ms. Anderson frames the *Wired* thesis into somewhat less polemical terms and asks the Pew study respondents ... "to take sides in the apps vs. Web debate by choosing among alternative visions of where things will stand in 2020". Given the study's attitudinal methodology, which solicited a narrative response from each participant, the results were not highly empirical, at least in a statistical sense. Nonetheless, nearly three-fifths (59%) of the respondents believed the current web/browser architecture would continue as the Internet's predominant delivery architecture. In contrast over a third (35%) of the study participants saw a major technology sea change to an architecture in which specific applications (apps) running on small mobile device became the dominant technology. A residually small number of respondents thought 2020 would bring a "synthesis" or "hybridization" of the two architectures.

Of importance, however, was not the magnitude of variation in responses, but rather the narrative tone in which those variations were expressed. For example, one study participant observed, "browser(s)...will continue to have key advantages over apps. They are connected to the entire Net, they offer full interoperability, and *they give the user more power* (emphasis added) than the developer or publisher. Likewise, another study participant voiced his concern that "...the history of enclosure, centralization, and consolidation makes me very pessimistic

about the open Web winning over the closed apps....” In this context, former White House technology advisor Susan Crawford’s observations likewise assume an almost ominous tone:

Apps are like cable channels—closed, proprietary, and cleaned-up experiences....I don’t want the world of the Web to end like this. But it will, because people’s expectations have been shaped by companies that view them as consumers. Those giant interests will push every button they can: fear, inexperience, passivity, and willingness to be entertained. And we’ll get a cleaned-up world that we can be perfectly billed for. It’s not good (quoted by J. Q. Anderson, *loc. cit.*).

Professor Crawford’s fear parallels a similar concern voiced in our previous article “Alexandria and the Cloud”, which proposed that “the recent struggle between the forces of informational concentration and dispersion is ending, with victory clearly resting in the camp of the former” (S. C. Bachus, *loc. cit.*). If the end-game outcome were simply a matter of technological preference, the debate would be relatively trivial – i.e., my technology is better than your technology, and your father’s too. But, far more is at stake than our father’s web-based technology.

We have little reason to believe that -- and many of the concerns expressed in the Pew report adumbrate this -- the open societies engendered by the Enlightenment will prevail, given the current course of economic and technological developments. To the contrary, the first decade of the 21st century has produced, with the United States in the lead, an economically, intellectually and spiritually impoverished peasantry living in their IP-addressed hovels. An Internet serfdom has been created in which personal identity can be re-affirmed only by ceaseless text messaging and a puerile fascination with the idols of the electronic marketplace. This is what the 21st century portends - a feudal world defined by the fiefdoms of global corporations, the media and their political vassals.