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The Freedom API

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Freedom is valuable. Freedom gives each of us the space to explore, to define our individual identity, to choose what to be, and what to become.

Today, our freedom is at threat from technology. Our always-connectedness, the constant consumption of media, the intimate knowledge that large corporations have of our quirks, desires & fears, and the cues and nudges they design to direct our choices points to a future of ever decreasing freedom.

What does this loss of freedom mean? It means the inability to see, to hear, and to feel for oneself. It means the inability to think, to imagine possibilities, to dream of a better future and to create something original. It means the death of serendipity, the end of wonder.

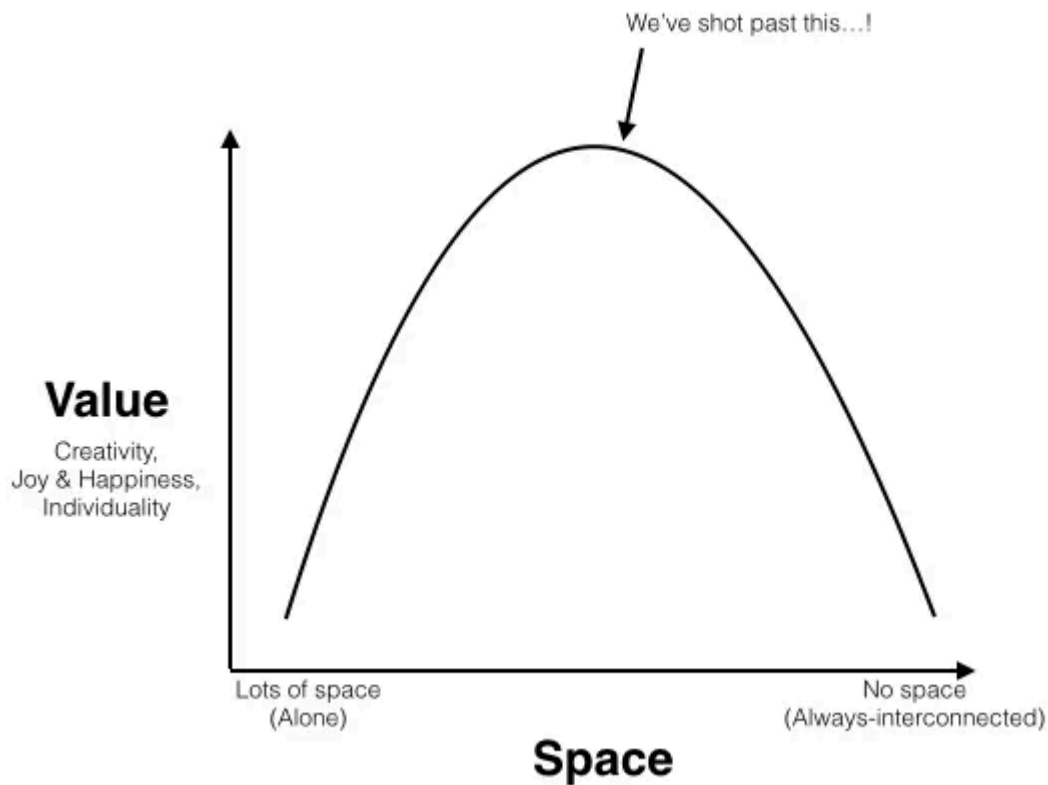
Suffocated by a digital claustrophobia, senseless and wandering, we could be herded by our overlords into a frenzy of constant consumption funded by just enough money from the mind-numbing jobs we will do to feed our addictions.

And under an illusion of choice and plenty, we would say we are happy.

The irony is that the geeks, the outcasts and the rebels are the ones creating this future of bland sameness and herd-mentality.

We need to act now. We need to reclaim our space. We need to breathe. We need to break free.

No Luddite myself, I have an idea of what we can do. But first, my thoughts on how we got this way.



What happened?

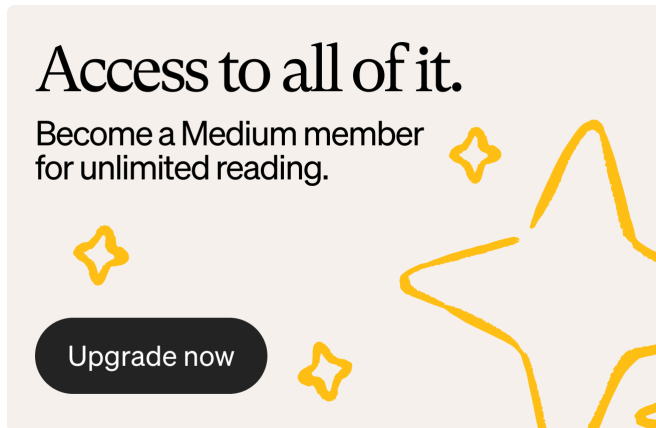
The picture above shows what I think the problem is. Humans have always built technologies to increase our inter-connectedness. However, too much of it is perhaps not a good thing.

Maybe there is a point of balance: where we are inter-connected & yet our individuality shines through, where we can be part of a team and yet can stand up for what we believe is right, where we can learn from others, and yet invent something of our own.

I feel we have shot past that point of balance — and thus, the stream of mindless chatter instead of meaningful conversations, the continuous curation & remixing of ideas instead of creation of new ones, and the fall to the lowest common denominator instead of aspiring to higher ideals.

Our digital rights

What is to be done? We cannot put the genie back in the bottle. I believe we need to create digital rights that will help us re-claim our freedom.



These are the digital rights I have in mind — for companies, governments and future artificial intelligences (AI's) to respect:

- **The right to privacy:** The right to not be tracked and targeted.
- **The right to attention:** The right to be uninterrupted & disconnected.
- **The right to variety of choice:** The right to not get recommendations.

These rights will give us back the space for reflection, wonder & learning, the serendipitous meeting of new people and ideas, and the sandbox to try things, make mistakes and not worry about our digital history.

However, we have to go a step further than talking about these digital rights in the abstract. I think we must create a technological solution to ensure us these rights.

An idea — and a solution

Whenever we install an app or a sign-up for a service, we have to agree to the terms of use, a user agreement or a license.

This is ironic and unfair — an example of how companies subtly devolve us of our rights.

When we paid for packaged software and owned it, signing an End User License Agreement (unread, of course!) was the norm, and it perhaps made some sense.

However, today, we often don't pay for software services and we are the packaged product that is being sold — to marketers and advertisers that mine our

preferences and target us to influence our choice.

So, if our individual information and personal data is the product — shouldn't companies be signing agreements with us, instead of the other way around?

The solution I have in mind is based on this simple idea: Think of it as a Gravatar for my terms & conditions, a single identity service where I can specify the details of what data can be collected, how it can be used, when I can be contacted and what I can be recommended.

Whenever I download an app or sign-up for a service, I can connect to this identity service, and my terms need to be digitally signed and agreed to by the company, government or AI that is going to collect and use my data.

This simple idea, of putting power and control of their personal information back in people's hands offers a glimmer of hope, a direction forward.

A digital declaration of independence

In the future, even more of our lives will be digital. Digital implants, brain interfaces and AR/VR will mean that we are always connected and tracked and are constantly exposed to rich and immersive media. The inevitability of artificial intelligence will mean that my personal information and history will be captured and analysed and that we will be directed towards “better” choices — what to buy, what to eat, what to wear, where to go and so on.

We need to act, to ensure that we carry forward the tradition of rights in the physical world into rights in the virtual world.

We need a digital declaration of independence that safeguards our right to serendipity & wonder from companies, governments and AI's. And naturally, this time it needs to be written in code, and published as an API.

I have created [GitHub project for this API](#), and a twitter hashtag #freedomapi. Join me, and let us build this together — **the Freedom API**.

Freedom

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