

Tim Berners-Lee on the future of the web: 'The system is failing'

Sir Tim Berners-Lee's optimism about the future of the web is starting to wane in the face of a "nasty storm" of issues including the rollback of net neutrality protections, the proliferation of fake news, propaganda and the web's increasing polarisation.

The inventor of the world wide web always maintained his creation was a reflection of humanity – the good, the bad and the ugly. But Berners-Lee's vision for an "open platform that allows anyone to share information, access opportunities and collaborate across geographical boundaries" has been challenged by increasingly powerful digital gatekeepers whose algorithms can be weaponised by master manipulators.

"I'm still an optimist, but an optimist standing at the top of the hill with a nasty storm blowing in my face, hanging on to a fence," said the British computer scientist. "We have to grit our teeth and hang on to the fence and not take it for granted that the web will lead us to wonderful things," he said.

The spread of misinformation and propaganda online has exploded partly because of the way the advertising systems of large digital platforms such as Google or Facebook have been designed to hold people's attention. "People are being distorted by very finely trained AIs that figure out how to distract them," said Berners-Lee. In some cases, these platforms offer users who create content a cut of advertising revenue. The financial incentive drove Macedonian teenagers with "no political skin in the game" to generate political clickbait fake news that was distributed on Facebook and funded by revenue from Google's automated advertising engine AdSense.

"The system is failing. The way ad revenue works with clickbait is not fulfilling the goal of helping humanity promote truth and democracy. So I am concerned," said Berners-Lee, who in March called for the regulation of online political advertising to prevent it from being used in "unethical ways".

Since then, it has been revealed that Russian operatives bought micro-targeted political ads aimed at US voters on Facebook, Google and Twitter. Data analytics firms such as Cambridge Analytica, which builds personality profiles of millions of individuals so they can be manipulated through "behavioural micro-targeting", have also been criticised for creating "weaponised AI propaganda".

"We have these dark ads that target and manipulate me and then vanish because I can't bookmark them. This is not democracy – this is putting who gets selected into the hands of the most manipulative companies out there," said Berners-Lee. It is not too late to turn things around, he said, provided people challenge the status quo.

“We are so used to these systems being manipulated that people just think that’s how the internet works. We need to think about what it should be like,” he said. “One of the problems with climate change is getting people to realise it was anthropogenic – created by people. It’s the same problem with social networks – they are manmade. If they are not serving humanity, they can and should be changed,” he said.

Will the situation get worse before it gets better? “It already has got worse,” he said, referencing the rollback of Obama-era rules to protect net neutrality. Net neutrality, which some have described as the “first amendment of the internet”, is the idea that internet service providers (ISPs) should treat everyone’s data equally – whether that data consists of an email from your grandmother, an episode of *Stranger Things* on Netflix or a bank transfer. It ensures that the large cable ISPs, including Comcast, AT&T and Verizon, don’t get to choose which data is sent more quickly and which sites get blocked or throttled depending on which content providers pay a premium.

In February 2015, the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) voted to more strictly regulate ISPs as utilities and enshrine in law the principles of net neutrality. Trump’s FCC, headed by the former Verizon employee Ajit Pai, wants to kill the rules, arguing that “nothing is broken” and that the rules were established over “hypothetical harms and hysterical prophecies of doom”.

Berners-Lee, who is in Washington urging lawmakers to reconsider the rollback, disagrees and cites problematic examples in which ISPs have violated net neutrality principles. For example, AT&T blocked Skype and other similar services on the iPhone so it would make more money from regular phone calls. Verizon blocked Google Wallet from smartphones when it was developing a competing mobile payment service.

“When I invented the web, I didn’t have to ask Vint Cerf [the ‘father of the internet’] for permission to use the internet,” said Berners-Lee, who previously stated that the internet should remain a “permissionless space for creativity, innovation and free expression”.

These powerful gatekeepers, Berners-Lee said, control access to the internet and pose a threat to innovation if they are allowed to pick winners and losers by throttling or blocking services. It makes sense, therefore, that ISPs should be treated more like utilities.

“Gas is a utility, so is clean water, and connectivity should be too,” said Berners-Lee. “It’s part of life and shouldn’t have an attitude about what you use it for – just like water.”

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