The Borg in Us All: Is Resistance Futile?

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Borg: *A cybernetic life-form, part organic and part artificial, with a singular goal: the consumption of technology, rather than the pursuit of wealth or political expansion as is the case with the human species.*

One of the main roles played by science fiction (SciFi) is to portray fundamental issues and questions that face humanity long before they actually become relevant to our daily lives. We cannot always be sure of where our reality ends, and fiction begins. Star Trek storylines including Borgs are a good example. In the storyline, Borgs are part organic, part artificial and created eons ago, yet they seem to presage the challenges in our contemporary personal reality and challenges in the Internet's cyberspace.

At birth, we become citizens of a country. We are born with certain rights that define our dignity as human beings, rights that vary by context and evolve over time. At the level of fundamental beliefs, they are expressed in documents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). When we open a browser or engage the Internet ecosystem in any way, we acquire a residency as global digital citizens. With rights come obligations. Our personal integrity depends on how well we exercise both.

It has become increasingly difficult for us to exercise those rights and duties to preserve our integrity in cyberspace because we have limited control over our digital personas. With surveillance technologies, the Internet of Things (IoT) and AI algorithms, our digital personas proliferate, as our digital personas are not created by ourselves, but others. Within the Internet's cyberspace more than just our actions create our digital persona. Built with a blend of personal data and ambient data that we do not control, personas are mined by others for various social, business and political ends. Data from multiples sources and AI algorithm intent can create multiple versions with different attributes from our own unique digital persona. In a twist on the idea of the Borg, our digital persona/Borg is born neither inherently friendly or threatening, it is just a virtual "me".

The dignity and integrity of each persona depend as much on who builds them, as it does on how we exercise our rights and obligations as digital citizens. This impacts on our integrity, and how we are seen, separate from our intent and our literal persona. Use by others can impact our human rights and damage us. Digital personas are more subject to abuse than literal personas.

Consider the symptoms of our "Borgdom": The screen and keyboard, microphone and speaker become part of us. We are incomplete without that. We hardly question our behavior. Obvious questions would curb our use and/or press for regulatory policy changes. Regulations can only protect our digital rights to a limited extent. They often do not even exist as digital surveillance companies do everything to prevent regulations from controlling access to data that constitute the basis of their profits. Access to apps provided by digital surveillance companies and agencies, in exchange for our constructed persona used for business and political purposes, is unacceptable as the "new normal." This lack of control over our digital persona, dignity and integrity represents an unacceptable tradeoff between our low-cost access to the cornucopia of digital services and the exploitation of our digital personas. Built beyond our control, we cannot terminate or banish them. They even can continue after death. In effect, we live with and leave behind an eternal virtual Borg!

How did this happen? Since well before the Wizard of Oz, there is always a little someone behind a curtain pretending big to influence others, usually for private gain. When a digital "Wizard"

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proclaims: "Pursue the consumption of technology, rather than wealth or political expansion" we should suspect the real motives. The result is the creation of crowds of technology consuming Borgs, susceptible to diversion and distract.

This innovation is taking place in the name of a better world, one where these technologies are the answer to the world's problems. This is the Wizard's oldest trick: "Divide what belongs together". Digital innovation shapes our real (literal and virtual) world. It's benefactors demand that innovation's path should not be restricted. Rules, regulations, and ethical principles make up the foundations of all societies, but the "digital drug dealers", from behind their curtains, say: "Technology is good for you. More is better. You must trust us!" The old rules, rights and responsibilities of our "social contract" are proclaimed obsolete in this "new reality."

Thus far, in a period of rapid change, this argument has been left to stand. The more technology we consume, the more it influences our individual and collective daily lives. We neglect that our rights and duties as virtual residents and Global Digital Citizens need to be defined and implemented. As a passive Borg crowd, enough people are hoodwinked into believing that unrestricted digital innovation is required to raise the quality of our daily consumer life. They have become recruits of the clone army.

What can we do to rouse ourselves from the passive Borg mentality and establish a healthy relationship between technologies and ourselves? Here are 13 ways to resist the Borg:

1. Be self-conscious – Observe and understand how our real self and constructed digital personas interact, influence and relate with others. Protect your integrity, You and your digital self are worth it!

2. Retrieve yourself – Know your digital personas better, how they function, and what be done to gain back control.

3. Learn – Distinguish between the misuses of digital technologies in general and misuses that come from mining "our" data.
   a) Misuse of technologies pollutes our digital environment.
   b) Misuse of data corrupts our digital persona to bad ends.

4. Understand – Which uses need to be subject to better individual behavior and broader public policy action.

5. Demand policies – Digital data policy should work much like real estate zoning, regulating what can be done with data, when, where and how. Digital use regulations should be fashioned in a consultative policy process that considers the rights and duties of data ownership and societal/public interests within a governance process.

6. Get wise – We may admire the profits of Amazon and Alibaba, while being irked by their data mining and targeted advertising. While data is central to business, the risk that data abuse will devalue relationships are more important, both for society and for business success.

7. Ask fundamental questions – More and more people are concerned about digital Integrity, about privacy and security, about identity protection and the uncontrolled use of their data. Prices, ordering convenience and fast delivery are not enough to offset abuses of personal data, or digital personas, integrity and trust.

8. Demand digital integrity – Only those persons, businesses and government agencies whose behavior respects the digital integrity of participants will have a future on the Internet. Business plans must include a respect for the data and its uses. "Digital Integrity Inside" must become an integral part of branding. Companies that embrace digital integrity will be more sustainable and successful have a clear competitive advantage based on lived digital integrity, and be better able to generate customer loyalty. Digital integrity is a logical component in the evolution of the business model in digital times.

9. Engage – Actively participate in shaping digital rights, obligations and policies are as important as active engagement in civil society. We need to understand the inadequateness

of current internet governance structures, and stop hoping that there is a benevolence beating heart somewhere in the bowels of the Borg empire. Engage and participate, resist and create, bring forth new behaviors and institutions that serve us and protect our privacy, our security and our freedoms in pursuit of a better tomorrow.

10. Innovate – Innovation today is mainly with the passive Borg mentality. It focuses on a limited spectrum of innovations in the service of oligopolies and abusive data miners. Digital device and application professionals need encouragement and support to work in and create spaces where innovations for the broader good are still possible.

11. Disseminate – The importance and significance of a new Global Digital Citizenship, based on dignity and integrity, is not restricted solely to the wellbeing of our persona. The virtual and the real are inseparable in the pursuit of goals such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals. We need conversation and communication. If digital data misuse remains the norm, desirable digital strategies will be impossible. Dialogue based on the values of Global Digital Citizenship can address the behavioral and regulatory challenges and help us reach our goals in all areas of life, areas such as art, culture, food security, climate change, and health, to name just a few.

12. Pull back the curtain – All religions as their believers to resist false prophets. Some of the most prominent fathers and mothers of the Internet became early converts to the Borg. Abandoning the scientific caution of their training, they Proclaimed to do no harm as they became Internet Missionaries to assist in the conquest by Borg. Even the technology underlying the Internet is not immune to the desires of the Borg. "Who does what?" in terms of Internet governance is yet to be resolved. Contenders such as ICANN and the ITU compete while engaged in a slow waltz and clothed in multistakeholder and multilateral facades.

13. Beware – the Borg is strongest in ways one least expects. The Borg monster knows how to hide in plain sight. As a response to suspicions around intent, the Borg deploys Borg services to make the empire look more attractive. However, despite the obvious attractions of a cornucopia of free/cheap services, the Borg monsters, like vampires on digital blood, must sustain themselves on a diet that consumes the data of customers, shun the light of day, and hide the erosion of their own dignity and integrity.

However, there is hope; there is always hope. Beyond our temporary presence in a submissive Borgdom, we still have the warm coals of our original humanity. Digital integrity as a goal is revived when the technologies and their uses of the digital data occur in a context that is unethical and unacceptable. When both data ownership and the terms of use are fully understood, we can restore their concordance with notions of the common good as found in policies and regulations and embedded in socially acceptable practices.

Society determines the value of technology. Technology does not mandate societies behavioral and policy norms. In the short run, the speed of development and deployment of the internet have outpaced our abilities to fashion public digital policy and to build an Internet ecosystem embedded with digital integrity.

It's a sign of the times that legislators are trying to counteract existing grievances regarding the access to and use of personal data. However, these much-applauded efforts still fall short of the notion of a global digital citizenship.

We are at a point where progress within the Internet ecosystem will depend on whether we will achieve basic digital maturity and enshrine digital integrity for all. This is where the next major step in the innovation of the Internet will take place.