

The Virtual Revolution

For better and for worse, how is the world wide web transforming almost every aspect of our lives, our economy and even our psychology?



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Programme running: 4 x 60 mins Production: BBC

The World Wide Web is transforming everything from how we learn to how we shop, vote and make friends. 20 years on from the invention of the web how, for better and for worse, is the digital revolution reshaping all our lives?

The series brings together everyone who's anyone on the web - from its inventor Tim Berners-Lee to Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, Wikipedia's Jimmy Wales to Amazon's Jeff Bezos, and online giants Al Gore and Bill Gates.

Through stories of how the web is being used and abused today, this series explores the revolutionary benefits and uncovers the hidden costs of the web's culture of global, instant and free information.

The Great Levelling?

Has the web lived up to its early dreams by empowering us all with equal access to global, instant and free information? Building on its countercultural roots, how much is web culture challenging our notions of ownership, value and creative freedom? Online sensations such as Wikipedia, Napster, YouTube and the whole culture of blogging suggest a story richer and deeper than a simple 'great levelling'. The web is a continuing collision of cultures at play, as technological possibility clashes with human nature and our need to control things and make a profit. This creative tension makes the web a fast-moving and powerful phenomenon that has a grip on all our lives.

Enemy of the State?

What is the impact of the web on global politics? Free information collected through social networks is being used as a weapon in the battle between the individual and authority across the world. While that struggle for freedom captures the headlines, the web is quietly shifting power permanently in ways we could never have imagined - accelerating globalisation, providing

us with new allegiances that cross traditional borders, reinventing warfare and creating frightening cultural dead ends. Stories include Twitter, PayPal, al-Qaeda's use of the web, the 'Great Firewall of China' and Russia's cyberwar with Estonia.

The Cost of Free

Businesses have invaded the web and found ingenious ways to make money from a free space - at a cost to our culture and privacy. What lessons did retailers such as Amazon learn from the gold rush years of the dotcom bubble? How did Google forge the business model that has come to dominate today's web? Web advertising and recommendation engines are evolving to target our individual interests, based on their knowledge of our previous behaviour.

On the surface, the web appears to have brought about a revolution in convenience. But, as companies start to build up vast databases on our online habits and preferences, what might this mean for our notions of privacy and personal space in the 21st Century?

Homo Interneticus?

Is the web rewiring our brains and our relationships? In the last five years we have witnessed the meteoric rise of social networks. What is the impact of this new way of connecting humanity on the younger generation, for whom this way of relating has become second nature?

But the web does more than connect us to other people. The technical structure that underpins it allows us unprecedented access to information. For some this liberates the mind to jump from subject to subject, but critics like Susan Greenfield and Nick Carr argue that it is overloading our minds. In a world first, the BBC joins forces with scientists at University College London in an experiment to find out if the web is making us think differently.

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