

THE  
MEDIA EDUCATION FOUNDATION  
PRESENTS

# DIGITAL DISCONNECT

**HOW CAPITALISM IS TURNING THE  
INTERNET AGAINST DEMOCRACY**

FEATURING **ROBERT MCCHESENEY**

**DISCUSSION GUIDE**

Written by Loretta Alper & Jeremy Earp

## Contents

---

<b>A Note on This Guide.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Synopsis.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>About Robert McChesney.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Pre-viewing Discussion Questions.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>I. Introduction.....</b>	<b>8</b>
Key Points	
<b>II. The Revolution.....</b>	<b>9</b>
Key Points	
Discussion Questions	
Assignments	
<b>III. Skeptics vs. Celebrants.....</b>	<b>13</b>
Key Points	
Discussion Questions	
Assignments	
<b>IV. The American Catechism.....</b>	<b>16</b>
Key Points	
Discussion Questions	
Assignments	
<b>V. Making the Internet Safe for Capitalism.....</b>	<b>21</b>
Key Points	
Discussion Questions	
Assignments	
<b>VI. The Rise of the Cartel.....</b>	<b>26</b>
Key Points	
Discussion Questions	
Assignments	
<b>VII. The Return of Big Brother.....</b>	<b>30</b>
Key Points	
Discussion Questions	
Assignments	
<b>VIII. Journalism in the Age of the Algorithm.....</b>	<b>35</b>
Key Points	
Discussion Questions	
Assignments	
<b>IX. The Growing Resistance.....</b>	<b>40</b>
Key Points	
Discussion Questions	
Assignments	

## A Note on This Guide

---

This guide is designed to help teachers and screening organizers engage the issues presented in the film *Digital Disconnect*, featuring Robert McChesney. It opens with a set of general discussion questions designed to help open up conversation before screening the film, then provides a series of key summary points, discussion questions, and writing assignments for each section of the film.

We've organized this guide by section to make it easier for you to manage and engage the details of the film. For each section, you'll find key points to help you and your students recall specific details during discussions and writing assignments. You'll find discussion questions designed to inspire critical thinking and open-ended conversation about the film's specific arguments. And you'll find writing assignments that require students to do further research and deepen their thinking about some of the major issues raised in the film.

The overall goal of this guide is to help you initiate and facilitate open-ended discussions – and formulate writing assignments – that remain focused on the actual issues and arguments raised in the film.

## Synopsis

---

*Digital Disconnect* trains its sights on the relationship between the internet and democracy in the age of fake news, filter bubbles, and Facebook security breaches. Moving from the development of the internet as a publicly funded project in the late 1960s to its full-scale commercialization today, renowned media scholar Robert McChesney traces how the democratizing potential of the internet has been radically compromised by the logic of capitalism and the unaccountable power of a handful of telecom and tech monopolies. Along the way, McChesney examines the ongoing attack on net neutrality by telecom monopolies like Comcast and Verizon; explores how internet giants like Facebook and Google have amassed huge profits by surreptitiously collecting personal data and selling it to advertisers; and shows how these companies have routinely colluded with the national security state to advance covert mass surveillance programs. Even more urgently, the film details how the rise of social media as a leading information source is working to isolate people into ideological filter bubbles and elevate fake news at the expense of real journalism. While most debates about the internet continue to focus on issues like the personal impact of internet addiction or the questionable data-mining practices of individual companies like Facebook, *Digital Disconnect* digs deeper to show how capitalism itself is turning the internet against democracy. The result is an indispensable classroom resource — a vital tool for helping students make sense of a technological revolution that’s radically transforming virtually aspect of human communication.

## About Robert McChesney

---

Robert W. McChesney is the Gutsell Endowed Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His work concentrates on the history and political economy of communication, emphasizing the role media play in democratic and capitalist societies. In 2002 McChesney was the co-founder of Free Press, a national media reform organization. He also hosted the "Media Matters" weekly radio program on NPR-affiliate WILL-AM between 2002 and 2012. From 1988 to 1998 he was on the Journalism and Mass Communication faculty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he was selected as one of the top 100 classroom teachers. McChesney has written or edited twenty-seven books, including, most recently, *People Get Ready: The Fight Against a Jobless Economy* and a *Citizenless Democracy* (co-authored with John Nichols); *Dollarocracy: How the Money-and Media Election Complex Is Destroying America* (with John Nichols); and *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism Is Turning the Internet Away from Democracy*. In 2000, McChesney authored the multiple award-winning *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*, which was reissued by The New Press in 2015 with a new preface by the author. His work has been translated into 34 languages.

## Pre-viewing Discussion Questions

---

To get a discussion going before showing the film, ask students or members of your screening audience any or all of the following questions:

1. When was the internet created? Who did the early work developing the digital network that would eventually become the internet?
2. When and how did the internet become part of ordinary people's everyday lives?
3. How would you define the "internet revolution" or the "digital revolution"? Why do you think people have used the term "revolutionary" to describe this technology?
4. Do you see the internet as a democratic space? As a tool for democracy? Explain how. If you don't necessarily see the internet as a democratizing force, explain why not.
5. What are some recent events and news stories that have shed light on the relationship between the internet and democracy?
6. What do you think is the average amount of time people spend online? Do you think you're above or below the average? How much time would you say you actually spend online during an average day?
7. A lot of people would argue that capitalism, as a system, is the most natural economic expression of democracy and freedom. Do you agree with this? Why or why not?
8. In your view, what is it about capitalism that might be beneficial to a democratic political system? Do you think there's anything about how capitalism works that might pose a threat to democracy?
9. Can you name the five most profitable companies in the world today? Do you know what these companies all have in common?
10. How would you define a business "monopoly"? How about a "cartel"? In your view, are these two things good or bad for a democracy? The answer might seem obvious, but give specifics.

11. What's the FCC? What's its main job? Who serves on the FCC? How do FCC commissioners get the job?
12. Have you heard of "net neutrality"? If you're familiar with the principle of net neutrality, are you in favor of it or opposed to it? Do you know what the current rules around net neutrality are? Do you know when these rules last changed? Do you know the official reasons for this change?
13. What's digital surveillance? Who's behind this surveillance and how does it work exactly?
14. What do you think of advertising on the internet? Do you find it annoying? Beyond the question of how annoying online ads can be, do you see any reason they might actually be dangerous to democracy?
15. In your opinion, all things considered, has the internet had a positive or negative impact on our democracy? How about its impact on journalism and the bedrock democratic ideal of a free press?

## I. Introduction

---

### Key Points

- Since it first started to come to public attention only two decades ago, the Internet has exploded in popularity and become a seamless part of our daily lives, revolutionizing human communication in the process.
- But while there's general agreement that the internet has revolutionized human communication, there's a lot less agreement about whether this revolution has been good or bad for democracy.
- At a time when the digital revolution has transformed virtually every aspect of human communication – including the kinds of information we have access to as democratic citizens – it's never been more important to ask whether the internet is strengthening or weakening our democracy.



## II. The Revolution

---

### Key Points

- Americans first started to be introduced to the high-speed digital computer in the 1950s and 1960s.
- At the time, computers were massive, intimidating machines housed in remote corporate and government settings, operated and understood only by experts.
- Public discomfort with computers during this initial period was reflected in popular culture at the time. Movies in the 1960s and '70s captured deep-seated fears and anxieties about computers, especially the possibility that they might be used to control people.
- In 1984, an ad introducing the Apple MacIntosh personal computer depicted it as a force that would slay the scary Big Brother computer technologies of the past and usher in an explicitly *democratizing* technological revolution.
- When the internet took hold a few years later, the digital revolution quickly swept the globe.
- The number of people online around the world has skyrocketed from around 10 million people in 1995 to almost three and a half billion people today. In the US, the rate of growth has surged from just 14% of Americans online in 1995 to almost 90% today, with people spending on average about six hours a day online.
- The result is an ever-expanding universe of data, billions upon billions of text messages and photos and videos.
- In total, it's now estimated that 90% of all the data and information ever created in the history of the world has been created over just the last two years.
- The result is a communication revolution that McChesney says may prove to be as transformative as the emergence of human speech and language and the invention of the printing press.

- But despite the magnitude of this revolutionary transformation, there's been very little agreement about whether this revolution has lived up to its *democratic* potential and been a truly *democratizing* force.

## II. The Revolution

---

### Discussion Questions

1. According to the film, what are some of the basic issues Robert McChesney has been asking about media for years? Why does McChesney say these questions are especially crucial when it comes to the internet?
2. What were computers like in the 1950s and '60s? How were they viewed by the general public? What specific examples from American pop culture does the film use to show public attitudes toward computers? What do these examples reveal about public perceptions, according to McChesney?
3. Describe the first Macintosh computer ad. When and where did it appear? What message did Apple and Steve Jobs seek to convey in the ad about their new personal computer? According to the ad, how would the Mac be different from previous computers and why would it matter?
4. What happened to the use of computers once the internet took off? In what fundamental way did the internet change how people had been using computers up to that point? What are some of the specific ways the internet has revolutionized communication more generally, according to McChesney? What does he say about YouTube videos and how does his observation fit with his claim that the internet has sparked a revolution in communication?
5. McChesney says that while there's no doubt the internet has revolutionized communication, there's less agreement about whether it's been a truly democratizing force. Before watching the next section, can you come up with some specific reasons people might give for why the internet has helped strengthen democracy? How about some reasons people might give to argue that the internet has been bad for democracy?

## II. The Revolution

---

### Assignments

1. As McChesney states at the outset, his work has focused largely on how the commercial basis of our media system, and especially its control by a shrinking number of corporations, have affected the kinds of information we receive. Write a paper examining who owns the major media outlets in the US and how this ownership structure might shape the kinds of information we receive as democratic citizens.

Here are some good sources to get you started as you research this subject:

- “Media Consolidation” issue brief from media reform advocacy group Free Press:  
<https://www.freepress.net/issues/media-control/media-consolidation>
  - NPR’s current breakdown of the big broadcast, tech, and internet companies:  
<https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/10/28/499495517/big-media-companies-and-their-many-brands-in-one-chart>
  - CNN report on media concentration and related FCC rulings:  
<http://money.cnn.com/2018/04/01/media/sinclair-anchor-promos/index.html?iid=surge-story-summary>
2. McChesney talks about the fears and anxieties people used to have about computers in the 1960s and ’70s, and how these attitudes were reflected in popular culture. Write a paper about public perceptions of computers during this early period and examine the main reasons people seemed to be suspicious and frightened of computer technology. Use examples from popular culture (movies, TV shows, science fiction writing, etc.) to ground your analysis.
  3. Research the amount of data and information the internet now makes available to anyone with an internet connection, and write a paper comparing it to the accessibility of information in the past. Be sure to discuss how the internet’s revolutionary impact on information flows compares to revolutionary communication technologies in the past like the invention of the printing press.

### III. Skeptics vs. Celebrants

---

#### Key Points

- McChesney identifies the two major sides in debates about the internet and democracy as the “celebrants” and the “skeptics.”
- Some internet skeptics have argued that the sheer amount of information available on the internet has undermined our ability to think and process information at the level required of citizens in democratic societies.
- Other skeptics have argued that the internet has undermined the democratic process itself by spreading fake election news and undermining political journalism.
- On the other side of the debate, internet celebrants have typically argued that the internet has empowered ordinary citizens to become participants in the democratic process by giving them unprecedented access to unprecedented amounts of information.
- Celebrants point to numerous examples of the democratizing potential of the internet, including its use by millions of people during the Arab Spring in 2011 to bypass and bring down an authoritarian regime, and the use of smart phones and social media to document civil rights violations and police violence in the US.
- Celebrants have also claimed that the internet is making electoral politics more accessible, citing the use of social media by candidates from both parties during the 2016 election.
- According to McChesney, the arguments that have been raised in these debates have been interesting, and important, but haven’t taken a sustained and deep enough look at the *economic* forces that have shaped the internet.
- In McChesney’s view, it’s not possible to understand the relationship between the internet and democracy without first taking into account the relationship between *capitalism* and democracy.

### III. Skeptics vs. Celebrants

---

#### Discussion Questions

1. Briefly summarize the contrasting positions of internet skeptics and celebrants. What are some of the main differences between them on the question of the internet and democracy?
2. What are some of the main examples the film gives to represent each side in this debate? Can you think of other examples to support each of these sides?
3. If you had to choose, would you consider yourself more of an internet celebrant or a skeptic? On balance, do you think the internet does more to help or hurt democracy? Explain your reasoning.
4. What's McChesney's critique of most debates surrounding the internet and democracy? What's his issue with the way the debate has been framed and why does he say it matters?
5. Why do you think there's been relatively little attention paid to how capitalism itself has shaped the internet and in turn the web's relationship to democracy?

### III. Skeptics vs. Celebrants

---

#### Assignments

1. Take a position in the debate McChesney lays out between celebrants and skeptics and write a paper making your case one way or the other. Focus specifically on whether you think the internet has been more of a democratizing or anti-democratic force. To support and advance your position, cite specific passages from the film. Also do some additional outside research on the people featured in the film – including Nicholas Carr, Thomas Crampton, Sherry Turkle, Jimmy Wales, and any other major celebrants or skeptics you come across in your research – and draw on their ideas as well.
2. Research the Arab Spring and write a paper examining the role the internet and social media seemed to play in this democratic uprising. How, exactly, was social media used? And what was the ultimate result of the uprising?
3. Write a paper examining the role smart phones and social media have played in shining a light on police violence. Does your research into this subject make you more or less likely to see the internet as a democratizing force? Be sure to explain your position clearly, and to use specific examples from the film.
4. Write a paper examining the role social media played during the 2016 presidential election and explain whether you think it was ultimately good or bad for the democratic process. Cite sources from the film, and from your own additional research, to support your argument.

## IV. The American Catechism

---

### Key Points

- In the US, the traditional story that's been told about capitalism is that it's a system that allows entrepreneurs to compete on a level playing field to the benefit of consumers.
- It's also a story that says capitalism and democracy go hand in hand – and that capitalism is in effect the natural economic expression of democracy and freedom.
- But in reality, McChesney argues, there's no necessary correlation between democracy and capitalism at all, and capitalism in fact often poses a threat to democracy.
- There have been many societies that have been economically organized around private property and markets, but politically have been dictatorships. And within capitalist societies like the US, capitalism and democracy often exist in tension with one another.
- One reason for the tension between capitalism and democracy is that inequality is built into the very structure of the capitalist system.
- Another reason for the tension between capitalism and democracy is that without government regulation, capitalism tends to create business monopolies that give inordinate power and advantage to a few massive corporations.
- The power of these monopolies can be detrimental to the smooth functioning of the democratic system because it means that a few giant companies end up with way more influence over government policy than ordinary people.
- An exhaustive Princeton University study showed that despite democratic rhetoric to the contrary, ordinary Americans have virtually no influence over policy decisions and that corporations dominate the legislative process.



- With these economic power dynamics in mind, McChesney argues that if we want to understand whether the internet is good or bad for democracy we first need to ask whether the internet has helped to push back against the lopsided influence of business monopolies and corporate interests and level the playing field for ordinary Americans.
- And he suggests that even a quick glance at business media in the US provides an obvious answer to this question: that instead of disrupting the anti-democratic tendencies of monopolies, the Internet has turned out to be the greatest generator of monopoly in the history of capitalism.
- The five most valuable corporations in the world today are internet monopolies – Apple, Google, Microsoft, Facebook, and Amazon.
- In addition, a relatively small number of commercial websites now attract the overwhelming volume of traffic, making the internet an increasingly unequal playing field.
- Moreover, this same handful of firms now gets the lion's share of all online advertising revenue -- with Google and Facebook, alone, now accounting for the vast majority of all advertising revenue.
- What's crucial to remember, McChesney says, is that the unequal, monopoly-ruled internet landscape that exists today didn't just develop on its own, organically, but is instead the product of a series of very deliberate policy decisions that served specific interests at specific moments in time.

## IV. The American Catechism

---

### Discussion Questions

1. What's the traditional story that's been told about American capitalism? Why do you think McChesney calls this story "The American catechism"? What is a "catechism" anyway? And how does it apply here?
2. According to McChesney, how closely does this theoretical story about capitalism match up with the way capitalism operates in the real world? What specific examples does McChesney give to support his argument that in reality there's no necessary correlation between capitalism and democracy? Can you think of other examples?
3. Why does McChesney say that capitalism is often at odds with democracy? What are the two main examples he gives to make his case? Do you think he makes a convincing argument? Why or why not?
4. What is a "monopoly"? And according to McChesney, why are business monopolies inherently anti-democratic? In what way do monopolies limit the functioning of democratic societies? And how have they been dealt with in the past?
5. According to McChesney, has the internet helped to push back against these anti-democratic tendencies of capitalism? If so, how? If not, what's the main evidence he gives to make his case?

## IV. The American Catechism

---

### Assignments

1. Do you agree or disagree with McChesney's assertion that there's no necessary correlation between capitalism and democracy? Take notes on the major reasons McChesney gives to make his case, then write a persuasive essay weighing in on this question yourself. Your job here is to argue either of the following:
  - a. Capitalism often operates without regard for democracy at all and in fact can be hostile to basic democratic principles.
  - b. Capitalism is, in fact, a natural corollary to democratic political systems and exists more or less in harmony with it.

Be sure to summarize McChesney's key arguments on this issue before doing your own research and writing a defense or critique of his arguments.

2. Research economic inequality in the United States. Go online and find the latest information and data on inequality from credible sources. Then write a paper summarizing your findings and explaining whether or not you see these trends as a threat to democracy. If not, explain why not. If so, explain why you came to that conclusion. Also explain some of the specific ways that class and inequality might come into play in politics and affect the functioning of democracy?
3. Read the full Princeton study by Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page that McChesney cites in the film. Write a paper summarizing its major findings. Then explain what these findings seem to tell us about how money affects the state of our democracy.

You can find the study here:

[https://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/mgilens/files/gilens\\_and\\_page\\_2014\\_-testing\\_theories\\_of\\_american\\_politics.doc.pdf](https://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/mgilens/files/gilens_and_page_2014_-testing_theories_of_american_politics.doc.pdf)

4. McChesney argues that far from leveling the economic playing field and pushing back against the power of monopolies, the internet has been the greatest generator of monopolies in the history of capitalism.

Research how the economic power of Standard Oil in the 1890s led to monopoly charges and anti-trust legislation. Then write a paper comparing that history with the charges today that Google and Facebook are monopolies on the same scale of Standard Oil all those years ago. What did the government end up doing to Standard Oil and other monopolies like it? What role has government played in addressing the new internet monopolies? As you write up your findings, be sure first to clearly define and explain what a business “monopoly” is, what “anti-Trust” legislation is, and why for decades economists have seen monopolies as a threat to both capitalism and democracy.

5. Read this New York Times story from 2017 about the EU’s antitrust case against Google:  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/27/technology/eu-google-fine.html>

Then read this follow-up piece from Reuters about the outcome of the case:

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-alphabet-antitrust-insight/google-poised-to-emerge-unscathed-from-european-antitrust-crackdown-idUSKBN1HJ1QY>

Write a paper summarizing the facts of this case. Then give your own take on whether you think governments should be exercising more regulatory power over internet monopolies to achieve balance and protect the public interest. Be sure to think about and address these questions: What kind of power do governments have to address the anti-competitive practices of tech and telecoms giants? What are the limits? Why is it so difficult to successfully challenge the monopoly power of a company like Google once it achieves market dominance? Do you favor the need for government intervention in the market to regulate and even fine companies that become monopolies? Or do you see monopolies as a natural consequence of capitalism that should be left to the marketplace?

## V. Making the Internet Safe for Capitalism

---

### Key Points

- The internet began in 1969 as an experimental networking project called the ARPANET, a series of interconnected networks built to allow computers to communicate directly with one another.
- The ARPANET project not only laid the foundations for today's internet, it was also funded entirely by the federal government: the federal government spent hundreds of millions of dollars in taxpayer money on the project over a period of decades while US corporations invested and risked nothing.
- At the same time, many of the people who helped develop the Internet came out of the left-wing counter-culture of the 60's and 70's. In fact, Silicon Valley in the '70s was full of programmers and hackers who were committed to taking computers out of the hands of top-down corporations and opening up a democratic space free of commercial influence.
- And throughout the 1970s and much of the 1980s, federal policy also saw the internet as a public resource and a public good, explicitly prohibiting the use of the internet for commercial purposes.
- That all started to change when the internet was up and running smoothly in the 1990s, and corporations finally started to see some commercial value in it.
- In the early '90s, thanks to American political leaders of both parties and without public debate, Congress passed legislation that more or less handed the internet over to commercial interests.
- The key rationale political leaders gave for commercializing the internet was that it would open up competition and spur innovation and economic growth, all to the benefit of democracy and the American people.

- This rationale seemed to be validated when the American economy suddenly began to boom in the mid-1990s after several years of recession, powered by explosive growth in internet stock values.
- But it would turn out that what was being hyped as a great development for the American people wasn't viewed so positively by the phone and cable monopolies at the time.

## **V. Making the Internet Safe for Capitalism**

---

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What was the ARPANET? Why was it launched, for what specific purposes, and who was behind it?
2. What role did private corporations play in building the internet from the ground up until the 1990s? What role did the government – and public, taxpayer money – play in building the internet from scratch?
3. How did government policy shape the direction of the internet until the early 1990s? When and how did government policy change? What were the main reasons given for this change? And what role did the public have in these decisions?
4. Why does McChesney quote internet entrepreneur Mark Andreessen? What's the basic point Andreessen was making in this quote and why does McChesney think it's important? How does Andreessen's attitude relate to the overall question of the internet and democracy addressed in the film?
5. Why did the economic recovery of the 1990s seem to validate arguments that were made in favor of commercializing the internet?

## V. Making the Internet Safe for Capitalism

---

### Assignments

1. Read or watch Vice President Al Gore's full speech about the National Information Infrastructure, which laid out the Clinton-Gore administration's vision for the future of the internet. Write a paper detailing the key rationales Gore gave for why the administration wanted to privatize and commercialize the internet. Then examine these rationales in light of the internet today. Did any of the Clinton administration's predictions come true? Did any of them prove to be wrong? Explain in detail.

You can read Gore's speech here:

<https://clintonwhitehouse6.archives.gov/1993/12/1993-12-21-vp-gore-remarks-at-national-press-club.html>

You can watch Gore's speech here:

<https://www.c-span.org/video/?53258-1/national-information-infrastructure>

2. The question of how much the federal government should regulate media companies has been a source of contentious debate for years. This debate has been especially intense when it comes to how much or how little to regulate internet companies, especially in the wake of recent revelations that Facebook has failed to secure the personal data of tens of millions of its users.

Research the history of government regulation of US media from radio and television in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries through the internet age. What were some of the major decisions that have been made around regulation? And what are some of the major arguments that have been made as these issues have come up for debate? Finally, whose interests have most been served by media policy over the years: the public interest? Or private, commercial interests? And do you think any of this has had an effect on the democratic character of our media system?



3. Research the so-called “Dot.com Boom” of the 1990s. In the years since, this period of exploding tech stock values has come to be known as “the internet bubble.” Write a paper summarizing how the economy went from being mired in recession to experiencing an economic boom driven by rising tech stocks to the inevitable bursting of the bubble. What caused the bubble to burst? What lessons have American political leaders learned from this period, if any?

## VI. The Rise of the Cartel

---

### Key Points

- Up until the early 1990s, people relied on phone companies to communicate with each other remotely, and on cable TV companies to receive television programming.
- As a result, AT&T and Comcast, the phone and cable monopolies at the time, saw the growing popularity and accessibility of the internet as a direct threat to their continuing dominance of the telecommunications industry.
- But these telecom monopolies were able to use their extraordinary influence in Washington to consolidate their power and avoid extinction.
- First, with the approval of the FCC and the Department of Justice, they began to merge with each other, eliminating competition and forming three giant companies: Verizon, AT & T, and Comcast.
- Then, in 2002, the FCC granted the cable companies – and a bit later the phone companies – exclusive use of their wires for broadband service, ruling that they would no longer have to share their wires with anyone else. The FCC’s policy shift, which wasn’t publicized or debated, allowed these three conglomerates to divide up the Internet market between them.
- Before this decision, the cable and phone companies were required by law to rent their lines out to Internet Service Providers, who were then forced to compete with other ISPs to deliver the best service to their customers. As a result, there were dozens of ISPs competing with each other for dial-up phone and Internet access.
- The FCC decision completely eliminated this competitive market for Internet Service Providers, so that we ended up where we are today – with just three companies, Comcast Xfinity, AT&T, and Verizon, controlling virtually all access to the Internet.
- Comcast Xfinity, AT&T, and Verizon not only dominate the industry, they also don’t compete with one another – operating like a “cartel” in the classic sense of the term.

- And this lack of competition has had obvious effects on the kind of internet service Americans have access to: The US now ranks way down the list by virtually every measure of internet speed, access, and quality of service.
- At the same time, even though people in Europe, Korea, and Japan have far superior internet service, Americans pay a lot more for internet service than people in other countries.
- The monopoly power of the cartel also means Americans have a much more closed, controlled, and undemocratic Internet, as seen with the recent FCC decision to overturn net neutrality (which is the idea that the government should regulate the internet like a public utility to keep it open and prevent corporations from closing it down to maximize their profits).
- The monopoly power of the telecom cartel has also exacerbated the so-called “digital divide.” The high prices charged by the cartel of AT&T, Verizon, and Comcast has meant that the poorest Americans have little or no access to broadband.
- McChesney argues that all of these anti-democratic developments are simply the logic of unchecked capitalism in action.

## **VI. The Rise of the Cartel**

---

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Why did the internet pose a threat to the traditional phone and cable monopolies? How did these corporations respond to this threat?
2. What role did the federal government play in helping the phone and cable companies to avoid extinction and consolidate their power? What impact did the FCC's 2002 decision have on competition? What did this decision change, exactly? Do you think this change was in keeping with the capitalist ideal of competition and entrepreneurialism? Do you think it was in line with democratic principles? Why or why not?
3. How do internet access, speed, and service in the US compare to access, speed, and service in the rest of the world? Why does McChesney seem to link the quality of internet service in the US to the FCC?
4. What is the principle of net neutrality? Why are the giant ISPs like Comcast and Verizon opposed to the principle of net neutrality? What did activists achieve regarding net neutrality in 2015? What changed in 2017? Why did it change? What justifications were given for this change? How did it square with public opinion? Whether you agree with it or not, do you see this change as an example of democracy in action? Or do you see it more as the opposite – as a direct threat to democracy? Explain your position.
5. What is the digital divide? Why does McChesney say that problems like the digital divide and the movement to end net neutrality are the direct result of “the capitalist logic” that now dominates the internet? What do you think he means by “capitalist logic” here? And how does it apply to all of the other examples he gives in this section? Do you agree with him?

## VI. The Rise of the Cartel

---

### Assignments

1. Read this piece in The Guardian newspaper by Ben Tarnoff: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/nov/29/net-neutrality-internet-basic-right-america-trump-administration>

Write a paper summarizing his argument in your own words. (Use quotes from the piece to illustrate and ground your summary.) Then give your own point of view on his contention that we need to democratize the internet by turning “those ISPs into publicly owned utilities” and by transforming it “from a consumer good into a social right.”

Be sure to explain what ISPs are, how they work, and why they’re important to any discussion about the internet and democracy.

2. Research the battle over net neutrality over the past few years. Write a paper summarizing the key moments, and key FCC decisions, that have occurred over the course of this fight. And clearly explain the arguments that each side in this fight have made. Finally, give your own perspective on this debate. Where do you stand on net neutrality given the arguments you’ve seen on both sides?
3. Research the “digital divide.” Write a paper explaining what it is. Then summarize the latest data and information that’s available about it. Finally, based on your research, explain why you think there’s such a thing as a digital divide to begin with, and what it says about the claim that the internet is a democratizing force.

## VII. The Return of Big Brother

---

### Key Points

- Since the 1990s, tech and internet companies have tried to project an image of themselves as rebel companies that aim to disrupt the status quo and fight the system.
- But while the people who work for these companies, and even run them, may be about diversity, democracy, and equality on the big *social* issues of our time, it's an entirely different story when it comes to the actual business models of these internet giants.
- Like all commercialized media, the main way the internet generates money is through advertising. But there's a crucial difference between online advertising and how traditional offline advertising has worked for decades.
- Prior to the internet, advertisers would place ads on billboards, in newspapers and magazines, and on television in the hopes that the right people would show up and see them.
- But the dominant online advertising model today takes a totally different approach: surveillance.
- Rather than placing an ad on a website in the hopes you'll visit the page and see it, advertisers now track what you're doing online, put together a profile of you, and sell *that* to businesses.
- This allows companies to target you with personalized ads that match up with your online interests and habits and follow you around on the internet no matter what site you're on.
- The 2002 film *Minority Report* presented a dark vision of this surveillance model of advertising, but now companies routinely mine our personal data to sell us more and more stuff.
- Not surprisingly, online surveillance practices like these have led to charges that ad agencies are violating some of our most basic democratic freedoms, beginning with our right to privacy.

- Facebook, Google, and other internet companies have been repeatedly accused of invading people's privacy for commercial gain, most recently with revelations that Facebook was involved in the Cambridge Analytica scandal.
- But this trend is only expected to accelerate as more and more smart devices and appliances make their way into people's homes thanks to the growth of the so-called "internet of things."
- Concerns about internet giants like Facebook, Google, and Amazon turning the internet into a giant surveillance tool to sell us more and more stuff have only intensified since it was revealed that the US military and national security state have also routinely used the internet to gather personal information on US citizens.
- In 2013, NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden leaked a ream of classified documents revealing that the NSA, with the direct help of telecom and internet monopolies, gathered the personal data of tens of millions of Americans without them knowing it as part of a top-secret program called PRISM.
- The founders of this country saw these kinds of close, unchecked partnerships between private power and the nation-state – especially within the context of militarism and security fears – as a direct threat to democracy.
- McChesney quotes Madison and Jefferson on the dangers of militarism and perpetual war, and the need for a free press to guard against the fundamental threat they pose to basic democratic principles like liberty, freedom, and privacy.

## VII. The Return of Big Brother

---

### Discussion Questions

1. What sort of political image have tech companies tried to project over the years, going back to Apple's famous "Crazy Ones" ad? According to McChesney, how does this carefully cultivated public image compare to the business models these companies rely on to generate their massive profits?
2. In McChesney's view, what's the fundamental difference between online advertising and traditional print and television advertising? How do the clips from *Minority Report* and the promotional video from Clear Channel help him to make his point? Have you been conscious of this new kind of advertising in your own experiences online? If so, when did you first start to notice this trend? What do you think about it now? Do you think it's okay for companies to watch what you're doing online and gather your personal information in order to know your tastes and tailor better ads to you?
3. What is "the internet of things"? According to McChesney, when internet celebrants praise the benefits of the internet of things, what are they leaving out? And why does it matter?
4. What is the Cyber Command? What is the PRISM program? Who's running it and how has it functioned? What concerns has it raised? Who is Edward Snowden? Why is he the subject of the documentary made by journalist Glenn Greenwald and filmmaker Laura Poitras? Do Greenwald, Poitras, and Snowden believe in the internet's democratic potential?
5. How do McChesney's concerns about internet surveillance square with the concerns the founding fathers had about militarism, private power, and state power? What did the founding fathers believe was essential to safeguarding American democracy?



## VII. The Return of Big Brother

---

### Assignments

1. Research the imagery that tech companies like Apple, Google, and Facebook have used to cultivate their brands. Review ads for these companies, corporate videos they've produced, public relations statements – anything that shows a clear attempt to project a certain corporate image. Write a paper summarizing what you find. What kind of image do each of these companies seem to want to project? Then talk about this image in light of all the news stories that have come out about how these companies use surveillance and misuse people's personal data. What do you make of the disconnect between the image they seem to want to project and these kinds of revelations? In your view, what are they trying to achieve with the carefully crafted public image they put out?
2. Watch the short video “How Well Does Facebook Know You” and read the accompanying article by Brian X. Chen, called “I Downloaded the Information that Facebook Has on Me. Yikes.”

Both can be found at the New York Times here:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/11/technology/personaltech/i-downloaded-the-information-that-facebook-has-on-me-yikes.html>

Write a paper summarizing the key points made in the video and in Chen's article, then give your own perspective on all of this. How do you feel about these kinds of practices? Do you think they're dangerous? If so, how? If not, why not? What are the implications of these practices on democracy, in your view? Do you think these kinds of practices should be allowed? Is it your sense that most people get what's going on and just don't care? Or that most people don't quite understand how these internet giants operate?

Finally, if you're feeling up to it, check out the tool Facebook tool to see what data Facebook has collected on you. Go here for that: <https://www.facebook.com/help/131112897028467>

Then write up a reaction to what you find. The key here is to think about all of this through the lens of McChesney's focus on the relationship between the internet and democracy.

3. Watch the Academy Award-winning documentary *Citizen Four*. Write a review of the film focusing solely on what it tells us about the relationship between the internet and democracy. To deepen your analysis of the film, do some outside research on Edward Snowden, and debates about whether he's a patriotic whistleblower or a traitor. Also check out Glenn Greenwald's website The Intercept (<https://theintercept.com>) and see if you can find relevant information for this paper there.

## VIII. Journalism in the Age of the Algorithm

---

### Key Points

- Before the internet started to take hold in the late 1990s, the big-city newspaper was ubiquitous in the US, with two or more big-circulation newspapers in most cities.
- But today, the American newspaper is in its death spiral. There are now roughly 35 to 40 percent of the working, paid journalists there were in 1990.
- While the internet obviously contributed to this trend, newspaper companies actually started laying off journalists in big numbers and cutting staff during the '80s and early '90s, well before most people were online.
- These cuts had less to do with declining public interest in print newspapers than with big media companies moving aggressively to maintain and maximize profits by merging into conglomerates and buying up local newspapers to eliminate competition.
- In other words, American journalism was already in crisis before the rise of internet, and the reasons had more to do with the commercial basis of the US news media system than anything else. The internet simply accelerated the collapse of journalism by putting even more financial pressure on commercial media companies.
- From the late 1800s and throughout the 20th century, advertising provided between 50-100 percent of the revenue that paid for journalism in the United States. But once people realized that a free classified ad on Craigslist got more response than a paid ad in the newspaper, ad revenue for newspapers started to dry up.
- And with the rise of surveillance-based targeted advertising, newspapers have gotten even a smaller share of ad revenue.
- When the Internet was still relatively new, an advertising firm would pay to advertise on a newspaper's website, the news website would run their ad, and the newspaper would get 100 percent of the revenues, just like they would if they ran ads in their newspaper.

- But today, with the rise of targeted advertising, this same newspaper is getting only about 10 percent of the ad revenues -- because roughly 90 percent is now going to ad networks that compile personal data on us and target us with personalized ads wherever we are online rather than to content providers like newspapers or news media themselves.
- One of the great promises of the Internet from very early on was that it was going to democratize journalism by allowing ordinary people to become participants in the system, and people continue to make the claim that the internet and especially social media have led to “the democratization of information.”
- Sure enough, a recent Pew study found that more and more Americans are getting their news from social media sites like Facebook and Twitter rather than from the traditional corporate media gatekeepers.
- But while at first glance social media may seem like it’s helping to bypass big media companies and democratize information flows, this ignores how these social media platforms actually work and deliver news to people.
- In reality, sites like Facebook filter the kinds of news and information people see by using the same surveillance tactics and algorithms they use to target people with personalized ads.
- As a result, people on these sites only see stories in their news feeds that agree with their viewpoints, effectively enclosing them in a kind of ideological filter bubble.
- The impact of fake news during the 2016 election only made this problem worse.
- According to McChesney, the problem isn’t the Internet itself but the commercial logic that now dominates it, making it more important than ever to ask whether it’s a good idea for democratic societies to be relying on *corporate, commercial* media for their journalism to begin with.
- Two influential annual studies that look at the state of democracy around the world seem to indicate that government-subsidized journalism is more free and suited to democratic societies than the strictly private, commercial-based media system that dominates in the US.

- “The Democracy Index,” published annually by the highly respected British magazine *The Economist*, has repeatedly shown that the US is falling way down the list of the most democratic, anti-authoritarian nations in the world.
- And a different annual ranking put out by a respected conservative organization called Freedom House has repeatedly found that the most uncensored, freest, and best press systems in the world belong to the same countries that top *The Economist's* list of the most democratic nations.
- The point here, McChesney says, is that despite everything we’ve been taught, there’s no necessary correlation at all between a commercial, capitalist media system and a truly democratic media system.

## VIII. Journalism in the Age of the Algorithm

---

### Discussion Questions

1. According to McChesney, why did American newspapers begin to decline in the late '80s and early '90s before the internet took off? Why was the newspaper business still profitable despite the declining number of papers? What's the point McChesney is making here? Is he saying the internet isn't responsible for the decline of journalism?
2. As the internet has grown in popularity, what factors have contributed to the drastic decline in ad revenue to newspapers? With the rise of the internet, how has advertising changed and why has it resulted in such a dramatic drop in ad revenue? When you're online, don't you see lots of ads? Where's all that money going? And what's different about this from the past?
3. What are some of the arguments celebrants have made about the democratizing potential of the internet for journalism? According to McChesney, what do these arguments leave out or fail to acknowledge? Where do you stand on the question of whether the internet has democratized information?
4. What is a filter bubble? Why are filter bubbles problematic when it comes to news? And how does the spread of fake news relate to all of this? How, exactly, have social media platforms like Facebook helped to spread fake news? And how do recent revelations about Cambridge Analytica factor in here?
5. Taken together, what do *The Economist* magazine's rankings of the most democratic nations in the world and Freedom House's rankings of the freest press systems in the world reveal about the common argument that a capitalist media system is by definition likely to be the freest kind of media system?

## VIII. Journalism in the Age of the Algorithm

---

### Assignments

1. Research the rise of “fake news” during the 2016 presidential election and write a paper examining all of the forces that contributed to it – especially the economic forces and algorithm-driven business models that McChesney details.
2. Research the Cambridge Analytica/Facebook scandal that made news in early 2018. Summarize the key components of the scandal, explain why it caused such a stir, and detail the different roles that were played by Cambridge Analytica and Facebook. Be sure to also explain the source of this scandal, the driving force behind it. Then give your own point of view on what this scandal says about the relationship between capitalism, the internet, and democracy.
3. Watch the full video of Eli Pariser’s TED Talk on “filter bubbles” here:  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/eli\\_pariser\\_beware\\_online\\_filter\\_bubbles](https://www.ted.com/talks/eli_pariser_beware_online_filter_bubbles)

Write a paper summarizing Pariser’s main arguments in your own words. Be sure to clearly explain what he means by “filter bubbles.” Talk about the main reasons he says they develop. And summarize the specific points he makes to explain why these filter bubbles pose a threat to democracy. Finally, Pariser gave this talk in 2011, well before the 2016 election. How did his warnings about filter bubbles play out during that campaign? And what does all of this say about the internet’s impact on the democratic ideal of a free press?

## **IX. The Growing Resistance**

---

### **Key Points**

- A powerful movement is now fighting on multiple fronts to level the playing field for ordinary Americans, curb accelerating economic inequality, break up the consolidation of wealth and power, and push back against the corrupting influence of corporate money on our political system.
- The battle for control of America's media system and the future direction of the internet has emerged as one of the key fronts in this fight -- especially since the FCC made its crucial decision to tear down net neutrality.
- Thanks to the tireless work of grassroots groups, more and more people have realized that what was supposed to be a free and open digital frontier is now closing down to serve the interests of a few major players, in the process violating any known understanding of privacy, democracy, and freedom.
- While it's still not clear what kind of revolution the digital revolution will turn out to be, it is clear that it's helping to raise awareness about the growing corporate and commercial threat to democracy.



## **IX. The Growing Resistance**

---

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Why does McChesney seem to be optimistic in the face of all the assaults on democracy he details throughout this video? Do you think he's right to feel optimistic?
2. In the clips of activists protesting net neutrality, what are some of the major points the leaders of these movements make?
3. McChesney cites several polls to back up his contention that there's growing popular resistance to corporate control of the internet. What do these polls say? Which side are you on in these questions?
4. In the end, what does McChesney say the great legacy of the digital revolution may end up being? Do you agree?

## IX. The Growing Resistance

---

### Assignments

1. Research the major grassroots organizations that have been working to keep the internet open, free, and in line with democratic principles. Begin with Free Press (<https://www.freepress.net/>) and The Center for Media Justice (<http://centerformediajustice.org/>). But widen your search to other organizations that are organizing for change.

Choose one of these organizations and write a profile of it. Explain what the group does, how it started, the issues it focuses on, and the key battles it's waging.

2. Research groups that are trying to push back against the corrupting influence of money and corporate power on our political system. Begin with the group Represent.Us (<https://represent.us/>), but do some research into other groups doing similar work as well.

Choose one of these organizations and write a profile of it. Explain what the group does, how it started, the issues it focuses on, and the key battles it's waging.