

SWITCH

Volume 11
Number 1 *The Interview Issue*

Article 2

4-8-1999

An Interview with David Brin

Switch Staffs

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/switch>

Archived from http://switch.sjsu.edu/archive/nextswitch/switch_engine/front/front.php%3Fartc=255.html. Documentation of the preservation processes used for this collection is available at <https://github.com/NickSzydowski/switch>.

Recommended Citation

Switch Staffs (1999) "An Interview with David Brin," *SWITCH*: Vol. 11 : No. 1 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/switch/vol11/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in SWITCH by an authorized editor of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@sjsu.edu.



An Interview with David Brin

Switch Staffs on Apr 8 1999

issue 11

Interview with David Brin

There it was, sitting there, on the shelf of the Elliott Bay Book Co. in Seattle, its green and orange cover obnoxiously beckoning me to pick it up. I had heard a very thought-provoking interview with David Brin on NPR a couple of weeks earlier, and had never heard of him before that-but then, I have not been one to read much science fiction. And here before me was his latest book, **The Transparent Society**, - an *autographed* version, even (I've never owned anything *autographed*). How could I pass it up?

Well, reading it was quite a journey in itself-I found Brin's perspective on the surveillance issue a refreshing change from the usual discussions. Although Brin's uniquely American pragmatic approach tends to clash with our post-structural influence, we decided that-ultimately, we agree. However, as a group, we could not help but have questions about how his concepts were framed.

David Brin, a well-known science fiction author, former astrophysicist, and self-proclaimed '**loud-mouthed bastard**', answered Switch's questions in a most insightful and outspoken way. So, what did we learn from the interview? Well, that we sound much younger than we are, that we need to cheer up, to have less contempt for our ancestors and for our neighbors (except for French philosophers), and that with some care and work on everyone's part, the world's future is bright.

Switch: Do you think that the costs involved in maintaining personal privacy are greater (or could become greater), than any utility of maintaining privacy?

David Brin: Depends on whether you mean real privacy or illusory privacy. Many people want the subjective sensation of being left alone. They understand - and don't mind - that governments and corporations know all about them, as long as those forces are polite and don't rub it in. Other people are concerned about actually controlling what is known about them by others. This latter goal can be difficult, costly, and frustratingly impossible.

The third kind of privacy - the kind we may be able to achieve - comes from having an enforceable right to be left mostly alone. This can come only from protecting yourself by knowing more, rather than trying to prevent others from knowing.

S: Do you see any potential for activists to project their identities publicly in order to

challenge the many common assumptions about privacy, while simultaneously leveraging the act in support of causes that, superficially, have nothing to do with privacy?

DB: Sorry, I have no idea what this question means.

S: Along with transparency and accountability, what do you think about strategies of disinformation as either a tool for creating smoke screens that may protect personal privacy or as corporate/government tools to obscure transparency? Won't there *always* be people that either intentionally or unintentionally create disinformation?

DB: Right. So in what society will this scheme generally fail? One filled with light, in which any henchman can safely blow the whistle on conspirators? Or a society filled with secrecy, in which whistle-blowers can be intimidated or killed? You don't live in the world depicted in the movies, guys. In that world everybody's stupid, because that's how the director can keep the hero in jeopardy for 90 minutes.

Adults learn to lie only sparingly. Credibility can vanish when you are caught. And once lost, credibility is darn hard to recover.

S: The main hypothesis of your book, *The Transparent Society*, - reciprocal surveillance for accountability and the decentralization of power - sounds like it would be a good way for Western civilization to deal with the uncontrollable flow of information, but what about totalitarian governments and third world economies - how would you propose tools for reciprocal surveillance be distributed to the masses?

DB: I talk about this in Chapter 10 (Global Transparency):

"...If power elites find foreign radio broadcasts threatening, imagine how they see a new medium where data flows are greater, more flexible, and more and more difficult to monitor. We have seen how some nations seek strict control over service providers. Not idealists in the West sometimes predict that such efforts are pathetically doomed to fail, but tyranny is an old, well-developed form of governance that takes advantage of basic human drives. There is no guarantee that despots won't come up with a different type of network - one that enhances, rather than diminishes, their power.

Such efforts must be opposed but how?

...it is essential for both governments and activists in the neo-West to explain, forcefully, that we are pushing for human rights for all the world's citizens for our own safety's sake. Indeed, nations ruled by narrow oligarchies who ignore criticism from their own masses have a miserable record of making devastating mistakes and strategic blunders, such as adventurous wars. Wars they will lose..but perhaps only after wreaking havoc on the world. "

In the long run, our own safety depends on foreign powers being intelligently governed. But any society run by a narrow elite will always fall prey to dangerous illusions. History shows this. Only if the decision-making process is wide open will dissidents feel free to point out their leaders' mistakes. (Like charging toward a war.) If our opponents act wisely in their own best interests, it *will* make them better competitors. But that's fine. Better than crazy rogue states with nuclear weapons.

S: Once we've all got access to the cameras to watch the watchers, how will one make

the time to check in? It seems easy to visualize, potentially, that the ones who would be watching the watchers would be the same people who, today listen to police radio scanners (pass the potato chips please!) and watch 'Cops'. Could ubiquitous surveillance lead to techno-vigilantism?

DB: Good question. See where I talk about this in chapter 9 (Humility and Limits). How will we find the time to watch? We all may join groups that hire the handicapped to watch and listen for us! Or automation may computerize the watching... say your portable eyeglass computer does a face recognition automatically on everyone you pass on the street, letting you know the name of anyone watching you for more than a minute at a stretch! I don't know what is going to happen. But it for sure will be strange.

S: We discussed many of the items on the questionnaire we found **onyour site**. One question that was somewhat difficult to answer, however, was the first one: The Time Flow of Wisdom. It was difficult to select either of the answers - It seems that, although a society learns from its mistakes as well as scientific discoveries, we are not necessarily any more wise now than we were in the past, nor *less* wise now than we will be in the future. (...)

DB: That is really too bad. It means we've been betrayed by all the generations who worked hard to get us here, and wanted desperately for us to be better. (As I want my kids to be better than me.) It means those generations lived and died for nothing.

Fortunately, I don't share your dour attitude, or your contempt for our ancestors. I think they accomplished a lot in their struggle against darkness, and we are the result. Nearly *all* the evidence shows we are vastly smarter, wiser, and better than earlier generations... as they would have wanted us to be. Instead of just accepting the common rant that modern people are jerks, have you tried to actually do the math?

In the past, what fraction of people would have witnessed war, first hand, in their lives? Or seen their village burn? Or been raped? Now take a look at today's six billion people and do the same calculation. In this 'violent century', look at a map and count how many millions suffered, and compare the millions who have known peace.

In the past, what fraction of people would have been subject to the arbitrary whim of some overlord, without right of appeal if that overlord abused his power? Compare to today... *even in countries without democracy!*

In the past, what fraction of people would have the opportunity to get educated and compete for a position in the profession of his/her choice? Compare to today.

The list of comparisons could go on and on. But the saddest thing is how little you folks seem to hope for your children. If you feel you cannot make a better world for them, then I certainly encourage you not to have any. I suggest you try nihilism on for size. You are already halfway there.

If, on the other hand, you see reason for hope that hard work and cooperation and good will among people can accomplish wonders - as they have already done - then roll up your sleeves, join those of your elders who are fighting like mad for the future, pitch in, and work to make a better world. Your kids may be ungrateful brats who scream that you left them a garbage pit, but you'll know better, and you'll love the dour little nihilists anyway.

S: (...) In other words, it seems that the wisdom of a culture is not an expression of *what* it knows, but what it *does* with what it knows, and in the past, we have not always done the wisest things with our technological advances. We will, most likely,

continue to make mistakes, so all we can do is realize that the decisions we make about our technology are always framed by contemporary socioeconomic views and desires. Would you mind commenting on this?

DB: If you are right, we're fried. Fortunately, you could not be more wrong. Human males had nuclear weapons for 50 years and *did not use them* (after the initial horror of those first two bombs). Name one other time in history that nations showed such restraint.

S: Paul Rabinow hypothesizes in one of his writings that upon completion of the Human Genome Project (HGP), our social structure will be transformed by what we learn, and that it will affect the way we view ourselves and each other—that the discovery of certain genes could define a new social class structure. Toward the end of your book you address this issue a bit as well, but as far as the surveillance/HGP relationship, well...images from the movie 'Gattaca' come to mind, where those who cannot live up to the potential of their genes sell their genetic material illicitly to those whose genes do not reflect their potential and surveillance is everywhere. Is 'Gattaca' an example of art imitating life or vice-versa? Do you think this or something like it will ever happen?

DB: Note, that fine film actually did mention that its future society *tried* to make this discrimination illegal. It's a hopeful sign that filmmakers are starting to change their kneejerk approach—depicting civilization as automatically filled with idiots—toward a more realistic depiction of a world filled with complexity. Gattaca was excellent for reasons you perhaps don't appreciate. The hero's position was morally ambiguous. He was *wrong* to put a billion dollar mission in jeopardy with a navigator whose heart might explode at any minute, possibly endangering his crewmates. But he was *right* to try and create a situation where an imperfect person could say "look what I did, despite your stupid prejudices!"

What you fail to notice is *that* films like Gattaca exist. That they are provoking thoughtful discussion among millions. (Remember what I said about suspicion of authority propaganda, in The Transparent Society?) The Planet of the Apes films have ensured that we will *not* persecute some chimp who talks. Think about that.

Stop holding your neighbors in contempt. Many of them watch the same movies. They are almost as smart as you are, and care about many of the same things.

S: It seems that much of the illness of our society comes from living in a completely man-made world - the majority of society seems to want everything to be as predictable and controlled as possible—like Disneyworld (which Postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard, in his book, **The Illusion of the End**, claims is a hyperreal representation of American values). Extensive surveillance seems to lend itself to this. Can living in such an artificial environment be good for human existence?

DB: Blah blah blah blah blah. Nearly every catastrophe of the 20th century had its roots in French philosophy and French diplomacy. (The Treaty of Versailles? The 1919 partition of the Middle East? Driving Lenin into a corner? Indochina?)

Postmodernism is their latest curse upon us. It is a horrible practical joke. "Hey! Did you know that nothing is real and that science is just a matter of opinion?" Oh yeah? And if a bullet hits your head, can you argue it out of existing and tearing a hole in your brain?

What complete nonsense! It is believed only by fools who cannot grasp that there is an objective reality - one that can be tested and cornered.

"Plato: Our senses are defective; therefore, we cannot discover truth through experience. That chair, for instance. Despite all your gritty "experiments," you will never determine what it is. Not perfectly. Therefore give up! Empiricism is useless. Seek the essence of truth through pure reason.

Galileo: You're right. my eyesight is poor. My touch is flawed. I will never know with utter perfection what this chair is. Nevertheless, I can carve away untruths and wrong theories. I can demolish fancy "essences" and epicycles and disprove self-hypnotizing incantations. With good experiments - and the helpful criticism of my peers - I can find out what the chair is not." The Transparent Society, Page 146

Hey, I lived in Paris for two years and loved it... and I also learned not to take pompous anti-American rhetoric from people with such an egregious philosophical history. I laughed in their faces, and guess what happened? They smiled and realized I saw through the BS. At that point they dropped the joke and we started talking about real stuff.

Hyperextended Americanism? You can do a lot worse, lads and lassies. Hyperextended Americanism means hyper-tolerance, hyperenthusiasm, hyperquestioning of authority, hyper-trying new things, and hyper-inclusion of everything that can think or offer something interesting. Compare this to the vicious prescriptive philosophies of limitation offered by earlier cultures, and choose. Right on.

We've created the first civilization where fear levels are so low that people have the time and sympathy to care about animals, the environment the future... and fun. (See my chapter about the 'age of amateurs'.) And finding out what's true, not what's ideologically correct.

Hey kids, enjoy nihilism if that's what you want to wallow in, during college. They are good at it in Paris, all dressing in "the uniform" of identical black clothes with cigarettes and identical disdainful sneers on their lips. Enjoy it. But I prefer nonconformists! They aren't called 'colorful' for nothing.

S: Right on, David.



::CrossReference

last 5 articles posted by Staffs

- :: Curator's Statement** - Mar 27 2003
- :: Douglas Engelbart Transcript** - Mar 25 2003
- :: Marisa Olson Transcript** - Mar 25 2003
- :: Peter Lunenfeld Transcript** - Mar 25 2003
- :: CADRE Invitational 2002-2003** - Mar 25 2003
- :: Jan Hauser Transcript** - Mar 25 2003
- :: Margaret Morse Transcript** - Mar 25 2003
- :: Oliver Grau Interview** - Mar 10 2003
- :: Interview with Tim O'Reilly** - Mar 10 2003

:: issue 16 :: social network part II - Feb 25 2002

view all posts made by Staffs

[about](#) | [contact](#) | [credits](#) | [subscribe](#)