Our love of technology risks becoming a quiet conspiracy against ourselves

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Technological invasion. Credit: reidrac, CC BY-SA

With memories of World War I still very much on his mind, in 1935 HG Wells wrote The Open Conspiracy, which advanced a new approach to the perennial problems of human aggression, national conflict and

political inertia.

This [conspiracy](#), as envisaged by Wells, would be a revolutionary movement that reflected the new spirit of the times. "Never before" he stated in the opening paragraph, "have the conditions of life changed so swiftly and enormously as they have changed for mankind in the last fifty years."

Reading Wells today one might be forgiven for experiencing a sense of déjà vu. The changes he identified were, as are those we face today, largely the result of technological and scientific advances. The telegraph and increased communication had shrunk the world, just as the internet and digitisation has done so for us today. Yet while science forged ahead, politics and morality lagged behind. The Open Conspiracy filled the ideas vacuum left by the failures of parliamentary democracy and socialism.

Conspiracy in the open

Wells suggested that, unlike conspiracies of old, this would be a visible conspiracy grown from below rather than led from above by an elite. His conspirators were "the most sane and energetic people" – anti-militarist in orientation, actively subversive of government and traditional institutions that perpetuated the folly of tradition. They would be drawn from different disciplines: banking, finance, and the sciences – and dedicated to spreading scientific knowledge worldwide.

Wells described his conspirators as awakening from an illusion, made possible by the almost instant exchange of information and a new method of organisation that would map the activities of the whole community. At the centre of the Open Conspiracy was "the brain of the modern community, a great encyclopedic organisation, kept constantly up-to-date and giving approximate estimates and directions for all the

material activities of mankind" – which rather sounds like a view of "big data" as seen from the 1930s.

Has Silicon Valley become a dystopian vision of a post-privacy future? Credit: codex41, CC BY

Out with the old…

The similarities between Wells' description of his new world order of peace-loving creatives and today's technological-utopian culture of the Bay Area, California is striking. Indeed, all that is missing from his account is a description of the networked personal computer (and the benefits of organic farming). The anti-government stance, the

commitment to peaceful causes, the celebration of technical expertise, the crucial involvement of private enterprise and commerce, the critique of education and the belief that more knowledge (about everything) will solve the world's most pressing issues far better than any government – such claims read like a [Silicon Valley manifesto](#).

But I've started to wonder why so many people outside the charmed circle of technology innovators in Silicon Valley, seem willing to embrace its vision – especially when it undermines something as fundamental as the liberal democratic right to personal privacy. I've found that thinking in terms of a technological conspiracy helps pinpoint the politics involved, whatever the technologists might claim.

Today, it is not uncommon for leaders of major technology corporations to speak about the inevitability of a [post-privacy world](#). Politicians frequently offer the not-very-reassuring cliché that: "if you have nothing to hide you have nothing to fear". Dave Eggers' novel The Circle conjures the deeply Orwellian-sounding phrase "Privacy is Theft" to describe a dystopian vision of the near future. So what is happening?

A subtle rewriting of the rules

In my time working at the [Conspiracy and Democracy Project](#) at Cambridge University I've come to the conclusion that this is a technological conspiracy, rather like Wells' Open Conspiracy, that is very visible and highly participatory. It produces a whole set of lifestyles and descriptions that challenge conventional wisdom and traditional structures of power.

Evangelical in their claims about the future, today's technologists encourage us to embrace their language and ideas, use them to describe ourselves and our actions and condemn those who are not sufficiently tech-savvy to irrelevance.

But technology is not neutral – and neither is code nor numbers. There are human, subjective judgements lurking behind the apparent objectivity offered by algorithms and the "user-friendly" operating systems. These technologies perform almost magically, while at the same time enabling all sorts of organisations to easily collect information about us, something that makes it that bit easier to usher in new forms of surveillance and control.

Putting technology in its place by recognising the political and social factors that support its vision is a step towards recognising our complicity in this conspiracy against ourselves and, perhaps, towards reclaiming our right to be left in peace.

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