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Email

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Mass Observation Directive for Summer 2015

Part 1: You online

It seems that the Internet is now part of daily life and is a tool that many people use to socialise, represent themselves and communicate with others. This Directive explores your attitudes towards identity and the Internet.

Please note this directive is NOT aimed just at people who spend time on the Internet or social media, but all of you. We want to know what you think – or imagine – about identity and the Internet, whether or not you have ever been online. Please use the questions below as prompts...

First task

Please list the first five words or phrases that spring to mind when you think about the term “Internet and online communities.”

I feel like I'm cheating in my very first submission. The Internet is a huge, huge part of my life. I feel compelled to give a very sophisticated answer (as if anything less would do an injustice to my relationship with the internet), and really struggle to clear my mind in order to allow 5 words or phrases to bubble up. I will try.

Data. Amazement. Infinite space. Mine. Alienation.

Do you use the Internet?

Do I!

If you do, please write about your first memories of using it. What sites were important to you when you first explored the online world?

I first became aware of the internet in either 1992 or 1993 as a young child, reading about it in computer game magazines. I was an avid offline-gamer, the type of which is rare these days (as is the concept of offline at all...). I remember seeing a screenshot of a web browser, perhaps Mosaic or an early version of Netscape. I didn't quite know what I was looking at. I could understand the idea of a computer talking to another computer – I had read about connecting computers with serial cables, other such local “networking” technology – but the mechanics of a global network were beyond me. All I remember is thinking it was so cool that you could pull up something on your screen that *wasn't in your computer*.

I eventually got online in 1995. It was a Christmas present. My dad obtained a subscription to the local Internet Service Provider (truly local – it was named after a large city about 10 miles from our home), and a floppy disk containing its install software. He packaged it up in a huge box to make it look like something giant and physical – just a floppy disk taped to the inside of an otherwise empty, cavernous box. But the box was actually tiny compared to the magnitude of what was inside.

Even though I was only 12, I had been the one lobbying to get online, and I had used a trump card: “Dad, did you know that if we get online, we can watch live pictures from NASA that the Galileo spacecraft is sending back from Jupiter?!”

My dad must have been proud that I was taking an interest in such a clearly educational topic – and

it was genuine interest! I have always been fascinated by astronomy and space exploration. And you can be sure that - as soon as we had installed the finicky PPP software on our family Macintosh and dialled a pay-per-minute local number using our 28.8K modem – the first website we visited was nasa.gov*. I don't remember how we knew the URL. We used Netscape 1.0 as our browser. The sound of the modem is etched in my mind. It must be 15 years since I last heard a modem, but I can almost whistle its tune.

*(Actually, perhaps this is not technically true; the first webpage we visited was probably the home page of the ISP, which may have been the jumping-off point from which we found nasa.gov. If there were search engines then, we weren't aware of them. Finding your way around the mid-90s internet was a matter of finding links, jumping from one island of links to the next, like a frog across lillies on a pond.)

So we got onto nasa.gov and downloaded images of Jupiter. It was exciting stuff – waiting for the image to load, line by line, filling in down the page as the lights on the modem flashed. It felt like we were in the future, like we had acquired a great power. Nobody else I knew had the internet. Suddenly, I had access to this incredible resource. I think it gave me something of a superiority complex, knowing that my friends from school would go home and play their local lives while I could go home and be part of this global phenomenon.

Did I use it to help with my homework? Perhaps a few times. I used it more to look up information on computer games and converse with other fans in America.

Re-reading the Directive, I notice how it has a very 2015 ring to it because it talks about sites. These days, the web reigns supreme and web sites are what people think of when they think of the internet. True, there's email too, and that hasn't gone away, but in 1995 there were other internet services that were popular besides the web. I am thinking primarily of Usenet, or newsgroups. This used to be a first-class offering of ISPs. "Access to x thousand newsgroups!" was a big selling point. Nowadays, Usenet is a faint echo of its former self, killed by spam and subsumed into the web, into forums and aggregators.

I was a big reader of a particular newsgroup, for a particular computer game, and an immature, childish contributor, showing my youthful arrogance. This game in particular was part of a long-running series, the latest version of which has only just been released within the last year. I own a copy but as an adult I no longer have time to play it. I yearn for the day when I can truly kick back, with buckets of free time like I had as a child, and explore this game again. It too has been a big part of my life. Perhaps I will pick it up again when I retire.

I also made web pages. I had a site on GeoCities, which has since been shut down. Although it was guerilla-archived by some dedicated people, my subsite had long since evaporated through neglect. My site was all about – you guessed it, another computer game. I recorded videos of me and my brother playing it and uploaded them to the site. They weren't videos in the modern YouTube sense, but small files containing the keystrokes pressed while playing, which somebody could play back on their copy in real time, to reproduce the way I had played the game. It was a clever approach – designed by the creators of the game – as computer hardware of the time struggled enormously to

do anything with video, which was viewed as strictly-Pro territory.

I could probably go on for hours talking about my memories of the early internet. About the experience of upgrading to Netscape 3.0 (too slow, computer wasn't powerful enough for it!), about the way web pages all had grey backgrounds, and the links were always blue, and visited-links were always purple, and about how I had to wait until after 6pm to use it so that the phone calls were cheaper, and about how I had to ask permission from my Mum or Dad each time, and ...

The internet has been a huge part of my life.

If you don't use the Internet, please write about why you have avoided it and say if you find it difficult not being online.

These days, I do find it difficult not being online! OK, that's a bit of a joke. But I'm only ever offline when on a foreign holiday, and even then rarely, as most places we go have WiFi. A ship in the middle of the ocean for a couple of days is the most offline I've been in the last 10 years. There was a time when being on holiday meant genuinely being offline for two weeks at a time. And I remember coming home from that being like re-connecting with your world and having a big catchup. But the need for that catchup is becoming rarer – as nowadays I'm rarely ever behind.

Daily routines and practices

When and where do you use the Internet today? On what devices? Do you ration your Internet usage or that of your family? What sites do you regularly use?

Have you ever completed a course to help you use the Internet or a computer? Tell us about this.

Do you use any apps or “wearable technology” that try to influence your behaviour? For example, to help you diet, manage a health problem, run faster, concentrate better, etc.? Do you prefer sites that connect you to a community or do you prefer to go it alone?

I use the internet on my desktop PC, at work, on my mobile phone, and occasionally on my laptop. I guess I also use it on my Samsung “smart” TV in the guise of the YouTube app. And my Sky box is also connected to the internet, so watching On Demand uses it too.

I normally look at my phone in the morning soon after waking up, checking to see if I have any emails, texts or other types of alerts. If I have a spare moment between getting the household ready, I might check a few news websites. I then read my phone on the train to work, and I even use it sometimes while walking from the train station, though I am always careful to look at it only when there is a safe empty upcoming section of path ahead, and never while crossing a road. I see many others around me doing the same thing (not all as safety-consciously as I). Us phone-walkers seem to have developed certain peripheral vision skills. Numerous times I have looked up just in time to see another phone-walker coming towards me, also looking up – both of us just in time to avoid a head-on collision!

I sometimes continue using my phone as I settle into my desk at work, waiting for my computer to get ready. My phone then generally takes up residence in my pocket until the evening, save for the occasional trip to the loo where it comes out and again provides valuable reading material.

On the way home I use it on the train again, and when at home I sometimes use it to answer practical questions – for example, looking up a recipe while cooking, or doing fact-finding during a conversation with my wife (e.g. we might be planning a trip away and we want to know if a certain attraction is open on a certain date).

I will use my phone at night in bed sometimes. If I can't sleep, I'll read it while my wife sleeps.

I carry my phone with me nearly at all times. I occasionally get low-battery-anxiety, but have incorporated charging time into my normal routines smoothly enough that this isn't really a big deal.

I use my phone for almost everything it can be used for. Its main duty is as an internet terminal. It tells me anything and everything! Secondly, it's my camera. It isn't as good as my DSLR but it's with me all the time, and there's a saying: the best camera is the one you have with you. Thirdly? It's my portable music player, my calculator, my calendar, my inbox, my picture of wife and child as wallpaper, my reference tool, my clock (I don't wear a watch; haven't for maybe 6-7 years?), my notebook and my audio note recorder. Its AMOLED glow is even the candlelight by which I come up to bed at night, not wanting to wake baby by turning on the main lights.

Samsung marketed it as a life companion, and while I hate that phrase and I have come to strongly dislike Samsung, the phrase is pretty gosh darned accurate.

But although my phone wins in terms of number of hours during which it is my primary go-to device for internet access, it's a close run with other devices with regards the total number of hours spent online. I usually get at least an hour in the evening on my desktop PC, most of which is online. And all day long at work I am at a computer (well, less so these days than when I was a developer and had fewer meetings to attend). I visit only a small subset of the internet at work though, as most of the interesting part is either blocked (e.g. Gmail) or so non-work-related that I couldn't justify browsing it. At work I use the intranet more than the internet, which I reserve for looking up basic facts and definitions, occasionally for technical guidance, or to read brief background on a topic.

Rationing?

I don't ration my own usage. I probably should. Or at least I should ration what kinds of things I use. I spend more time aimlessly getting low-level amusement from Reddit than I should – I often spend half an hour clicking through kind-of-interesting things and then wonder where the time went. I regret that I didn't spend the time more productively – even just reading something useful rather than something amusing. But I guess I spend so much of the day being (or attempting to be) productive that being aimless for a while is winding down. I don't play games any more. Maybe I should.

A lot of the time I spend online is time that I would otherwise not be able to make great use of. The aforementioned train journey. Sitting on the loo. Waiting for something. So I don't feel the need to ration myself, just to better prioritise.

As a technologist, I read standard geeky websites. Ars Technica, Hacker News (which, for the uninitiated, I must stress is naff all to do with helping people break into computers; more the

opposite), Reddit, and the BBC News website for a dose of normal news. I make huge use of Wikipedia, and have donated to it (in the past, I spent a not-inconsiderable amount of time editing it too). I read manuals of software that I use. I read blogs that get linked to on the aggregator sites (but actually I read more comments than original articles; part of this is that a *lot* of webpages run like dogs on my phone with its old browser and old CPU. I find that the headline plus the commentary gives me an appropriate level of awareness of the topic being discussed. Another contributing factor to me doing this is that most articles on any given subject are of pretty mediocre quality, and it's more interesting to read what people have to say about the subject than about the article.)

Running down the Firefox awesomebar to see what websites I regularly use, I note Anandtech (reviews of computer hardware), and... actually that's it for the regular list.

XKCD should be on there but I only read it on my phone, 30 seconds at a time.

I use Stackoverflow and the Stackexchange network for problem-solving.

I keep up on camera news on DPreview.

I use mobile banking apps rather than websites on my phone, but on the desktop PC I use the websites for several banks.

I use YouTube to obtain the occasional music track or watch far too many back-to-back episodes of Peppa Pig with my daughter.

There is a very long tail of other miscellaneous websites that I use occasionally. This long tail is the bit of the internet that I think of as the real internet. All the sites I mention above are just fancy ways of finding the real content.

I still maintain a website myself, largely concerned with publishing photos (I have more than 100,000 online, all organised along many dimensions, though with varying levels of metadata applied). I used to have a more blog-oriented site up, but I let it lapse just over a year ago. I'll bring it back one day, perhaps. Right now I'm more interested in spending my time generating content than in publishing it. To that end, I recently started a new blog on a very mainstream blogging service, as opposed to my fully bespoke prior attempts. I could go way off topic writing about this point so I'll leave it there; also to avoid getting too deep into personally identifiable territory.

Somehow I have managed to write more than a whole page answering this question without mentioning the elephant in the room. I use Google. Of course I use Google. Some might say Google uses me. Gmail, Google Calendar, Google Search, Blogger, Maps and Hangouts. Google knows an awful lot about me.

I have never taken a course to teach me how to use the internet. I think I just worked it all out for myself, reading magazines and websites. The internet is remarkably self-documenting, if you know how to look for information. I have taken many courses on various aspects of computer technology, largely in connection with my job, and largely of a deeply technical, esoteric, and commercial variety. Things like learning advanced programming of a proprietary piece of statistical analytics software, or courses on enterprise IT architecture.

On health apps...

I used to use an app designed to log my weight and food intake, in an effort to lose weight, but I couldn't keep using it as I found it slow and limiting. I eventually settled on a generic logging app which allows me to define categories in which I am interested in recording log entries (weight, food notes, my timesheet for work, general notes, health notes, when I last had a haircut, when I had a headache, ... and from time to time little projects like logging the arrival time of buses to report patterns of lateness to the local newspaper (this was a project of theirs!)). This app is slick and fast to use, so I use it. It also makes it easy to export the database of log entries, which is important to me. I cannot bear to use software where I put data in without a hope of ever getting it out again – the dreaded vendor lock-in.

When I was training for a marathon, I used a few running apps, including a game that you played by putting in earphones and having it tell you a story about a zombie apocalypse in which you have to run to escape mobs of zombies – sort of motivating, but not quite atmospheric enough to make you believe it enough for it to really work!

I use Google Fit to count steps.

I have lots of ideas for apps that I *would* use for self-enlightenment-through-logging but I've never found the time to either create them or get them made.

To the final part of this section of prompts: you've probably guessed it, but I'm not the world's most social animal. For me, the internet is an escape from people as much as a way of connecting with them.

Communities and social networking sites

Are you a member of any online communities? Or forums? Or review sites? What do you get out of it?

Do you use social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn? Which ones and how regularly? What do you use them for? Do you use the sites for the purpose they were built for, or for a different function (for example, using Instagram to keep a food diary)? Do different sites “feel” distinct from each other? Have you left any sites, if so, for what reason? If you don't use (any or particular) social networking sites, why not?

Who do you imagine are typical users of social networking sites?

Have you experienced or heard any stories about people misbehaving on social networking sites? Please give details.

I have accounts and pseudonyms on many websites, but on few would I consider myself a member. I'm not connected enough to the people to feel a sense of belonging. The closest any website came to that was perhaps Metafilter, which I stopped using a few years ago. It's very USA-centric and is big into the liberal-conservative culture war they have going over there. I became somewhat weary of every topic degenerating into a political shouting match.

I have Stackoverflow and Hacker News accounts which have a moderate level of “karma”. I get some level of warm fuzzy feeling out of people upvoting my comments and accepting my answers. I think I have a basic desire to be helpful, and to want to feel like I've solved a problem and given the right answer – or, perhaps, just to be right.

I've got a Facebook account, and I do occasionally try to get into the whole social networking thing. I've got a few hundred (maybe?) people listed as friends, but I quickly lose enthusiasm for Facebook when I see how unengaging most of my friends' lives are! At the moment, it's a lot of 30-somethings publishing a persona and announcing positive life events (and cracking wry humour at mildly negative life events). Little real conversation. It's still a useful communication medium; my wife and I used it in collaboration this week to organise a visit from another friend. It's not a completely hollow pursuit.

What I do find alienating is being part of an older wave of internet users who have never quite got comfortable with the practices of modern web services like Twitter and Snapchat. I don't have that have-to-follow mindset that makes Twitter alive; I'm as likely to want to read and respond to something 3 months or 3 years after the fact. I just don't have a use case for the immediacy of tweeting. I do actually have a Twitter account, and have tried it occasionally, but I keep the account just to reserve a preferred pseudonym.

I guess this must be what my elders feel when they see the speed and frenetic pace of development of the tranche of the internet that *I'm* used to.

Maybe one day these Snapchat kids will look aghast at *their* kids using virtual reality or intelligence-augs or some other scary new technology.

I can't comment too deeply on the feeling between different social network sites as I don't use them enough. Facebook and Twitter feel like they are the mainstream. It's their icons that I see painted on the bottom of adverts. I think Instagram also sometimes gets an icon. The rest are just fly-by-night dotcom-busts waiting to happen. Facebook feels very personal – everything there is about my friends (except the ever-increasing advertising). Twitter is very impersonal. Whenever I see links to tweets, they seem to be full of syntax. @this, #that, [http://whatever](#).

I imagine that *everyone* is a user of Facebook. Twitter, less so – technologists, socialites, celebrities, paid-microbloggers, ...?

Misbehaviour? Well, I did once block a school “friend” from Facebook due to his escalating racist and misogynist comments. I've heard stories in the news about people posting ill-advised statements online that made it back to their employer. I don't think I recall anything like that amongst my friends – that I've heard about. When I was younger I was very much into misbehaving online, or perhaps just cheerleading and laughing about those who did, on IRC channels.

Your identity

Would you/do you use your real name and face online? Do you use aliases? Is “who you are” the same across different Internet sites? Has this ever caused any problems?

Do you worry about impersonation and identity theft online? Have you, or has anyone you know,

experienced this?

Are you bothered by the idea of governments and corporations accessing and storing personal data? What do you feel about online advertising? Is it different than how you feel about spam or junk mail?

I use my real name when payment is involved, such as Amazon, or booking travel, or “official” things like applying for my passport and drivers licence, where I probably couldn't get away with using a fake name! Generally where there has to be a connection back to my real life identity I accept that I have to use my real name.

But if there is no *need* to connect real life and virtual life, then I don't. If I want to post on a forum, I will normally create an account using a pseudonym, and as few personal details as I can get away with. I see very little advantage to providing my real name. There are a lot of bad actors out there who are gnawing at the edges of information leaks, desperate to build up your profile so they can steal your identity. So yes, I do worry about identity theft online.

It worries me having to deal with companies who I know won't treat IT security as a priority. I know it's only a matter of time before they get hacked and their database leaked. Again I try to give the minimum possible personal information.

Although I use different names, I am still the same personality. I don't act differently or put forward differing views based on what account I'm signed in as (i.e. no sockpuppetry). Sufficiently advanced stylometry could probably connect my various pseudonyms, should they come together under the control of an entity that way inclined. (There is a near-100% chance that this will happen one day. Nothing is ever deleted any more, so it is inevitable that at some point, a bored history student will download AllTextEverWritten.zip and run it through graph mining software running on computers that are beyond today's wildest fancies).

Only one person I know has suffered identity theft; a colleague at work had his bank account drained by someone in Texas. Otherwise I have no personal experience of it.

I am tremendously bothered by the way my personal data is used and abused by corporations and governments. The latter have absolute sovereign power to do whatever they please (within the bounds of a very flexible definition of democracy). So they are the primary “enemy” of information security. I say enemy, because as far as the National Security Agency of the USA is concerned, I, being British, am a foreigner, and am therefore fair game. Never mind that I am generally a supporter of the USA and hope for the special relationship to continue. Never mind that I share many of the values and aspirations of America and its people. Simply because of my place of birth, that agency sees fit to intercept my email, listen to my phone calls, and grab absolutely anything else it can get its hands on – treating me as a potential terrorist to be monitored. I have no doubt GCHQ does exactly the same thing.

There was a time when I, cypherpunklike, believed that encryption was the answer. The way to fight back. Now I know this is futile. They would just outlaw encryption, and send in men with

guns. They will take away general purpose computing if they have to. No, the answer is to maintain a population that is vigilant against these evils - educated and willing to oppose malignant centralised controls.

I will quote from Edward Snowden:

"Arguing that you don't care about the right to privacy because you have nothing to hide is no different than saying you don't care about free speech because you have nothing to say"

Now, corporations are a creation of, and subordinate to, states. I worry about them less, because their goals are more transparent – to make money. For all the sins of corporations, they don't generally *try* to kill and oppress people the way governments do. My main worry with corporations is as I mentioned above – that they will be incompetent, and allow my data to leak to unauthorised third parties, typically scammers and crooks. Sadly, incompetence is often thrust upon them as government security agencies demand companies share information held about their private customers. None of the big web names (Google, Microsoft, Facebook, Apple, ...) are immune to a subpoena, and are probably not immune to mass ingestion of data via Room-641A-like exfiltration to Nation State Adversaries.

Online advertising is a difficult one. On one level, I accept that it funds a lot of good things. I don't block adverts. But I don't go back to sites that have intrusive advertising (Flash, animations, videos, sound, offensive clickbait, the list of ways in which advertisers can be scumbags goes on). And I do think there is too much advertising in the world. Certainly too much that preys on human frailty, ignorance and emotional weakness. Predatory advertising is like a digital mugging, convincing those who can least afford it to part way with cash they don't have, to buy things they don't need. I consider myself highly media literate and thoroughly inoculated to overt advertising, but on a deeper level I am concerned at getting subliminal exposure to branding, native advertising, astroturfing, layering, fake reviews and other forms of advertising that can get into your brain via the back door.

Spam hasn't bothered me for many years as Gmail's spam filter is almost perfect.

Has the Internet changed your attitudes towards friendship, romance and sex? What about money? Are there some topics that you would tell Mass Observation, but you wouldn't put or discuss online? Please give details.

I have never had a lot of friends, preferring a few good friends to many acquaintances. I don't know if the internet has changed this as I've been on the internet for more of my years than not. Romance and sex? Well, I'm certainly far more enlightened about both than I might have been if I were relying on school sex education classes. I met my wife nearly 15 years ago and we've been totally solid and faithful so I have been out of the whole seeking-phase for a very, very long time. I remember online dating being considered strange, for weirdos only (a bit like the internet itself). I think it's much more normal now, and is possibly the most sensible way for people to meet with properly matched intentions.

Likewise money. I became internet-literate before becoming money-literate, so it's just a normal

part of finances for me. Online banking, mobile payments, comparison websites, investment strategy – I don't know how people can run their finances without the internet!

There is nothing I would tell Mass Observation that I wouldn't put online, because as far as I am concerned, this is online, just with a time delay. Perhaps the exception is where I am answering simply because somebody has asked. If nobody had asked me these directive questions, I probably would not have taken the time to blog the answers.

Memory and imagination

Have you used the Internet to research something from your past? How was this experience?

The Internet is only 25 years old, how do you think it will influence society and personal identity over the next quarter century?

Has there been an event in your life that wouldn't have happened without the Internet?

I've used genealogy sites. I've even written genealogy software (for personal use).

When performing searches online, I found it remarkable that some records that I would consider public are only available via paid subscriptions. Things like birth, death and marriage records. I can't understand why these public documents aren't all online for free, when so much private content is.

Despite this, my searches were fruitful, and I was able to trace several generations of ancestors back to northern England and Scotland. I found it wonderful to connect with past generations – my own family, literally living in history. So little survives.

(Who says the internet is only 25 years old? TCP/IP is the core of the modern internet and dates from the 1970s.)

The internet has only just begun its influence on society. Computers will disappear. That is, they will become so ubiquitous and integrated that most people won't think about them, we will just use them. A bit like how we use electricity.

I think World War Three has already begun, and it is a cyber war. Everyday folk are already being used as pawns. Information is power, and the fight for attention, for ideas, and for communication domination, will escalate. There will be a "geneva convention" on information.

Almost all the events in my life would not have happened without the internet! Perhaps the most significant to me:

I mentioned my wife earlier. We met nearly 15 years ago, but as friends at university. We didn't get together as a couple until later, after going our separate ways. If it wasn't for the internet, we wouldn't have kept in touch enough to meet back up when our paths once again crossed.

Media

What is the difference between: A letter and an email? A blog and a diary? A video chat (Skype/FaceTime) and a phone call? Tweets and text messages?

Do you present yourself differently on these formats? Please give examples.

A letter is a work of art. It takes time and effort in a way that an email does not. Sending a letter, particularly a hand-written letter, says something about your commitment to communicate. I send letters very, very rarely. I think the magic comes from the handwriting and imagery that is possible in a letter. And from the physicality of delivery. If an email made your letterbox flap, and placed a large visible reminder of its presence on your floor, it might be halfway as impactful.

Perhaps one day when everybody has digital paper that can record high-fidelity handwriting, and every household surface is a digital display, it will be possible for electronic communication to become part of your world in the way that a letter is.

A letter is also enormously more private, as it is not subject to scanning or indexing or interception (except in the gravest circumstances).

Having said all that, the purpose of communication is usually not to be artistic, or dramatic, or to invoke nostalgia. It's usually just about getting a message across, and that is where email shines. I sometimes send my Dad email while walking to work. It takes 30 seconds. It's a piece of contact in our relationship that couldn't have happened without email. In that sense, email is vastly superior, as it contributes to the project of keeping us all talking.

A blog is a publication. It might be newspaper-like, or diary-like, but it's nearly always public. I think a diary is necessarily a more private affair, but only for a time. I think very few diaries are written with the intention of being *truly* private. I keep a diary, and I know that it's very likely my descendants will trawl through my belongings, find it, and read it – when I'm gone.

I think tweets and texts are a little similar, the distinction being drawn on privacy lines. A tweet is intended to be a broadcast to anyone and everyone – not even limited to a circle of friends like on Facebook. A text though is normally one-on-one. I send hundreds of texts to my wife each month. Usually just little status updates that help us work together more efficiently. Things like “I'm on the 1730 train”... “OK, meet at nursery.” Some people tweet this kind of thing, and I can't understand why! It's like privacy doesn't matter to them *at all*. Or perhaps they know that their conversation is a drop in a noisy ocean, and only the algorithms will read it?

Our household uses Skype all the time, as we have family abroad that we would otherwise see infrequently. I don't like Skype as a piece of software; the client is buggy, the company is Microsoft (complete with US-government wiretapping), and the protocol is closed and has poor support for cross-device message history (sometimes my brother sends me a message on Skype and I don't get it because I didn't check my “Skype inbox” on the right device).

Skype to us represents family. It's free, and it's as close to in-person as technology will currently allow. Phone calls seem formal and distant by comparison. And expensive too!

I don't think I do present myself differently between formats, other than pseudonymous blogs, where I am less guarded.

A Task

Please search your own name (remember not to tell us what this is!) on Google (or a search engine of your choosing). Tell us what you think about the results. How does it make you feel?

My name is very common; I'd be lucky for any of the top 1000 results to be about me. Actually, quite the opposite: I feel very lucky that none of the top 1000 results are about me! It's a nice privacy filter that not everybody gets. I actually considered giving my daughter a common, un-Googleable name so that she too may enjoy this. But I don't think this is a hugely effective long-term strategy, as machine-learning will improve search results to the point that needles can easily be extracted from haystacks.

Part 2: Dear 16 year old me

Write a letter to yourself at 16 and share any words of guidance, comfort and advice to your younger self...

Please start by telling us a little about you at 16. What were your hopes and dreams? Has your life turned out how you expected it to? Do you still share the same ideals with your 16 year old self? If not, are there any that you wish you had retained? Is there anything you would warn 16 year old you to avoid doing? Or is there anything you regret not doing? Are there any decisions, choices or actions that you'd like to change? Or any moments that you'd like to encourage you in the past to savour? What have been the key moments in your life so far?

At 16 I was an arrogant brat. I was clever, and knew it, but that made me lazy. I didn't need to work hard at school (or even university later on) so I was *very* late to the habit of hard work and getting things over the line. To this day I'm a great starter, weak finisher.

At the time I think I hoped to conquer the world in some respect – not literally, but to be a great Something. Video game designer. Inventor. Activist. Anarchist. Web entrepreneur. Builder. Journalist. Anything and everything! I was into extropianism (although didn't yet know it by name). I had a wild energy and sense of invincibility.

With time and hard knocks this has been tempered. I am calmer, with a cooler head, and take pleasure in the little things, in slow progress, in solid foundations and in considered words. I am a husband and a father, with responsibilities. I am The Man that I would have stuck it to. In many ways, I am the oil in a machine – a machine that I did not design. But I see the great push and pull, I feel its cosmic wisdom, and am content to be excellent oil – on the one condition that my time on Earth will not be wasted or forgotten. It is work to ensure *that*.

So not much of 16-year-old-me's hopes and dreams are left. But it's hard to recommend doing anything differently. There are many things in my life which I feel hugely blessed to have; things which I might not have had I chosen a different path. Swings and roundabouts. Green grass on the other side. The butterfly effect. No, I would not counsel changing the future.

My personality is now quite conservative and resistant to change. There's every chance I could have had a dramatically better life that I should *still* be striving for (I'm not that old yet!) - something radically different to what I have now. I'm just afraid of losing something I have for the promise of something I *might* get (having a mortgage will do that to you!).