



REASONS TO BE CHEERFUL

Words Joshua Bullock
and Alex Smith

We are moving along swimmingly. Not as quickly as science fiction imagined, but new perception-changing technologies connected to the Internet are accelerating the progress that Man's discovery of fire and the Infinite began. In the bleak daily chorus of events and tragedies that mark our world of imperfect mortals, it is hard to believe in an unintended, inexorable march towards a society of total equality, harmony and plenty. But we are on it. I can't give you timeframes, can't tell you what halfway looks like and I can't advise on a quicker way of getting to the destination. A solution comes from a shift in perspective that can't reverse itself. Sometimes that solution seems so absurdly simple it takes time for people to persuade themselves round to it. But when they know, they know. This world doesn't work for everyone, so it works for none of us. Walk with me.

Let's say that in the next 100 years we can work anywhere with sockets, that 3D printers make the majority of goods near free and easily available to all. Say that nuclear fusion or an overdue global pact to work towards renewable energy means there are no more heating bills, no more wars for materials and that near unlimited power and resources for all fields of research exponentially increase scientific progress and invention. Let's suppose many things together in the coming pages. There are developments which will affect human behaviour in ways you cannot now conceive, in the same way your grandfather during the Second World War couldn't have imagined the frustration of pornographic pop-ups interrupting a game of Angry Birds. Further epiphanies will shake the world like those of Archimedes, Newton and Pasteur before them – just because we have the Internet doesn't mean we've entered into the end game of human endeavour. It's a tool. We still have a responsibility to ourselves and our personal liberty. Note I said ourselves, not each other. I've got a better chance of knowing what I need than you do.

In the exact reverse of *The Matrix*, technology is the means for mankind to un-enslave itself and unlock its potential to win real, lasting freedoms and a more meaningful reality. The developed world has already been released from the drudgery of many obligated tasks. As labour becomes automated, primary and secondary industry (farming, construction, manufacture) have needed fewer blistered hands to push their rocks up hills. Human beings have moved steadily towards a burgeoning service sector that deals with intangible, conceptual products: marketing, education, health, finance, communications. In this evolution, we get more doctors and teachers. But we also get more telemarketers and foreign exchange traders – pretty valueless to society, but overall progress nonetheless.

What will we do with our lives if we no longer have to leave a vacuum over the living room carpet or commute into city centres every day? Over the course of the last century, technological advances should have given us more spare time. Keynes predicted a fifteen-hour working week for the 21st-century worker back in 1930. Instead our economic system has subsumed these spare units, under the obligation of its relentless currency, into some ill-defined purpose of growth. But growth into what? Employment is now an arms race of productivity where the individual is the loser. Middle-income workers are willing to work longer hours to buy the good things in life, but also because they feel work done well is its own reward. But can earning money on someone else's terms to accumulate capital for people we don't know and whom we may never meet really be the high watermark of our professional evolution? Our growth as consumers of product has not been matched by a growth in income to purchase the goods and amenities to make us happy. We are like Tolkien's dwarves: find the gold (work hard), bury the gold (put money in banks), guard the gold (die solvent). The status quo fails even against its own flawed logic. If the best things in life are free, other necessities tend not to be in the cities we squeeze into to access our wage slips.

While the welfare system in Britain and most of the Western world now protects the destitute from starvation, the man in the street's material stake in a free-market economy has diminished rather than improved. Capital has not proved itself as democratic as the people who use it might hope. The person who sweeps Wayne Rooney's dressing room would take over eight centuries to earn a year's worth of his wages. According to analysis by the Washington Centre for Equitable Growth focusing on capital income trends through last century, in the late 1970s the highest-earning 1 per cent of families held less than 10 per cent of America's income. It now exceeds 20 per cent. Interestingly, the last time there was such an uneven spread of wealth was in the 1920s, before the Great Depression, and before the New Deal ushered in a democratisation of wealth that reached its apogee in the mid-1980s when the bottom 90 per cent earned 36 per cent of national income. Who in the political class now has the imagination and the resolve to put forward a radical New Deal for the disempowered?

Those reasons to be cheerful. More of us are working at home for a start. The first stage in opting out of a fight you can't win is walking away. More of us are configuring our lives around those other concerns too often given short shrift, like children, the environment, personal wellbeing or hobbies. For those still in education, the idea of leaving school, going straight to work in an office until retirement age then having a heart attack soon after is no longer appealing or encouraged. We are

learning how to be selfish, and the Internet is enabling us by connecting cottage industries to a vast global consumer base. Not all of us will invent Twitter but we can all be eBay merchants if we so choose.

As people transmit information to one another in ways that ignore other boundaries of territory, language and culture, learning comes quicker. New theories, research, collected data and analysis are instantly shared across the planet to enable all interested brains to think and add to the pool. The days of scholars having to travel far and wide in the pursuit of dusty tomes in crumbling catacombs are done.

At the risk of devaluing our humanity in the digital age, the information revolution means the average person 'processes' five times more information than in pre-Internet 1986. The web, 24-hour television and mobile phones have meant we are not left alone with ourselves – for better and for worse – in the same way. Stunningly, we also produce 200 times more indexable data through social media, texting and emails than when faxing and pigeon post were the main means of communication. A lot of the exponential production shared will be selfies and Ice Bucket Challenge videos, but some of it will be TED talks that put you in the front row of a lecture theatre with the world's best thinkers.

Comment and insight come instantly and bite-size in a rolling yet fragmented multimedia news environment, without the *digestif* of time. We might not be wiser in our interpretation of this Big Data, but we no longer have to wait until the nine o'clock news for Huw Edwards and the verdict, or Brian Williams at NBC. We don't have the luxury. When we are able to examine with the benefit of distance the history of our twenty-something-year-old Internet age, we will have the most intricately sourced and verifiable document available in the Indiana Jones vault of human existence.

But we need the clarity of time to know the direction this wealth of data is taking us. We need to sift it, put will.i.am or some other stooge on the pie charts to bring in the kids. Most of what we're told is the shape of popular thinking today is an exercise in digital marketing, because not even Google can prove that clicking on something means agreeing with it. Just because something has gone viral doesn't mean it is innately more worthy of interest than something else. The Internet doesn't have an algorithm that filters useful information altruistically; it bows to individual preference and vested interest. People pay for Google rankings. There will always be people who click the first three links, and there will always be the bargain hunters who continue to page 9 or 10 looking for deals.

This is to say the way we think has not become more uniform because of the Internet. A lot of music and art is self-referential and cyclical as they rework readily available forms rather than exploring new ones. As a young person walking down a London street in the Nineties I could at once identify rude boys, goths, emos, skaters, grungers by their clothes – and I was similarly judged on mine. Those tribal badges are being eroded, from deprived high-rises to privileged suburbia a regulating of clothing is happening. It's even been given a name: 'normcore'. In times to come we may crave our robust old prejudices. We shouldn't. Humans are and will be as infinitely various and bewildering as ever before. More so as they become freer to express themselves in ways above and beyond denim.

As we become increasingly self-aware consumers, what can we trust in but ourselves? If self-evident truths backed by science, like our need for renewable energy, have not yet seen their application by democratically elected governments, is it we the people, or our leaders who are to blame? Do we even believe in black and white decisions any more? Do we believe a President Bartlet can exist? Our best political commentators like Nick Robinson of the BBC talk of narratives and journeys as if politics was modern history being made by chess pieces. Obama is stalemated on the right, so he's pushing left. Ed Miliband touched a piece, so has to move it. But Ed hasn't made up his mind. Then leave him, he's done for.

Do we believe in 'just' wars? Do we believe that proper bad guys like the Nazis still exist, who don't need to be understood, only fought? How exactly does an entire state go 'rogue'? We are frustrated by the irreducible complexity of the Syrian civil war and the baffling fact that the world's richest democracy is still struggling to make free healthcare a right for all its citizens. Life isn't binary, we've learned. We're frustrated it hasn't caught up with the rationality of science and *The West Wing*.

The Palace of Westminster, which contains both Houses of the United Kingdom's Parliament, will have to be abandoned in twenty years if extensive repair work is not completed. 1920s cabling and asbestos in the passages. Bats in the belfry. Constitutional amendments in the air. English MPs not voting on Scottish Bills. Scots not voting on English bills. Europe. Them. Us. Boundaries. Nationhood. Units self-dividing and self-determining along the axis of time towards the irreducible self-governing 'one'. The individual. All powered by unstoppable information.

Perversely, the heralds of this new dawn seem lobotomised. In *Guardian* comment sections, Twitter feeds, curated online repositories of passing inanity like Buzzfeed and that humming all-licensed fool, the Reddit forum, all draw in opinion then trend its virality. But what use is this age's unending paddling pool of events, gossip, reaction and haphazardly skimmed skein of 'now'?

Well, along the fringes of TV and online news stories lies a different kind of political animus, seemingly unravelling as slowly as a Chinese epoch, but actually growing like a dragon. Its dissent is uncoordinated; the only mobs that meet in England now do it in car parks away from CCTV and well policed stadia. But pushing dissent through fibre optics scatters the wave of revolution into droplets. The results of a political argument in hashtag might not amount to much when judged historically against the heft of *realpolitik* and the storming of the Tsar's Winter Palace, but out there everyone is getting rinsed. Obama, Rupert Murdoch, Miley Cyrus, Mohammed, North Korea, Kim Jong-Un, *The*

Interview and James Franco. Once an acolyte sees Ayatollah Khamenei in a photoshopped bra that first seed of doubt in his magnificence is planted. Just imagine what Khamenei in turn has clicked on by mistake when investigating the Internet for himself. The Ayatollah is after all the journalist of Allah; he needs eyes on all evidence of His works and must have browsed. Nothing is Holy, no individual's world is impervious. The Internet works both ways. Generals still walk past chambermaids in the corridors of power, but their tedious daily realities can no longer be as safely guarded from one another online. I hope that some of what we are learning better is each other.

The traditional press lambasted the Occupy movement for being an incoherent, directionless rainbow coalition unable to effect change, but that is the most honest form of protest our times can now create. We still need campaigners to promote solutions, as we need honest journalists to judge their ideas and efforts. But mainly we need to help everyone by getting cleverer. That comes by giving everyone the Internet, pointing them at the data and allowing their inbuilt capacity for pattern recognition to take over.

We are crunching the numbers and becoming statistically smarter, if somewhat bludgeoned by facts. Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker has demonstrated from his empirical analysis of historical documents that 'the decline of violence may be the most significant and least appreciated development in the history of our species'. Battlefield deaths per 100,000 of population have dropped a thousand fold over the written centuries of human history. Before organised sovereign states, battles killed more than 500 out of every 100,000 people. In the early twentieth century, even with genocides and two world wars it was only sixty. Today the one irreducible person who dies in battle is at the end of a line of three million people who don't. An increase in peacekeeping or each person keeping their peace or both equally? You have the facts now; *you* work back from them to wherever you choose.

Becoming cleverer as a human population has meant becoming calmer. Goodness is logical. Only the skewed visions of self-interest projected from the megaphone or weaned up in hatred from our duped hearts, hurt us. More and more compelling statistics are being made for lower speed-limits, alternatives to fossil fuels, the legalisation of some crimes. While we are all still learning the wisdom that needs to come with increased information, currently the best politician for our autistic electorate is one who pushes through the change they believe is right then accepts the consequences and leaves office. The worst crime is believing there is a consensus that can be won. On February 7th, 2008, George Bush effectively created 152 billion dollars overnight to stimulate the economy at the start of the current recession. How much could we summon up from the air to package off as bonds to build the renewable energy industry we need to power ourselves? We could all vote at the ballot box on arbitrary amounts that go up in 10³: 1000, a million, a billion, a trillion. A golden fiver in a January lottery that gives the bearer the right to cash in a hospital in an area of their choosing.

Civil servants should grow fat on inefficiency, with no targets, lines sunk, pensions secure, thinking for thinking's sake. We need them drawn from radically diverse areas, physically roving the country and meeting people and we need to understand that traditional top-down educations perpetuate tradition unless they are invested with experience and imagination. And I don't mean education at school, rather the ongoing education daily existence represents. Until the current financial system of credit has finally been debunked as the chosen means for advancing the interest of every individual on this Earth, we should start choosing who gets that credit more wisely. Perhaps some form of scientific evaluation should be conducted on how much a citizen's job actually makes them happy and fulfilled. People will then have an economic imperative under this grant system to find something they actually enjoy doing, which is to all society's benefit. But these are all my fallible suggestions and should be treated sceptically. It's OK, we're heading in the right direction. Keep walking with me.

You must think I've leant back holding a key and thrown it into the night with the promise that you or your descendants will find it one day. I have. But we're moving more quickly towards its discovery – or as quickly as we should be. We're certainly moving forward because we're cross-referencing and peer-reviewing and sharing, pirating and making available the results. In fifth-century Athens the world had a democracy. Now we have close to a hundred. None have ever functioned entirely well, because there is no perfect group that can will into being circumstances that fit everyone. No Heaven I've read of in a book matched my hopes for it. But in the time between you and Socrates there were centuries without democracy. Great ideas would spark for a time and some never flared to illumination. Before underfloor heating and Common Law, good intentions were flattened by expediency and clubs.

Come now on a perceptual travelator and overtake the loping figure of mankind as he drags the baggage of bad practices and mean-spirited value systems along the last leg of his journey. It's hard to say what fraction of human history will have elapsed before this figure completes his final triumphant flight to total enlightenment. Let's say a primate with tool-making faculties and the perception of self has existed for 200,000 years. The world is 4.6 billion years old and the sun is not predicted to collapse for several billion to come. This ignorant, brilliant, auto-didactic infancy might be a blip in the lifespan of our race. We may live out billions of years in harmonious self-reliance and today's errors will form a historical lesson, remembered in the same brutish, superstitious and belligerent terms as the Black Death, slavery or Neanderthal mammoth hunts.

Even mass extinction events like an asteroid impact or nuclear winter will be surmounted by bunkers and hydroponics. As long as the virtual archive of human knowledge is stored safely and a few humans exist, then progress is still being made. There is no human life which has touched another that has been wasted. The only way a person could truly be cut off from powering human progress is if he/she managed completely to hide the passage of his/her life and death from everyone forever. Which in many ways resembles a definition of poverty.

The line we are walking is full of intervals of nine steps backwards and ten steps forward, but when we look back we can see we've come a long way. Greed and war are more potent, more explosive stimuli for human endeavour than a woolly sense of being decent to one another. But like any explosion, chaos is regulated, smoothed out, learned from. In time, we can hope that science flattens the peaks and troughs of the human line through the future. The only practical application I can safely advocate while on the travelator is to improve your behaviour to others every year you live. Split the chocolate three ways before it melts in your pocket or split it because a shared meal is good for all three parties in ways not yet empirically explained.

The Roman poet Lucretius defined the Internet and the atom in his great didactic poem *De Rerum Natura* (On the Nature of Things) in the first century BC. Noticing that even rocks were prone to unstoppable decay, he imagined that by reconstituting their eroded selves elsewhere they must have inherent in themselves before erosion the possibility of many things. That quality of everything in something that a networked connection brings us all. An unmediated, non-centralised repository of data.

And still we are confronted by the lack of levers for change. Should we enter the political process to speed this progress up? The point is perhaps that our arrival at the destination of individual liberty cannot be sped up. By unilaterally imposing your view of the world on your peers, subjects, teammates you improve your lot, but not necessarily theirs. The ripples you make in your life can be as significant or insignificant as gives you comfort, it's true that some great lives cause a squall but they are not and will never become the sea.

This progress towards a universal good result is predicated on a faith in human goodness. A belief that historical cycles trump linear progression, and that we are only ever one nuclear war, pandemic or asteroid away from a return to a hunter-gatherer existence is to deny the fact that the data and knowledge that fuel this advance are not under lock and key. They are now everywhere and reside nowhere absolutely.

Once upon a time your reasons to be cheerful were not wholly persuasive. They were given to you under the expectation of gratitude and the threat of an Afterlife withheld if you weren't. Your Gods were characters that liked good behaviour and were uncomfortable with innovation. Your reasons to be good to one another were based on guilt, reward and punishment; a ransom brokered on Earth claiming to be signed off in Heaven. The real reasons to be cheerful now are that you and Christ don't have to do anything to save the world. You don't even have to be decent to each other. You are in the hands of a progress no one knows the shape of. How that knowledge affects the short span of your consciousness is up to you.

