

Gaslit Nation Transcript

23 August 2023

“The Cory Doctorow Interview — Part I”

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[advertisements]

[intro - theme music]

Andrea Chalupa (01:00):

Welcome to *Gaslit Nation*. I am your host, Andrea Chalupa, a journalist and filmmaker and the writer and producer of the journalistic thriller, *Mr. Jones*, about Stalin's genocide famine in Ukraine; the film the Kremlin doesn't want you to see, so be sure to watch it. We are running a very special summer series called “The Future of Dictatorship: What's Next and Ways to Resist.” The series features leading voices on the front lines of understanding AI, corporate surveillance, Silicon Valley greed and more, because the dictator's playbook remains the same but the technology changes and we wanted to talk to some of these big leaders trying to understand these changes about how to protect ourselves. You could learn more about the dictator's playbook from the graphic novel from *Gaslit Nation*, *Dictatorship: It's Easier Than You Think!* And guess what? We're having a new *Gaslit Nation* Night Out. Thank you to everyone who joined us at Caveat, but we've got an all new event coming up and that will be September 18th at P&T Knitwear, an independently owned bookstore on Orchard Street in Manhattan.

Andrea Chalupa (02:14):

This time our wonderful friend, Russian mafia expert Olga Lautman will be joining me for a live taping of *Gaslit Nation* at P&T Knitwear. You can join us Monday, September 18th at 7:00 PM. The event is free. For details, go to gaslitnationpod.com and you'll see the link right on our homepage at gaslitnationpod.com. So that's 7:00 PM September 18th, P&T Knitwear on Orchard Street for a live taping of *Gaslit Nation* with Olga Laman. We'll be back with all new episodes of *Gaslit Nation* in September, including a live taping with Terrell Starr of the *Black Diplomats* podcast, reporting from Ukraine, on Tuesday, September 12th at 12:00 PM Eastern, for our supporters at the Truth-teller level and higher on Patreon. Come join us for that and drop questions in the chat. Hope to see as many of our listeners as can make it on September 18th in New York at P&T Knitwear for a fun night out. There won't be a live stream for this, but we'll record what we can and hope to share it with you on the show if it's any good [laughs]. And before we get to this week's guest, here's a quick word from our sponsor, Judge Lackey, the narrator of the new *Gaslit Nation* graphic novel, *Dictatorship: It's Easier Than You Think!*

[start audio clip]

Judge Lackey (03:29):

Want to have some fun? [bro saying “yeah” SFX] Attack the press, but use them first. [evil laugh SFX] From the morbid fascination with Hitler's trial to the tabloid frenzy over Trump's rallies, dictators rise by dominating press coverage and the best part: the press won't realize it until it's too late! Learn more in

the greatest book ever written, starring me, Judge Lackey. *Dictatorship: It's Easier Than You Think!*... Almost too easy.

[end audio clip]

Andrea Chalupa (03:57):

Cory Doctorow is a science fiction author, activist and journalist. He is the author of many books, most recently *Red Team Blues*, a science fiction crime thriller, out now, brand new; *Choke Point Capitalism*, a non-fiction about monopoly and creative labor markets; The *Little Brother* series for young adults; *In Real Life*, a graphic novel; and the picture book *Poesy the Monster Slayer*. In 2020, he was inducted into the Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Hall of Fame.

[transition music]

Andrea Chalupa [00:04:33]:

In doing research for this, I was noticing that it seemed like your Twitter account might be shadow banned. Would you say that's so, ever since Elon took over?

Cory Doctorow (04:45):

Well, it was definitely true as of a couple of days ago. There are tools that you can use to verify, for example, whether something is search banned or shadow banned. And what I was seeing was that these long threads that are a part of my daily blogging were getting about 5% of the views that they would normally get. And definitely those external tools validated that I was not coming up in searches and so on, although their infrastructure is big and weird and not well maintained, and so there were some people who were getting the in search results and it wasn't clear whether that was because there was a regional ban or because a rule hadn't propagated to all the server clusters. In any event, it made enough of a stink yesterday that today I'm definitely not shadow banned. This is the capriciousness of the platform. And more generally, a thing that I've spent a lot of time talking about lately in the context of platform decay is the role of what I call twiddling in bad platform conduct where there's just so much flexibility that digital gives you to alter the rules on the backend.

Cory Doctorow (05:48):

And you see this a lot of times with performers just tying themselves in knots trying to figure out what the rule is to make sure that the people who subscribe to you on YouTube or TikTok actually see the videos you post. And it's a bit like having a boss who docks your pay every month for having broken a bunch of rules, but won't tell you what the rules are because if you knew what the rules were, then you'd figure out how to break them without your boss figuring it out. And this is a very weird perspective from a kind of information security perspective, where in information security we're really suspicious of what's called security through obscurity; this idea that your security only works if the person you're trying to be secure against doesn't know what you're doing because then if they figure it out, then you're in real trouble, you know?

Cory Doctorow (06:29):

Cryptography works whether or not you know how the cryptography works. That's real security. And so this very brittle security through obscurity gets a pass and it drives all kinds of platform workers crazy. So there's good ethnographic literature on how Uber drivers relate to the app and how the drivers

themselves divide themselves into ants and pickers. So a picker only picks the best looking jobs and an ant takes all the jobs. And the algorithm that assigns work and then prices labor does something called algorithmic wage discrimination where two different workers will get a completely different payout for the same job. And what appears to be the case is that if you're a picker, the algorithm tries to push you to becoming an ant, which is to say the more selective you are in taking rides, the more each ride is worth. But once you become less selective, which is to say once you stop doing whatever other side hustle you have that lets you be a picker, then you start getting paid like an ant again.

Cory Doctorow (07:29):

This is a really noxious temptation to companies that are trying to goose their bottom line, especially companies whose natural growth is tapped out. You think about Amazon: Amazon's not going to sign up a bunch more Prime subscribers. They've got something like 80% penetration, right? If you're not an Amazon customer now, you're probably never going to be one, which means that the only way Amazon can make more money is by charging its customers more and paying its suppliers less. There's no more growth. Netflix, Disney, all these monopolies, they've got no more room for growth except through exploitation.

Sarah Kendzior (08:01):

In terms of Twitter, I feel like Twitter kind of stands out in this glut of digital media companies that have gone downhill because it seems to be an intentional, purposeful demolition. That seems to be why Elon Musk bought the company. Do you agree with that or have any thoughts about that?

Cory Doctorow (08:20):

I don't think anyone really knows what's on Elon Musk's mind, including Musk. He's clearly a man with very poor impulse control, so it's hard to know exactly what he had in mind. But I think you're right that the different thing about Twitter, up until pretty recently, was how quickly this degradation took place. Usually it's a slow process, right? You don't notice straight away that every Google search result is getting worse or that when you search Amazon more and more the results are sponsored results for things that you didn't search for and are not interested in. And you wake up one day and as the Washington Post described, you search for "cat bed" and the first whole screen is ads. 50% of the next five screens are ads and a lot of them are ads for dog products. And you're like, "Oh wait..." This is a process I call enshittification, right?

Cory Doctorow (09:05):

And it happens slowly. You don't notice that it's happening until one day you wake up and it's all terrible. And Musk, he did what Trump did. He took processes that normally take place very subtly and are drawn in the finest charcoal lines and he just grabbed a crayon in his fist like a toddler and just scrawled, so you could see what was otherwise kind of hard to see as it emerged very slowly on the page. But since then we've had some real bust outs, right? Reddit's enshittification has been super fast. Same with Twitch, same with... What's the one where everybody talks to each other? Discord [laughs] Sorry.

Andrea Chalupa:

Too many to name.

Cory Doctorow:

Yes.

Sarah Kendzior:

[laughs]

Cory Doctorow:

So there are a bunch of these that have just turned the crank really fast and I think some of it is down to the end of the zero interest rate policy where money isn't free anymore at the central bank, and so there's a lot of pressure by investors to increase the gains, and that during the period of zero interest rates when you could get loans effectively for free if you were a business, there was so much subsidy that was thrown at these platforms to make them attractive offers that they tapped out their growth, right?

Cory Doctorow (10:15):

Everyone who is ever going to ride an Uber is already an Uber rider. There's not anyone who hasn't tried an Uber and is waiting for the right day. And back when the Saudi Royals were sponsoring the price of every Uber and lighting \$32 billion on fire to give you a 41 cent on the dollar discount for every ride you took, if that wasn't the Uber you wanted, you're certainly not going to like the Uber that you get now where the drivers are paid half as much and you're charged twice as much. And so as the market tightens, as platforms are being kicked around by investors demanding a better return on capital, and as growth just is no longer possible, there's just no one to grow into... No one else is going to become a Netflix subscriber. It's not like there are a bunch of people who are like, "Yeah, I never tried that Netflix service, but this is the week!" Right?

Cory Doctorow (11:05):

The only way you get new Netflix subscribers is with punishing password shares, which effectively is increasing the price of a Netflix subscription. You charge more for what people used to get, where it used to be they'd split it two ways or three ways, and so the price was \$4 a month. You have to make it \$12 a month for those people. You have to triple the price in order to grow. And so, yeah, we're seeing this really rapid demise of so many platforms all at once, and the people involved are just like, "Well, you had your millennia lifestyle subsidy. Party's over. Cough up." And these are the same people who laid off a quarter million tech workers this year and cut 7,000 jobs out of Disney and are tightening wages for fast food workers, all the while complaining about the great resignation and quiet quitting and "no one wants to work." And no one's got any room left for more debt fueled consumption, right? The mortgages are really expensive now.

Cory Doctorow (12:05):

No one can draw down their home equity line of credit because that used to be a 2% float. Now it's a 7% float. Your credit card rate is doubled. The age in which we use "buy now, pay later" services to break up the cost of a Chipotle over three months is definitely over. And so there's no more spending power left in the economy. It's all tapped out. It's all going to debt service where those debt rates have ballooned. The debt you are carrying on your card or whatever—on your home equity line of credit or whatever—those have all just gone [makes explosion sound]. So now you're paying a fortune on those. So you're not going to go out and sign up for Netflix at \$12 when it used to cost you three, you know?

Andrea Chalupa (12:43):

So what is going to happen? You're saying infinite growth is not possible, so will the market, Wall Street, will people finally catch up to this? Are they going to keep trying to smash and grab until there's nothing

left? What is going to be the push-pull that forces things to some sort of denouement and what does that look like if that is possible?

Cory Doctorow (13:07):

Well, as Yogi Berra said, "Prediction is hard, especially about the future." And as a science fiction writer, I know better than to try and predict things. It's quite dismal to imagine that the future is predictable because then it doesn't matter what we do, right? I think the future is contestable and there are a lot of potential futures ahead of us, and the worst ones look like private equity taking the huge amount of capital they're sitting on, buying the... I think it's like 6 million Boomer businesses employing 11 million people that are going to go on the market in the next couple of three years, rolling them up, slashing wages, squeezing suppliers, merging firms, raising prices, loading those businesses up with debt and then running them into the ground, and then leaving every Main Street looking like the Main Streets of the small towns that had a Walmart move in on the outskirts, but it'll be everywhere. It'll be a continuation. For example, the Manhattan retail apocalypse where one in four ground level storefronts were empty, where for a while it was just homogenous. It was like Citibank, Citibank, Citibank, Nail Bar, Citibank, Citibank, Citibank—

Andrea Chalupa:

Mmhmm [affirmative]

Cory Doctorow:

CVS, Walgreens. And now it's empty storefront, empty storefront, empty storefront, Citibank, Walgreens.

Andrea Chalupa (14:16):

Yeah, I just drove up Third Avenue in Manhattan the other day and it was just all boarded up, like blocks boarded up

Cory Doctorow (14:22):

So, we could just keep going like this or we could do something about it. Anything that can't go on forever eventually stops. And there is a real sense that excessive corporate power—and not excessive corporate power in any domain like the oil industry, the tobacco industry, the finance industry, whatever—that corporate power per se is a problem, that it perverts our ability to make decisions. It perverts our ability to make policy, it undermines our ability to get justice. Think about what's happening with the Supreme Court right now and the corporate billionaires who are using their wealth to undermine both justice and the appearance of justice and the legitimacy of the system. And I've long felt the system was not very legitimate, but we can't underestimate just how dangerous it is for there to be a collapse in confidence in the system's legitimacy because the thing that stops people from resorting to violence (if the system is unjust) is the perception that there are other ways by which the system can be reformed or addressed or reconfigured.

Cory Doctorow (15:25):

If you don't think the elections are fair, if you don't think the courts are fair, if you don't think there's any regulatory justice or whatever, then if things are untenable, then all you can do is set things on fire and blow stuff up. And so this is a very, very deadly cocktail. And politicians may figure it out. We've had more antitrust trust busting, anti-corporate power reform than ever. Last week, I was in Berlin meeting

with a bunch of people from the Parliament, the Chancellor's office, and the regulators about antitrust remedies in Europe and blunting corporate power. And there's one thing that's kind of a no-brainer, but that everyone's too scared to do, which is called structural separation. So you've got these businesses like Amazon where they're a marketplace, but they're also a competitor of the businesses in the marketplace. So you're trying to sell on Amazon, Amazon's taking 50 cents out of every dollar in junk fees, and then if you survive that and your product is good, they clone your product and then they don't charge themselves 50 cents on the dollar in junk fees, so they underprice you. And they don't have to compete in the auction for search results, and so they can just be at the top of the search results and then you go out of business, right?

Cory Doctorow (16:40):

The answer to this is not to make Amazon pinky swear really hard that they won't abuse this power to be the referee in a game where they own one of the teams, but rather to say, "You can be the referee or you can own a team, but referees can't have a financial interest in the teams. That's just how it goes." Just like if you're getting a divorce, you and your partner won't use the same lawyer—you won't use a lawyer from the same firm, let alone the same lawyer—and if the judge owns the firm that the lawyer that both of you hired and he's trying to match with both of you on Tinder, then you're like, "No, this is not a fair process," right? And so the same lawyers who would absolutely never involve themselves in any of these arrangements if they were going through a divorce, wouldn't use the same lawyer for themselves and their ex, will sit there with a straight face on Amazon's payroll and say, "Oh, no, no, no."

Cory Doctorow (17:28):

"Amazon is perfectly capable of building firewalls between the part of the business that runs the market and the part of the business that participates in the market." And the right answer to this is the same answer we give judges: You can be a judge or you can be involved in the case, but you can't be a judge who's involved in the case. Structural separation. And this started with railroads. We used to say to railroads, "You can ship freight for other people or can be in the freight business, but you cannot compete with the people you ship freight for because you can always give yourself a discount." Any competitive market, you can win just by providing services to yourself below cost, right? We used to say this to banks. When people talk about Glass Steagall going away in the 2008 crisis, all that stuff, foundationally Glass Steagall was a structural separation rule so that banks could participate in the economy by running businesses (which is what we used to call an investment bank) or they could loan money to businesses (which is what we used to call a retail bank).

Cory Doctorow (18:21):

And then we took that away and we said, "You can own a chain of pizzerias and be the bank and creditor to the biggest rival of that chain of pizzerias." And so you've got Tony's Pizzeria and you've got the Citibank pizzeria, and the idea that both of them are going to be able to compete on a level playing field when they both rely on Citibank LLC to provide them with their money is obviously wrong. I'm in Germany and I'm saying, "We need structural separation. Google and Facebook shouldn't be allowed to sell ads, buy ads, and be the ad marketplace. Amazon shouldn't be allowed to sit between buyers and sellers and be a buyer and a seller and so on." And they said, "Yeah, that's probably true, but we're never going to get it in the European Union." Well, today [*this episode was recorded on June 14, 2023*] the European Commission announced that they were going to pursue structural separation for ad tech and force Google to sell off everything except for the marketplace where they won't be able to represent buyers and sellers that will be disaggregated.

Cory Doctorow (19:13):

Basically 51% of every ad dollar goes to Google or Facebook that they keep. That's the profit they get. I mean, they process 90% of the ad dollars, but the share of the dollar that's spent that goes in their pocket, instead of going to a publisher, it's 51%. And in this real-time bidding auction where someone shows up and says, "I have a male 32 years old who lives on the Lower East Side and has been Googling gonorrhoea, who will pay how much to advertise to that guy?" And they represent that side of it, the publisher side of it where they're auctioning off the reader. And they represent the advertisers who all show up and they say, "I'll give you \$10, I'll give you \$2, I'll give you \$8." And they are an advertiser. And they are a publisher because they own YouTube and a bunch of other platforms that have tons of ad inventory. And 51 cents out of every dollar goes to them.

Cory Doctorow (20:06):

And so the European Commission has just said, "Not only have you repeatedly demonstrated that you cannot be trusted when you say you can police yourself, but we're stupid to believe that anyone could." This is just not an equitable arrangement and you have to cut it the fuck out and you're going to have to sell off two of those lines of business. Now, there's legislation pending in the US on the same lines: the America Act. And this may sound weak sauce, but forcing businesses that are platforms to defenestrate those business units that put them in a conflict of interest with their own customers is an enormous part of creating a market in which small and medium businesses, family businesses, cooperatives, nonprofits, can all provide services without having to be corralled into working for one of these goons. It's the same scam that let private equity firms buy up emergency room doctor practices and do surprise billing.

Cory Doctorow (20:59):

All of this stuff relates to the lack of a structural separation rule, which as of a week ago, German politicians thought was impossible and as of today is now on the table. And so things are moving fast, right? There's stuff happening. We have people like Lina Khan running the Federal Trade Commission. She was a third year Yale law student like eight years ago, and she wrote this incredible paper called "Amazon's Antitrust Paradox" that just blew the doors off the antitrust establishment. People vilified her. It made people really interested in how corporate dominance is structuring huge parts of how we live, including our economy and how we work. Amazon's one of the largest employers in the country after, I think, Walmart and the military. Maybe it's the other direction. Maybe it's the military and Walmart. But she wrote this incredible paper and now she's like, she's in her early thirties and she's the Chair of the Federal Trade Commission.

Cory Doctorow (21:50):

She's like the most powerful anti-corporate regulator in the world. And she's incredible. She's not like a swamp creature. She didn't come out of some corporate think tank or a white shoe big law firm. She's a protegee of Elizabeth Warren's, right? She's fucking amazing. In the two and some years she's been in office, *The Wall Street Journal's* run like 87 editorials vilifying her.

Andrea Chalupa:

[laughs]

Cory Doctorow:

That's how you know that she's on the right track. So there's stuff happening. So if we get behind these people, then maybe we sit down and we do what we did to John D. Rockefeller back when it seemed like he was unassailable and we put 'em out of business.

Sarah Kendzior (22:28):

Yeah, on that note, I want to get back to the enshittification concept, which really, really resonated with a lot of people. I think they were searching for the word to describe what they saw as this kind of collective rot. And one of the consequences of that rot, of things just not functioning, online mediums not working the way they used to, I think is a loss of imagination. It's a loss of people being able to see these kinds of possibilities. And then that can lead to a loss of activism. And so for future people, like the individuals you were just describing to rise to the fore, how will this enshittification process mar those efforts and what can be done about that?

Cory Doctorow (23:09):

I think you're right to talk about imagination here, and I think the project of every bully is to extinguish the imaginative possibility that things could be otherwise, right?

Sarah Kendzior (23:17):

100%.

Cory Doctorow (23:18):

There's this game that they play. Like Margaret Thatcher said, "There is no alternative." And the Vogons in Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* say, "Resistance is futile." And Dante, over the gates of hell, put "abandon hope all ye who enter here." And these are ways of saying, There is no possibility of it being otherwise; this terrible world is the best of all worlds; nothing that is harming you is the result of a choice that someone made, it's instead the great forces of history bearing down with this inevitable force that was always going to make it this way and it can never be any other ways. You know, Le Guin said at one point, "The divine right of kings seems beyond question." And today, capitalism seems beyond question. And then maybe Žižek, maybe someone else, lots of people took credit for saying, "It's easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism."

Cory Doctorow(24:10):

You have these people, like Google, who are like, "What do you mean you want to search the internet without us spying on you? That's impossible. That's like water that isn't wet." Or Zuckerberg saying, "What do you mean you want to talk to your friends without us spying on you?" Or Apple saying, "What do you mean you want to own a device where you get to decide how it works instead of us and where we can't corral you into making choices that benefit our shareholders even if they hurt you?" And it's just not true that it has to be this way. No one came down off a mount with two stone tablets and said, "Larry, Sergey, thou shalt stop rotating thine log files. And lo, thou must start mining them for actionable market intelligence!" Right? Google, when it started... People give Google all this shit about Don't be evil. Don't be evil is just table stakes.

Cory Doctorow (24:57):

You've got to go back and read the original Google paper, the 1998 page rank paper where these two grad students, Sergey Brin and Lawrence Page, wrote this paper for an academic journal describing this new search engine they were thinking of calling Google. And in the third paragraph they're like, "Now, there's this really important thing if you're going to build a search engine, which is that it can't be advertising supported or it's just going to go to shit." [laughs] 1998! And if you remember, when they went public, when they had their IPO, they kept 51% of the voting shares. So they floated a bajillion shares, but they weren't voting shares; all the votes of all the shares they floated added up to only 49%. And they said in their S1 (the prospectus that you give to investors), "You may be asking yourself, 'Why

should I buy an interest in a company that these two guys are going to have absolute dominion over, but they're going to spend my money?"

Cory Doctorow (25:50):

"And the answer is we have this singular vision and we know how to keep the search engine good." And here we are, right? The two guys who never ceded control, who on day zero said the one thing you mustn't ever do is add ads, who are now just thrashing, right? And they've gotten to this point where search results are just unbelievably bad and they're fix for it is they're going to have a chatbot that's like this habitual confident liar replace links to web pages that may or may not be true with long florid paragraphs full of garbage as though that's somehow going to fix search, right? It's wild. And I think that if we can imagine a different kind of search, a different kind of internet company, a different way of arranging things, if we can do what the Luddites did—because the Luddites, they get smeared as technophobes, but to be a weaver in early 19th century England, you need to go through a seven year apprenticeship and learn how to use these super sophisticated machines.

Cory Doctorow (26:56):

It was like getting a master's in engineering from MIT. And when their bosses started buying these steam mills and water mills that were so easy a child could use them, these workers understood that what these guys were going to do was kidnap children—war orphans from the Napoleonic war orphanages in London—and stick them in 10-year indentures in these factories where they'd be beaten and starved and maimed and even killed by these machines. And that's what they objected to; not what the machine did, but who it did it for and who it did it to. And the Luddites were like, "I can imagine making stalkings in slightly more efficient ways without enslaving children." That was their big ask: "Can we do this without enslaving children?" Right? And the bosses were like, 'What are you talking about? That's like water that isn't wet.' And they had mass hangings of Luddites. You could be hanged for swearing an oath of loyalty to the cause of Luddism, and they had these mass hangings, including of young teenagers who] had sworn loyalty to the cause as a way of discouraging people from joining the movement. They recalled soldiers from the Napoleonic Wars and garrisoned them in mill towns to stop people from imagining a different arrangement. Imagining is a deeply subversive act, and I think that science fiction is not a very good predictive literature, but it's an extremely good imaginative literature.

Andrea Chalupa (28:25):

Yeah, absolutely. I want to go back to the European Union because we talk on the show about Brexit, and we always try to point out that the EU is a regulatory body. There's a reason why all this dark money wanted Brexit to pass so that the British economy could go to shit and get rid of regulations and so on. And I think what's really screaming out from everything you're saying, it's sort of a call to action for reformers to get into the system, to know that there is a possibility—like the EU is showing it, like that labor, like the Elizabeth Warren protege mentee is showing it, that the good people, the reform-minded are being called to in this moment, to get into the system, get in where they fit in, and fight for a different way of doing things. What would you say to people listening who feel hopeless, who feel that they don't matter, that they're overwhelmed with everything that's going on in the world, everything that we're facing, from climate change to an oligarchy? What would you say to them? Where should they get in?

Cory Doctorow (29:29):

Let me just briefly talk about Brexit. So I voted Remain. I'm a British citizen and I think on balance the EU is a good project. I think that you're right that one of the things that pissed the British establishment about the EU is they were having these new sort of quantum of transparency and accountability in the

finance sector, but let's also not mistake the EU for anything but a neoliberal corporate project since day one, right? And there is a left Brexit (a Lexit) movement that is about, "Hey, let's get out from under the austerity of the European Central Bank and let's stop allowing Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, and Cyprus to serve as tax havens and regulatory havens and prevent the enforcement of law and so on." It's a mixed bag. I do think that the reasons that the Brexiteers wanted out of the EU are not the reasons that I'm skeptical of the EU, but I think there are good reasons to be skeptical of the EU. And in terms of what you should be thinking about for your future in this moment.

Cory Doctorow (30:31):

So I have this arch nemesis. Everybody should have an arch nemesis. Mine is Milton Friedman. He's the archduke of neoliberalism; the guy who architected the project of Reaganomics at the University of Chicago, celebrated and welcomed and protected monopolies, and did all kinds of incredibly bad things. And Friedman was this absolute crank, right? He had this idea during what the French call the 30 Glorious Years—like 1945 to 1975, the post-war prosperity years—where there was this unparalleled growth and prosperity of working people. It was not even by any means. There was a lot of racial disparity, gender disparity. There was disparity among colonized people and disabled people, but the liberation movement that drove the liberation of white working men didn't stop there, right? It became the momentum behind universal suffrage, behind the civil rights movement and so on. All of those elements, you know, labor unions worked with the civil rights movement and so on.

Cory Doctorow (31:31):

So there was this moment where the arc of history was bending towards justice and people were better off than they'd ever been. Their kids were going to college instead of growing up to have the same job that they had that their dad had and that their dad's dad had. Their daughters were able to enroll in post-secondary education as well. They were living in cities that had excellent services. There was the growth of social security and universal medical coverage through Medicare and Medicaid. It was quite a moment. And Friedman wanted to send all that stuff back. He wanted to turn us back into kind of hereditary servants tugging our forelocks at our social betters. And people would say to Friedman in this period, like, You gotta be crazy. Like, nobody wants this. How are you possibly going to make these ridiculous ideas into a reality?

Cory Doctorow (32:21):

In particular, his funders, because there are a lot of millionaires and people who have inflation-adjusted billions who were really interested in Milton's ideas but wanted to make sure they were spending their money wisely and didn't want to just give him money to build sandcastles in the sky. And Friedman said, Look, anything that can't go on forever eventually stops. There will come crises. Even if this society never has its own internal contradictions that tear it apart, there will be external contradictions, right? There will be military belligerents, there will be pandemics, there will be natural disasters, there will be all kinds of things that are going to drive us into crisis. And when that crisis strikes, the ideas that are lying around can move from the periphery to the center. And our job is to keep these ideas lying around, to nurse them, to promote them, to have a kind of discourse of what we can do the next time a crisis strikes so that when people have become disenchanted with the status quo and its institutions and are saying, "What should we do next?"

Cory Doctorow (33:25):

We can say, Well, everybody knows that we should be doing X, Y, and Z. In his case, it was everybody knows that the reason OPEC cut off our oil was women's lib, right? [laughs] Didn't make any sense! But he'd been beating that drum for a long time and that was his moment, right? He seized the moment. We are lurching from crisis to crisis already. There is crisis upon us and crisis on our horizon. Those crises will

get worse because of the climate emergency, because of the debt crisis, because of the crisis of policy debt where we've made bad rules that are festering in our world about environmental law and about labor law and so on. When that crisis strikes, if we have good ideas lying around instead of the same old stupid ideas like "How about more austerity? How about the jobs retraining program?" In the UK whenever there was a housing crisis, they were like, "How about we give grants to people to buy their first house? It's called help to buy. Everybody gets 10,000 Pounds to buy their first house. Guess what happened to the starter price of every low rent home and flat in the UK. It went up by 10,000 pounds! [laughs] These very, very dumb ideas that are floating around are all we got. So when crisis strikes, we just do the same thing but harder. We need to have these good ideas lying around—shovel ready, good technical ideas—and my last but one book... I write when I'm anxious, so I've had two books in the last year. I got six more in the next three years. But my last but one book is this book called *Choke Point Capitalism* I wrote with Rebecca Giblin. And the first half of the book dissects the way that the entertainment and tech industry steals from creative workers in real technical detail, like, here's how the accounting fraud works.

Cory Doctorow (35:05):

And the second half is like shovel-ready proposals for things we can do as a society, not as individuals. It's not like, here's how you should shop better to stop the monopolies. You can't shop your way out of a monopoly in the same way you can't recycle your way out of the climate emergency. And instead, it's like these big systemic reforms that the next time there's some huge breach associated with theft in creative labor markets, instead of saying, "Hey, let's just do what we did last time, but harder." we can say, "Let's do one of these new things that have a chance of working." I think that's how we get our change, right, is we cook the ideas, we promulgate the ideas, and then when the crisis strikes, we don't let them steal the crisis from us by saying, "Let's do it again the way we used to do it.

Sarah Kendzior (35:51):

On that note, I want to bring up, you know, there are these ongoing strikes in the entertainment industry, especially in the role of AI. And there's a broader, more widespread fear among workers that they're going to be replaced by AI. And you brought up before the search engines that are essentially replacing search results—neutral search results—with these AI text stealing, soul stealing sort of functions. I'm personally worried about this. I sometimes read that I'm overreacting. I'm wondering, what are your thoughts on this? How afraid of AI should we be, particularly artists, writers, thinkers, et cetera?

Cory Doctorow (36:29):

Well, look, it's definitely the case that our bosses want to fire our asses and replace us with software. And it's also clearly the case that that does not require software that works, right? Anyone who's ever called a switchboard that used to be staffed by a human and is now staffed by a voice response system knows that the point of that system is to discourage you so you don't try and get an appointment or find out where the airline put your luggage and just go away, right? And if you hang in there, you'll eventually get to talk to someone in the Pacific Rim who reads you stock answers out of a three ring binder, and then if you hang into that long enough, you eventually get to talk to someone who has the job of the person who used to answer the phone, which is to solve your actual problem, right?

Cory Doctorow (37:07):

Our bosses, I think, believe that the arts are so concentrated that they can fire us and replace us with software and get low-skill, low paid, low self-esteem scabs to edit what the software makes, and then our audiences will suck it up because they won't have an alternative because they control the choke

points. There's four big movie studios, one big movie chain, right? If that's what's on the screen, then you're going to have to go watch it. And you'll like it, or else, right? And I think that that is a definite thing we should worry about. What we should do about it is harder. So the first thing I want to say is that as a technical matter, it is definitely a hundred percent not a copyright violation to ingest a copy of a work for the purpose of making a statistical analysis of it. That just is not a copyright violation.

Cory Doctorow (38:00):

There is no one who is serious about copyright beliefs otherwise. One of the great stupidities, and the thing that's going to really hold us back from actually doing something about this, are the people who think that wanting it badly is good enough and who don't really understand copyright and who've been told this by people who are copyright experts, including labor copyright experts, and who go like, "No, that just can't be right. It's not fair use. It can't be fair use. They're taking the work, they're going to put me out of work, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." This is just not up for debate. I mean, it's just like... It's a stupid distraction to claim that it's a copyright violation. But copyright law is a law. Laws can be reformed. So let's say maybe we reform the law and we make it a copyright violation to study a work and make a statistical inference from it.

Cory Doctorow (38:45):

First of all, I think that would have a lot of bad effects, right? There's just a lot of science that relies on this stuff. Like computational linguistics, which for the first time is studying informal speech because informal speech is now written instead of spoken, and is learning a whole bunch of stuff just about how language works and how our brains work and how cultures work and so on, that's just good science. It's amazing. It's super interesting. We would be poorer as a civilization if we extinguished that. But I think more to the point, we should be worried about what this would do to labor. So we live in an environment of extremely concentrated labor markets, and if we create a new right to decide who can study a work and make a statistical inference from it, signing away that right will be a condition of working for these large firms, and they're going to universally converge on those terms.

Cory Doctorow (39:38):

In fact, this has already happened, even though that right doesn't yet exist. So if you're a commercial illustrator, it's probably in your contract already. If you are a voice actor, most of your work is going to come from game studios. The game studios have all changed their standard session so that it starts with, "My name is Cory Doctorow. To the extent that a right to train a model with this recording exists, I waive that right and assign it to the company that commissioned the recording." Right? And if I don't want to say those words, I can quit and they'll hire someone else who can say those words. And in a highly concentrated labor market, that's what happens when you give an individual bargainable right to workers; that right is immediately bargained away to firms. And so then you get kind of the worst of all worlds.

Cory Doctorow (40:19):

So the largest firms are the ones that are going to amass the corpus of sufficient size to build really good models. And so those large firms will extinguish all of their smaller competitors by creating very large, sophisticated models that they can use as substitutes for creative labor. The small firms will go out of business immediately, as will independents who won't be able to compete with the products being produced with these models. Meanwhile, I think that there is a real likelihood that in 10 years we'll look back on this moment and say, "I can't believe that we ever thought that the works people made by prompting weren't art." I think there's a chance we may look back and say, "I can't believe we ever thought they were art" too. But I'm old enough to remember the start of the sampling wars when there were a lot of people who said, "There is no way that looping a recording is making music."

Cory Doctorow (41:05):

“It's just theft.” And that's an instructive example to look back on, right? Back when recordings started to be taken first as tape loops, and then as digital loops and turned into new music, there were a lot of musicians who were really angry. They were angry in part because they had been given a genuinely very, very bad deal by their labels. The Beatles used to share one penny, four ways for every LP, but not the whole penny because 15% was kept back for marketing, and then of the remainder they had to give 10% to their agent, and then the rest, they split four ways, right? And they were a white band. The heritage acts (which is music industry speak for Black people) got a much worse deal than that. And so people were really pissed about what was going on, and they were angry at any taking of their work because it felt like a continuation of this overall taking.

Cory Doctorow (42:00):

If you ever hear Prince talk about copyright infringement online and file sharing, it's basically an extension of his absolutely legitimate ferocious anger at his label. He, I think, just got confused, and confused the relationship that an artist has with a commercial intermediary with a relationship that artists have with other artists and with their fans. And those are not the same thing. So when sampling began, despite these howls of outrage from older artists, more established artists at the time, the actual law of sampling was very unsettled. And there was the general consensus in the early days that it just didn't even intersect with copyright law. Like, if you've ever gone to New Orleans and seen a jazz band, you see the trombonist blow, like, a couple of bars of *That's Amore* in the middle of a solo, and it's not a copyright infringement. It's not a copyright infringement. It's just to one side of copyright.

Cory Doctorow (42:55):

And that was what sampling was viewed as. And over time, because of this outrage, we got a change through a couple of court cases and through a change in the practice of the big three record labels—Sony, Warner and Universal—who collectively control 70% of all music recordings in history. And the way that they changed the rules was they basically said you had to clear a sample in order to use a sample. They would only clear samples for people who were signed to the major labels. And if you signed to the major label, you had to sign away the right to benefit from or control your own samples. And so if you wanted to make a sample, you signed to a label, you took the advance, and then you gave some of the advance back to the label or to one of their two competitors who didn't give it to another artist, they gave it to a shareholder.

Cory Doctorow (43:37):

And so you were poorer and the other artist whose work you were sampling didn't get richer. All artists became worse off, right? This extinguished a whole genre of music. The kind of sampling we did at the start of the sampling era went away. If you look at early albums that were like the top grossing albums of their day—*It Takes a Nation a Millions to Hold Us Back* by Public Enemy or *Paul's Boutique* by The Beastie Boys—if you were to go and clear all those samples at the going rate, each one of those CDs would have to sell for \$150 a disc in order to clear, right? So they got lucky. They were able to, in the early days of streaming, they were able to clear for streaming, basically because it was confused. But De La Soul, who were an equally important band from that era, but who are today very obscure, never managed to clear their music for sampling.

Cory Doctorow (44:24):

And for 15 years, their music was not available. As of March [2023] some of their catalog is available, but the frontman of the band died in February [2023] and never lived to hear his music in the ears of the musicians who came after him. So we made every artist poor. We made certain kinds of music illegal. We heightened the strength of the labels over artists because if you wanted to sample, you had to sign the

deal. And the deal didn't just come with you signing away your samples, it came with a whole bunch of concessions you would have to make that made you worse off as a performer, as a recording artist, right? So all of this stuff made your life worse. So that's the worst case scenario. But there's an alternative way of thinking about this. We don't have to give individual tradable rights to performers that kind of cast them in the role of an LLC making a business to business transaction with a label.

Cory Doctorow (45:13):

There are rights that are held in common by musicians that have been incredibly successful at getting musicians paid. For example, anytime anyone wants to record any song that's already been recorded, they can without permission provided they pay a set fee called the Compulsory or Mechanical Royalty. When Sid Vicious wanted to record "My Way", he didn't need Paul Anka's permission. He just recorded it and paid the fee. So Taylor Swift is the most important recording and touring artist in the world today. She has the most bargaining power, the most leverage, the most fame. She can't get her masters back. She tried. She offered millions of dollars, but she was bidding against this guy, this private equity guy who hated her and whom she hated, who wanted to make sure that every time someone played her music, he got richer so that she would feel angry and sad.

Cory Doctorow (45:59):

And he outbid her all the way across the board and ended up with her masters. So, everyone in the world has the right to re-record any Taylor Swift album, including Taylor Swift. So she went into the studio and remastered her own songs. And so if you go on streaming, you can listen to the version that came from the private equity goon, or you can listen to the version that Taylor Swift owns. And if you listen to the Taylor Swift version, he doesn't get a dime. That is a really important parable about how a collective right that you cannot alienate can become a source of incredible power for artists as a class that protects them at the start of their careers—and even after they become these incredible outlier successes—in ways that individual bargainable rights absolutely cannot. So maybe we could create a collective right to train and we could create a collective administration body.

Cory Doctorow (46:50):

It could go wrong in a million ways. Collective administration bodies have not been great for the most part. But just because we haven't made a good institution doesn't mean that we can't make a good institution. It's the 21st century. We know how to be more transparent. We can put all the transactions online. You have collecting societies who are like, "Well, we're sitting on all this money for these obscure artists we can't find. Like, who the hell is this Beyonce character?" Right? [laughs] And then they get to keep the money. It's very bad! So we can make them publish what they're doing and that could make a huge difference, getting that transparency in there. Or we could do something else. We could follow the lead of the copyright office. So in the US, and actually in international copyright treaties, copyright is something you get for an act of human creativity. As they say at the world Intellectual Property Organization, "Copyright inheres at the moment of fixation for a human creative work."

Cory Doctorow (47:44):

So when a human makes a thing and fixes it in some tangible medium, a copyright appears out of nowhere and lasts for that person's life plus 70 years. And very notably, if the person who does the creative work is not a human being, no copyright inheres. So you remember the monkey selfie. A monkey cannot attract a copyright. And so the fact that this photographer produced this work by inveigling this monkey into pressing the shutter does not create a copyright. And that work was born in the public domain and will never be copyrightable. It's not eligible for copyright. And the US copyright office has now issued three memos saying that the works created by algorithms are not copyrightable.

And so I am prepared to believe that if Disney could, the way that they would make Pixar movies from now on is by thinking up some prompts.

Cory Doctorow (48:33):

I live around the corner from the Disney studio. I've been going down and walking the picket line with the folks there. I'm in the Animators Guild. I'm a writer with them, not the Writer's Guild. But a little solidarity picketing. One of them said this really interesting thing. He said, "They already treat us like a prompting engine." Like, make me ET, but the hero is a dog. And there's a car chase in the second act." And then they come back and they're like, "Can you add a love interest?" Right? And this is just how you prompt a language model, right? This is like, "Make me instructions for getting a grilled cheese sandwich out of a VCR in the style of the King James Bible." Right? This is exactly how people talk to language models. So they would love to treat us like language models. They'd love to think of some prompts, type them into the keyboard, walk a half mile down Olive Avenue to the legendary Smokehouse, have a three-martini lunch and a porterhouse, come back and have the new Pixar movie sitting on a hard drive.

Cory Doctorow (49:28):

But if you told them, "Yeah, you can do that. You can fire all of our asses, but that movie will not be eligible for a copyright, and anyone can take it and sell it and compete with you for it," they're going to be like, "Oh, no, fuck. We're just going to pay animators and writers. Are you kidding me? No way!" They would rather drink a gallon of warm spit for breakfast for the rest of their lives than give up one tiny iota of copyright ever. So these are the kinds of ideas lying around we can have for what we should do about this shit, as opposed to "let's do the thing we did last time with sampling and create an individual vulnerable right and hope for a different outcome." Now, as to whether or not the plausible sentence generator is going to wake up and turn us all into paperclips, that is nonsense and we shouldn't worry about it.

Cory Doctorow (50:11):

And the people who are pushing that line are people who make products that are not fit for purpose, that are enacting serious real harms now in how they classify people and determine their eligibility for loans, parole, to keep their children, to get medical procedures and so on. These are dangerous products that shouldn't be in the market. And by focusing our attention on these hypothetical harms that are very far in the future, they take away our attention from the immediate harms that actually matter. And they co-opt the language of AI safety, which is really about making people safe *today* from the harms enacted by automated decision-making classification. And they make us instead think about whether or not we're all going to be stuck in *The Matrix*, which is an allegory, not a thing.

Andrea Chalupa (51:00):

Our discussion continues and you can get access to that by signing up on our Patreon at the Truth-teller level or higher.

Sarah Kendzior (51:12):

We encourage you to donate to help rescue and recovery efforts in Turkey and Syria following the devastating earthquakes in early February to help people in Turkey. Visit the TPF, Turkey Earthquake Relief Fund, at tpfund.org

Andrea Chalupa (51:28):

To help Syrians in need, donate to the White Helmets at whitehelmets.org. We also encourage you to help support Ukraine by donating to Razom for Ukraine at razomforukraine.org. In addition, we

encourage you to donate to the International Rescue Committee, a humanitarian relief organization helping refugees from Ukraine, Syria, and Afghanistan. Donate at rescue.org. And if you want to help critically endangered orangutans already under pressure from the palm oil industry, donate to the Orangutan Project at theorangutanproject.org, and avoid products with palm oil.

Gaslit Nation is produced by Sarah Kendzior and Andrea Chalupa. If you like what we do, leave us a review on iTunes. It helps us reach more listeners. And check out our Patreon; it keeps us going.

Sarah Kendzior (52:14):

Our production manager is Nicholas Torres and our associate producer is Karlyn Daigle. Our episodes are edited by Nicholas Torres and our Patreon-exclusive content is edited by Karlyn Daigle

Andrea Chalupa (52:26):

Original music on *Gaslit Nation* is produced by David Whitehead, Martin Vissenberg, Nik Farr, Demian Arriaga, and Karlyn Daigle.

Sarah Kendzior (52:34):

Our logo design was donated to us by Hamish Smyth of the New York-based firm, Order. Thank you so much, Hamish.

Andrea Chalupa (52:41):

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