

Gaslit Nation Transcript

30 August 2023

“The Cory Doctorow Interview — Part II”

<https://www.patreon.com/posts/cory-doctorow-ii-86988535>

[intro - theme music]

Andrea Chalupa (00:11):

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 (01:14):

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](http://gaslitnationpod.com) and you'll see the link right on our homepage at [gaslitnationpod.com](http://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 (02:30):

Contrary to popular belief, dictators love elections! It's so much fun to win 95% of the vote! Elections are a terrific way of reminding the people that they hold no actual power and that the Constitution is a joke. [audience laughter SFX] And that if they're not in on the joke, they will face punishment. Get more fun tips from me and other handsome devils in *Dictatorship: It's Easier Than You Think!*... almost too easy.

[end audio clip]

Andrea Chalupa (03:00):

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]

Sarah Kendzior (03:37):

I have a question related to, of course, the most important topic of this conversation, which is Taylor Swift. I think you're right that that was a very instructive parable. I assume you're referring to the Scooter Braun lawsuit.

Cory Doctorow:

Yeah, that's what I'm thinking about.

Sarah Kendzior:

Yeah, and the fact that she was able to get around that and to re-record her work and put out I think a superior version; one that was immensely popular—most people are not Taylor Swift. Most people don't have the money, they don't have the resources, they don't have the audience. What would you recommend to somebody who's just starting out—a singer/songwriter or an author or somebody up and coming—to protect themselves from these sorts of business practices just as they're trying to get off the ground?

Cory Doctorow (04:19):

Join a union. If you're in a field that's unionized, join the union. And if the union sucks, make the union better. The argument that most people don't have the bargaining power of Taylor Swift and therefore can't avail themselves of these mechanisms is true, but for that very reason that thinking about how you as an individual are going to resolve your problems of bargaining power is moot. And we write about this at length in *Choke Point Capitalism* and the problems of conceiving yourself as an individual business person producing art. It is the same thing that leads people to say, "I don't want prompt-based visual art or music or words being written that's trained on my work because that work is mine and it is my style and I made it." I have infinite sympathy for the idea that we shouldn't have our wages stolen by people who automate parts of our labor, but the idea that your idea is bloomed out of your forehead like Athena springing from Zeus, it's just so wrong. And it's part of the same brain worm that makes people go, like, "Well, all I need are more individual bargaining rights because I am an individual who creates in a vacuum and bargains in a vacuum and I don't have to and I shouldn't have to be a part of a collective to make that work."

Cory Doctorow (05:43):

There's a great video creator, Kirby Haywood, who made this series called *Everything is a Remix*, and he just takes all these things that are thought of as extremely original works—and that are extremely original works—and shows how there are also collages where there are surprisingly large verbatim lifts

from other works to make them work. I grew up in science fiction and my mentor was this woman, Judith Merril, who was this incredible woman. She was this writer, editor and critic who was like a feminist, a political activist. And after the 1968 police riots in Chicago, she went into voluntary exile, moved to Toronto—where I was from—and she had been married to Frederik Pohl. She took their books and donated them to the Toronto Public Library System. They formed the nucleus of what was then called the Spaced Out Library. It's now called the Merril Collection.

Cory Doctorow (06:34):

It's the largest science fiction reference collection in the world. She was the writer in residence there, and we went on a school trip when I was about 10 years old, and she came out and she said, "You know kids, if you write stories, you can bring them down here and I'll critique them for you, help you make them better." This is, like, Judith Merril, right? This is amazing, right? This is like... I'm a Canadian. It's like Wayne Gretzky offering to teach you how to play hockey. And I knew who Judy was because she was a friend of my dad's. My dad was a political activist and she and he knew each other through the anti-nuclear proliferation movement. But the reason I recognized her is when my mom was getting her master's in education, on the nights that she taught, my dad would stay home with us and we would eat dinner in front of the tv and Judy would introduce *Dr. Who* on public television.

Cory Doctorow (07:18):

And the thing she would do when she did these introductions is tell the stories of how the tropes in each week's *Dr. Who* were invented because she was there! She lived in this big leftist polyamorous science fiction writer house in New York called the Futurian House. She had this gravel voice. She looked like Slappy Squirrel. She had this gravel voice. She was a chainsmoker. And she would be like, "This time travel plot, I remember, we came up with it at a spaghetti dinner. Ray Bradbury was there and he was angry because Isaac Asimov was trying to sleep with C.M. Kornbluth's wife. And, uh, we said, 'What about if we did it this way?' And we all came up with it and we wrote like 11 stories under different pen names. And then Frederik Pohl had subway fair so he went down to John W. Campbell's office and he threw all the manuscripts over his transcript at Rockefeller Center and came back, and then we drank the last of the wine."

Cory Doctorow(08:11):

And the thing that she was very clear on is that all of these ideas that are part of science fiction, on the one hand, they had origin points, right? Someone came up with the idea, but it was rarely just one person. And even when it was, the shape of the idea, the meaning of the idea was developed by a collective of people. When you type into a model, "draw me someone removing a grilled cheese sandwich from a V C R in the style of Maxfield Parrish," the amount of training data that it draws on that comes from Maxfield Parrish paintings is very small. The vast majority of the training data that goes into that work comes from works that are labeled in the style of Maxfield Parrish because most of the work in the style of Maxfield Parrish today in a world of human creators—without taking the models into account—comes from people who drew something in the style of Maxfield Parrish.

Cory Doctorow (09:01):

That's how it is. That's how art gets made. Edgar Allan Poe invented the detective story. *Murders in the Rue Morgue*. We know when the first detective story was written. Every detective story, including my last novel, *Red Team Blues*, is Poe fanfic. The world would not be better off if only Poe could write detective stories because *Murders in the Rue Morgue* is not a great detective story. It's okay. It's not great. Poe wrote better. Detective stories weren't his forte, but there we are. Cervantes invented the modern novel with *Don Quixote*. The world wouldn't be better off if only the heirs of Cervantes could write novels. It just becomes part of the plumbing. And so I think that this sense that you are an individual creator

creating stuff that is deeply personally expressive is true, but it needs to be balanced against the fact that you exist in a milieu, in a continuum and a collective, and that even the stuff that you make that runs counter to it, where you make stuff that breaks the rules or that rejects the norms is still in dialogue with that stuff. And there's just no such thing as art that is wholly original. It just wouldn't be recognizable as art.

Sarah Kendzior (10:16):

Yeah, no, I think those are great points. And everything you're saying is making me think of that 19th century meeting between Mary Shelley and Lord Byron where they basically conceived the horror and the sci-fi genre.

Cory Doctorow:

Yeah!

Sarah Kendzior:

And it was a collaborative process and it was also built out of a climate change disaster; the year without a summer. But the thing that makes it, I think... Obviously there's many things that make it distinct from now, but there is a relationship of trust, or at least an acknowledgement of one's humanity, one's individuality as a human being. And when we're online now, especially in the enshittification era where there's mass surveillance, where there's bots, where there's AI deployments, we're not always sure who we're talking to, that spirit of collaboration can really be marred. How do we as creative people, how do we get that back? Kind of like... I don't know, if you share my nostalgia. I mean, I used to read you on *Boing Boing* when I was in college, but of the old internet, when you kind of felt like you were exploring this new world and making friends and partnerships and people kind of, I don't know, building ideas off each other and creating something cool and unique.

Cory Doctorow (11:24):

This is the problem of our age, is trust. And if you think about the crypto bubble, it was really driven by people trying to figure out how to substitute math for human relations. They were like, "How do you know you can trust someone else on the internet?" Well, rather than setting up a server and then trusting the server to handle our money properly, we'll create this baroque mathematical operation that allows all of us to spend money and pass it back and forth (or spend money-like objects) without any of us having to trust one another, even know who one another are. We can be anonymous." Making it less important to trust people is fine, but it's not a substitute for trusting people. And the thing that's the most important proof of that is all those cryptocurrency projects ended with someone figuring out how to steal all the money and then riding off in the sunset, going like, "Caveat emptor, motherfucker! Not your keys, not your wallet!"

Cory Doctorow (12:21):

Just this kind of nonsense about, you know, you are the reason that all of your money is gone, not the system that we told you that you can use. The internet was and is both a machine for destroying and creating trust. There are people who I am quite close to who I've either never met in person or only met a few times, but know primarily digitally. And the internet itself, its underlying infrastructure, its core is built on personal relationships and trust. The new novel I have out, the detective novel about cryptocurrency and heists, is dedicated to this guy Dan Kaminsky. And Dan, he died during lockdown. He was diabetic and he was alone and he didn't manage his insulin well. And then he became cognitively

impaired and it became impossible for him to do it and he died of acidosis. And Dan was a really smart guy.

Cory Doctorow (13:17):

And on three separate occasions, he discovered profound bugs in core internet protocols and infrastructure that could have literally taken down the internet. And he coordinated a response to quietly, efficiently and completely patch those bugs before they were disclosed and then exploited. So he saved the internet three times. It wasn't his job. Like, no one... Maybe someone paid him something to do that, but that's not why he did it. It wasn't like that was his job. He was just doing it because that was his job. If you go back to the first online social spaces, Usenet, which was like this shared message board that ran by bouncing messages back and forth to the hard drives of computers in military and scholarly institutions, all of the telecoms for that was handled by a group who called themselves the Backbone Cabal. And these were people who worked for these big institutions and figured out how to violate those institutions' trust by hiding the phone bills inside these giant encyclopedia-sized bills that they would get every month.

Cory Doctorow (14:20):

They would just make these calls and just chalk it up to the general ledger. And they did it because they believed in the project. They did it out of a sense of solidarity. And there's a computer workshop, a micro computing workshop that's held in Northern California every year that I've attended a couple of times. It's quite remarkable. It started during the demilitarization of semiconductor production when everyone who knew how to make a microchip used to only be allowed to talk to each other because they all worked on secret military projects, and then they weren't allowed to talk to each other because they all work for rival corporations. But none of them knew how to make a whole microchip, right? They were all experts in different parts of the process. And so they convened this annual secret summer workshop to violate their non-disclosure agreements and solve each other's problems because they all believed in microchips.

Cory Doctorow (15:08):

They all believed that we should have computers. They believed in the project, right? They had solidarity to each other. UNIX comes out of AT&T Labs. AT&T had been the subject of a consent decree from the Department of Justice. They'd avoided being broken up every couple of years for 68 years before they were finally broken up. And every time they would take on board some restriction about what they could do. And one of them was they couldn't bundle software with their products. They had to give software to other people to sell. So they developed this operating system called UNIX, which they weren't allowed to sell. And so they let lots of different vendors use it. If UNIX sounds familiar, it's the underlying operating system for Linux, which is the most popular operating system in the world. And you undoubtedly have 10 Linux devices in your house without even knowing it.

Cory Doctorow (15:51):

Your smart toaster and your car and whatever, they're all running Linux. And the people who were in charge of UNIX, their bosses didn't want them disseminating patches and updates to these companies that were commercializing AT&T's ideas without AT&T getting money for it, and so the people who worked on these for these rival companies, these UNIX user groups would get mysterious phone calls that would go like, "This week's UNIX patches are on a data tape behind the rock next to the second garbage can in this park near AT&T's research facility in New Jersey." And they would go and find these mysterious data tapes and bring them home because these people had solidarity with each other. They believed in the project. Even cryptocurrency, the first DAO (Distributed Autonomous Organization), this

thing that's like an LLC for cryptocurrency, except there's no limited liability and you can lose your shirt doing it.

Cory Doctorow (16:40):

No one should ever join one. The first one of these had this smart contract, which is like a smart contract, but not a contract—and no one should ever get one of those either. And the smart contract had a bug, and all the first Ethereum people were taken to the cleaners for \$50 million. They had \$50 million stolen from them collectively. And they were like, “Lads, we all came together on this project to say that every transaction that goes on in the Ethereum network should be absolutely a hundred percent irreversible. That is the core of our project, and we stand by it, *except* maybe we should reverse this one because, like, is fundamental justice really served by all of us being \$50 million poorer? Why don't we all just get together and literally have a conspiracy to fork the network and reverse the transaction?” Which they did. So solidarity trumped ideology. Even Bitcoin, which is the most maximalist kind of, you know, founded and maintained by people who can no longer read their copy of *The Fountainhead* because the pages are all stuck together.

Sarah Kendzior:

[laughs]

Cory Doctorow (17:36):

In the early years of Bitcoin, it's pretty clear that any one of a small number of people who controlled a large number of Bitcoin could have gotten together and stolen all the Bitcoin with something called a 51% attack, where the people who control 51% of the computation get together and just rewrite the ledger and take all the money. And they never did it because they believed in the project. So even these people whose project was, “Let us abolish solidarity in favor of math.” were like, “But we have a lot of solidarity in doing this.” Right? We're all in this together, this project of making sure that no one's ever going to be in anything together again. So I think that trust is more present than we think. Yeah, there's a lot of bad conduct on the internet. There are a lot of people who are very bad and hurt and who are seeking to hurt other people.

Cory Doctorow (18:24):

There are the occasional heartwarming stories. I'm thinking of Sarah Silverman, or... I forge her name... The woman who wrote *Shrill*. Lindy something. Both of them confronted people who had been very cruel to them on the internet and actually ended up in these very warm relations. And I'm not going to say that the people who bear the brunt of this cruelty, who are inevitably women and fat people and marginalized people and people of color and whatever, have a duty to go and figure out how to make white nationalists get to grips with their emotions. But it does happen. There are these instances where people do establish real warm solidaristic feelings across these screens and build really important relations with one another. You see it in podcasts, and you see it in people who are still blogging or doing feeds online on Twitter or YouTube or whatever.

Cory Doctorow (19:17):

I mean, just think about the way that Hank and John Green interact with their audience and just how good that is. Or I'm thinking of the Maximum Fun podcast network and people like Sidney McElroy, the GP who hosts *Sawbones*, and just like this incredibly good relationship that she has, that their fans have. They have get togethers. They have conferences and camps and cruises and stuff where they all get together and just people really seem to have a good old time. Or my friend Will Wheaton, who has been

very open about the abuse he suffered as a kid and the depression he struggles with and whose Tumblr wall is just full of people who are relating to him and each other in this really personal way that maybe is aided by the distance of the screen rather than harmed by it. So I don't know how we resolve this trust issue.

Cory Doctorow (20:16):

I mean, the project of neoliberalism is to make us see ourselves as individuals, right? Margaret Thatcher didn't just say, "There is no alternative." She said, "There's no such thing as society." She really wants us to think of the world in providential terms, where people are poor because they're bad and bad because they're poor. And that's clearly not the case. And we saw so much of this during the pandemic, like, yeah, we know about the people who went around and shouted at people for wearing masks or whatever, but mostly what you got was pantries and help and bringing things over to other people's houses and just a lot of good old fashioned solidarity. And honestly, when you look at the people who are most aligned against it—the people who are screeching at school board meetings and whatever—those people are terrible, don't get me wrong, but does anyone look at those people and think these are people who are happy and well adjusted and who've had a good life that led them to this place, like this is the response of someone who's just really doing fine? Those people are not doing fine. The way they act towards us is downstream of the way that they're experiencing their own lives, which isn't to let them off the hook, but at least to understand that this isn't innate to the human condition, that this is the product of people who are just profoundly broken.

Andrea Chalupa (21:37):

So this is just such an honor to talk to you, and you're welcome back anytime. Every time you have a book, come back.

Cory Doctorow (21:44):

Sure. Well, there's lots of those coming up.

Andrea Chalupa (21:46):

Please. Yes, I know. anxious times produce books.

Andrea Chalupa:

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 (22:03):

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 Earthquake Relief Fund at [tpfund.org](http://tpfund.org)

Andrea Chalupa (22:20):

To help Syrians in need, donate to the White Helmets at [whitehelmets.org](http://whitehelmets.org). We also encourage you to help support Ukraine by donating to Razom for Ukraine at [razomforukraine.org](http://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](http://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](http://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 at our Patreon; it keeps us going.

Sarah Kendzior (23:06):

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 (23:18):

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

Sarah Kendzior (23:26):

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

Andrea Chalupa (23:33):

*Gaslit Nation* would like to thank our supporters at the Producer level on Patreon and higher...