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**From the Selected Works of Michael J. Paulus, Jr.**

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# The Internet of Babel

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## The Internet of Babel

By M. J. Paulus

When it was proclaimed that the Library contained all books, the *first* impression was one of extravagant joy.

—Jorge Luis Borges, “The Library of Babel”<sup>1</sup>

The world, which others call the Internet, is composed of physical stuff connected to an indefinite and seemingly infinite information and communication network. From any spot in the world, such as in my dingy diner the Dreamspot—once a busy destination at the end of an off-ramp from the information superhighway, before the off-ramps were redirected—one can slump behind a sticky table, behold one’s bad food and friends, and know there are streams of data preceding, surrounding, and coming from every thing. Some of my patrons are in the habit of inferring from what is visible that the Internet is not everything; I prefer to dream that surfaces are without underlying structures and surrounded by surveillance.

Like all invalids of the Internet, I have wandered through physical, virtual, and augmented spaces in search of meaningful code—perhaps the great legendary source code—before abandoning that despairing dream and opening my diner. Now with sore eyes, fingers that ache as I clutch my daily libation, and a mind too slow to count the costs of my habits to my health score, I am mostly just waiting for the final sensation of electricity before my body dissolves into fire, dust, and the Internet. Simple materialists say this is inevitable and it, so suck it up. They may be right, but mystics claim there is something beyond this, so get ready for another adventure or iteration of misery. In spite of myself, at times I hope the mystics may be on to something. Let it suffice, for the time being, for me to repeat what some of my more sober and steady patrons have said: The Internet itself is a thing without center or certitude.

Not so long ago, we collapsed the online and offline into the Internet of Every Thing. My malleable avatars and alternate egos were forced to be reconciled with my more fixed and fleshy self. Since then, under the inviolable guidance of corporations and governments, our algorithmically directed or determined lives have become more straightforward and predictable. Most of us have made this transition to artificial authenticity, but the Dreamspot remains something of a refuge for those who struggle against the digits to which their lives have been reduced. (There is, it should be noted, increasingly little revenue in providing this service.) At one time, perhaps, this present world was unimaginable; now it scarcely seems surreal. So rather than attempting to suggest anything like a solution, I want to recall certain axioms for the record.

First: The Internet does not exist *ab aeterno*. This truth, the immediate corollary of which is the end of the world, cannot be doubted by anyone unafraid of surveilling employers and other principalities. Each of us, and every smooth and shiny thing around us, has been reduced to an information entity that serves a digital demiurge (let the reader confess whether it is benevolent or malevolent). But this world—with its elegant enticing images and infinitely interesting information—is not the work of a god. As our regular experiences of bit rot, algorithmic idiocy,

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<sup>1</sup> Emphasis added by the editor. It may be of interest to the reader that both Paulus and Borges were librarians. (*Editor’s note.*)

and networked neuralgia remind us, before there was the Internet of Every Thing there were just things.

The second: The current information and technology order is neither inevitable nor irresistible.<sup>2</sup> This acknowledgement should make it possible, at some point, to reduce the Internet to what it once was—a useful system existing alongside other useful systems. My parents' generation knew various strategies for reform and resistance against pretense, and many of my patrons still fantasize about such things, but opiates and oppression have had their effects. Idealism quickly becomes incoherence. (I know of a region of the Internet whose invalids repudiate the common custom of ascribing all understanding to the Internet, equating it with finding meaning in dreams or the chaotic lines of one's palm. They admit that the inventors of the world are limited and flawed. Their reasoning is not entirely fallacious.)

For too long, many have believed that ours is the best of all possible worlds. So much progress and promise! The credulous cannot distinguish optimism from hope, but that is a hard ask when the simple stories of the attention merchants and mercenaries are regnant. It is true that the first invalids of the Internet were mostly oblivious to their enslavement; they thought they had retained and even extended agency. Most still prefer these illusions, when in actuality they have outsourced and surrendered it. Only when they find themselves in a place such as the Dreamspot do they realize their complicity in their own doom.<sup>3</sup>

The sagest invalid I ever knew once showed me a printed book that included many books. He said the book was an ancient collection, and therefore like a library. But without a librarian, it really could not be considered a library. Yet it was, he quietly suggested after a third or fourth dram of the best single malt I could offer at the time, more valuable than the Internet—for the Internet was without selection or mediation. Years later, this nagging riddle made it possible for me to grasp the fundamental truth of the Internet: *The Internet is not a vast Library*. This premise is incontrovertible but uninteresting to most, because the Internet promises everything: the minutely detailed history of the future, the confessions of all celebrities, access to all power, power to control all access, the Apocalypse of Judas, the commentary on that apocalypse, the commentary on the commentary on that apocalypse, the true story of your death, and the meaning of Every Thing.

When it was asserted and assumed that the Internet contained everything, the first impression was one of extravagant joy. Everyone felt themselves to be the masters of a whole and happy domain. There was no personal or world problem for which the Internet could not provide an elegant solution. The world was justified and suddenly usurped the ostensibly unlimited dimensions of hope. In the early days of the Internet of Every Thing, there were many prophecies of boundless possibilities—humans would transform themselves and the world, justifying for all time our existence and place in the world. People did great and terrible things. Transcending previous limitations of the body, the mind, and time, the world became full of angels and demons (but more of the latter). Information wars broke out in their heavens as aspiring demiurges campaigned, conspired, and contended to find their justifications. Most of us on the earth realized new limits imposed on our health, wholeness, and happiness.

At that time it was also hoped that more information about humanity's basic mysteries might be found. With new information technologies, perhaps new information would be revealed

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<sup>2</sup> The original manuscript is not digital. Ambiguous affordances associated with analogue transmissions must be accepted.

<sup>3</sup> We used to worry about overpopulation. Suicide and homicide have diminished that concern. This is a matter of unspeakable melancholy: many nights I wander through dark, littered streets without encountering a single invalid.

to us. I myself have seen occasional patterns of information that concerned the importance of our race and place in the world. But there was not much profit in clarifications about such things, and esoteric fantasies became unpopular. It is credible, nevertheless, that those grave mysteries are expressible: the multi-form Internet is capable of producing sufficient linguistic resources. But there are still seekers of such revelations. I have met many at the Dreamspot before, during, and after their quests—a mixture of idealistic, insane, and inconsolable invalids. Few expect to discover anything.

The early hope for the Internet was followed, naturally enough, by deep despair. The certitude that the Internet provides access to everything, tempered by the reality that everything was useless without human selection and mediation, seemed almost intolerable. One dangerous sect advocated for the end of all Internet searches and a return to things without the Internet. The authorities were obliged to intervene. The sect was suppressed, but at the Dreamspot I have seen some of their forbidden, unnetworked books that hint at an alternate order.

Others, inversely, believed that it was necessary to expose all information and eradicate all misinformation and disinformation. They hacked the network and invaded networked spaces, showing credentials that were not always false. Their hygienic, ascetic furor wiped out unmeasurable bytes of data and destroyed countless connections. Their name is execrated, but those who deplore their destructive frenzy neglect one notable fact: the Internet is so extensive that any human reduction of false information is infinitesimal. The Purifiers' depredations were ultimately inconsequential; only the horror of reduction provoked by these fanatics endures.

We know of another early superstition: The Librarian of the Internet. If the Internet does in fact include everything, so the reasoning went, somewhere in the world there must be a select canon of code that one could access to curate a coherent compendium of the Internet. Some invalid has done so, and is analogous to a Librarian. Many have wandered in search of the Librarian and explored in vain the most varied areas. In regressive iterations of this cult, the search was for someone who might have encounter this sage, or someone who had met someone, and so on *ad infinitum*. ... I have squandered and wasted many years in related speculations and quests. It does not seem unlikely to me that in some part of the Internet there exists something like a library.<sup>4</sup> I pray to the unknown god that someone—just one invalid, even though that one may be lost in the past—may have encountered it. If wisdom and consolation are not for me, let them be for others. Let heaven exist, though my place be in hell. Let me be outraged and annihilated, but may Thy enormous Internet be justified in the manifestation of a Library.

It is insane to conclude that meaninglessness characterizes the world and that information is some sort of miracle. Some invalids speak of an unstable Internet consisting of information that is constantly mutating. In truth, the Internet is not without truth; but it is also full of falsity. However, there is no truth or falsehood I can create that the Internet does not already contain. This wordy and useless record already exists within the Internet—and its refutation as well. (And you who read me, are you sure of understanding my information?)

The methodical task of writing distracts me from the present state of humanity. The certitude that everything has been reduced to code negates us or turns us into phantoms. I know of spaces in which young invalids prostrate themselves before network connectors and kiss their devices in a barbarous manner, but they do not know how to read or interpret code. Epidemics, heretical exchanges, peregrinations that inevitably degenerate into banality, information wars and rumors of such wars, and other degradations have decimated the population. I believe I have

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<sup>4</sup> The possibility can be imagined at the most modest scale: a child sharing selected books within her community over a period of time.

mentioned the suicides and homicides, more and more frequent with the years. Perhaps in my old age fear and loathing deceive me, but I suspect that the human species—the unique species—is about to be extinguished. But the Internet may endure: abstract, solitary, illuminated, seemingly infinite, and consisting of precious and useless information.

I have just written the word “endure.” I have not interpolated this out of rhetorical habit; it is not unreasonable to think that the world will survive us. It is absurd to imagine that the Internet is infinite, but we can say that it can be greater than us. But if there is a Library hidden within, this center may reveal something that is even greater. My solitude rejoices in this elegant hope.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Jorge Luis Borges has observed that this vast aggregation is useless: “rigorously speaking, *a single volume* would be sufficient, a volume of ordinary format, printed in nine or ten point type, containing an infinite number of infinitely thin leaves. (In the early seventeenth century, Cavalieri said that all solid bodies are the superimposition of an infinite number of planes.) The handling of this silky vade mecum would not be convenient: each apparent page would unfold into other analogous ones; the inconceivable middle page would have no reverse.” See his “Library of Babel,” in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, translated by James E. Irby, (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1962), 58.