

The Web turned 35 and Dad is disappointed.

The Web officially turned 35 and its Dad has renewed his expression of his disappointment. Since the open letter that Tim Berners-Lee posted on Medium is not too long, I want to share it, then share a few reactions. One week ago, on March 12th, Tim wrote:

(Original Hope) *Three and a half decades ago, when I invented the web, its trajectory was impossible to imagine. There was no roadmap to predict the course of its evolution, it was a captivating odyssey filled with unforeseen opportunities and challenges. Underlying its whole infrastructure was the intention to allow for collaboration, foster compassion and generate creativity — what I term the 3 C's. It was to be a tool to empower humanity.*

The first decade of the web fulfilled that promise — the web was decentralized with a long-tail of content and options, it created small, more localized communities, provided individual empowerment and fostered huge value. Yet in the past decade, instead of embodying these values, the web has instead played a part in eroding them. The consequences are increasingly far reaching. From the centralisation of platforms to the AI revolution, the web serves as the foundational layer of our online ecosystem — an ecosystem that is now reshaping the geopolitical landscape, driving economic shifts and influencing the lives of people around the World.

(State of Affairs) *5 years ago, when the web turned 30, I called out some of the dysfunction caused by the web being dominated by the self-interest of several corporations that have eroded the web's values and led to breakdown and harm. Now, 5 years on as we arrive at the Web's 35th Birthday, the rapid advancement of AI has exacerbated these concerns, proving that issues on the web are not isolated but rather deeply intertwined with emerging technologies.*

There are two clear, connected issues to address. The first is the extent of power concentration, which contradicts the decentralized spirit I originally envisioned. This has

segmented the web, with a fight to keep users hooked on one platform to optimize profit through the passive observation of content. This exploitative business model is particularly grave in this year of elections that could unravel political turmoil. Compounding this issue is the second, the personal data market that has exploited people's time and data with the creation of deep profiles that allow for targeted advertising and ultimately control over the information people are fed.

How has this happened? Leadership, hindered by a lack of diversity, has steered away from a tool for public good and one that is instead subject to capitalist forces resulting in monopolization. Governance, which should correct for this, has failed to do so, with regulatory measures being outstripped by the rapid development of innovation, leading to a widening gap between technological advancements and effective oversight.

The future hinges on our ability to both reform the current system and create a new one that genuinely serves the best interests of humanity. To achieve this, we must break down data silos to encourage collaboration, create market conditions in which a diversity of options thrive to fuel creativity, and shift away from polarizing content to an environment shaped by a diversity of voices and perspectives that nurture empathy and understanding.

(Level Set) To truly transform the current system, we must simultaneously tackle its existing problems and champion the efforts of those visionary individuals who are actively working to build a new, improved system. A new paradigm is emerging, one that places individuals' intention rather than attention at the heart of business models, freeing us from the constraints of the established order and returning control over our data. Driven by a new generation of pioneers, this movement seeks to create a more human-centered web, aligned with my original vision. These innovators hail from diverse disciplines — research, policy, and product design — united in their pursuit of a web, and related technologies, that serve and empower us all. **Bluesky** and **Mastadon** don't feed off our engagement but still create group formation, **Github** provides online collaboration tools and podcasts contribute to community knowledge. As this emergent paradigm gains momentum, we have the opportunity to re-shape a digital future that prioritizes human well-being, equity, and autonomy. The time to act and embrace this transformative potential is now.

(Fundamental Change) As outlined in the 'Contract for the Web' a multitude of stakeholders must collaborate to reform the web and guide the development of emerging technologies. Innovative market solutions, like those I've highlighted, are essential to this process. Forward-thinking legislation from governments worldwide can facilitate these solutions and help manage the current system more effectively. Finally, we as citizens all over the world need to be engaged, and demand higher standards and greater accountability for our online experiences. The time is now to confront the dominant system's shortcomings while catalyzing transformative solutions that empower individuals. This emergent system, ripe with potential, is rising, and the tools for control are within reach.

Part of the solution is the Solid Protocol, a specification and a movement to provide each person with their own 'personal online data store', known as a POD. We can return the value that has been lost and restore control over personal data. With Solid, individuals decide how their data is managed, used, and shared. This approach has already begun to take root, as seen in Flanders, where every citizen now has their own POD after Jan Jambon announced four years ago that all Flanders citizens should have a POD. This is the future of data ownership and control, and it's an example of the emergent movement that is poised to replace the outdated incumbent system.

(Call For Action) Realizing this emergent movement won't just happen — it requires support for the people leading the reform, from researchers to inventors to advocates. We must amplify and promote these positive use cases, and work to shift the collective mindset of global citizens. The Web Foundation, that I co-founded with Rosemary Leith, has and will continue to support and accelerate this emergent system and the people behind it. However, there is a need, an urgent need, for others to do the same, to back the morally courageous leadership that is rising, collectivize their solutions, and to overturn the online world being dictated by profit to one that is dictated by the needs of humanity. It is only then that the online ecosystem we all live in will reach its full potential and provide the foundations for creativity, collaboration and compassion.

Tim Berners-Lee / 12th March 2024