

free wifi here

Jamie Allen

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I am writing these words in an airport, and into a text file, because I'm having trouble getting online. Due to quite a few misaligned techno-bureaucratic constellations, I cannot connect to the internet.

Is the internet a place? If it is, it's more like an airport than an apartment. More like a library than a study. More like a brothel than a bed. When wireless internet was all slick and shiny and new, a lot of us were pretty excited about its potential as a kind of lubrication, or glue, for neighborhoods and communities, parks and protests. Neighborhood nodes and free-WiFi in the park were these new kinds of idyllic place-networks — parties online you could bring your body to, and all your friends (online and off). There are different kinds of glue, of course, and Facebook seems a rather thin and runny one. "Going" to a FB "event" has become more a statement of support than a statement of intention to create place, encounters or moments together (online or off). But there are still ways of making these non-places special. There are secrets we can share with one another, dark corners where we can escape the onslaught of 'likes' and upworthiness.

Quite a while ago now, computer programmer Richard Stallman re-inserted into the lexicon of the cultural and technological imaginary a distinction about freedom, or free-ness. In discussions about technological development, people talk about "free as in speech" versus "free as in beer". That is, "with zero restrictions" or "for zero monetary cost." These phrases evoke the important differences between market-exchange value, and the more inherent, presumably more important, value of ideas and their exchange and availability. In our current world, sometimes things are free in both ways, sometimes in only one, and perhaps most often in neither. The Internet, for a while, seemed like it was on its way to being free as in speech and free as in beer, marginally at least (You still would need a computer and all that, sure). But mostly, that's not really how things are working out.

Meanwhile, I am still having trouble staying connected to the internet. I've missed my flight, my wallet and phone were stolen a couple of days ago,

my credit card numbers resultantly cancelled and useless. I have no ID with me where I am. I have no idea where I am. I have no ideas where I am. It's an airport. Wasting the change in my pocket on the seven-euro-coffee-as-entry-fee to Starbucks seems like a bad move, in case I need bus fare into the city if I can't get the next flight out. What I need is data, connectivity. Do I curse our technological condition, wanting for a world where some other person's direct act of sympathy would somehow get me on a plane, or into a bed, a hotel? It's in situations like this, in fact, that I wish the World was more like the Internet, not the other way around. Where things are excessively generous and alive with exchanges, supporting a still teeming abundance of ideas, brimming with a (pubescent?) concern for other people oftentimes so creatively wholehearted that it mutates into innuendo, teasing, bullying, and abuse. Can I crash on your couch?

Sitting on the floor, nestled beneath the warm radiofrequency canopy of the Tegel Airport Starbucks WiFi (the only 'free as in beer' WiFi in the entire airport), I realise that the staff is starting to shut down the coffee machines. Soon, they will shut off the co-branded T-Mobile router that is my artery to resources, my access to a place to sleep tonight, my route home. "Free as in beer" only works if you order before last call. One more packet, barkeep...? You don't have to go home, but you can't stay here...

Art is a particular kind of techno-idealism. It is the arranging of materials and ideas, or one of these packed inside the other, and it is purported to deliver all kinds of freedoms. Freedom of expression, freedom of the individual, creative freedom, freedom from history. Art, most of the time, isn't "free as in beer", although we like to think of it as "free as in speech". Art on the Internet, perhaps more so than in a lot of other ways we might experience ideas, still, at times, pushes into places that seem to sketch out new kinds of "free". There are ways of thinking represented, and constraints we're unaware of, new kinds of gifts and economies sketched out for art and communication, creative acts, the technological.

There are people who, when they realise the many systems, services and networks they rely on everyday—they recoil from them. This is part of

what being "free" seems to mean to us—being autonomous, being alone. Our technological collusions, our bonds with machines, are to be contained, controlled. Is it ok, though, to love a dependency? To appreciate our attachments to systematicity, instead of trying to cut them out, or away?

It is possible, freely, to love how it is to need something, or love that thing so much it seems entirely outside of the need for justification (surely, that is part of what "love" is?). It is also possible to love (even technological) necessity, reliance, attachment and vulnerability. I love being addicted to food, and air, and water. I am in love, in different ways, with some of the people I know. And I love being online. Yes, I like parks and trees and squirrels and all that, probably about as much as the next person, but I also love the Internet. And so do you, or you wouldn't be reading this right now.

And that's ok.

What would a place be like that is both "Free as in Art" and "Free as in Internet"?

Welcome to the Palais des Beaux Arts Wien.

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