How the Internet’s most earnest evangelist became its fiercest critic

By Caitlin Dewey October 28

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Code is old hat to Harris, an acclaimed digital artist and in-demand TED-talker, who learned to program at Princeton in the late-’90s. The marathon Zen meditations are, however, a more recent addition: Harris’ latest, ever more desperate attempt to reclaim his mind from his Macbook screen.

To hear Harris tell it, it’s a battle that he’s waged, on and off, for the past seven years, ever since his early, unbridled optimism about the Internet’s potential began scoring him commissions and high-paid speaking gigs. The Internet is still his medium today. In early October, he released Network Effect, his first major project in two years. But where his earlier work celebrated big data and social networking, Network Effect pans both as dystopian.

“I don’t want to suggest that some moments are more valuable than others,” Harris said on the phone from New York, where he and his meditation-guru girlfriend are about to catch a plane to Australia. “However, I would say the mindset we inhabit on the Internet is a mindset that stops us from seeing moments as sacred.”
“Staring at a glowing rectangle,” he’ll say several times, “is no way to live.”

If that seems an odd conviction for a programmer with project proposals out at Google, Twitter and Netflix, Harris readily admits: It is! But the messy-haired, soft-spoken 35-year-old — who really does speak in terms of “mindsets” and “moments” and “ways to live” — has long bucked standard procedures and expectations.

He entered Princeton University in 1998 as an English major, but switched after his first computer class — he’d sent three e-mails in the entirety of his life, to that point, and seeing his code manifest as a live webpage felt like a “Eureka moment.”

“He was one of the special ones,” said Brian Kernighan, Harris’ adviser and the famed computer scientist who coined the term “Unix.” “He sees things that other people don’t see.”

Certainly Harris had a way of seeing that was almost unheard of in the early aughts: These were the very earliest days of Facebook, the primordial, pre-Web-2.0 era of Geocities home pages and forums and blogs. The phrase “big data” — coined in Silicon Valley in the late-’90s, and not yet associated with creepy ad targeting or corporate surveillance or massive brokers — struck Harris as magically omniscient, like a view of the world from above. Between 2004 and 2008, during what he calls his “data phase,” Harris produced some of his best-known and most-beloved works: stuff like “Word Count,” a site that visualizes the frequency of English words, and “We Feel Fine,” a “search engine for emotions.”

“We Feel Fine” searched blogs and social networks for the phrases “I feel” or “I am feeling,” then tagged them with metadata like location and time. Each feeling was then mapped as a little multicolored dot, a speck in a chaotic, pointillistic series. By clicking into the dots, the feelings could be sorted, filtered, flung around — given order, basically.
It was as if the camera had zoomed out so far that you could fit everyone on the Internet into a single screen. (“Sit with We Feel Fine for just a few minutes,” NPR’s Adam Frank enthused, “and you will feel like the angels in ‘Wings of Desire,’ eavesdropping on the clamorous inner life of the world.”)

For Harris, who had hoped to stretch the storytelling powers of computer code since college, “We Feel Fine” was a breakthrough — lasting evidence that data could create “shining, beautiful, poetic things,” just like conventional art forms could.

The piece also caught the eye of organizers at the ideas conference TED, who in 2007 asked Harris to deliver a lecture on the “secret stories” of the Web. Video of that talk (he’d go on to give another) has been viewed almost a million times: It’s uplifting and earnest, even oracular. Harris was 27 at the time.

“I think one thing we have in common is a very deep need to express ourselves,” he said to a packed house. “I think this is a very old human desire … What’s new is that in the last several years a lot of these very traditional physical human activities, these acts of self-expression, have been moving onto the Internet.”

“I really believed in it,” Harris says now. “I thought humanity could be seen as this singular organism, and that we could create its portrait on the Internet.”

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A lot has changed since 2007, of course. Even the most fundamental things. If you visit We Feel Fine now, your computer probably won’t run it; most browsers no longer support its plug-ins.
Harris isn’t sure there’d be much to see, even if they did: Where “We Feel Fine” once scraped 15,000 to 20,000 feelings per day, it’s rare now to get even 8,000.

Perhaps no one feels as fine online as they once did.

Harris can pinpoint the moment that change came for him: It was 2008, and he was slogging through a commission for the Museum of Modern Art. The project, “I Want You to Want Me,” scraped data from thousand of dating profiles; it required three months of near-constant coding. Harris spent 18-hour days in front of a five-foot screen, fingers twitching manically. His friend and long-time mentor, Joanne DeLuca, says it would take him a full hour just to get out of the zone.

“He’s one of those people who’s very much in their bodies — he loves to swim and hike and be in nature, and he wasn’t doing that,” DeLuca said. “He started to question what was interesting to him in life. He was questioning what his passions were.”

It surely didn’t help that his early passions — big data, social networks and the Web — had transformed entirely between 2002 and 2008, making the new online landscape almost foreign to him. Online communications were getting shorter: blogs and e-mails replaced by “wall posts,” chats, 140-character messages. Online work seemed to be growing more disposable, too: In a 2012 talk for the lecture series Creative Mornings, Harris would marvel at the three-hour half life of the average link.

Where the Web’s visionaries once spoke of equality and universal connection, the “personal brand” became Silicon Valley’s new religion — second only to personal data, which new platforms like Facebook siphoned up for sale. These numbers, which had once represented some kind of enlightenment to Harris, had become the lifeblood of a complex corporate system whose sole aim was to monetize and monopolize user attention.
Harris’ growing doubts would eventually be published as a manifesto on data in the New York Times: “It will help us feel connected, but will it help us feel loved?” he wrote. “It will help us uncover facts, but will it help us be wise?”

Data will help us remember, but will it let us forget? It will help politicians get elected, but will it help them lead? It will help companies make products addictive, but will it help us get free once we’re hooked? It will help advertisers see people as statistics, but will it help us remember those statistics are people? It will help banks prevent credit card fraud, but will it help us stay out of debt? It will help credit card companies predict the impending collapse of a marriage, but will it keep our marriages from falling apart? It will help parents make kids genetically perfect, but will it help us love them regardless? It will help high-frequency traders sell stocks in nanoseconds, but will it help protect markets from feedback loops in their programs? It will help meteorologists predict storms and tornadoes, but will it help us rebuild the homes of survivors? It will help biologists map the migration of fish, but will it keep us from overfishing the oceans? It will help physicists find the “God particle” in a supercollider, but will it help us agree about God? It will help astronomers search for signs of alien life, but will it help us know if aliens are friendly or mean? It will help cardiologists monitor pacemakers with WiFi connections, but will it keep hackers from hacking our hearts? It will help virologists publish the genomes of major diseases, but will it keep terrorists from developing weaponized strains? It will help soldiers kill enemies remotely with drones, but will it help us see war as more than a game? It will help urbanists develop “smart cities,” but what will become of our towns? It will help governments map the consumption patterns of cities, but will it help us depend less on consuming? It will help hackers leak evidence of government surveillance, but will we treat those hackers as heroes or thieves? It will help police triangulate the location of gunshots, but will it help us address the underlying causes of violence? It will help educators make excellent standardized tests, but will it help us embrace different standards of excellence? It will help farmers engineer crops to produce bigger yields, but will it keep corporations from patenting our food? It will help search engines know how often people search for “love,” but will it help people find it? It will help singles plan a hundred first dates, but will it help them know when they’ve found the right person? It will help pet owners clone their dogs and their cats, but will it help us love the clones as much as the cloned? It will help neurologists implant chips in our brains, but will it help us turn off the chatter? It will help geneticists sequence our genome, but will it help us understand who we are? It will help us feel connected, but will it help us feel loved? It will help us uncover the facts, but will it help us be wise? It will help us live forever, but will it help us see that life’s meaning stems from the fact that it ends? It will help us keep count of everything in our lives, but will it help us understand that not everything that counts in our lives can be counted? It will help us see the world as it is, but will it help us see the world as it could be?

Harris’ 2013 manifesto on data, titled “Data Will Help Us,” which was published in the New York Times. (Jonathan Harris)

Confused and searching, Harris struck out after other sorts of projects: a photo-a-day series called “Today,” which he managed for over a year; a spin-off community/platform called Cowbird, which allowed other people to do similar storytelling. In 2013, investors offered Harris half a million dollars for Cowbird. He drew up the papers. He threw them out. (“I don’t think Jon would’ve made a good CEO,” his college mentor, Kernighan, said. “He’s too nice a guy for it.”)

In early 2015, Harris and a long-time friend, Greg Hochmuth, began collaborating on a project about found YouTube videos, but after four months of work it hadn’t come to anything. The pair kept returning to this central problem: the videos documented life around the world, but they felt so lifeless, so boring.
“We had this idea that we’d create an empathetic human library of everything we do, that people could see themselves in,” Hochmuth said. “But when we put it in the interface, it never felt warm … It was honestly kind of sad.”

At the time, Harris was thinking a lot about a poem by Marie Howe called “What the Living Do”: It was about the sanctity of small, everyday moments, the kind that people wholly absorbed by their phones don’t seem to pay attention to. He’d begun meditating seriously, even attending a silent, week-long retreat where no one spoke for five full days.

Harris had been the Internet’s evangelist and it’s portraitist; he’d lived inside it and away from it. Over breakfast in New York, he and Hochmunch decided to upend the direction of their project: It would be the Internet’s final judgment.

Network Effect is Harris’ first piece of work in two years, and it’s unsettling, even nightmarish, from the start: like browsing the Web from inside the mind of a brilliant schizophrenic.

Every visitor gets only seven minutes and some change on the site. An all-caps countdown in the center of the screen informs them that their time is limited. A heartbeat echoes in the background, just beneath the collaged sounds of Amazon Turk workers reading random tweets. (Harris and Hochmunch advise you view the work with headphones on, in order to appreciate the cacophony.)

Network Effect is divided into 100 movements, each devoted to a specific human verb: “cook,” or “march” or “pray.” Clicking on that verb brings down an avalanche of data, from mashed-up YouTube videos of people in prayer to graphs on the word’s historical usage. The information is all very “real,” crowdsourced by Amazon Turk workers or pulled from online sources. It’s also, practically speaking, completely worthless.

A still from Harris’ latest project, “Network Effect.” This is from the movement “stare.” (Jonathan Harris)
“It calls into question the logic of Internet use,” Harris said. “We’re losing agency over our own minds while big companies make money … It’s not all bad, but there are different ways of seeing.”

Given that cynicism, of course, Network Effect can’t hope for virality on the level of We Feel Fine — but the reception has been positive to this point. It’s been written up by the usual cadre of design blogs and tech magazines, all of which slapped their most inventive, clicky headlines on it. “This voyeuristic site will make you reconsider social media,” Wired promised.

Harris, for his part, has already reconsidered: He’s stepping away from the Internet again, focused on reconquering his own mind. For the next few months, he’ll be largely off the grid — aside from the check-in e-mails and texts he always sends his close friends. He and his girlfriend are going to Melbourne for another one of Harris’ talks, then on to India.

Harris recognizes, of course, that not everyone has that privilege: that silence has become a “luxury good,” that modern life often demands some level of allegiance to the network. “Unplugging” is no simple task for computer-bound office workers.

“I don’t know the answer to that, honestly” he said. “Except that, if we decide the current culture isn’t good, we should discuss whether we need to exist in the information economy.”

Until that unlikely day, however, there’s always meditation.

“We have become slaves to devices that addict us,” Harris said. “But everyone is the custodian of his own mind. We all have the potential to be the steward of our own consciousness.”

The epilogue to “Network Effect.” (Jonathan Harris)