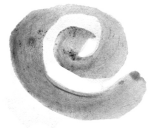# On living in the future while trying to create a better one

Writer Cory Doctorow on finding an audience, the restorative power of solidarity, iterating on ideas so you understand them better, how people talk themselves into doing the wrong thing, and the dangerous monopoly of Amazon and Audible.

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As told to Margot Atwell, 3778 words.

Tags: <u>Writing</u>, <u>Technology</u>, <u>Culture</u>, <u>Inspiration</u>, <u>Success</u>, <u>Mentorship</u>, <u>Time management</u>, <u>Business</u>, <u>Process</u>.

When you were a kid, how did you imagine the future?

Well, I certainly thought that there would be a lot more jet packs and a lot fewer fascists. But on the other hand, William Gibson has this riff where he says, people called *Neuromancer* dystopian, where as far as he's concerned, he wrote a book in 1984 in which only one city had been destroyed by a very limited thermonuclear exchange. That made it an incredibly utopian book because around 1984, I think most of us were anticipating dying in a fiery Armageddon.

What do you like to read? What inspires you?

I read very broadly, as you might imagine. I live at this intersection of politics and tech that drives a lot of my nonfiction reading. I've been trying to read a lot more nonfiction from people who I really thoroughly disagree with lately as a way of at least making sure that I understand their arguments well. It is very interesting to dig into the memoirs of people who I really disagree with, who want to explain themselves. To bring it back around to *Attack Surface*, the core question of that book is, how do people talk themselves into doing the wrong thing? That's an experience I think we've all had, we all have regretted what we've done.

We all know that in the moment, it felt like we were doing the right thing, that we could justify it to ourselves. It's a rare person who does something that while they're doing it, they understand it to be thoroughly unjustifiable. We all tell ourselves a story about why a small sin is forgivable. Then we tell a story about why this next sin, which is graver than the first one, is only a very small step that we're taking. The way that we talk ourselves into just the worst things in the world in that incremental way is very interesting to me. I think it's the most important question really that we have about our political sphere right now.

What does your curiosity look like, and how do you explore things that interest you?

I have a very methodical way of approaching my interests that actually predates my blogging career. Before I was blogging, every time I found something interesting, I would write up a pointer to it. The act of digesting an interesting thing for public consumption, including consumption by strangers, is very powerfully mnemonic. It helps recall and make connections between things that don't have obvious corollaries, and to make that synthetic work that goes into a lot of fiction, but also analytical nonfiction where you're saying, "Oh, well, when you consider this as against that, suddenly something new falls out of it."

Can you tell me about your perception that measurement changes the way you write and think?

The shorthand for this is clickbait, that people try to write the things that will attract a bunch of strong reactions from the people around them. I don't like the term clickbait, because I think that it conflates trying to be interesting and relatable in the things that you're writing about with being dishonest. The standard critique of clickbait goes like "Your title did not encompass all the nuance of the story that I got when I read the rest of the article." Headlines are not 1,000 words long, and so headlines will always elide some of the most important points. The reason we write headlines is to attract the attention of people who might be interested in the substance that follows the headline.

But that all said, when you're tied to a metric, there is this sense that when you write material that doesn't evince a strong reaction, that you're wasting your time, and that you should direct your attention and your energy to the things that other people are interested in. There's a couple of problems with this. The first is that you just end up chasing the same stuff that everyone else is chasing. If you're just trying to ride a wave of public interest, then you live and die by it, and you're not making original contributions to the discourse.

But the other problem with this is that the really interesting meaty insights are to be had in areas that take some doing. The first time I write about something, it probably won't attract a lot of attention because I don't understand it well enough to convey why I found it interesting. The iterative process of finding new morsels of information that relate to a topic, integrating them, and then getting better at explaining them as these new pieces slot in is where we get new areas of discourse. It's how we bring ourselves to talk about new things.

How do you decide which ideas to explore in fiction and which to explore in nonfiction?

I think fiction and nonfiction approach the same subject from different ends a lot of the time. I have two kinds of modes of nonfiction creation. One is this <u>daily feed</u> that I write every day, which is really a running open author's notebook. The other are these longer synthetic pieces that are often commissioned or where I feel like I've got a big, long thing to say.

This week, I had a piece out on OneZero (*How to Destroy Surveillance Capitalism*) that's a long pamphlet or a short book, that's a response to another much longer book by Shoshana Zuboff about surveillance capitalism. As I read her book, I found myself quibbling with her at first and then having some very profound disagreements that dug into some hard and complicated nuance in this very important dialogue we're having about what it means to be spied on as you go about your day. I started out to write a review. That review turned out to be 30,000 words long, and it turned out to be like a book itself.

Fiction, by contrast, tends to arise when I realize that there's a dramatic component to a social or technical question that is important to me, and there are elements of that question that can be surfaced best by having a little play in which imaginary people undergo the dramatic shifts and challenges that are suggested by that technical subject.

I guess, the theme that runs through all of this, through blogging, through internet creativity, and through this method I have is that the traditional publishing method has hinged on finding an audience and then producing work that is to the taste of the audience. For me, the great pleasure and delight of this future that we live in, the jet pack that we did get, is the ability to write material that's as esoteric as you want it to be, but for the audience that finds that kind of esoterica satisfying to find you.

Rather than being confined to trying to please a notional stranger, instead, your work turns into a signal to people who have interests that are, if not the same as yours, at least they're co-terminal with yours, so that you can have a dialogue with people that you would otherwise be unable to locate. Of course, this is the theme that runs through so much of both what's great and what's terrible about our world.

Were you worried that publishing the ebook of your first novel, *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*, under a Creative Commons license would harm your fledgling career at that point?

No. I mean, at that point it was pretty clear that, first of all, there was a lot of stuff that people were downloading on the internet and then they were going out and buying it. Second of all, as a writer whose career was just starting, as Tim O'Reilly says, my problem was definitely obscurity, not piracy.

Ultimately, my publishers put the kibosh on it, which I'm not delighted about. It's a point of disagreement. But I never felt like it was a risk to my career at all. I mean, as a recovering bookseller, there are so many good works that disappear even when they have incredible pushes from their publishers.

Can you tell me about some of the responses you got from readers?

The thing that I hear most often about this that really makes it worthwhile is the readers who say, "I've read everything. The way that I started is that somebody told me that I would like your work, and because it was so easy to get hold of, that gap between hearing about it and reading it was instantaneous and that made me a fan for life." Nobody knows what our future holds. We are living in an incredibly precarious time. So many of the writers I grew up idolizing or who mentored me ended their careers in real significant financial problems and really struggling artistically as well, that I would easily trade a little bit of money at the beginning for a long-term high fidelity relationship with an audience at the other end of my career.

Can you talk to me about how Amazon and Audible have taken over the book-selling industry?

One of the idiotic things about copyright, and one of the things that is under-theorized in our copyright debate is that in 1998, Congress passed the Digital Millennium Copyright Act and it contains this clause, section 1201, that makes it a felony to give people a tool to unlock DRM. All kinds of manufacturers have figured out that what they can do is then design a device so that you have to remove DRM to do a thing that they don't like. Therefore, doing a thing they don't like becomes a felony punishable by a five-year prison sentence.

DRM and monopoly, when they go together, make for a particularly pernicious world. We saw this play out in the early years of music when Apple made iTunes and convinced the record labels that they should insist on DRM because it would protect the record labels' interests. What the record labels actually found was that every time they sold music that was locked to iTunes, Apple gained more negotiating leverage over them, and it became harder and harder for them to do the things that they wanted, things that they thought were important to their business.

Amazon came along and said, "Well, we're the also-ran here. Nobody cares about our music store. Tell you what, we'll do an MP3-only music store that is DRM-free and works on everyone's devices, and our slogan is going to be, 'DRM stands for: Don't Restrict Me.'" The same year, Amazon bought Audible, which at the time was a nascent audiobook platform. It was popular, it was successful. It did not dominate the industry the way that it does today. The dominant audiobook form then was CDs. Audible had DRM. As with iTunes, it didn't stop people from pirating audiobooks, but it did lock these very expensive items, these $25 digital files, into Audible's ecosystem.

At the time, Amazon said, "Oh yeah, we're going to get rid of the DRM there too. 'Don't restrict me,'" then they just never did. Instead, they instituted a policy that there was mandatory DRM on all of their audiobooks, even as they were saying to publishers that they could do Kindle books that didn't have DRM. Even as publishers were selling into the library market without DRM through Overdrive, Audible had this policy that every audiobook had to be locked permanently to their platform. Audiobooks have grown in import, in part due to Audible's talent in marketing, but in part due to a bunch of other factors like the growth of podcasts, which just accustomed people to having spoken word in their ears as they moved about their day, and replaced talk radio for a lot of people with prerecorded audio.

Audible has come to command not just an ever larger share of the audiobook market, but that audiobook market is becoming more central to publishing. Now, a frontlist title will make as much money in audiobook sales as it will on hardcover sales. 90% of that market for audiobooks is dominated by a single firm, and every title that is sold by that firm is locked forever to that firm's ecosystem. Anyone who makes a tool to enable customers for those audiobooks to move to a rival's platform risks a five-year prison sentence and a $500,000 fine for a first offense. You can see why the publishers are starting to feel like they got burned here. But unfortunately, it's

really hard to escape that lock-in.

I have done my own audiobooks for quite some time now. Periodically, someone will invest in publishing them on their dime instead of mine. I'm always grateful to them when they do it. But inevitably, they find that those audiobooks don't sell as well because they're not in Audible's silo.

I wanted the audiobook to be a first class citizen for this title because this book means a lot to me. I knew that I could make a really good audiobook. I knew that because I'd done it with *Walkaway* and with *Information Doesn't Want to be Free*, and with *Homeland*, books where I've retained my audio rights. I knew it because the publishers have hollowed themselves out through so much outsourcing that when you make an "independent" audiobook, you go to the same voice actor, and the same director, and the same studio, and the same editor. You produce a product that is functionally indistinguishable from something that would have been produced by a mainstream publisher.

Other than buying your audiobooks, what are things that authors and readers can do to help break the hegemony of Amazon and Audible?

I think that there is a risk in thinking that you can shop your way out of monopoly capitalism. I mean, it is intrinsic to the nature of monopolies and more importantly monopsonies, which is when there's only one buyer, which in the case of Audible, the whole market for audiobooks goes through this hourglass pitch that Audible controls. All the sellers have to funnel through Audible, all the buyers have to funnel through Audible, and Audible gets to stick a gatekeeper there. There's a limit to what your consumer power can do there. Which isn't to say that you shouldn't do anything. As the saying goes, jam yesterday, jam tomorrow, no jam today.

You can improve the lives of individual creators who are locked into Amazon's ecosystem by buying their work somewhere else. Unless it's an Audible original, all of the audiobooks are available on rival platforms like libra.fm, Downpour, Google Play, although they're hardly a small independent, audiobooks.com, and so on. There's a whole bunch of rivals to Audible that you can consume this stuff on as well as, obviously, Kickstarter.

But really, we need structural change. The idea of shopping your way out of monopoly capitalism is like recycling your way out of climate change. Don't stop recycling, but don't kid yourself that that's where the work has to end.

For your creative work, how do you define success and how do you define failure? Or do you even use those words?

Well, the dirty secret is that I always hope it's a success and I always feel like a failure. Imposter syndrome, it's what's for breakfast.

I guess what I can tell you is the moments where I feel successful. The moments where I feel successful are when I learn about how my work made a difference for people. Particularly in relationship to the *Little Brother* books, the most successful things for me, the most tangible and enduring feeling of success that I get is when I meet people who work in tech policy, cryptography, or tech more generally, including cyber lawyers, who say, "My journey to this thing where I'm fighting for users of technology, for technological self-determination, for fairness and openness in our technology, began with this book."

The reason that feels so tangible and important is in part because it makes a difference to the world that we're in. It's a way that art leaps off the page and into the world. But also it feels like a legacy. When I think about what I'm doing now, I think about it as being passed down from my mentor, Judith Merril, and her decision to give her time and devote her prodigious talents to these very speculative bets: that if you talk to enough school children, some of them will come to reflect your values in the field that you chose. I'm making the same bets with the chips that she passed on to me in this great casino we call our political world. That feels very satisfying because it feels like it implies that I'm passing on chips to people who are going to go off and mentor other people, that I made a lineage. That's super satisfying.

What's something that you wish someone had told you when you began writing?

Well, what I wish I listened to when I began writing was to write every day. I always assumed that writing every day was like doing an hour of aerobic exercise and eating five servings of fruit and vegetables every day and getting eight hours of sleep. That it was this incredibly aspirational goal that only people with trainers and chefs got to do. Then I realized that if I wrote a little every day, 250 to 500 words every day, I could write a book every year, I could write two books a year at that rate. That things that were habits were things that you got for free. I had to realize a bunch of stuff to get there.

A really key piece of this was realizing that though there were days when I felt like I was writing very well and days when I felt like I was writing very poorly, that even though when I finished a manuscript, there were parts of it that were good and parts of it that needed improvement, that those were totally uncorrelated. That how I felt about my work in the moment was much more strongly correlated to my blood sugar and my anxiety than to the objective quality of the work. The upshot of that is that, although you will feel some days like you have, "writer's block", which is to say all the words that you can think of seem like stupid words, you should just write them down in a very cognitive behavioral therapyish way where you're like, "I feel a thing, that thing is unconnected to objective reality. I'm going to act as though my feeling was wrong because I know that the last time I felt this, it was wrong. I'll keep feeling the thing, but I'm just not going to act on the feeling."

What restores you?

What restores me? I think the thing that restores me more than anything is solidarity. It's seeing people come together across lines, where you see common interests cohering that weren't obvious. Again, back to the book, *Attack Surface* is a story about people realizing that they have more stuff in common than was their difference, and that they have a common enemy, a systemic enemy, that they should all be fighting. It's this idea that the role of techies is not to provide tools to oppressed people. It is to understand that a movement for liberation requires that everybody involved have a say in how it's undertaken, including what tools will exist, and how they work.

I think that the great crisis of the last 40 years was the project to convince us that we were all atomized individuals with no natural shared interests. I think that it's a lie and it's an obvious lie, and it requires a lot of work to maintain. But because so much energy goes into maintaining it, we sometimes miss that, we think it's human nature. Yochai Benkler gave a speech, I think at Harvard, where he said, "If you go to Wall Street and you find a playground where there are men in expensive suits giving their toddlers an airing after work, you can see people who profess a belief that selfishness is the human condition screaming at their kids, 'Billy, share.'"

Because nobody wants to live with a kid who thinks that selfishness is the human condition. Most of parenting consists of convincing kids that selfishness is not the human condition. When you see the reemergence of this aggressively downregulated trait that so much energy has been put into abolishing, and you see it reemerging, it's like seeing a flower bloom in the crack in a pavement. It's generosity and fellow feeling winning out, triumphing over adversity. That's really the thing that keeps me going.

Cory Doctorow Recommends:

To listen: djBC's brilliant, classic "Beastles" mashups, like the *Let it Beast* album, which are hard to find but worth the effort. Better than mere novelties—this is music that enhances both The Beatles and The Beastie Boys.

To read: Adam Rutherford's *How to Argue With a Racist*. The odious, intellectually fraudulent world of "race science" is full of plausible seeming arguments for racial disparities in performance, capability and social woes. Rutherford—a hilarious science communicator and respected genomist—destroys these arguments with real humor, empathy, and science.

To watch: Jordan Peele's adaptation of Matt Ruff's "Lovecraft Country." This book was outstanding, but the TV adaptation is even better. The inversion of lovecraftian tropes (the real horror is racism!) works so well, both as a means of invoking lovecraftian tingling horror and as a critique of race politics.

To listen: All the President's Lawyers. KCRW's (LA) weekly show with Ken "Popehat" White, a former federal

prosecutor who breaks down Trump's legal woes with real humor and deep legal knowledge. The opposite of hot takes.

To see: _Marc Davis In His Own Words_ by Christopher Merritt. Merritt, a Disney Imagineer, was a protege of Davis, one of the original "Nine Old Men," behind the Tiki Room, the Haunted Mansion, Pirates of the Caribbean, etc. This two-volume set combines never-seen work by Davis (both from the Disney archives and from the extensive collection that Davis's widow provided access to) and quotes from never-seen interviews, including extensive interviews Merritt himself conducted.

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