

Why the Internet is a Modern Form of Slavery

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I can see your face in front of my eyes. “What, Bernie?” you’re yelling at me, “the Internet? I’d have expected a few things that you might come up with as the modern form of slavery, but the Internet? It brought us so much freedom!”

And you’re right. Indeed, the Internet has brought us a lot of cool things that weren’t possible before. It has transformed our lives, and it did bring us more freedom in some areas.

Here’s my point: We’re paying a price for that. A hefty price, in my opinion.

It was quite a journey for me to come to the conclusion that the Internet makes me feel enslaved.

It began many years ago. I was running a VC-backed startup, selling software and services to telecoms. I knew the Internet as a place where it was expensive

to build the infrastructure, servers, web applications, etc. But suddenly, in the early 2000s, something changed. Web Hosting, and so-called “root servers”, became available to the general public at affordable rates. Even though my business didn’t immediately need one of those consumer-grade root servers, I bought one just to check out the potential of that new technology. I found that most servers in the Internet run some kind of UNIX-like operating system, mostly GNU/Linux. That came as a big serendipity to me. I learned to love UNIX early in my life because of its elegant architecture and powerful command-line interface. After having lost UNIX out of sight because MS-DOS and Windows, both stark contrasts to elegant architecture, dominated our lives for too long. Getting back “my” UNIX through servers powering the Internet was definitely a fun experience.

My experience with root servers, virtual servers or VPS (Virtual Private Servers), the backbone of the Internet, continued. I used them for my business to develop new software products. Later, starting from 2011, I ran a software development firm with offshore development teams and myself as the lead developer and project manager. During those days, I needed all kinds of things: servers for myself and my development team to develop and test web applications for my clients, a place to safely store the source code we produced, servers to run web applications to manage my teams and the development process (using tools like redmine, Jira, ...), servers to host my side business (a small web shop), servers to host my play projects.

During all these years, the Internet as such was a fun experience. It gave me so much freedom to make my thoughts, ambitions and dreams a reality. I don’t know what path my life would have taken if the Internet hadn’t been invented, but I can’t imagine it would have been a better one. I am so grateful and still excited about the Internet.

Nevertheless, it can be done better. Like with every successful and high-growth phenomenon, the Internet has attracted folks that are trying to exploit the gravity

that the Internet exerts to people. By that, they exploit me. And chances are, they're exploiting you as well.

Read on to learn what specific experiences I made that made me come to that conclusion.

The Slavery of Tremendously overpriced VMs

VMs (a.k.a. VPS, virtual servers, instances, droplets) look cheap. Some providers offer free layers, and the paid services are starting as low as \$5/mo. If you want to do any real stuff, though, you're quickly arriving at \$20 – \$30 per

month for a single VM. These costs quickly add up. I didn't like paying for 20 or 30 of these, so I ventured into finding options for "dedicated" servers. These are servers that are still hosted in some provider's datacenter, but you pay for the whole physical machine rather than for just a "virtual" machine (sharing resources with many other virtual machines on the same physical server). I tried out a few options for dedicated servers. One of the best deals I could get was German provider hetzner.com. I had a server with 64GB of ECC RAM (never, never, ever run a server without ECC, i.e. "error-correcting code), fast Quad Core Intel processor of the latest generation, two 256GB SSDs (never, never, ever run server without mirrored storage) for around \$69/mo before VAT. I could easily run 40 or 50 VMs on this machine, saving me thousands of dollars a year. The essence is: cloud-based VPS look cheap, but in reality the rip you off once you start using for anything that real life requires.

The Slavery of Aggressive Marketing

Well, do I need to write anything here? We all know it. Once you've bought domain name, you're being spammed with lots of up-sell, cross-sell, you-name-it

emails, sometimes even phone calls. And try to cancel service. It's always funny to see how difficult it is.

The Slavery of Outgoing Email blocked

I implemented an email server on an Amazon EC2 instance for one of my clients. Emails went out and everything was fine. I released the app to my client. Suddenly, emails didn't go out any more. I spent days trying to figure where the bug in my software was. Only to find out that Amazon blocked outgoing emails, and required to pitch my "use case" to them so they are sure I'm not a spammer.

The Slavery of Ports blocked by ISPs

I was a happy user of Cox Internet service, at least when I ignored the fact that ISPs charge at least double the rates here in the US than they do in Europe (I moved from Germany to the US in 2014). Then, I wanted to run a server from my home. When you run a server from home, you need ports 80 and 25, which are the standard port numbers for HTTP (the "Web") and SMTP (email). Shockingly, Cox told me they are blocking these ports for some phony "security" reason. I could go by their business service, though, for four times the monthly fee. If I pay 4x, all the "security" reasons will suddenly be gone. Thank you, Cox. I switched to AT&T and everything's working fine now.

The Slavery of Pay Extra, Pay Extra, Pay Extra

Often I'm tempted to try out that new piece of server-side open source software. Running my own Dropbox-like service? My own Evernote-like service? My own github-like service? My own web conferencing, CRM? All very tempting, given the fact that if I host it myself (rather than at the data centers of the big guys), I can mitigate many of the slavery factors that I mention in this post. Unfortunately,

each and every VM, instance, droplet, whatever you call it, costs extra. To me, that is maybe the factor that most strongly makes me feel enslaved.

The Slavery of The Lie About Billing by the Minute

Many web hosting providers advertise that you only pay what need, by the minute. However, they make it hard to just “park” your server. You will lose data, configurations, etc. unless you know how to backup and restore it. That is a non-trivial task. Amazon even gives you reasonable prices only if you “reserve” your instance for a year or even three years, further aggravating the lie about billing by

the minute. Most people keep their servers for years, even if they use it only a tiny fraction of the time. That’s part of the hosting provider’s business model, and it makes them rich. To me, however, it makes me feel exploited, enslaved and ripped off.

The Slavery of Surveillance

Think about all the things that Edward Snowden revealed. We’re being spied on on every occasion. Sure the world has too many bad guys, and we need to protect ourselves. But really think about that “everywhere and all the time” surveillance that’s going on. To me, it feels like I’m in a horror movie. 2015 is much worse than Orwell’s 1984. Watch Apple’s famous [1984 Super Bowl commercial](#) again, it’s widely credited one of Steve Job’s most ingenious moves.

The Slavery of Advertising and Us Being the Product Without Our Permission

Andrew Lewis described it brilliantly: “If you are not paying for it, you’re not the customer; you’re the product being sold”. Google tortures me with advertising in

gmail even though I'm using the paid google apps service. So-called re-targeting bombards me with advertising for a thing that I've once visited on the Web, but which I don't need anymore. Data scientists claim that Facebook knows more about me than my friends do. Very scary. The point is: the companies making a profit with our data, the companies that see my personal, private data as the new oil, make it so easy to use their services that I can hardly escape. They even undermine the business model of others that aim to be less obtrusive. I no longer want to be captured in their tentacles.

The Slavery of Being Locked-in When We Grow

The main achievement of cloud computing is not (only) VPS, but especially so-called SaaS and PaaS services. While they make things easy and accessible, I feel annoyed by their business models. Cheap entry, but when you grow and do something that really matters, it's going to cost you a lot. I've seen myself moving up the price tiers with github, unbounce, Atlassian and others. I just hate having to think about ways how to avoid their well thought-out pricing traps.

The Slavery of Being Tricked Into Subscriptions That we Don't Need

Everyone wants "recurring revenue". I hate to provide it if I don't need (or even want) it. Many services are only available as subscriptions even though their use is more of one-time nature. Think SurveyMonkey. The fact that you're conducting an online survey does not necessarily mean that from that moment on you've decided to become a survey junkie and hammer out one after the other of these beasts.



Is freedom possible?

The good news is: There's always a choice. I founded antsle.com with the mission to free the world from the slavery that the current Internet imposes on us. To give us back our freedom. To create and lead the autonomous web hosting movement.

If you enjoyed reading my article, please like/recommend it below and help spread the word. Every small act of compassion helps to gain victory over slavery and make the Internet a place of freedom again. So please forward this post to your friends.

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