

# The 'Darknet' & 'Trusted Computing'

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The problem with that time – and we're talking cusp of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – is that no one was prepared to do much intellectual labour. Everyone knew that relations were jamming – I know, I wrote stuff down – but there was no imagination in the air and no one tried to think of new forms – new economic forms, legal forms, social forms; and those that were making money up till then just tried to protect their old revenue streams as strenuously and for as long as they could. It was ridiculous. I guess that big corporations had had a long stint of ordinary people identifying with their interests, so they thought they could sell anything to them. Maybe that was it. But that was never going to last in the face of this.

You have to realise that in those days sending digital objects around the Internet didn't have the *feel* of a crime. Everyone was doing it. In some cases they'd made complex infrastructures for doing so. They had built deep social webs over that space that gave them a sense of owning it. A lot of people lived their whole lives in electronic space – everything: personal stuff, social, cultural and intellectual... Even the corporations themselves had told them they could do anything they wanted with wired computers! – remember that time? – it was all about freedom and breaking out of the past into a future of unlimited communications possibilities.

And the crackdown was ferocious. So when you think about it, what happened next wasn't very surprising.

The corporations knew they were playing a time game. It was going down but they thought make money from it while it's still here. The first system was pretty basic – allocation of unique serial numbers to documents to allow tracing, automatic authentication of software, hardware, digital objects – it would disable anything unrecognised, fake, copied, old, free or blacklisted. They knew they weren't using their imaginations. I have it right here: on November 18<sup>th</sup> 2002, some guys from Microsoft stood up at a conference in Washington, DC and put it bluntly, "In addition to severe commercial and social problems, these schemes suffer from several technical deficiencies, which, in the presence of an effective darknet, lead to their complete collapse. We conclude that such schemes are doomed to failure".<sup>1</sup> (Yes: that was when "darknet" was a term of corporate abuse...)

But you get together a coalition of that size and they are not going to let their expen-

sive systems go down so easily. People didn't have a clue what this was going to mean. Even the people who were trying to wake everyone up sound naive in retrospect; even campaigners like Richard Stallman sounded incredulous: he wrote, in terms that sound endearing today, that these systems "will continually download new authorisation rules through the Internet, and impose those rules automatically on your work. If Microsoft, or the US government, does not like what you said in a document you wrote, they could post new instructions telling all computers to refuse to let anyone read that document. Each computer would obey when it downloads the new instructions. Your writing would be subject to 1984-style retroactive erasure. You might be unable to read it yourself".<sup>2</sup>

Like I say, though, all these crazy locks on doors, all these paranoid systems rejecting even software that was perfectly good, all those covert middle class people who had never been criminals before, all the show trials and raids – it didn't really solve what it was meant to solve. Corporations never managed to take possession again of fluid digital commodities. But they lost the friendly faces they'd tried so hard to don. Sad, when you think about it. I put it down to the distinct lack of imagination of that time.

#### NOTES

1. Biddle, Peter, Paul England, Marcus Peinado and Bryan Willman "The Darknet and the Future of Content Distribution" (paper presented at 2002 ACM Workshop on Digital Rights Management, Washington, D.C., <http://crypto.stanford.edu/DRM2002/darknet5.doc>, 18 November 2002).
2. Stallman, Richard "Can you trust your computer?". For a more detailed examination of the implications of these technologies for users: [www.gnu.org/philosophy/can-you-trust.html](http://www.gnu.org/philosophy/can-you-trust.html).

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