

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by Google

by Bruce Sterling

Los Angeles, 2026

Ted got busted because we do graffiti. Losing Ted was a big setback, as Ted was the only guy in our gang who knew how to steal aerosol spray cans. As potent instruments of teenage social networking, aerosol spray cans have "high abuse potential". So spray cans are among the many things us teenagers can't buy, like handguns, birth control, alcohol, cigarettes and music with curse words.

I tried hard to buy us another spray can. I'm a street poet, so really, I tried. I walked up to the mall-store register, disguised in my Dad's business jacket, with cash in hand. They're cheap, aerosol spray cans. Beautiful colours of paint, just screaming to get sprayed someplace public where everybody has to see what's on our minds. The store wouldn't sell me the can. The e-commerce system simply would not allow that transaction. The screen just went gray and stayed gray.

That creepy "differential permissioning" sure saves a lot of trouble for grown-ups. Increasing chunks of the world are just... magically off limits. It's a weird new regime where every mall and every school and every bus and train and jet is tagged and tracked and ambient and pervasive and ubiquitous and geolocate... Jesus, I love those words... Where was I?

Right. We teenagers have to live in "controlled spaces". Radio-frequency ID tags, real-time locative systems, global positioning systems, smart doorways, security videocams. They "protect" us kids, from imaginary satanic drug dealer terrorist mafia predators. We're "secured". We're juvenile delinquents with always-on cellphone nannies in our pockets. There's no way to turn them off. The internet was designed without an off-switch.

So my pal Ted, who stupidly loved to tag his own name on the walls, got sent to reform school, where the security is insanely great. Me, I had a much higher grade-point average than Ted, but with no handy Ted to steal spray cans, the words of the prophet have vanished from the subway walls. So much for my campaign to cover the town with graffiti street-stencils of my favourite teen pop stars: George Orwell and Aldous Huxley.

And Shakespeare. I used to hate Shakespeare, because the teachers would park us in front of the webcam terminals, turn on the Shakespeare lessons and leave the building. But then, somehow, they showed us Macbeth, a play which actually MEANS something to us. Grown-ups don't understand that (or they wouldn't be teaching it) but Macbeth is the true authentic story of my generation. This is Macbeth's world, and us teenagers just live in it. Dig this: those "Three Weird Sisters", who mysteriously know everything? They can foretell anything, instantly,

like Google? Plus, the witches make it all sound really great - only, in real life, it totally sucks? Well, those "Three Weird Sisters" are the "Internet of Things", they're "Ubiquitous Computation", they're "Ambient Findability". The truth is written all over the page (or the screen - my school can't afford to give us any "pages"). Just read that awesome part where they're boiling pseudocode in their witch-cauldron! They talk like web designers!

Macbeth stumbles around seeing ghosts and virtual-reality daggers. That sure makes sense. Every day of my life, I see people with cellphones yelling eerie gibberish in public. The world of Macbeth is totally haunted and paranoid! You can't get one minute's privacy, even inside your own bed!

So, I did my class report about Macbeth, and every kid in my English class instantly agreed with me. I'm not the most popular guy in school, but they started CHEERING me. And Debbie, this wacky Goth chick in my class who identifies with Lady Macbeth... After my class report, Debbie sleep-walked out of the classroom and pretended to hang herself! Of course the teen-suicide subroutines in the school jumped onto Debbie immediately. Debbie broke the software rules, so Debbie is toast, just like Ted.

My Dad - he's still alive, apparently - he sent me an email from China and said I ought to "recruit" Debbie into my "social group dynamics of online identity production". My Dad always talks like that. I haven't seen Dad face-to-face in six years. Look: I am a 17-year-old male, okay? I don't want to send Debbie any hotlinks and digital video. I want to take Debbie out! Maybe we could take some clothes off! But there isn't any "out" for me and Debbie. There isn't any "off", either.

Okay, I admit it: Debbie is insane. The fact that Debbie really likes me, that just proves it. Debbie ACCEPTS this sick state of reality. She EMBRACES it. We are doomed.

Imagine that Debbie and me somehow go out together. We want to network with our peer group, teenager-wise. I need to figure out what's hip and with-it and rebellious, and Debbie needs to know what the other cyber-Goth chicks are wearing. Is that okay? No!

It's not that we can't do it: it's that all our social relations have been reified with a clunky intensity. They're digitized! And the networking hardware and software that pervasively surround us are built and owned by evil, old, rich corporate people! Social-networking systems aren't teenagers! These machines are METHODICALLY KILLING OUR SOULS! If you don't count wall-graffiti (good old spray paint), we have no means to spontaneously express ourselves. We can't "find ourselves" - the market's already found us and filled us with map pins.

At our local mall, events-management sub-engines emit floods of locative data. So if Debbie and me sneak in there, looking for some private place to get horizontal, all the

vidcams swivel our way. Then a rent-a-cop shows up. What next? Should we go to Lovers' Lane? There aren't any! They eliminated all those! They were tracked down with satellites and abolished with Google Maps.

Okay, sure: I know I sound pretty depressed. Us teenage poets depress easily. You know what they tell me whenever I rant like this? "Get a hobby." Play imaginary fantasy computer games! That is allowed me! Wow, thanks! When she nursed me as a baby, my Mom dropped me right on my head to play Wonder-World of Witchcraft. I sure know where that story goes. If "religion is the opiate of the people", then immersive multiplayer 3D virtual worlds are hard-core Afghani heroin. My Mom will never make it back into the labor force: Mom's way too busy building herself up to 146th-level SuperMasonic Tolkien-Fantasy Ultra-Elf Queen. Like that helps! Look, I can show you Mom's gaming environment, right on the screen here. My Mom's a Welfare Elf Queen (CR) (system crash) (hard reboot)

Debbie: why do you access me, when you know that makes things hard for me? Why do you tag, and link to me? Why do you telephone? And why, why, why do you write me silly notes on paper? I am so sick of you, Debbie. Why, why do you hack me? It is just to see the things that you know I am writing about you...

Debbie, you believe in us. You think we are the future.

I am so miserably happy, just now.

From issue 2569 of New Scientist magazine, 15 September 2006, page 52-53