

# Google's Utopia: Our Nightmare

## SidewalkToronto—A City Redesigned

Kim A. Broadie

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The Internet wasn't supposed to be like this. John Perry Barlow, Internet pioneer and friend of the Grateful Dead and contributor to their very early virtual community, The Well (or Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), wrote this in his 1996 *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*:

"Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather."

Google seeks to replace these weary giants. It seeks sovereignty. Anarchists seek to eliminate gods and masters, but one can't shake the feeling that Google has become a new incarnation of both.

The company has begun building cities of the future from the Internet up. Their first goal, in a partnership with the city of Toronto, is to develop 12 acres of the city's waterfront with smart systems that will optimize everything. Ubiquitous connectivity. Digital omniscience. Techno-utopia.

Sidewalk Labs, a sister company of Google under the Alphabet umbrella, has an ambitious project in play, called *SidewalkToronto*. They have published mountains of dazzling material outlining its proposals and visions making starry-eyed claims that they will solve the problems of urban life all over the world.

As an aside, it should be mentioned that Google, Amazon, and Microsoft all have billion-dollar contracts with the Pentagon and the US intelligence communities.

Many citizens of Toronto are uneasy. The original proposal was for 600 acres, but the City Council scaled it down to 12. Why? *The Financial Post* reports that in June 2019, U.S. venture capitalist Roger McNamee wrote to the city council warning them about Google's smart city project.

McNamee calls it the most advanced version of surveillance capitalism so far. In his letter to the council, he said Google will be using algorithms to "nudge human behavior" in ways to favor its business. His conclusion is that "no matter what Google is offering, the value to Toronto cannot possibly approach the value your city is giving up."

Strong words. McNamee was an early investor in Apple, Google, and Facebook. He is certainly not a technophobe, nor a Luddite. What are the values McNamee fears will be lost?

Our power. Our autonomy. Privacy is already gone. Surveillance is already total. We need to reclaim our data.

What does Google want? They estimate their waterfront project will generate \$14 billion in revenue per year, to be shared with the city.

Sidewalk Labs, along with Google, say they just want a fair return on their investment, in increasing amounts over time. Money is the clue. A company with a trillion-dollar market cap must grow or die. It needs to in order to maintain its virtual monopoly over the world's digitized information.

That means Google needs to privatize entire cities. That is the way to accumulate more capital. They need to supplant municipal regulations to gain unfettered flow of data from everywhere and everyone. Ever increasing flow of data means ever increasing flow of wealth. The digitized version of your life is the surplus value they own and convert into more capital.

In the October 21, 2017 *Guardian*, Evgeny Morozov gives us more clues about Google's real intentions. He writes that Dan Doctoroff, the CEO of Sidewalk Labs, broadly indicates they will form alliances with wealthy real estate developers and investors to build high-tech cities for their mutual financial benefit.

Morozov writes, they promise "cheap, modular buildings to be assembled quickly; sensors monitoring air quality and building conditions; adaptive traffic lights prioritizing pedestrians and cyclists; parking systems directing cars to available slots. Not to mention delivery robots, advanced energy grids, automated waste sorting, and, of course, ubiquitous self-driving cars."

By clearing out cumbersome regulations, Google will install sensors, networks and algorithms to run the city. The real-time data flows will regulate, but also tune, herd, and condition the behavior of humans, in the words of Shoshana Zuboff, author of *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*.

Zuboff, in her massive book, explains the backstory of the nature and logic of surveillance capitalism: "In the competition for scope, surveillance capitalists want your home, and what you say and do within its walls. They want your car, your medical condition, and the shows you stream; your location as well as all the streets and buildings in your path and all the behavior of all the people in your city. They want your voice and what you eat and what you buy; your children's play time and their schooling; your brainwaves and your bloodstream. Nothing is exempt."

Nothing personal, even though Microsoft now has finalized contracts with hospital groups to collect your personal medical records. It's just fuel for the business. It's not about snooping; it's just business. Shall we give up our smartphones, smart toothbrushes, smart light bulbs, smart doorbells, smart refrigerators and cars, smart vacuum cleaners, smart toys, and soon to come, smart skin?

A basic metaphor for surveillance capitalism, Zuboff says, is the one-way mirror. On our side of the mirror we talk, play games and music, text, search, take selfies. On the other side, the side we can't see, it is all monitored and digitized. Fed into AI machines that learn from algorithms.

Facebook even knows your heart rate as you gaze at your screen. Like heroin, the benefits of our phone addiction are immediate, but like any addiction it becomes, in the end, a cruel master. We can't seem to live without them.

As anarchist and social critic Paul Goodman wrote during the 1960s, we must decide how to draw the line against the authoritarian and oppressive forces at work in society. The Googles and Amazons of the world store 99 percent of the world's information in digital formats. Asymmetrical power, inherently unjust.

Compared with these behemoths, police surveillance, with all its facial recognition, seems like child's play. They were, however, the first to get into the game after 9/11 and the PATRIOT Act. Cameras that enable facial recognition are a tool the New York Police Department has used for decades. It is still too unreliable for courts. It is still a work in progress.

Even so, the NYPD uses a system devised by Microsoft called Domain Awareness System. This system connects 18,000 cameras with two billion license plate readings, 100 million summonses, 54 million 911 calls, 15 million complaints, 12 million detective reports, 11 million arrests, and two million warrants. How many Androids do you think Google collects data from?

The police data is being overtaken by private data companies. *The New York Times* reports that hundreds are now getting into the facial recognition act. Companies like Clearview have scraped thousands if not millions of faces off social media and can identify and profile anyone you want, for less than \$100. Police departments around the country are using them. It's legal.

When the people of Toronto express uneasiness about Google taking over the waterfront, they may not even be aware of the big picture. It's not just the data; it's the private takeover of the city, even the idea of a city.

Google's response to their concerns is a kind of misdirection: "We believe that data collected in public space must be overseen and closely controlled by an independent and publicly accountable Data Trust, not Sidewalk Labs, Google, or any private company," said spokesperson Keerthana Rang. This data, they say, will be overseen by an independent trust that prevents any company, including Sidewalk, from selling personal information or disclosing it to third parties without explicit consent.

These companies have always violated such commitments.

Besides, who will exercise oversight? Google is advancing the same old neoliberal agenda that has been pushed in government for decades. Privatize everything. The markets will provide the solutions. It's even in their proposals.

Real time market pricing for hotel rooms, parking spaces, energy, water, rent, and so on. Not only that, it is even more tightly centralized than the Federal government.

They know everything about everyone. The advance of surveillance capitalism depends on theft of our experience. Such asymmetrical power is inherently unjust. It is a far cry from the free cyberspace proclaimed by the old Deadhead, John Barlow.

Given the nature of the technology, can a Net that embodies Barlow's vision of a realm free from authoritarian controls be created?

Kim Broadie taught history in New York City high schools until retirement. Only recently he discovered anarchy through PM Press and realized he has been an anarchist all his life. He blogs at **[approachinganarchy.net](http://approachinganarchy.net)** and **[kimbroadie.com](http://kimbroadie.com)**.

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