

Chat with Seán

July 13, 2020

This is an ongoing series where [CJ Eller](#), community manager at Write.as, takes the time to chat with the many interesting people who use Write.as about their lives & writing practice.

The third conversation in this series is with [Seán](#). Together with his partner Kate, he stewards a [Garry Oak ecosystem called Hummingbird Hill](#). The two document their experiences there over at [Hummingcrow & Co.](#) — it's a blog full of everything from hummingbird photos & music recommendations to pancake recipes and local insect facts.

This conversation was conducted over on [Are.na](#).

CJ Eller: [Hey Seán!](#) I wanted to start this chat with something I noticed on your [personal site](#). You mention a moment in your life where you stopped engaging with the web & then started gradually rejoining it.

Could you speak to that process? Did you have a vastly different sense of the web when you rejoined it? What remained the same? What changed?

Seán: Thanks so much for reaching out to chat, CJ! I really love the idea of having a conversation in this format, and am struck by the fact that this is the first time I've felt a real inclination to *socialize* through Are.na. This is a bit of an aside, but relates to the hiatus that I took from the web in 2017 which you're referring to.

I should first clarify that when I say I stopped 'engaging' with the web, it's not that I didn't come online at all during that time (though I did have very limited Internet access), but rather that I stopped visiting

social networking platforms of any kind—which vastly reduced the amount of time that I spent online. This was paired with relocating geographically to a community where I didn't know anyone and wasn't faced with the expectation of 'keeping up' with what was being posted on Platform X. In a sense, I was hitting the reset button on my online presence and returning to an approximation of what life was like before social networking became so ubiquitous—which, really, wasn't very long ago at all, and yet probably seems like ancient history for many people.

This brings me to the core of your questions regarding what has changed from my perspective over the past few years:

On a personal level, whereas before I 'walked away' from the Social Web I felt like I was trapped in an eternal purgatory of compulsion which left me feeling overwhelmed, empty, and sick, yet *endlessly hungry* most of the time, I returned with a renewed sense of agency and clarity which enabled me to hone in on what a healthy, fulfilling online experience might look like for me. This led me to discover and invest myself in platforms such as Are.na, Write.as, Scuttlebutt, and Neocities, where I actually feel more like a human being than a metricized 'user'... which brings me to my second observation.

Whereas on the one hand, countless people are more deeply embedded in Social Media mythologies than ever before, there have now arisen numerous alternative frameworks for exploring how we can/should engage with each other and the world digitally. Many of these new platforms, tools, and communities are encouraging people to return to an older 'web 1.0' experience (the romantics, we might say), while others are prompting people to imagine and build a future which ultimately moves away from previous paradigms entirely (the futurists). Since returning, I've found myself intrigued by both of these angles but remain undecided as to which seems more viable and sustainable on a broader scale (though my hope is that it will be some combination of the two).

CJ Eller: I *really* resonate with how you put these opposing paradigms for the future of the web as a type of romanticism & futurism. Like you, I think I probably fall somewhere in the middle. I'd love to hear more about why you are drawn to both rather than one or the other. How do you feel like each of these paradigms make you feel like a human & less like a user? How has each helped you escape that eternal purgatory of compulsion you mentioned?

Seán: For me, it's helpful to conceptualize the web in physical terms in order to wrap my head around online experiences. So I'll try to work through my thoughts by way of analogy:

Imagine the web as a sprawling city in transition – a place where you've been living for about 25 years. Although there are still a handful of beloved old institutions and community spaces still clinging on, the landscape has largely become dominated by sleek condominiums, power centers, and corporate skyscrapers – most of which started popping up around town about 15 years ago. In the process, a diverse patchwork of communities have either become dispersed or mutated by the new hegemony (let's call it 'Big Progress'), and most people in the city have assimilated to it. However, in recent years, there has also been a growing movement of people who are dissatisfied with the current state of affairs for a wide variety of reasons but with a loosely shared goal of deep change.

Some of these people believe that the things that made the city so much better before can be brought back in rejuvenated forms as a means of repairing the damage done by 'Big Progress'. Others propose that in order to truly move beyond the current paradigm, a new type of city must be built using a different structure entirely in order to preclude the same outcome happening again. Both are carving out spaces and building tools based upon their respective outlooks, but there is a fair amount of overlap between their communities.

This is essentially what the current state of the web feels like to me.

And whereas some people might view the 'romantic' and 'futurist' approaches as fundamentally incompatible, I believe that they are two sides of the same coin which can potentially strengthen one other. Another way to convey this more broadly would be to say that I am most compelled by paths which draw strongly upon lessons/tools of the past while also envisioning/building unprecedented futures. It seems to me that the main challenge is not becoming too fixated upon looking one way or another.

Getting back to your questions: there are certain online spaces which make me feel like a guinea pig running on a wheel and others where I feel like a human being making meaningful decisions. The former type of experience encloses me in a state of aimless, desperate compulsion, whereas the latter empowers me to preserve my rights & values and to live with mindful intention. When considering these experiences, I keep coming back to a root question underlying this distinction: in which direction are the incentives aligned? Towards power or empowerment? My sense is that chipping away at an answer to this question requires some measure of both romanticism and futurism.

Revisiting the 'old web' helps ground me in the lived experience of an alternative digital landscape which is easy to forget when you're running on 'the wheel' (e.g. Social Media). And envisioning the 'next web' (which may ultimately not be called 'the web' at all) reminds me that there are always new possibilities and ideas to consider which may illuminate previously hidden pathways & pitfalls.

CJ Eller: Well let's talk about the "building" aspect of this new city. You seem like someone who's interested in building on this alternative web. How do you think about your role in this kind building? How did you start tinkering? What were things that got in the way? How did you further develop that inclination to personally build on the web?

Seán: I would say that I consider myself to be something along the lines of a 'roaming tinkerer' when it comes to building in this web 'city'. By that, I mean that while I do have some straightforward knowledge

about web development, I'm mostly just figuring things out in my own crude, experimental way as I go.

I roam around searching for spaces and tools which might support my ability to create and explore autonomously, and to connect with other community members from time to time.

My entry point for this way of being online was really just the general excitement which I originally felt about the web as a realm of discovery, creativity, and connection. I remember how magical web spaces felt during my earliest days online, and how empowering it was to learn that anyone could create or enter digital spaces freely as a means of exploring their identity and expressing their interests beyond the norms & limitations of offline society – and on top of that, connecting with other strange humans around the world who they would never otherwise meet. For someone who has always been a social outsider, this felt especially revolutionary.

At first though, I was only an explorer – getting a feel for this new city and the rich patchwork of buildings, tools, & communities which gave it form. But gradually, I became 'street smart' enough to become a builder, of sorts, as well. Truthfully, the greatest challenge for me has always been the fact that I have more of an 'artist's mentality' than an engineer's, and as a consequence have a hard time working with the technical language and structure of digitality.

That being said, I used whatever tools I could get my hands on (mostly free trials of software such as Macromedia Dreamweaver & Flash) to begin experimenting with creating spaces for myself, and inspected other structures which caught my eye to learn to piece together my earliest creations. And once I began tinkering and learning, my mind opened to more and more applications for this new ability: personal spaces led to activist campaigns, fandom shrines, and more. As a teenager, I built many sites in this fashion and was able to share them through platforms such as FreeWebs. (I'm now remembering that a fan site that I created in my late teens had a forum, and two of the users

who met there eventually ended up getting married! An early memory of the power of web-building sinking in...)

Returning now to the web as a city in transition, I'm still tinkering, learning, and exploring, but as the landscape has become dominated by 'Big Progress' (i.e. Social Media), I have become increasingly cantankerous. This is primarily because, in my eyes, the colorful diversity and participatory vibrancy of the 'old city' has been largely displaced by dull homogeny and apathetic passivity. Whereas before there was a vast patchwork of structures reflecting the richness of the people who built & inhabited the city, now almost every building looks the same, and people express their humanity by putting posters on their walls and yelling out of the windows of their otherwise-identical units. The once-open streets are littered with ads, heavily-surveilled, and lined with tabloid stands.

Again, this is how the dominant webscape feels to me right now.

In order to sustain this new environment, 'Big Progress' has sold countless people the idea that this state of affairs is not only 'normal' but *desirable*. Even further than that, they have managed to convince many people that beyond their walls and sanctions lies the risk of *social annihilation*. Your very livelihood and significance as a human being depends upon committing yourself to their properties and terms in perpetuity. In this paradigm, 'Big Progress' is not only a part of the city – it is the city. Everything else becomes peripherally anomalous.

As a roaming tinkerer, I have felt increasingly restricted by and concerned about these entities which impose a rigid, manipulative framework upon my ability to explore and make connections. So instead of remaining trapped in their enclosures, I've found myself drawn outward towards areas of the city where 'romantics', 'futurists', and 'romantic-futurists' (such as myself) can live more autonomously – spaces such as Are.na, Write.as, Scuttlebutt, and Neocities which empower me to continue to experiment, build, and learn on my own terms.

To expand a bit on these platforms: Are.na has become a research space for me, and feels like going to a library where I can either keep to myself in a study room or link up with other researchers in collaborative zones. Write.as feels like a peaceful journaling space where I can express myself freely & creatively, and share my output privately with loved ones or in a friendly writing circle. Scuttlebutt is a welcoming neighbourhood by the water where I go to escape the city noise, reflect & write, meet new people & socialize, and learn about new tools & spaces I might explore. And Neocities is the district where I currently reside, and which feels like a remnant of the colorful city that I first roamed & became inspired by when I arrived here.

Having established a presence within these communities, I now find myself positioned in a space between the people who seek to navigate away from their dependency upon 'Big Progress' yet lack the 'street smarts' to do so, and the architects, engineers, & punks who are cultivating these new spaces of digital empowerment, autonomy, & diversity. As I've continued to weave my way between these groups, it has become increasingly clear to me that we greatly lack maps, guides, and accessible pathways which would help nurture vibrancy & inclusivity in these areas.

This is where I focus most of my attention as a digital citizen – in advocating for and trying to develop greater engagement and collaboration between people of a wide variety of backgrounds and skill sets who share a common desire of breaking away from the current hegemony—drawing upon the past and navigating the present while working towards a healthier future.

CJ Eller: We definitely need more maps, guides, & accessible pathways. Could you give some personal examples of how you're trying to nurture vibrancy & inclusivity on the web?

Seán: Broadly-speaking, I strive to encourage critical thinking and more inclusive conversations about these issues. And by “inclusive” in

this context, I mostly mean bringing humans to the table who aren't 'tech people', yet who also inhabit this web city of ours and have valuable experiences & perspectives to share. In order to nurture online vibrancy, I believe it's crucial to be having both offline and online dialogues about these topics with as wide a variety of people as possible. I sense that this is a major impediment to the various movements which are attempting to 'redentralize' or re-imagine the web right now.

In offline contexts, this means regularly drawing attention to how *powerful and consequential* the web is, and how empowering it is to learn how to navigate, connect, and build through it. This may seem extremely simple and obvious to a lot of people, but I think is deceptively so.

Being online has become widely framed as a passive activity – like turning on a TV – rather than an incredible opportunity to explore, learn, connect, and express ourselves in unprecedented ways. In my view, sustained passivity about the nature of the web environment itself and our behavior within it has led to a dearth of literacy and agency (people become 'users'), and a loss of literacy and agency has left people vulnerable to being manipulated and exploited ('users' become 'consumers'). As such, in the currently dominant frameworks of 'engagement' on the web, personal information and social activity have been metricized and commodified for the benefit of 'Big Progress'.

But to a lot of people who have been successfully marketed web passivity, being so blunt about critical perspectives will likely come across as more-or-less conspiratorial, and potentially also threatening to their self-conception (e.g. 'who are you without Social Media?'). So, I usually start by asking people very simple questions about their online experiences and deepen the conversation bit by bit from there.

So that's the first layer for me: broadening critical dialogues about this 'web city' of ours in general.

The second layer is sharing the specifics of what I've learned, showcasing tools & spaces I've found useful, and pointing people toward more skilled tinkerers & communicators than myself. This sometimes happens in the form of curation, such as what I'm doing here on Are.na by making some of my research public in collections like [digital.life](#) or as I have in the past through channels such as [my old SpaceCollective blog](#) – and furthermore, inviting people to join me in exploring these topics. Or it can be through using lesser-known online tools to create things like [a collaborative community events calendar](#) or a [pandemic resources portal](#) – or, on a more personal level, [a collaborative blog with my partner](#). I should also add that the focus for me is usually not so much encouraging people to learn to build online completely 'from scratch' as a means of reclaiming agency (unless they show a strong interest in doing so), but rather nudging the boundaries of their awareness of alternative platforms which can enable them to gradually wean off of passive dependency and toward greater web literacy.

Finally, there are so many fantastic writers, coders, artists, etc. who have created incredible testaments to and critical articulations of the complex beauty and horror of this 'city'. So I point people to the work of inspiring people like [Zach Mandeville](#), [Robin Sloan](#), [Lauren McCarthy](#), and [Ben Grosser](#), who do such a beautiful job articulating their perspectives and posing questions about these topics. For people who are either new to the city or have forgotten how to navigate without the benevolent guidance of 'Big Progress', these people, works, and spaces can easily remain hidden from view. So I try to be a good guide, introducing them to some spots in the city where they too can mingle with other explorers & outsiders, find ways to reclaim some of their agency, and help build a more diverse, human-friendly online environment.

CJ Eller: I am curious about the conversations you have with those who aren't “tech people” about their own online experiences.

Are there patterns you've noticed in how you've been able to *deepen*

the conversation in ways that genuinely resonate with these people?
That make people start to better understand their agency on the web?

Seán: The most prominent pattern that I've noticed in my conversations with a lot of 'non-tech people' is some form of *deep fatigue* about their web experiences. People will commonly talk about how overwhelmed and burnt out they are on being 'connected' all of the time, or they'll complain about countless aspects of the platforms they're tied to, but they'll then go on to talk about how they feel *compelled* to remain in whatever arrangement they find themselves in.

This is a great entry point for a conversation about web literacy and agency because my response is to point out that *they don't have to live this way*, and that breaking away from dark patterns and dependency on exploitative platforms isn't as impossible as it may seem. It can certainly be very challenging and usually takes time, but there are so many alternative web experiences to be had. Even just prompting people to reflect upon their early web experiences can open up great dialogues about how much the landscape has changed, and how a healthier scenario might look.

I've found that with a little bit of guidance and encouragement, many people who've never really thought about these issues critically, yet are greatly affected by them nonetheless, are excited to learn and explore once they get going. It's sort of like teaching someone who's never really cooked before and usually eats the same bland prepackaged food all of the time that it's not only easy to make meals for yourself, but it can also be cheap, fun, and really fulfilling once you have the right tools and basic knowledge.

There's a natural transition from these points to the topic of effective education in general. I suppose you could also say that I view the current circumstances of the web in great part as a consequence of failing education systems — particularly in terms of promoting critical thinking and communication skills. So now it's up to concerned citizens to do what they can to mitigate the damage and try to concoct

remedies.

CJ Eller: Have you gotten as far as to teach some aspects of tinkering to people? If so, what were those experiences like? What parts of web agency do you focus on? You got me thinking about agency not so much as teaching people how to be a programmer but how to be a 'roaming tinkerer' on the web.

Seán: I think you're honing in on a very important distinction for me between the value of teaching people how to become programmers vs teaching them how to become 'roaming tinkerers' – both are powerful ways of becoming more literate, but the emphasis is different (i.e. programming is more specialized, whereas 'roaming & tinkering' is more generalized).

In recent years, I've been thinking a lot about how the concept of 'surfing the web' has fallen out of fashion – which may seem superficial, but I think is actually a fairly consequential metaphorical loss which is relevant here. You don't have to know how to build a surfboard or learn oceanography to become a good surfer. And surfing is a skill that you have to work at, not a passive experience that just happens when you step on the board. Surfing is also *fun*, and I think this is sadly missing from most of the web these days.

Getting back to your questions, the majority of my 'web teaching' focus has always been very personal – spending time helping loved ones and friends become more web literate and critical. This often arises naturally as a result of frustrations and concerns which people have while navigating web experiences.

A simple example which I think says a lot about the state of web literacy is the topic of making strong passwords/phrases and managing them without becoming overwhelmed. This is a foundational aspect of the online experience and remains elusive to the vast majority of Internet users – not because people don't care about security, but because it seems 'hard' to do.

When issues like this are more or less left to 'sort themselves out', my sense is that they drift into a normalcy of prideful ignorance (e.g. people laughing about how bad their passwords are). And unlike in the offline world, where there are often other people who demonstrate things like security (even as simple as using different keys to lock different doors), this is something which typically comes across in the online world as a security textbook on a reference shelf (no offense to the wonderful resources out there by groups like the EFF).

This is a long, winding road to saying that I try to walk people through these kinds of topics in as human a way as possible. Ideally, sitting down at a computer together to talk through the procedures and issues in a way that makes sense to them. I don't think this can be replicated online anywhere near as effectively, which is another major reason for the slippage away from online autonomy toward dependency on 'Big Progress' in my opinion. When things seem 'hard' and there's no one around to help you feel otherwise, a learning opportunity is lost.

Lately, I've been guiding my partner through a lot of these kinds of topics and helping her understand some tools & techniques which can empower her to become more digitally autonomous. Like me, she's also much more 'artist-minded' than 'engineer-minded' but has similar concerns to me about her web experience. However, no one has ever sat down and walked her through gaining an understanding of these topics. Some of it is technical, like popping open the hood of a car and describing how to swap out the parts, but a lot of it is an open creative exercise where the basic question is: what do you want the web to look/feel like? Then we might draw it out on a piece of paper, and both dig around online to learn how to manifest it digitally.

I've never considered myself much of a teacher, but when I do engage in activities like these, I feel a real sense of 'reward' which is so often described about the teaching process. It's always so exciting to see what people come up with when they have the basic tools and

understanding to build or tinker.

CJ Eller: That's a great point about 'surfing the web' falling out of use. I'd be curious to hear how 'surfing the web' has changed (or hasn't) for you personally over the years — because I didn't even think of tinkering as part of that experience, maybe because 'surfing the web' struck me as a more passive activity than it actually is.

Seán: Isn't it funny how a word like 'surfing' can have such different connotations? I definitely see what you mean when you interpret 'surfing the web' as a passive activity, similar to 'channel surfing', and suspect that a lot of people feel the same way. I may be wrong, but my sense is that this 'active vs. passive' dichotomy falls within a broader consequential phenomenon of technological novelty sinking into mundanity. It's like how people will often talk about (and experience) something like flying as though it were no big deal — or perhaps more relevant here, driving a car. Not only is driving a skill which can be learned & cultivated in countless ways, but it also empowers people to explore the world *and*, potentially, to learn about what's happening under the hood of the machine that they're moving around inside of. Not to get too deep into another metaphor (we might also talk about the responsibilities of driving), but I think there's a lot we can learn from considering and comparing human-technology interactions like these more broadly.

Gettin back to the web, I'm sure that a lot of people would chuckle at my suggestion that something like the loss of 'surfing the web' is significant, but turning that topic around, I think it's worth reflecting upon which terms we *do* now use to describe our online experiences/actions. Consider, for instance, the way in which the corporation '[Google](#)' has become a verb which countless people use to describe *the act of searching online*. This, again, gets back to the digital hegemony that I've been vaguely calling 'Big Progress' (of which entities like GAFAM are a part), that not only seeks to dominate people's online experiences, but in some sense to *become* the online experience. (On this note, I must point to Zach Mandeville's

Scuttlebutt essay *The Future Will Be Technical* which articulates perspectives on related ideas extremely well – see, for example, [the “Verbs\(\)” module.](#)

Tying this in to your question about how 'surfing the web' has changed for me personally over the years – so much of the power and inspiration of the web, in my experience, has always been rooted in discovery. But even this word risks taking on an aura of passivity within the current webscape (in large part due to automated recommendations), so I'll emphasize that I'm using 'discovery' in the sense of an active, open exploratory process rooted in individual autonomy. I didn't discover platforms like Are.na, Write.as, and Scuttlebutt because I 'Googled' them – I found them because I was exploring the digital landscape with intention and 'search literacy' applied toward finding particular tools and spaces (p.s. I have actually barely ever used [the Google search engine](#)).

Returning again to something I said earlier, in my eyes, the webscape has become far less colorful and diverse in large part because the corporations behind 'Big Progress' have not only converted the online experience from an active, open one into an increasingly passive, constrained one, but also because they have ushered in products and services which have a tendency to homogenize the landscape and drain its color.

Whereas in my early days online, it was *difficult* to experience drab sameness day after day online when 'surfing the net', now sameness pretty much engulfs the 'web browsing' experience. The same handful of platforms and templates not only dominate the landscape, but monitor & control the roads most people travel upon. Discovery via high 'personalization' & popularity is not really discovery to me, so much as passive indulgence – which is okay and potentially even beneficial in moderation sometimes, but I think unhealthy as a default mode of exploration and learning.

There are many rabbit holes to dive into here, but I'll wrap up my

thoughts by emphasizing that the ability to tinker is directly tied to the ability to discover openly. 'Roaming', 'surfing', 'exploring', and 'searching' are a means of both becoming more aware of the features & possibilities of the online landscape (past, present, & future), as well as finding better tools & guides with which to learn, experiment, & build. My feeling is that the more open and diverse that landscape is, the more likely it is to cultivate active participation (whether tinkering, coding, connecting, or just expanding web culture in various ways).

CJ Eller: The Zach Mandeville module you shared is great. There's a part in it that resonated with me:

>What happens if we simply try to increase the amount of verbs a person knows? What happens if we build fully in the sun, so we don't have to figure out how to stow our shadows?

This speaks exactly to what you're talking about here. I am specifically interested about your thoughts about how the tools you use help you rethink exploration of the web. It makes me think of how exploring a place in a car is different than on a bicycle which is different than being on foot. Because something like [Secure Scuttlebutt](#) requires a different frame of mind when it comes to discovery than searching a website on Google.

Seán: That's a really great way of putting it. There are such profound differences and possibilities of experience to be had between modes and spaces of exploration – which we find mirrored between the online & offline realms. When you mention the different frame of mind which comes with exploring a space like the Scuttleverse as opposed to searching through massive entities like Google, I find myself thinking about the distinction between *reaching destination* vs *experiencing journey* in the exploratory process.

Google presents its search engine as *the most powerful and efficient* means of finding what you're looking for – but this makes a fundamental assumption about where the value of searching lies. As

with so many technologies which are presumptively marketed as 'Progress', the inherent trade-offs to this value framing are swept under the rug — such as losses of autonomy and exposure — until they fester long enough for people to become acutely concerned about them. Meanwhile, the *journeying* aspect of exploration collapses to a width so small that you can barely begin to form a critical or contemplative thought between Point A and Point B. This is a powerful means of retaining control.

On a related note, in recent years I've noticed an uptick in people yearning for some form of *slowness* to counterbalance hyperefficiency — and I think an alternative way to think about that desire is to consider slowness as *more journey time*. Journeying isn't about sprinting as quickly as possible in a direct line from one place to another — it's a meandering process filled with things like natural pauses, accidental discoveries, and periods of reflection. Behemoths like Google essentially position themselves as 'shortcuts' which bypass the 'inefficiencies' of journeying — in effect, to become *The Destination for destinations* (or with something like [Facebook](#), The Community for communities). In this paradigm, people inevitably become digital tourists (again, 'users'/consumers) rather than explorers (agents) because they increasingly lose their ability to navigate on their own.

In contrast, a platform like Scuttlebutt doesn't seek to monopolize any aspect of the exploratory experience by becoming '*The X for x*', but rather presents a new variable which opens up more space for people to *journey* either individually or collectively in any number of directions on their own terms. Even as a destination, the Scuttleverse itself is always moving and expanding — like a wandering network of towns & outposts — and being there strikes me not so much as being about *arriving* as it is about *journeying*. In that space, the imperfect, evolving nature of SSB *itself* is always an active focus of exploration and critical engagement. Rather than constantly drawing you inward like a black hole (dependency), the Scuttleverse fosters outward expansion regardless of whether that takes you beyond its boundaries (autonomy).

I'll need to think more on these distinctions to articulate my thoughts on them better, but I sense that they ultimately get at much more fundamental approaches to individual & societal wellbeing.

Getting back to that excerpt from Zach's essay, I would say that increasing the amount of verbs that we know (and create) empowers us not because it helps us become *more precise and certain* about obtaining 'the best answers', but rather because an expanded set of verbs/tools helps us become *more open and inquisitive* — broadening our awareness of other possibilities of experience and consideration.

CJ Eller: Do you think these tools fostering outward expansion ultimately makes people use them less in the process?

Personally I've used software similar to SSB a handful of times and then dropped them soon after, never sure why. I was probably looking for that dependency loop to keep me hooked into the software when it requires the active exploration and engagement you speak of. Perhaps I have to unlearn that tendency and become more patient. Has that issue ever come up for you?

Seán: I've definitely drifted away from a number of alternative tools/platforms/spaces over the years because I was never really able to connect with them sustainably for one reason or another as well. And you're absolutely right that remaining engaged with a platform like SSB requires unlearning deep-set habits and expectations for a lot of people – an effort which many will ultimately conclude is not worth the effort.

However, I would emphasize that one crucial factor in that equation is the extent to which newcomers are able to meaningfully connect with other people in the community which they're seeking to join. If you develop strong enough bonds with even just one person in a particular space, you're much more likely to become a long-term community member than if you don't really feel like you connect with anyone or

are valued (similarly to moving to a new town or starting a new job, for instance).

One of the reasons that I've personally become so enamored with SSB in particular is because there is a powerful, tangible sense of accessible community, history, and culture throughout the platform which I find so often lacking on Social Media. The Scuttleverse is not sprawling and addictive in the way that we've been trained to expect 'successful' social platforms to be, but it has a warm atmosphere and its roots are deep, strong, & ever-growing. Getting back to the analogy of the 'web city' (and setting aside the fact that SSB technically need not be attached to the web), it feels a bit like a beloved neighbourhood café which may never be able to compete with 'Starbucks' – but maybe that's not really the point. SSB's structure and values framing is fundamentally different from that of towering platforms like Facebook & Twitter, which is precisely why a particular core community of people have continued to nurture it over the past few years.

Prior to joining the SSB community, I've explored many other alternative social platforms (such as Diaspora, Mastodon, Matrix, etc.) – but never felt particularly welcome or valued as a newcomer. And *that's* the main reason I drifted away. Trying to become 'significant' enough to forge connections felt all-too-similar to the struggles I've experienced on major Social Media platforms. In stark contrast, I was very quickly and warmly welcomed into the Scuttleverse when I arrived there by a bunch of friendly, interesting people (often engaging at length with one another *respectfully in longform!*), and I now do my best to carry on the broader tradition of what butts refer to as 'community gardening' (loosely, fostering healthy social engagement & inclusion) there myself.

Similarly, you and I are currently engaging in a type of conversation which strikes me as an emblematic of this same emphasis on *qualitative, open connection with unknown humans*. Despite having no previous association with one another, you reached out to me through Write.as, and invited me to have a conversation through Are.na in a

way which explores a new area of potential beyond the norms of online dialogue. In other words, you took the time to reach out to a newcomer to your community and created space for me to speak with you openly & at length *in a completely different ecosystem* (beyond the walls of social metricization & commodification). When does this happen on platforms like Facebook or Twitter?

[I'm now put in mind of the fact that, in a way, we're also engaging in an alternative, more DIY version of Letter—which arose to meet a deep desire which many Twitter users felt for more qualitative open human exchanges than the platform allows for, and has grown strong because it offers a novel framework which meets those values (though, sadly, they've recently introduced the number of “Reads” as a prominent default metric).]

Ultimately, I would say that whether it be Write.as or Are.na or Scuttlebutt, the long-term viability of alternative / open “y” platforms depends upon the extent to which they resonate with / respond to the values, needs, & growth of a strong core community of people who are weary of the monopolizing / restrictive “X” Platforms—enabling the formation of new habits & norms of online engagement/community-building in the process. This is, I think, less about direct competition as about finding & making room for greater online diversity and autonomy.

CJ Eller: I think the last question I have for you here is regarding the point you made about community gardening. What does community gardening on the web look like for you personally?

This has been a wonderful conversation Seán. Thanks for taking the time to chat. The warmth you bring to these topics makes me excited about how we all can nurture a better, romantic-futurist web.

Seán: Thank you so much again for taking the time to create space for this dialogue, CJ! I thoroughly enjoyed reflecting upon your thoughtful questions and look forward to continuing our exchanges elsewhere (or

maybe even here! Perhaps I will interview you next time hehe). Not only did this prompt me to ponder more deeply about these topics out loud (and in an intriguing format), but also imparted some of the real warmth of qualitative, open social connection in the process—which is, in my experience, often very elusive both on- and offline.

I think that drawing attention to this concept of “community gardening” is a really wonderful way to close our discussion. It also brings me back to thinking about the words which we use to describe our online activities and experiences. So to answer your question, I want to start by pausing to reflect upon these two words: “community” and “gardening”. Both are commonly understood in a simple, straightforward way, but I would again suggest that it's worth digging into our terminology a bit more deeply in order to approach 'community gardening' as a broader concept more meaningfully.

When we talk about “community”, it's important to first acknowledge that there will always be a vast terrain of manifestations rooted in this term. One community's particular set of values & interests will be fundamentally different from (and potentially incompatible with) many others. As such, what it means to nurture and cultivate any given community will always vary contextually. Taking another step back, it's worth noticing that communities are not just networks of people, but also the spaces which they inhabit and activities which happen within those spaces.

(From this vantage point, I find it's helpful to consider what an inviting or healthy community feels like in the offline world. Again, this will vary greatly from person to person – but I think taking time to reflect upon what aspects stand out as distinctively positive and negative is a useful way of becoming grounded in lessons from lived experience beyond our screens.)

Now on to the “gardening” aspect. Gardening is an activity which begins with a recognition of what is currently growing or not growing in a particular environment, and a consideration of how that

ecosystem might be changed 'for the better' based upon a certain values framework. Notice that I used the terms “environment” and “ecosystem” here, which I've noticed being increasingly incorporated into discussions of web platforms/experiences in recent years (this is probably a good sign). In the same way that a community is not just a network of people, neither is the web just a network of wires & signals which link people together. It is a space within which there are varying 'ecological' conditions and propensities. Some communities will thrive in one landscape and wither in another, and some landscapes are more open to 'biodiversity' than others.

Sustainable community gardening for me means finding ways to match & balance these sets of considerations through an ongoing process of individual & collaborative experimenting, exploring, and negotiating. Experimentation with different tools and techniques enables us to better understand what relationships, activities, and creations can grow in a given environment—while also expanding our collective knowledge. Exploration helps us become aware of alternative spaces/communities with ecological conditions & propensities which may better suit our needs & hopes (and perhaps prompt us to *reconsider* our desires as well). And negotiation serves as a means of finding compromises and reconsidering norms to accommodate greater diversity & adaptive resilience.

Taken together, my sense is that these actions inevitably lead us away from passive acceptance of flattening hegemony as *the default mode of being* on the web and toward an active process which enriches the landscape with a wider array of community gardens. This, in turn, empowers us to take better care of our 'personal gardening' needs as well.

In short, for me, community gardening highlights the intrinsic symbiosis between resilient social networks and the environments within which they thrive as a means of developing practices, spaces, & tools that nurture autonomy & sustainability.

At least, that's what comes to mind right now. Ask me again in six months and I'll likely have a very different answer ;^)

p.s. For anyone who wants to dig more deeply into these ideas (and read alternative perspectives which far predate my awareness of the term 'community gardening'), I highly recommend visiting the [#community-gardening thread in the Scuttleverse](#) where you can also add your own thoughts!