If Klaatu Can Neutralise Electrical Power, How About Killing the Internet?

Shôn Ellerton, September 20, 2021
What would you say if you had the choice of permanently killing off the Internet?

Back in 1951, one of my favourite science fiction movies was created: *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. (*not* the awful 2008 remake)

It features an unexpected visit by a 'traditional silver disk-like' UFO that descends and lands quietly on the lawns of a public park in Washington D.C. The UFO sits there for some time arousing excitement from the locals and, naturally, after being spotted and with very little time, the police and military are brought in to surround the spacecraft with guns and weapons poised upon it. The journalists are there as well, cameras clicking in unison. After some time, a ramp emerges from the seamless metallic structure and a door opens revealing a manlike figure in a mask by the name of Klaatu who slowly walks down the ramp. He stops in the middle of the crowd, in isolation from a safe distance by the police and military. He slowly pulls a peculiar-looking object from his pocket, offers it in a gesture-like manner and, as it springs open like a peacock splaying its feathers, one trigger-happy soldier shoots him in the chest. He staggers and collapses, but then, the eerie music of Bernard Herrman's masterpiece featuring the other-worldly theremin instrument kicks in as Gort, one of the race of indestructible robots to police the galaxy from extraterrestrial threats reveals his Cyclopean eye under his helmet which then immobilises all the surrounding weaponry with a laser-like beam. Panic ensures but nobody is hurt. It is quite a memorable scene. The wounded man then explains it was a peace offering. It was the first message that mankind is not ready to receive the

technology bestowed upon him. In this case, the command of nuclear power, which poses as the extraterrestrial threat.

Gort carries Klaatu back to the safety of his spaceship for medical attention. After recovering, Klaatu attempts to make arrangements to speak to all the nations of Earth, a near-impossible task during those pre-Internet days, that if efforts are not made to reduce the proliferation and use of nuclear weaponry, it would be necessary to destroy the inhabitants of the Earth for the safety of other extraterrestrial civilisations. This is, of course, far-fetched, but the principle is of importance. Finding it impossible to make a speech to all the nations because of the existing differences between nations, some being in a state of war, Klaatu prepares for a little demonstration known only in advance by a local physicist who Klaatu confides with knowing that he possessed the necessary knowledge and wisdom to understand. The demonstration is bold and effective. To disable all electrical-powered objects on Earth for a period of 30 minutes at a given time *except* those which are needed to sustain human life, for example, aircraft in flight, hospitals and so on. The world, indeed, grinds to a halt and the message is given to warn that the development and use of nuclear weapons must cease.

The practicalities of the movie are very much far-fetched and sits firmly in the realm of science fiction, but the message the movie gives is poignant and clear. It was deemed so important by my English high school teacher, who was teaching us philosophy back in the 80s, that he brought a video tape of the movie one day to class and we all watched it. The original version is still worth watching now, if one can overcome the not-so-great shoestring-budget effects and the over-maniacal scream of the lead actress when approached by Gort mistakenly assuming she was going to be harmed by him.

The demonstration of cutting off power got me thinking about something else. Here's the scenario. If someone with the power of a genie asked you if wish the Internet to be destroyed forever except for life-saving applications and you had ten minutes to answer, how would you respond? One may consider that this scenario lies in fantasy land; however, there are and have been countries in the world where Internet is stifled, if not, eliminated.

As in the science fiction movie described above, the Internet would be preserved for all life-critical applications until an alternative solution is found

within a given reasonable timeframe. Examples are less clear than those in the previous with electrical power, but let's just say that there are.

Ten minutes is not a long time to decide. If someone asked me that question, how would my thought processes work? In short, I could reflect that life will not cease to exist, nor other systems which computer technology is required, most of which rely on closed systems without the aid of the Internet. Certainly, life would be very different than it is today, perhaps a throwback of older times, many of which had their golden as well as their terrible moments in history. I'd ask the question to myself. Would the world become a better place without the Internet?

There would be no toxicity on social media. There would be far less propagandizing the nation through herd influence. There would be no computer viruses affecting our most vulnerable of systems. Perhaps we would revert to reading more rather than replying to silly memes on Facebook posts or writing cryptic little one-liners on Twitter to stir antagonism. Politics would certainly change; I am certain of that. There would be an increase in numbers of those who have a dispensation for reading and interpreting nuance rather than replying in herd-like mentality on political and social issues. There would be no harmful material like child pornography, extreme violence or subversive material; for example, a tutorial on how to make your own in-house atomic bomb. The justice system would work without the interference of the social media mob. Maybe we would be healthier. No online games subverting our youth to hours and hours of cooped-up screen viewing. Being more active outside and interacting with others. Perhaps we would become better people who are not subservient to the screen.

What would I lose? What would *we* lose for that matter? Quite a lot as it stands.

There's no question that in terms of physical and mental health, the Internet has been a big problem. Yes, there are many computer-based activities which do not require the Internet, but it is still necessary to physically get out and interact with real people rather than virtually through the Internet. However, there are a lot of benefits the Internet has given us. For a start, we have near-instant connectivity to friends and family. The ability to armchair travel around the world exploring through the eyes of others. Being able to work remotely, when possible, rather than being sat ball-and-chained to an office chair. Share one's experiences and stories with others. The ability to publish books, articles and

journals with relative cheapness. Being able to access your bank account or other services without physically making the trip. The list goes on.

Many are expressing concern that the Internet is extensively policed and controlled by some nation states citing Big Brother concerns. This is not an unreasonable concern; however, more of us are slowly beginning to embrace newer forms of Internet technology which will make the Internet sphere a more free, anonymous and private domain for all of us to explore. The trend is visible by noting the uptake in VPN technologies, use of independent browsers who do not collect your private data, adoption of alternative operating platforms other than Microsoft and Apple, and a healthy revival in older alternative forms of connecting people and ideas like newsgroups and other legacy communication protocols, and of course, embracing newer decentralised services such as distributed storage, secure communication apps and digital currencies.

These newer decentralised technologies are becoming more popular, particularly in the exchange of thoughts and ideas without the threat of being censored by those who operate large centralised services like Google, Twitter and Facebook. The negative aspect, unfortunately, is the unstoppable distribution of dangerous material which might have the propensity to injure others. The benefits, in general, do tend to outweigh the negative.

As the time limit of ten minutes is fast approaching, what would I choose to do?

Say no to killing the Internet and to leave it on. However, if I could kill the Internet for a month or even a year for everyone on the planet except for life-critical situations, I'd need another ten minutes to decide!