

Cory Doctorow, European Affairs co-ordinator for the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), science fiction author and co-editor of Boing Boing.net, on a very contemporary Renaissance.

Living free and uneasy

Photography: Bart Nagel



Cory Doctorow:
"We've built a fireproof library - and if that's the only thing we remember about the dot.com revolution, man it's been worth every penny we spent on it."

The Renaissance represented unprecedented activity in the arts and sciences across Europe. New ideas erupted, disrupted, inspired and cross-pollinated across a range of disciplines. Media flourished under the influence of the latest technology (eg Gutenberg's press) in the form of books and literature. Artists celebrated the limitless freedom and potential of the age, while wealthy patrons sought to exert control over the messages being sent out.

Sound familiar? It does to Cory Doctorow. The self-described "activist, writer, public speaker and technology person" is a champion of the internet and all forms of digital freedom. He's passionate about this new renaissance and enthusiastic about the disruption it's causing.

"I'm the European Affairs co-ordinator for the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), a civil liberties group based in San Francisco," he says. "The EFF has fought and won many of the key battles that have made internet the place it is today, including the battle that required lawmakers in the US to get a warrant before they could read emails and brought due process to the internet."

These battles are defining how information will be disseminated for years to come. They will influence the way we communicate, the way we are entertained and the way companies do business. And yet these battles aren't even on most people's radar - even if their MP3s, DVDs and PCs know different.

"The internet is giving businesses new things to capitalise on," Doctorow says. "It's reversed some of the cost/profit metrics. For example, people used to charge money to access and search very large databases [which cost money to organise]. Now, Google has inverted those economics: people are organising the database in the course of their daily lives on the internet, by making links on Web pages. By giving away access to the database, which you once charged for, you can now sell ads against those results. The cost centres have become profit centres and vice versa. That's what businesses need to look for.

"For example, I'm a science-fiction novelist and my books are published by Tor Books in New York, the largest science fiction publisher in the world," he says. "The day my books

CORY DOCTOROW IN BRIEF

Cory Doctorow was born in Toronto, Canada, and is an “activist, science fiction writer, public speaker and technology person”. He is European Affairs co-ordinator for the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) and contributing writer to *Wired magazine*, among other publications. He is also co-editor of the award winning weblog Boing Boing (www.boingboing.net). His recent novel, *Someone Comes to Town, Someone Leaves Town*, is free to download on his website (www.craphound.com).

come out in the shops, they're also available as free downloads under Creative Commons licences. The biggest problem a novelist faces isn't piracy, it's obscurity. By making my books available as free downloads, I generate more sales of the printed books.”

The times they are a'changing – and no-one really likes change except those who are tired of the way things are right now. But, as Shaw once said, “the unreasonable man persists in trying to adapt the world to himself... all progress depends on the unreasonable man.” And that seems to be at the heart of this latest renaissance: counter-intuitive progress.

“It's very hard to control the spread of knowledge in an information age. For example, around 2000, it became clear that controlling the spread of a digital recording was a nearly impossible technological task. This was the era of [the former free peer-to-peer file sharing service] Napster, which put the 80 per cent of recordings that weren't available commercially onto the internet without any centralised cost – once again, things that used to be a cost become a profit and [vice versa].”

And what about those who object to the fast pace of technology and argue that their livelihoods are being threatened?

“Technology giveth and technology taketh away,” counters Doctorow. “There are a lot cry-baby capitalists who think the market owes

them a living, that when the technological moment that made their business model possible passes, governments and the courts should prolong it for as long as possible, no matter what the cost to other industries or prospective industries.” However, Doctorow acknowledges that businesses are beginning to realise the potential of the new frontier: “We're in the midst of what may be the most substantial consumer revolt we've ever seen. And companies are looking to take advantage. For example, any company – and I won't name names – that manufactures a device that can store and play 10,000 songs, and charges 99 cents a song, clearly intends to capitalise on file sharing networks.”

And will all of this disruption be worth it in the long run? “When the Royal Library of Alexandria burned, none of those documents came back from the ashes,” Doctorow says. “When Napster, which at the time was [effectively] the largest library of human creativity ever assembled, was [shut down] by a court order, it took about 10 seconds for that library to spring up again all over the world, and in new forms. Other file sharing networks put it back online almost instantaneously. We've built a fireproof library – and if that's the only thing we remember about the dot.com revolution, then it's been worth every penny we spent on it.”