

The New Internet Hierarchies and their Significance

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The social evolution of the internet is still in its very early stages. While excitement may focus on AI and virtual reality, it may be through social forms and structures that the internet produces its most significant change. This is already the case, with social media heavily affecting many young people's sense of themselves.¹ Images of their social reality vary from an ultra-connected network or web to a decentralised panopticon, the prison in which the guards could be watching any prisoner at any time.

Whether we view them as negative or positive, these types of horizontal or non-hierarchical connections have been hyped by people on the cutting edge of culture for several decades. As well as being key to the creativity of much of Silicon Valley, they are still central to contemporary thinkers close to this publication. Jordan Hall for instance touts 'decentralised sensemaking' as that which will replace the hegemony of what he calls 'the Blue Church'² – the institutions that created and propagated authority and narrative before they recently began to fall apart and to lose that authority.

This article will bring the reader's attention to the opposite structure – vertical or hierarchical online social relationships. These have been growing in significance on the internet throughout the last decade – but because of the negative way in which the hierarchy has come to be seen in popular thought, we have tended to ignore it.

The Hierarchy

The hierarchy is a vertical relationship, in which some entities are 'above' or 'higher' than others:

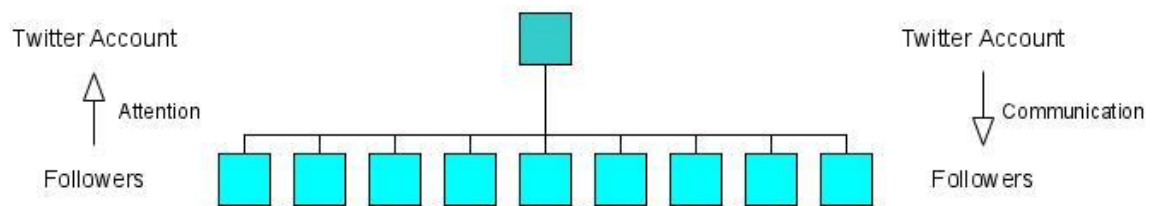
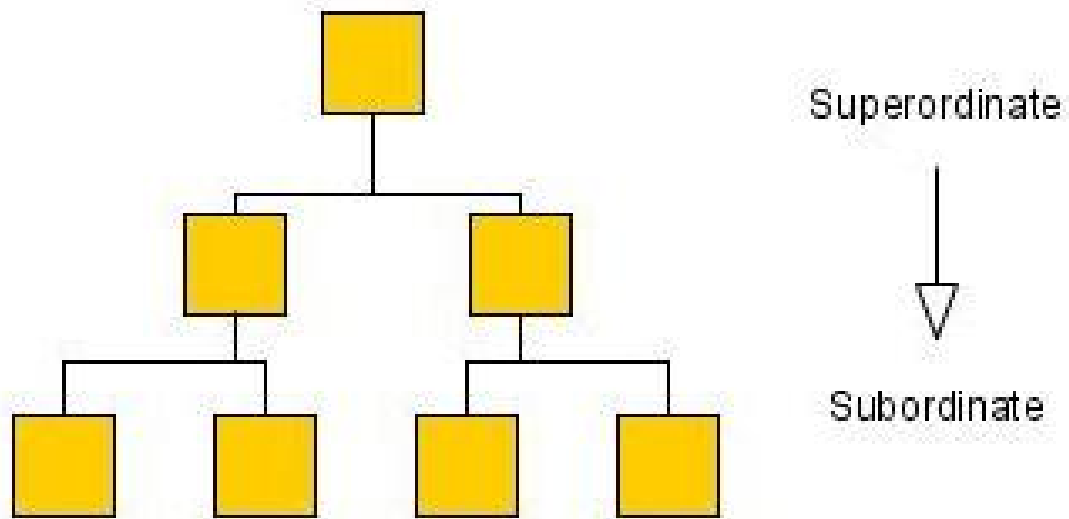
While a real-life hierarchical relationship will generally have some meaning behind it, for instance the relationship between a teacher and a student or a priest and congregation, the most common kind of hierarchy on the internet is incidental.

This is because hierarchies are the foundational structure of several social media platforms, for example twitter. This platform (and instagram, and many others) is founded upon the most basic hierarchical structure possible: a two-level structure, consisting of a twitter user and their followers:

This is a hierarchical structure because communication is arranged to flow one way: a follower automatically 'receives' the tweets of the person they follow. Of course, on these platforms additional hierarchical structures create a 'network' or 'web' structure of relationships – but these are themselves composed of the hierarchical 'follower' structure. Other features of the platform can change the flow of communication, for instance the ability to reply to tweets. These add extra possibilities to communication, without changing the fundamental structure.

¹ Haidt, Jonathan & Paresky, Pamela. "By Mollycoddling Our Children, We're Fuelling Mental Illness in Teenagers", *The Guardian*, January 2019.

² Hall, Jordan & Fuller, David. "Deep Code: Jordan (Green)Hall Documentary" at 37:50, *Youtube*, July 2019.

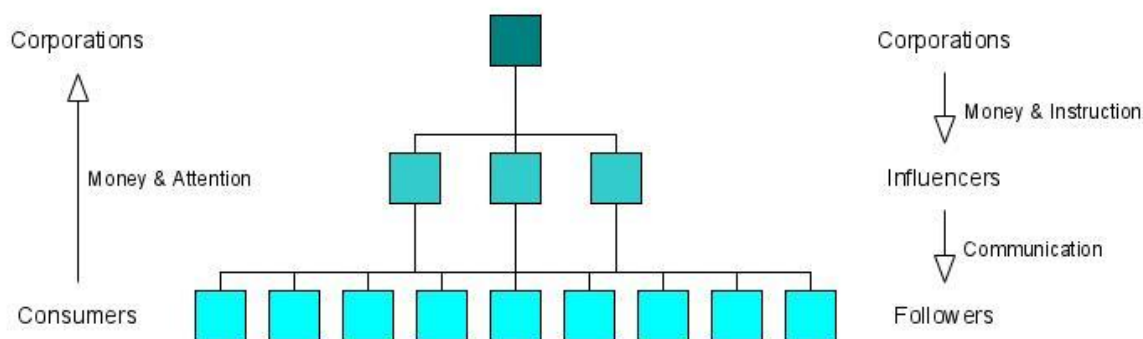


These hierarchical forms are fundamental to much of social media, and everyone with any number of followers to an extent manifests it. But just as most ‘content’ or information on these platforms is superficial or throw-away, the type of attention given towards the users who publish this information is largely casual, occasional or brief. Hierarchy becomes more significant when the relationship between the individual and their follower becomes stronger. This happens when the communication towards the follower is more powerful, and the attention given back is more intense.

The worlds of marketing and business have understood these relationships quite intimately for a number of years. The ‘influencer’, one who is paid by a company to advertise their product as part of their social media communications, is becoming a cornerstone of modern advertising, and the ways in which these phenomena are discussed in business and in media are revealing.

Thus for Paris Martineau of *Wired*, influencers have followings who take their word as ‘gospel’;³ the influencer is someone “with the power to affect the buying habits or quantifiable actions of others”.⁴ Other media underline the influencers’ ‘authority’ or ‘knowledge’,⁵ together with the relationship they have to their audience. In other words, the ‘influencer’ transforms a relationship which is just hierarchical in a technical sense, into a relationship that is meaningfully hierarchical.

The relationship that the ‘marketing’ influencer has with his or her audience is part of a larger hierarchy, with the corporations that pay the influencers at the top.⁶ The brands send products, together with the ideas that accompany these products, down to the influencers who propagate them:



³ Martineau, Paris. “Inside the Pricey War to Influence Your Instagram Feed“, *Wired*, November 2018.

⁴ Martineau, Paris. “The WIRED Guide to Influencers“, *Wired*, December 2019.

⁵ Geyser, Werner. “What is an Influencer? Social Media Influencers Defined“, *Influencer Marketing Hub*, June 2021.

⁶ Ellis, Emma Gray. “Byeeeeee, Logan Paul: Brands Prefer ‘Micro Influencers’ Now“, *Wired*, November 2018.

In this way the significant hierarchical relationship becomes subsumed into an economic structure that overlays it. The inevitability of advertising and other economic interests to affect the meaning and content of media in the 20th century era has been written about extensively, for example in Noam Chomsky's 1988 '*Manufacturing Consent*'.⁷ Thus in the case of many 'influencers', the entirety of the relationship with their audience could be defined by their marketing activity, after it has begun.

But despite the lack of attention from media, many strong online relationships transcend the sale of products, whether the 'influencer' takes part in that activity or not.

The Deep Influencer

So far we have shown how hierarchical relationships are built into many of the objective structures of social media. What happens when these structures coalesce with the real-life vertical relationships we mentioned above? During Covid-19, huge numbers of teacher-student relationships have been transplanted onto the internet. The dissatisfaction and frustration that has accompanied this shift can be contrasted to the wild success of similar relationships that have *evolved* in the hierarchical online environments.

The person who is able to communicate meaningfully about things that are important to us, from politics to our daily lives to our fundamental belief structures, can transform the objective hierarchical structures of the internet into something more powerful, more profound, more modern and yet more timeless, than any type of mediated relationship that has existed in the past. All of these, and one more – they also make them more dangerous.

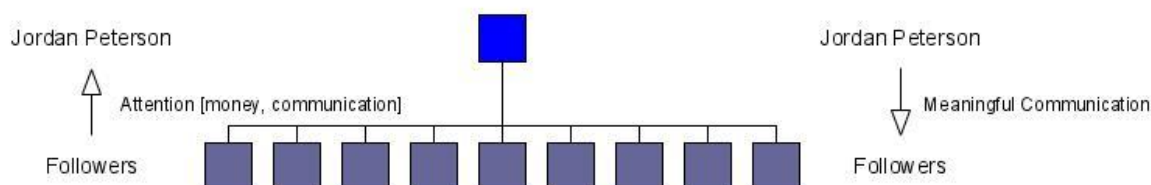
Let us consider as an example the man who typifies this relationship most purely and powerfully, Professor Jordan Peterson. Peterson developed a loose system of knowledge during the 1980s-90s, which he integrated and published in the 1999 book '*Maps of Meaning*'. This work is concerned with how meaning and belief are formed in the human, and how they affect how humans act in turn. Attaining a degree of publicity in his native Canada, and gifted with a good speaking ability, Peterson began to publish lectures based on his work on Youtube in 2013. He gained significant attention in the polarised climate of 2016 with a political trajectory begun by a video entitled '*Professor against Political Correctness*'.⁸

From this point, his content combined critiques of various aspects of contemporary social and institutional life with the deep research he had previously conducted. This was like water in the desert to many people. His videos regularly attained hundreds

⁷ Chomsky, Noam & Herman, Edward S. *Manufacturing Consent*, *Pantheon Books*, 1988.

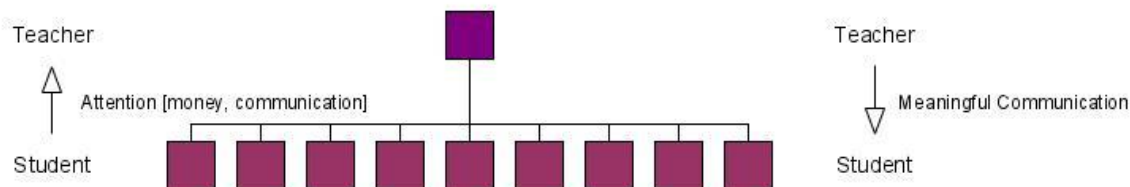
⁸ Peterson, Jordan. "Professor Against Political Correctness", *Youtube*, Late 2016. Now removed from his Youtube channel.

of thousands or millions of views each, and he had a dedicated following who hung on his every word, whose lives were changed by those words.



However, Peterson’s success was brought to an abrupt halt in 2019, for reasons involving various private problems, including issues with health. His recent reappearance has seen a conversation with Jonathan Pageau,⁹ in which some possible problems were identified in Peterson’s relationship to the world: both his position at the top of his own hierarchical structure, and his accompanying lack of being ‘in a community’. Whether these problems were related to his ‘fall’ or not, they are not limited to Jordan Peterson alone.

In order to comprehend the problems that Peterson faces, we should first consider the similar, vertical, pre-internet relationships mentioned above. The person whose knowledge can transform others has always mirrored the above hierarchical structures. The teacher, priest, shaman, artist – and later the writer – all have a hierarchical relationship with those who are informed by them. In these cases, the ‘information’ that comes down from the top of the hierarchy is a truer type of ‘in-form-ation’ than the social media influencer; it partially forms and structures that which is below it.

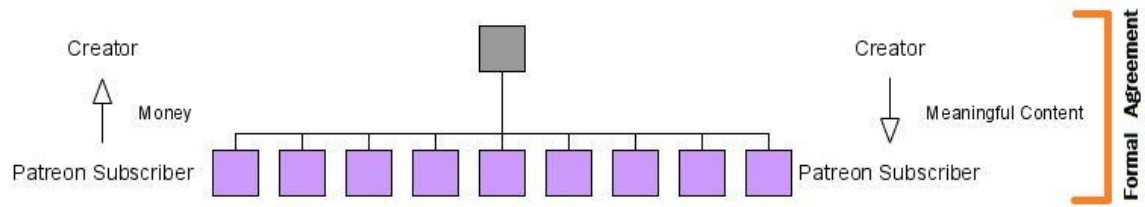


The coalescing of the person of the teacher/influencer with new media structures magnifies and intensifies the relationship between them and their audience. The quantitative power of distributed media has become combined with the features of a relationship. We should note that these new media structures go far beyond the main social media platforms we have already mentioned.

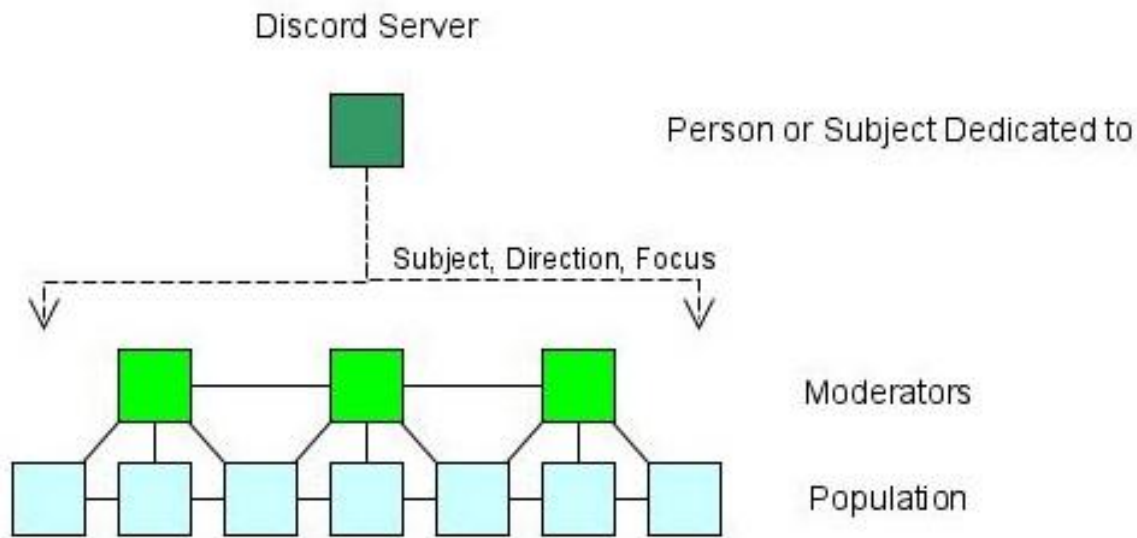
For instance, Patreon reifies relationships by a formalised exchange of material: the provision of regular content by a person is returned by a provision of regular monetary

⁹ Peterson, Jordan & Pageau, Jonathan. “The Perfect Mode of Being. Jonathan Pageau – Jordan B. Peterson Podcast S4 E8“, *Youtube*, March 2021.

support by their followers. Twitch is similar, relying on real-time content and active, constant communication with followers. On both platforms, old hierarchical concepts such as ‘loyalty’ begin to be relevant.



Discord, a development of the old IRC chat rooms, is organised into servers which are typically ‘dedicated’ to something. They might be dedicated to a game, but they are also frequently dedicated to a person and the subject that person is concerned with. Thus popular socialist youtuber Vaush’s server has many more people in it than any server simply dedicated to ‘socialism’. Similarly, tech and investment youtuber Louis Rossman’s server has more people in it than most servers dedicated to those subjects. In these cases, the person who the server is dedicated to may not be involved at all – but they provide focus, direction and subject matter. Reddit forums can be similarly ‘dedicated’ to individuals.



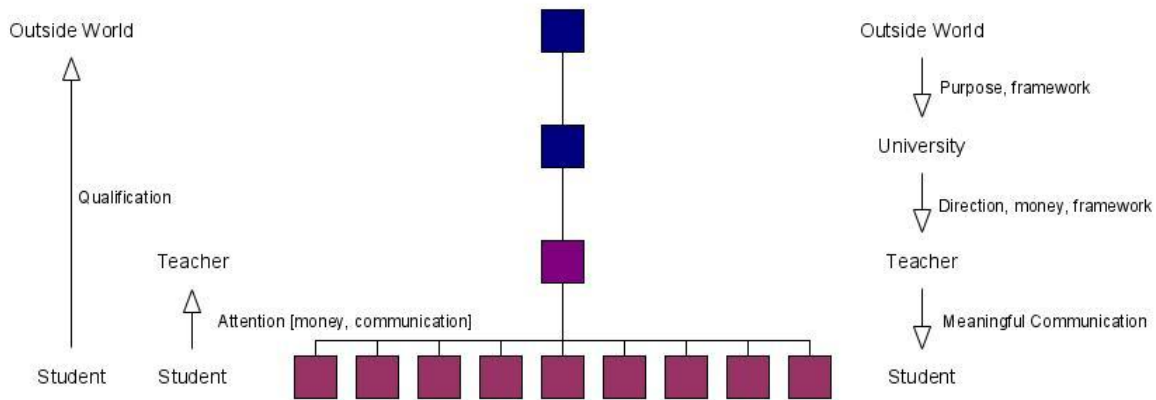
Thus we have structures which bind followers and ‘influencers’ together, and ‘spaces’ which are ‘dedicated’ to individuals. This implies something sensational: that we are seeing the emergence of ‘domains’ or ‘little kingdoms’, organisational structures which form ‘under’ somebody and in which that person exercises a great deal of power.

The possibilities and problems that accompany these structures are not fully clear, as they are so new. I have certain fragmentary observations, however.

Problems

The problems which threaten the person at the top, as well as their followers, begin with a list which is essentially the same as that which we would produce when considering the problems of 20th century ‘fame’; idolisation, mythologisation, pride, vanity, megalomania and an extreme pressure and expectation upon the individual. Because these should be fairly familiar to people I will not explore them here, although the processes of mythologisation certainly deserve more attention.

What is important to note, however, is that the very concrete media structures of the internet era illuminate why these problems emerged in the vague, magical time of 20th century pop culture. Both sets of media structures are concerned with focusing attention; they direct the viewer’s attention towards a specific subject or object, then monopolise this attention (i.e. engage all of a person’s sight and hearing). It is this focusing of attention that at least partially produces the named problems. Consider in comparison the older teacher-student relationships we have mentioned. In a University, the relationship between a professor and his or her students is within a larger academic context, and should be directed towards the world outside the university. In a Church, the relationship between a priest or pastor and his flock is directed towards God, not the priest.



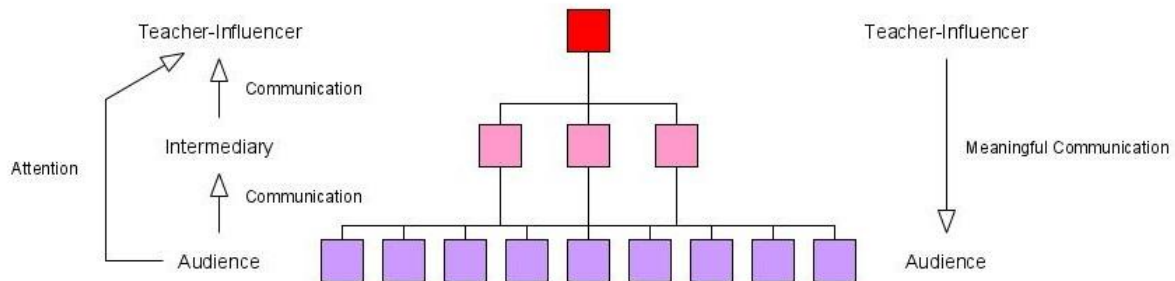
The media structures that magnify the relationship of the online teacher/influencer with their followers are self-contained, without the context and direction that an academic or religious hierarchical relationship would provide, and without the distance that the relationship between a modern writer and reader would entail.

Another problem that compounds the above is that of quantity. A relationship between a teacher and their students before the time of mass media generally allowed for easy communication from the student to the teacher. As these mass media technologies allow the quantity of people to be reached by messages to increase, so communication the other way, back up the hierarchy, becomes nearly impossible.

Both of these causes – a too-concentrated and undirected flow of attention, and the unmanageable quantity of ‘followers’ or ‘audience’, can be tackled. Returning to the simple concepts of ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ relationships, the individual who is the focus of attention must themselves pay attention to the vertical as they do to the horizontal. This is the first challenge, because while it may be easy to enjoy and develop horizontal relationships with friends and colleagues, the acknowledgement of one’s ‘domain’ or vertical relationships is extremely challenging. On the one hand, a person could become entranced with their role as ‘leader’, ‘teacher’, ‘guru’, ‘figurehead’ – and thus enter into the dangerous illusions of megalomania, egomania, self-importance, etc. On the other hand, one could determinedly avoid this fate, by undermining and sabotaging all signs that they occupy the objective role that I have described the teacher/influencer as having. This will simply prevent them from directing the appropriate attention to their vertical relationships.

If the person avoids both of these pitfalls, they can calmly and neutrally develop the hierarchical structures, instead of letting them be a source either of embarrassment or fetishisation. For instance, they could mitigate the first problem I identified – the flow of attention – by directing the attention of their audience towards greater targets; towards a clear goal, towards the wellbeing of the earth, towards God. The person redirects, through their words, the attention that is focused on him or herself by extending the hierarchy to things above them.

The second problem I mentioned, that of an unmanageable quantity of followers calcifying or corrupting communication, can be mitigated by paying attention instead to the ‘lower’ parts of the hierarchy. This should again be extended, but instead of *reaching* lower, the problems that emerge underneath one in a hierarchy are fixed by adding intermediate levels. These regulate and manage the attention, forces, and pressure at play.



This already happens in every online hierarchical relationship to an extent; editors, moderators, and employees partially act in this way. But often this is informal or ad-hoc; a moderator may have no real ability to communicate with someone ‘above’ them, while an employee may be just as removed from the mass of the people as the teacher/

influencer. The embracing of the form of the hierarchy would entail their formalisation; their organisation into fully functioning, rather than malfunctioning, structures.

Possibilities

It is therefore through the embracement and development of the hierarchical online structures that the solutions to the problems I have mentioned will be found – although with these solutions, new possibilities and new dangers will emerge. The current informal but de-facto ‘domains’, united under an individual through a Logos – their word and purpose – could quickly become powerful non-capitalist organisations. The potential powers of these organisations are infinite: political, cultural, charity or spiritual work, the development of ideas, and so on. Many reader’s minds may fly immediately to dystopian possibilities, and these are certainly a risk – imagine *Neuromancer* + feudalism. But the similarity of these structures to mediaeval feudalism, where the people of an area were in an unbreakable hierarchical relationship with their Lord, is partial. The bindings that link people together in online hierarchies are very weak, and entirely optional. Even if these structures were transformed into more powerful organisations as I am suggesting, this ‘lighter’ aspect would remain, hopefully avoiding the drawbacks of more severe forms of hierarchy.

A different path of development to these ‘principalities of individuals’ would require no less attention to the emergent hierarchical structures. This would be the new ‘University’, a concept that has already been planned and imagined many times in private, but has not yet emerged. This structure would theoretically be a more conservative solution to, and development of, the phenomena I have described. The first universities in Europe grew from the banding together of small numbers of scholars; their systems for the sharing and teaching of knowledge grew into the institutions that we now know. I believe that this will be an important part of the potential University to come – the hierarchies I have described, as they are developing internally into structures which can teach people, will develop and formalise systems for sharing and teaching between themselves. This would be instead of, say, Jordan Peterson simply creating a top-down structure that mimics the Universities of 40 years ago.

Many of the problems of the modern world derive from insufficient or malfunctioning hierarchies – an inability to act collectively for instance, or a lack of belief in our leaders. The simplest reason for viewing the new online hierarchies positively is that they could help satisfy the human instinct for leadership, direction, and action in a way that other contemporary structures have not been able to do.

Thus central authorities and accompanying meaning-making structures have taken major recent hits to their credibility – from the financial crash to the 2016 elections to Covid (most notably the refusal to consider the lab leak hypothesis). This combined with other threats to the integrity of our central institutions has produced an emerging

consensus among various ‘counter-culture’ figures across the left,¹⁰ right and centre;¹¹ that these central structures are collapsing, and will be replaced. I believe that the new online hierarchies have an enormous potential to be fundamental organisational components of future society, both in their positive and negative manifestations; far more so than the ‘decentralised organisations’ that are often hyped as a successor.

However the hierarchies develop, they call for our attention. If I have to an extent focused on the problems that accompany the new hierarchies, it is because the powers and responsibilities that accompany them should be taken very seriously.

¹⁰ Nagle, Angela. “Did Populism Start a 21st Century Anti-Clerical Revolution?“, *Substack*, June 2021.

¹¹ Hall & Fuller, Deep Code.

The Ted K Archive

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