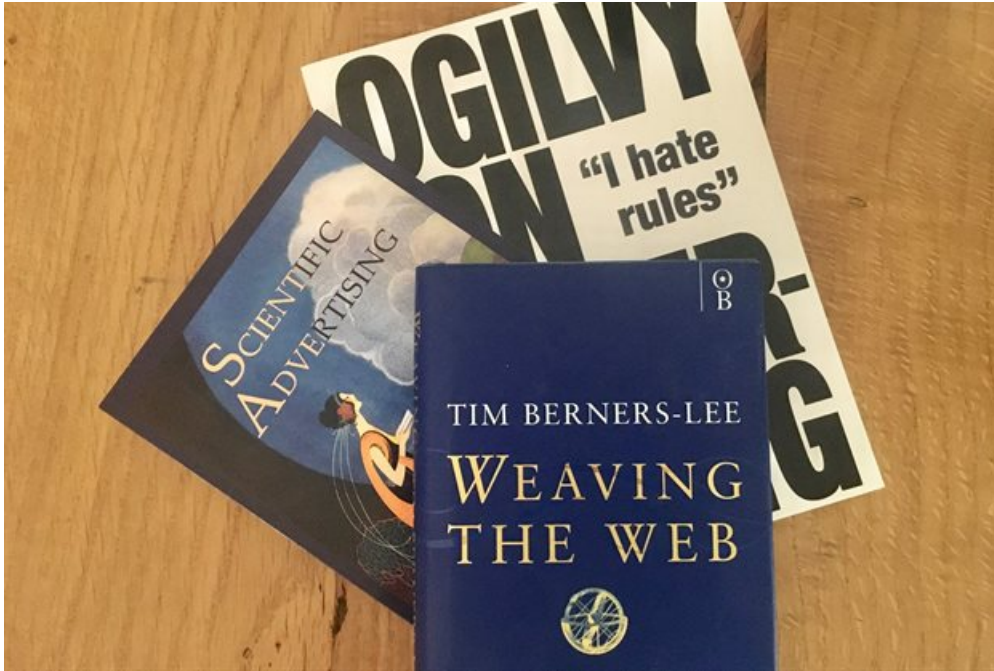# Internet or Splinternet - it's up to us to decide

By Bronwyn Williams

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This week, Bronwyn Williams goes back in time to read Tim Berners-Lee's Weaving the Web: The Past Present and Future of the World Wide Web by its Inventor...

All too often, we tend to discount the old in favour of the new. We preference the latest ideas over tried and tested wisdom. This is a mistake, after all, as Voltaire said, "History never repeats itself, man always does." This implies that people have faced the same needs, desires, problems and pain points throughout history, and we would be remiss to discount the wisdom and solutions of those who have come before us when addressing them.

Back to the past

This week, I went back in time to read Tim Berners-Lee's *Weaving the Web: The Past Present and Future of the World Wide Web by its Inventor*. Berners-Lee is known as the father of the web and the book, written in 1999, details the history of how he was instrumental in coordinating both the technology and the ideology of the Web into the global information system we know and use today.

As I read the book I could not help but notice that Berners-Lee had thought deeply about - and proposed some very robust solutions to - many of the problems we are grappling with our online communications systems today. Long before Facebook was even an idea, Berners-Lee had foreseen the challenges of balancing the risks of the misuse of free speech and open access to information with the anti-democratic threat of censorship. Some of his proposed solutions were to focus on protocols rather than policies - that is to focus on building global *standards* that could be turned into "DIY" filters users could apply according to their own morals and values (much like a "parental guidance" movie age restriction works), rather than rules and regulations applied wholesale top-down by a single central authority.

(Incidentally, much of this same thinking around protocols, other than policies, is now driving the thinking and design of the decentralised, yet robust, business and organisational models being advanced by the global crypto community.)

Of course, we have not listened to his advice, and instead we are busy "breaking the internet" into a "splinternet"; with nation states putting up authoritarian fire walls and applying stickier and stricter censorship laws - in effect tearing apart the *World Wide Web* into fragments, rather than drawing us closer together as Berners-Lee and the early internet idealists envisaged.

Back to basics

This in turn reminded me of David Ogilvy's *Ogilvy on Advertising* (a must for any marketer's library) and Claud Hopkins's *Scientific Marketing* and all the pithy wisdom on the craft of persuasion with words and pictures contained within those (now slightly yellowing) pages. We do ourselves a disservice when we read the newest books filled with the latest popular yet untested ideas at the expense of going back to the old ones that still work.

Just watch Ogivly himself reminding marketers to focus on real results and scientific advertising rather than creative ideals - and, really, predicting the future of content marketing, digital advertising and the current (Slack-driven) email marketing renaissance:

If only we had the humility to listen to and learn from the past, we might do a better job of building the future. The farther back we look, the farther forward we are able to see. The more humbly we are prepared to learn from history, the less we will repeat avoidable mistakes.

ABOUT BRONWYN WILLIAMS

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