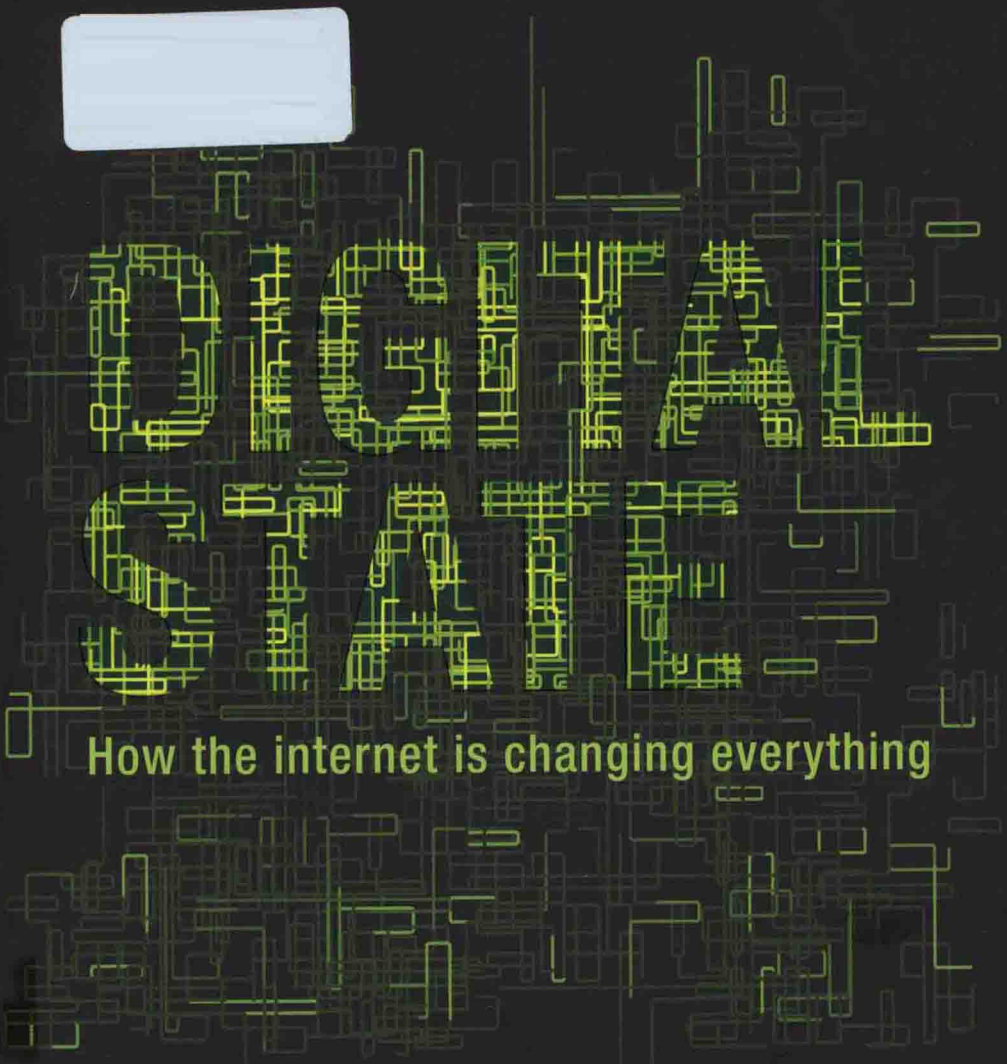
From the best-selling author of *The Better Mousetrap: Brand Invention in a Media Democracy*



DIGITAL STATE

How the internet is changing everything

Written and Edited by
SIMON PONT

KoganPage

To the Digital Natives, who know no other world but this.
The future is theirs; may they be brilliant with it.

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Also by Simon Pont for Kogan Page

THE BETTER MOUSETRAP:
BRAND INVENTION IN A MEDIA DEMOCRACY

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SIMON PONT is a writer, commentator and brand-builder. His agency career includes being part of Saatchi & Saatchi and Naked Communications, the pioneers of communications planning. Hollywood movie studios, Icelandic investment banks, British chocolate bars and Middle Eastern airlines figure amongst his time on the inside of Adland. He is chief strategy officer at agency network Vizeum, and an EACA Effies judge. He is the author of *The Better Mousetrap: Brand Invention in a Media Democracy* and *Remember to Breathe*, a novel.

Say hello at **www.simonpont.com**.

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PROLOGUE

> “Like a squash ball, locked inside an all-glass court, played in a never-ending Sisyphean rally between two invisible and equally able opponents, that’s what the *Digital State* first felt like. A descriptor in search of a winning shot, to break the deadlock, to set it free.”

I had this idea, not even as much as an idea, more a part-idea, a descriptor, the ‘Digital State’, a descriptor for something quite real, or soon-to-be-real, that held real significance, an energy and direction for the way in which it feels things are going.

Like a squash ball, locked inside an all-glass court, played in a never-ending Sisyphean rally between two invisible and equally able opponents, that’s what the *Digital State* first felt like. A descriptor in search of a winning shot, to break the deadlock, to set it free, unleashing vivid descriptions and Technicolor details.

And set to this creepy little squash match in semantic purgatory, I could hear a soundtrack. I could hear Alicia Keys singing an *Empire State of Mind*... where the streets will inspire you... the bright lights make you feel brand new... where there's nothing you can't do; 'Put your lighters in the air, everybody say yeah, yeah.'

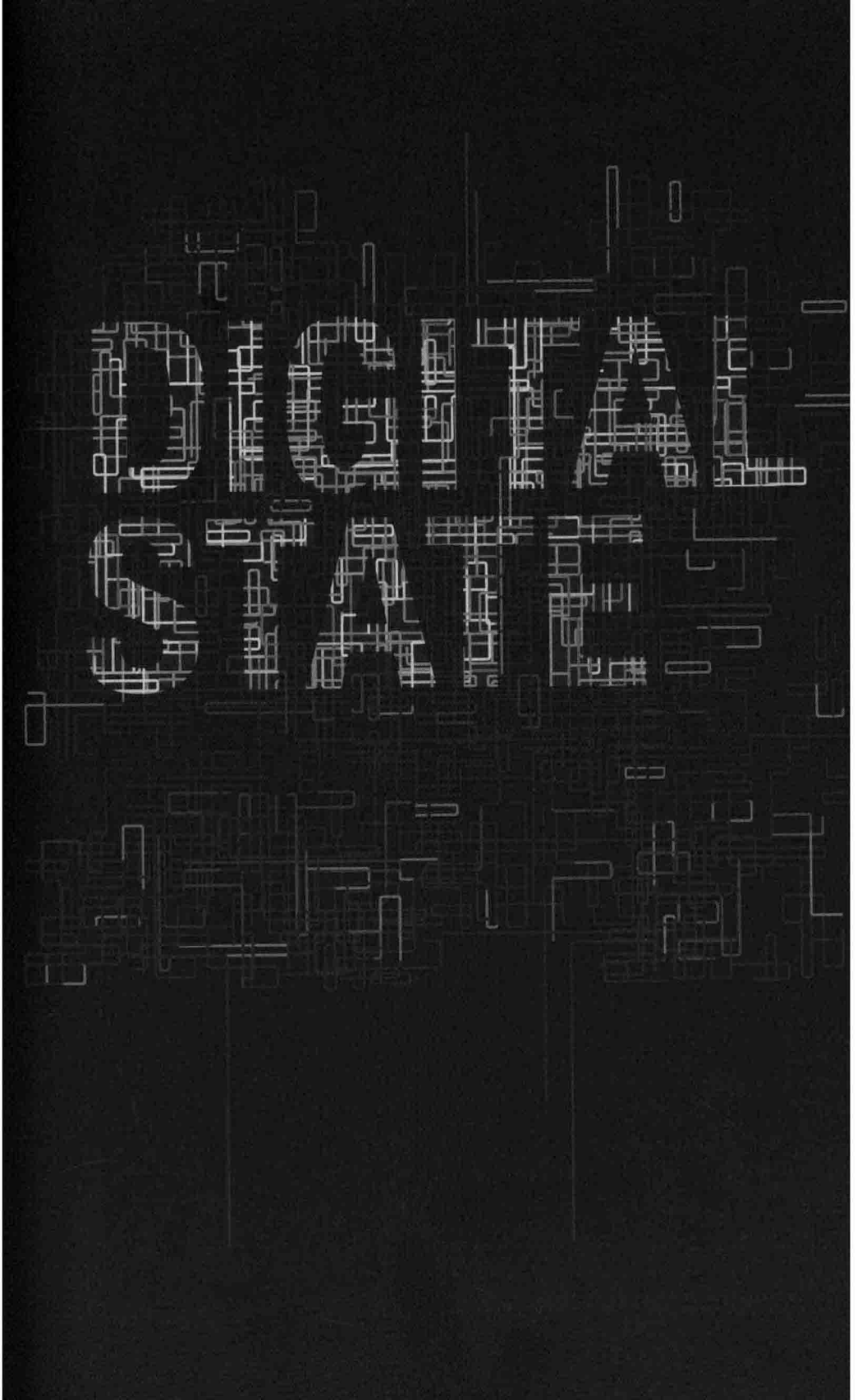
Like I said, all a bit haunting, but captivating too. So very captivating.

The *Digital State*: I felt I was on to something. I felt as though I'd crossed a border, entered a new frontier. And, while I had a good few ideas about the kind of streets and lights ahead, most of all I had questions.

To recycle Hartley's line on *the past* and point it forward, I see *the future* as a foreign country too, where they'll do things differently, remarkably so. And the big challenge with looking forward, with looking through a glass, is that it's likely to be 'darkly'. But let's take that step forward just the same, through the glass, through what has in fact turned out to be a screen, likely HD.

I think there'll be some bright lights ahead, but, just in case, let's get our lighters ready.

SP
London


DIGITAL
STATE

"It was the best of times,
it was the worst of times,
it was the age of wisdom, it
was the age of foolishness,
it was the epoch of belief,
it was the epoch of
incredulity, it was the
season of Light, it was
the season of Darkness, it
was the spring of hope, it
was the winter of despair,
we had everything before us,
we had nothing before us...

Charles Dickens,
A Tale of Two Cities (1859)

The sky above the port was
the color of television,
tuned to a dead channel.

William Gibson,
Neuromancer (1984)

No more secrets.

Sneakers (1992)"

CONTENTS

ABOUT SIMON PONT ix

PROLOGUE *Simon Pont* xi

INTRODUCTION *Simon Pont* 1

1 DIGITAL CURRENTS AND INVISIBLE FUTURES *Faris Yakob* 7

2 UTOPIA, DYSTOPIA. DISCUSS *Simon Pont* 27

3 HOW THE DIGITAL STATE CAN CURE MODERN MARKETING *Judd Labarthe* 41

4 *THUNK* *Bettina Sherick* 57

5 TEENAGE KICKS *Austen Kay* 67

6 STORIES INTO ACTION *Christian Johnsen* 79

7 EVERYTHING CHANGES, EXCEPT ME *Hans Andersson* 93

8 MY DIGITAL STATE *Christopher Lockwood* 103

9 'I'VE BEEN EXPECTING YOU' *Tamara Quinn* 119

10 DIGITAL DARES US TO DREAM *Simon Pont* 133

11 A NEWER NORMAL AND DEEPER BLUE *Nicholas Pont* 149

12 RESISTANCE IS POINTLESS *Vicki Connerty* 161

13 DIGITAL THROUGH A HUMAN LENS *Malcolm Hunter* 173

14 ESCAPE THE WALLED GARDEN TO THE PARADISE BEYOND *Greg Grimmer* 185

15 SUCH PEOPLE IN IT *Simon Pont* 197

16 HOW 'INTERNETS' INVENTED US *Stefan Terry* 215

EPILOGUE *Simon Pont* 231

APPENDIX 235

CONTRIBUTORS 237

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 241

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INTRODUCTION

> We're living the polar opposite of splendid isolation. We now celebrate the splendour of feeling and being interconnected, 'on the grid' all of the time... where it's unclear whether we are imprisoning or liberating ourselves, and it's likely we're doing both.

For a time British foreign policy purported that isolation was splendid. Distance from others was healthy. Maybe only an empire, at one point the largest in history, with all the arrogance that comes from presiding over one-fifth of the world's population, could assert such a stance. Such dazzling, reach-for-your-Ray-Bans conceit or, as Cecil Rhodes once put it, 'To be born an Englishman is to win first prize in God's lottery.'

That was all very then. Right here, in our right now, we're living the polar opposite of splendid isolation. We now celebrate the splendour of feeling

and being interconnected, 'on the grid' all of the time. We like the idea of living and being part of this world wide web, this matrix, where it's unclear whether we are imprisoning or liberating ourselves, and it's likely we're doing both.

Our quotidian lives are feeling less commonplace because, more and more, that commonly frequented place is cyberspace, a placeless 'space' that sits in between our physical and imagined worlds, where we can feel globally connected. Online, we are all becoming 'citizens of the world', gravitating *towards*, without by extension so quickly recoiling from whatever we are not. The online world is one of 'friends' and 'likes', not of strangers and dislikes. Cyberspace is a cosmopolite's haven.

Take 'living memory', and apply a little stretch. Give contemporary history a timeline that kicks off with the 20th century and a second Industrial Revolution in full swing, and then hurtles forwards with an ever-quickening pulse. The inventions, the achievements, the transformative technologies that race and build along the timeline, each and every one utterly life-changing. Witness: the domestic telephone; radio and television; the aeroplane; the atom bomb; the microchip; the personal computer; lasers and fibre optics; the internet...

The internet: backbone of the Digital Revolution, a revolution in *our* time, which we're living through, witnessing, being so very much part of – technological change continuing to reshape society and steer the human condition. The crossover happened in 2009, when there were suddenly more digitally connected devices littering the planet than there were people. Continue the trend line, and by 2020 connected devices will outnumber people *sevenfold*. In a sheer aggregate sense, the machines *have* taken over. Our 'always on' world has become one of gadget choice, an array of web-linked devices within arm's reach, each a compass by which we continue our cyber-wanderings.

Cisco forecasts that 78 per cent of all web traffic will be video by 2016. YouTube is the most popular desktop home page for people in the UK, a site which now receives 4 billion views from somewhere on the planet every day. 'Every minute 72 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube' (Social Media, 2013). Across 2011, YouTube received 1 trillion views. The numbers – 4 billion, 1 trillion – seem unreal, unrelatable, an abstraction: like Stalin's view of a million deaths, 'a mere statistic'.

In 1982, the movie *Tron* seemed like wonderfully absurd cartoon fiction, but I don't think it's proved so absurdly off the mark. It's just that *Tron*'s depiction of two utterly separate worlds, one physical, one digital, was very literal, too literal, and the reality, *our reality*, is a hybrid, where separate

worlds are fusing and augmenting – and this all has quite remarkable implications for what 'reality' is starting to mean to people.

The very idea of 'solid and tangible' is being usurped. DVD box sets are dust-gathering format dinosaurs; films are taking to the clouds, along with our music collections and the contents of our old hard drives.

Now we have *Wikipedia* and an *Encyclopædia Britannica* available only in 'digital format'. On 14 March 2012 *Encyclopædia Britannica* announced it was going 'completely digital', bringing 244 years of hard-copy existence to an ultimate full stop. Jorge Cauz, president of *Encyclopædia Britannica*, declared, 'The end of the print set is something we've foreseen for some time. It's the latest step in our evolution from the print publisher we were, to the creator of digital learning products we are today.' This is significant, I think. Symbolic. All the information online, and only online. On the day of *Britannica*'s press release, a colleague of mine asked, 'If someone somewhere turns off the wrong switch, what happens to all our stuff?'

It's fast approaching a point in time where we can't afford for anyone to accidently flick the wrong switch. And we certainly can't afford for anyone to flick it deliberately. We've uploaded too much, pumped too much of ourselves into cyberspace, to go and lose it all. And the more we invest through our uploads, the more paranoid we become. Cyber-terrorists have become the new bogeymen under the stairs.

And of course there's the obvious irony that we worry so much about the information being gathered on us, by the State, to *protect* us, but then we freely, gladly, pump so much of it out there for 'anyone' consumption. In the UK, protest rings out at a DNA database of 3.1 million people, with 4.2 million CCTV cameras on the streets, rotating on each of us. We want our privacy. And then we chronicle our entire lives through Facebook, provide complete disclosure. But then, too, in the case of *WikiLeaks* and the form of Julian Assange, being a freedom (of information) fighter pursuing a belief in complete disclosure can make you a very wanted person.

Governments are little different to the people they govern; they consist of individuals keen to embrace our digital world, and terrified by its potential reach and influence, should it fall into 'the wrong hands'. Knowing which are the 'right hands' and 'right governments' becomes a point of subjective and biased perspective too. All sides and parties are guilty of wanting to PR-manage and damage-control in the name of 'public interest' and 'the greater good'.

Coming out of the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, the website Herdict (**www.herdict.org**) takes an apolitical, agnostic approach to right and wrong, simply crusading for open access to the

web by flagging the real-time blockages. Whether Vietnam or China, the United States or Germany, Herdict names and shames the countries and reports the urls where site access is being slowed or denied.

> *In the interactive world of Web 2.0, the prime mission of some of the technology sector's fastest-growing corporations is to provide cross-border connections. Little wonder that the old-guard officials who dominate repressive regimes see these companies as little more than the arms dealers of the information age.*
>
> ERIC SCHMIDT AND JARED COHEN, THE DIGITAL DISRUPTION, *FOREIGN AFFAIRS* (NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2010)

OUR NEW STATE

> *STATE*
>
> *(noun) – a particular condition of mind or feeling; a state of being; being in a state of*
>
> *(adjective) – a demarcated, institutionally defined and governed collective*

'State', a double meaning, a defined and governing structure of some kind, and also a condition of *being*: the *state* that we're in, whether as a collective or as individuals, each of us, all of us. What kind of state *are* we in, in both senses of the word? It certainly feels like the cusp, but the cusp of what?

These are fast times, where it feels as though almost anything could happen, and happen in a near-instant. But how should and how do we feel about it all? We fear the sky could come crashing in. We also know that the Digital Revolution could be the beginning of something maybe rather wonderful, which blows the roof off in a very fabulous kind of way. A growing number subscribing to enlightened self-interest? A new age of enlightenment even, grandiose but maybe not over-egging the potential? It all prompts the poser: dare we hope? Should we be thrilled? Or is feeling thrilled just too naive? Is any genuine sense of positivity and optimism just asking for trouble?

I think the Digital Age is opening doors, creating new vistas, new lands to explore and worlds to conquer, on all kinds of levels, real, augmented, virtual, intrinsic, extrinsic. I think it's double-handing in a number of ways too, accelerating opposites, allowing new collectives to rally and shape,

but allowing micro-cliques and atomization to spark and run riot. I think it's empowering all kinds of genuine self-expression, and fuelling some borderline-unhealthy levels of self-delusion. It's bringing people together; it's pushing people apart. It's creating new feelings of belonging; it's driving new kinds of estrangement. It's making things happen fast, and it's making things happen too fast.

These are wonderful times; these are overwhelming times. Everyone is speculating. No one knows. But certainly it's a tale of two kinds of cities, make no mistake. And while *no one knows...*

I knew a fair few people had more than a few ideas. In fact, I knew a good few in particular who, guaranteed, had a whole heap of ideas and views and, once you asked the question, the challenge would be getting any of these folk to shut up. That was the ticket, I figured, rallying the kind of firepower who can get a job done, friends of mine, whom I admire for who they are and what they have to say, all crazy smart, where, even when it's only a quick chat, unexpected thoughts can leap and fizz, where the moment can feel heightened and things likely to happen.

Not long after the success of *Pulp Fiction* (1994), I remember watching an interview with Quentin Tarantino where he declared that he wanted to write a 'guys on a mission' movie, a war movie in the style of one of his favourites, *Where Eagles Dare* (1969). Now *Where Eagles Dare* is a goddamn *Boy's Own* classic, Burton and Eastwood taking a weekend out to storm the Schloß Adler, single-handedly beat the Nazis and win the second world war. It only took a Voice, a Squint, some machine-guns, and more machismo between them than a whole German army could counter. Who wouldn't be overcome by that kind of double act, a pairing of Absolute Cool? (Hell, it almost made up for the Cooler Kid getting tangled in the Swiss–German border wire. Almost.)

So in the *Where Eagles Dare* mould of compatible and complementary skill sets, where collaborations can conquer strongholds and best Nazis, I loved the idea of rallying those I knew, maybe an Ocean's Eleven, maybe a Dirty Dozen, maybe as many as a 15-person squad, and to each putting the question: what are we living through and looking at here, this vista before us? Just what's your view of the view? Specifically, what is the Digital State, and what is our Digital State of Mind?

I knew I wouldn't be disappointed by the replies. And I wasn't. What followed is this.

SP
London

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