

# WIRED

## Tim Berners-Lee: we need to re-decentralise the web

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By Liat Clark

Twenty-five years on from the web's inception, its creator has urged the public to re-engage with its original design: a decentralised internet that at its very core, remains open to all.

Speaking with Wired editor David Rowan at an event launching the magazine's March issue, Tim Berners-Lee said that although part of this is about keeping an eye on for-profit internet monopolies such as search engines and social networks, the greatest danger is the emergence of a balkanised web.

"I want a web that's open, works internationally, works as well as possible and is not nation-based," Berners-Lee told the audience, which included Martha Lane Fox, Jake Davis (AKA Topiary) and Lily Cole. He suggested one example to the contrary: "What I don't want is a web where the Brazilian government has every social network's data stored on servers on Brazilian soil. That would make it so difficult to set one up."

It's the role of governments, startups and journalists to keep that conversation at the fore, he added, because the pace of change is not slowing -- it's going faster than ever before. For his part Berners-Lee drives the issue through his work at the Open Data Institute, World Wide Web Consortium and World Wide Web Foundation, but also as an MIT professor whose students are "building new architectures for the web where it's decentralised". On the issue of monopolies, Berners-Lee did say it's concerning to be "reliant on big companies, and one big server", something that stalls innovation, but that competition has historically resolved these issues and will continue to do so.

The kind of balkanised web he spoke about, as typified by Brazil's home-soil servers argument or Iran's emerging intranet, is partially being driven by revelations of NSA and GCHQ mass surveillance. The distrust that it has brewed, from a political level right down to the threat of self-censorship among ordinary citizens, threatens an open web and is, said Berners-Lee, a greater threat than censorship. Knowing the NSA may be breaking commercial encryption services could result in the emergence of more networks like China's Great Firewall, to "protect" citizens. This is why we need a bit of anti-establishment push back, alluded to by Berners-Lee.

He reiterated the need to protect whistleblowers like Edward Snowden that leak information only in extreme circumstances "because they have this role in society". But more than this, he noted the need for hackers.



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"It's a really important culture, it's important to have the geek community as a whole think about its responsibility and what it can do. We need various alternative voices pushing back on conventional government sometimes."

In the midst of so much political and social disruption, the man who changed the course of communication, education, activism and so much more, and in so many ways, remains dedicated to fighting for a web founded in freedom and openness. But when asked what he would have done differently, the answer was easy. "I would have got rid of the slash slash after the colon. You don't really need it. It just seemed like a good idea at the time."