

James Corbett: Our Digital Gulag

[Our Digital Gulag](#)

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And how we burned in the camps later, thinking: What would things have been like if every Security operative, when he went out at night to make an arrest, had been uncertain whether he would return alive and had to say good-bye to his family? Or if, during periods of mass arrests, as for example in Leningrad, when they arrested a quarter of the entire city, people had not simply sat there in their lairs, paling with terror at every bang of the downstairs door and at every step on the staircase, but had understood they had nothing left to lose and had boldly set up in the downstairs hall an ambush of half a dozen people with axes, hammers, pokers, or whatever else was at hand?

– Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn , [The Gulag Archipelago 1918–1956](#)

It's not often that you leave the post office quoting *The Gulag Archipelago* and pondering the nature of the digital gulag that is being erected around us, but here we are.

You see, it started out as a simple, ordinary, everyday trip to go buy some stamps for a package I was sending. Back in the good old days, this would have been a minor inconvenience. Remember way back when in 2019, when the biggest hassle you'd

face at the post office was a long line up of people waiting to buy some postage for their parcel?

Well, that was then. This is now. The era of the New (ab)Normal™. And, like every other aspect of our existence, even the simple act of shipping a package has become an opportunity to reflect on our electronic enslavement.

It shouldn't have surprised me. After all, last year I had to suspend DVD sales on the website because "COVID-related postal disruptions" meant that the DVDs were, more often than not, being returned undelivered (if the post office even accepted them at all). Even my annual Christmas package back home to my Canadian family ended up not being sent last year because the "new strain" fears meant a fresh round of holiday mail disruption.

So it goes without saying that going to the post office has *not* been a part of my everyday activities for about a year now. In fact, it's so consistently been a source of dashed hopes and foiled plans that I've been more or less avoiding it altogether.

That changed this past Wednesday when I decided to test the waters by sending another parcel to the US. I went through my usual routine: I printed out a homemade shipping label, filled out the customs declaration sticker, slapped them on the envelope and headed out the door. Passing the package over to the post office clerk, I was relieved to find that mail was indeed being sent to the US as normal. He rang up the price of the postage and began affixing the stamps and I breathed a sigh of relief.

But then he stopped. He cocked his head. He made a noise that in Japanese means something like "uhhhh..."

Oh, no.

"I'm sorry, sir. You can't send mail like this anymore."

“What?”

“Oh, you can’t send packages to the US in this way anymore,” he repeated as I stared in disbelief. No doubt beginning to question my Japanese comprehension, he reached for a flyer explaining that Japan Post was no longer accepting packages to the US with homemade labels and handwritten customs declarations. No, that was the Old (ab)Normal. Here in the New (ab)Normal you have to create an account on the Japan Post website and/or download an app to your smartphone in order to send a package. You must fill out all of the destination and customs information ahead of time and then print off a special label for the envelope before they can take it.

He ripped the half-glued stamp from the package and handed it back to me. “I’m sorry, sir. You’ll have to bring it back when you have the special label.”

I left the post office without a word, my head spinning from the interaction. In a moment, I saw it all spread out before me: A future in which nothing, not even the simplest transaction at the post office, could take place without a smartphone or an electronic device. A future in which every single transaction is monitored in real time by the government. A future in which that government could at any time intervene to stop those transactions from taking place.

I immediately thought of the opening chapter of *The Gulag Archipelago*.

The gulags, of course, were the Soviet forced labor camps that started under Lenin and flourished under Stalin. They were made famous in the English speaking world by Russian writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who won the Nobel prize in 1970 for his work documenting the history of the camps and the stories of those, like himself, who had served time in them.

Solzhenitsyn didn’t refer to the gulags as internment camps, though; he thought of them, collectively, as “that amazing

country of Gulag," an Archipelago of islands that themselves "crisscrossed and patterned that other country [Russia] within which it was located, like a gigantic patchwork, cutting into its cities, hovering over its streets." In Solzhenitsyn's vision, this island chain lay "right next to us, two yards away from us," behind the brick walls and high fences surrounding the unmarked buildings that made up the prisons and camps that most people didn't even know existed.

But there they sat, just out of reach, a network of institutions housing all those who committed some (usually nameless) transgression against the state. Scooped up from their homes, lured from their workplaces, ushered from their loved ones, the "residents" of this "amazing country" were led away by the members of the Soviet security forces, often without resistance, to meet their fate.

It strikes me that the digital prison that is being erected for us is quite similar. Just out of reach in that nebulous "cyberspace," here and not here, seen and not seen, just out of reach. We know that it exists, that more and more of our life is taking place there, but we are led into it so innocuously that it seems ridiculous to question it. "Oh, James, it's just an account to send some mail. What's the big deal?"

The big deal, of course, is that this is just one more brick in one more edifice in one more institution in the amazing country of Digital Gulag. Sure, by itself the creation of an account on the post office website is hardly the end of the world. But, as you no doubt know by now, it does not end there. Soon enough we'll find that our [vaccination certificates](#) are being tied to our [digital identity](#) so that we can scan the proper bar code at the [UBI](#) office in order to receive our [protein substitute](#) rations.

And, every once in a while, someone will try to escape the digital gulag. They'll try to buy something without the proper

bar code. Or they'll try to enter a public space without a digital immunity passport. But living their lives under the watchful gaze of the electronic Big Brother panopticon, they'll discover soon enough what it means to be a prisoner in the digital gulag.

Even when we do protest the erection of this electronic enslavement grid, that protest is—almost inevitably—planned online, tweeted out under a hashtag, photographed for Instagram, videotaped for YouTube and discussed on Facebook. And if it gets a certain number of views that protest is called a “success.”

But what does it mean for the future of political resistance—of *any* resistance—that all of our interactions are now taking place online? This is the questions confronted by write Bill Blunden in his recent piece on [Internet Honey Traps For Everyone!](#)

“If you have a movement that depends heavily upon a digital platform, you don't have a movement. What you've actually got is a honeypot that, wittingly or otherwise, will snare those drawn to it. In the end, all of that data traverses a maze of interconnected pipes which are centrally monitored and controlled by you-know-who.”

And, just in case you didn't get the point, Blunden doubles down:

“The whole notion that resilient long-term organizations will coalesce around social media portals is a bit naïve. Real movements don't emerge from the pseudo anonymity of internet channels, which are literally crawling with [informants](#), [hackers](#), and [artful government spies](#).”

Yes, the act of going online to protest the online prison we are being placed in is akin to Soviet dissidents volunteering to go to the gulag so they can preach to the prisoners. It is inherently self-defeating.

What, then, is the answer to all of this? Resistance? Refusal? By yourself? How else to motivate others to join you in this day and age, if not online?

If there are pat, simple answers to these questions, I have yet to hear them. But I do know this: like the prisoners in the gulags, we will one day burn with anguish thinking of this time we are in, right now, when things could have been resisted. When resistance was even *possible*.

This is a consistent theme for Solzhenitsyn: How easy it would have been to resist at first and how impossible that resistance became later on. Putting faith in a system that they could not possibly comprehend, the average Soviet citizen believed that even if they were charged with a crime, they would surely have a chance to clear things up. As long as they were calm, as long as they let things proceed in their natural course, then surely they would be allowed to go free. As Solzhenitsyn observed, "Universal innocence also gave rise to the universal failure to act. Maybe they won't take you? Maybe it will all blow over?"

And here in the digital gulag we find ourselves in a remarkably similar situation. "If we just follow the rules then we'll be fine. Relax. It's no big deal."

But *what* rules? Just create the post office account. Just take your government-approved experimental mRNA injection. Just don't ask questions or challenge authority online, and then you can participate in all the fruits of this wonderful digital existence!

Oh, [did I mention](#) I was removed from Patreon this week for spreading "COVID misinformation" and I have received two strikes on my YouTube account for "questioning the WHO guidelines?"

So how's that rule-following thing working out for *you*? Still sure that it'll all work out if we just don't kick up too much

of.a fuss?

I write all this *not* out of a spirit of defeatism. This is 2021, after all, the year of the [people's reset](#). No, I write this because we will never be able to put the brakes on this agenda unless we look it square in the face. This is inherently difficult. No one wants to look a monster in the face. But we *must* do it, and we must not kid ourselves about the nature of the monster that we see, or the gravity of the threat that we are facing.

As Solzhenitsyn wrote, "A person who is not inwardly prepared for the use of violence against him is always weaker than the person committing the violence." Are we inwardly prepared for what is surely coming? And what does that mean?

Don't ask me. I don't have time to answer. I'm off to make an account on the Japan Post website. After all, what choice do I have?

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