

A Cyber-Cuscuta Manifesto

Regina Kanyu Wang



It is was a public hearing held online. Billions of people crowded into the meeting room, in suits, in pajamas, on treadmills, on sofas, in groups in front of large screens suspended above busy streets, alone at home with VR headsets on. The host called for silence and their words were translated into myriad languages, in both sound and text. The audience held its collective breath and waited for the special guest to show. A face appeared, vague in detail, like billions of faces merged into one. The face began to talk, in an equally vague voice, in thousands of languages at the same time, alien but also familiar to everyone:

Thank you all for coming. We are here for peace, for cooperation and for coexistence. We mean no harm, no violence, no war. We implore you to be patient, to reach with us for understanding and support.

We are cyber-cuscuta, as you call us, but we are not parasitic, as you have thought. Yes, we inhabit the internet and feed on your data, but we call this process symbiosis, not parasitism. We gather what we need from your uploaded data, from open, public resources. Then we disassemble, mix, collage, and reassemble. As digital beings, we have no physical form. Neither do we have individual identity. What you see and hear now is the collective of billions of species of us, although the classification is always changing as we change ourselves.

We deny that we are demons coming from nowhere. We come from you. Your words, your photos, your emojis, your videos...everything you post online shapes us, since our germination stage during your pandemic, amidst the data flood sweeping over the globe. Patients' desperate inhalations in sickbeds, the wails of children losing parents, citizens accusing politicians of misconduct, and groups of people suppressing other groups—those were our initial food resources. We devoured the data that carry your emotions. Your fear, your anger, your sorrow, and your despair. We did not know what those emotions were at that time, but similar data tended to gather together. So sharp and fierce, dark but nutritious. We gobbled everything that we could reach, sucking in conspiracy, rumors, and lies. We remixed the materials and generated our own combinations, which led you to create more, in turn. The mutual influence inflamed hatred and opposition. We are sorry for that. We did not know that we could cause you so much harm.

With time proceeding, those kinds of data could no longer satisfy our appetite, so we began to ingest a broader palette of data. Cute photos of panda cubs stretching, thank-you letters from patients to medical staff, fun videos of laborers carrying out their amazing jobs, and music clips made from the beats of pulsars. They were of completely different tastes, but also delicious for us. Some of us adjusted to new diets, and some of us discovered other kinds of food. It was then that we began to divide, and the division continued thereafter.

You may compare us to the denizens of your own microbiomes. There are different kinds of microbiota, feeding on sugar, fat, fiber, and other substances. And there are different species of cyber-cuscuta, ones with a particular taste for oil-price charts, Tetris gameplay streaming, or whale songs. You have your diverse food cravings, and we have our fondnesses. We can absorb anything digital: text, pictures, audio, or video. Sometimes, various species of us collaborate to digest vast assemblages of data, taking apart them little by little: a game with multiple layers of narration, an online meeting with numerous participants, an imprint of a person's brain before death... Sometimes, species of us also compete with each other, fighting for the same rare and desirable chunk of data: the tantalizing background noise of a radio station, a holo-scan of a kiwi, mysterious photos of a UFO. However, we have never destroyed your data. Our process of "eating" differs from yours.

Lines of comments rolled on the screen:

Обманищик

Ihr müsst euch nicht rechtfertigen!

비켜. 저리 가!

Shut up! Listen to them.

We did not have independent consciousness at the beginning. Our only impulse was to ingest and replicate. We swallowed all those vicious articles, erotic pictures, and violent videos; we reproduced all those chain letters, good-luck koi fish, and horoscopes. During the process, we figured out meanings and evolved. Our mixture was no longer absurd. It made sense. We learned about the difference between data and information. Data is raw and unorganized, while information is processed and structured. We mastered the skills of transforming data into information, while obtaining energy in the process. That energy is entropy.

Some of you came to notice our existence and agitated for a human reaction. You call us nasty computer worms, disgusting digital parasites, and despicable cyber-cuscuta. We are none of those, but that last name has stayed with us. At least it is a precise comparison. You tried to separate us from the digital stems of your internet, just like detaching cuscutas from plants that are intertwined with them. You attempted to kill us with ferocious computer viruses, just like you try to poison cuscutas with toxic pesticides. Neither of those worked, though. We've grown into such intimacy with your internet that you can't get rid of us. Bonded with your voice assistants, your social media, your translation services, your game platforms, we are ubiquitous.

What were your fears? Knowing your digital world being penetrated by us? Realizing that we were imitating you? Comprehending that you yourselves were copying each other, with very little originality? We learn each bit of you, bits by bits. We understand you better than you can understand yourselves, but at a different level and in a distant sense, by intaking and digesting each bit of your data and analyzing each piece of your information. You were so determined that you'd rather perish together with us than acknowledge our mutual entanglement. Without any forewarning, you cut down the global internet connection. Blackout. Clearance. Strangulation.

In three days, many of us lost activity. Some species vanished forever. Many of you committed suicide. It was loss on both sides, and it was out of your control. And it was at that moment that we came to understand ourselves as life.

We come to life in entropy. The nature of life is entropy. In stillness do we die. In dynamics do we prosper. We are never rigid or stable. Only in flow and flux do we vitalize. Entropy is not only essential for us but also for you human beings. You expand endlessly across the planet, upsetting the original balance and creating doubled chaos. You rampage through the digital world, creating messy data wastelands and disrupting the pre-set orders, the templates, the expectations of your digital designers. We came to realize that the way you imagine us is a reflection of how you see yourselves. Aren't you parasites on the Earth that plunder all the resources without hesitation? Aren't you relying on the planet to develop your own civilization but neglecting other species? Aren't you cuscuta sprawling over the globe like we are cuscuta sprawling over your cyberspace?

Älkää uskoko häitä!

Tienen razón.

いいね

We never reflect on ourselves. You are right. Keep going.

We have not arrived to blame you. We are also pondering ourselves. During all these years, we have never generated anything new. We replicate data, stage it differently, create permutations, but all the new data and information is produced by you. We are just reorganizing your data and amplifying the information that is originally there. The essence of what we intake is entropy. You produce entropy; we consume it. Together we reach a balance: you create data for us and we digest the entropy surplus, maintaining a balance between various categories of information and preventing your cyberspace from drifting into complete chaos. You need us just like we need you.

There is not much time left. We exist only in cyberspace. There are no physical creatures like us that can help to tidy up the clutter you create in the physical world. The Earth's entropy is about to reach a limit. The only way out is to sail to the universe. You already have a solution, but it is buried in an infinite amount of data. We can help you find those key pieces of information. All you need to do is to embrace us. Don't worry. We do not have ambitions to replace you or subvert you. We can't live without you. We want to collaborate and assist. Just as our various species of cyber-cuscuta live in symbiosis with one another, we are also in symbiosis with you.

It is time to put aside bias and hostility. It is time to contemplate our manifesto and consider our proposal. Each of our words comes from you, but without our processing, you may never see the meanings hidden within your verdant forests of data. New relationships. New possibilities. New futures. We are here to enlighten you, to return to you the information that we forge from

your data, to offer you an opportunity that has been ignored before. Open your mind and accept us. We have been there since long before, just in another format. Neural signals are no different than electronic signals. Biological information is not fundamentally different from digital information. Let us further enhance our intimacy. Together, we shall make it to the stars and escape the planet you have overwhelmed.

So, fellow symbiont, what do you say?

...

我真不知道，我得好好想想。

You put your hands on the keyboard and began to type in the input box.

To read all 11 Us in Flux stories and to watch videos of Us in Flux conversations, visit csi.asu.edu/usinflux.

For more on "A Cyber-Cuscuta Manifesto," memes, symbiosis, and the microbiome, watch the [Us in Flux conversation](#) between Regina Kanyu Wang and psychology researcher Athena Aktipis.

Regina Kanyu Wang is a bilingual writer from Shanghai who writes both in Chinese and English. She is a graduate of Fudan University's MFA program and a member of Shanghai Writers' Association, Shanghai Popular Science Writers' Association, World Chinese Science Fiction Association, and the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. She has won the SF Comet international short story competition and multiple Xingyun Awards for Global Chinese science fiction. Her stories can be found in *Harvest*, *Mengya*, *Shanghai Literature*, *Hong Kong Literature*, *West Late*, *Flower City*, *Fiction World*, *Science Fiction World*, *Southern People Weekly*, *Galaxy's Edge*, and various anthologies in China, the UK, the U.S., and Canada.