THE politics of the internet are not always easy to get your head around. As we have seen over the past few years, debates about regulatory issues – broadband availability, network neutrality, privacy and so on – bring together diverse interest groups and arrange them in weird combinations. In last year’s landmark campaign against America’s Stop Online Piracy Act, which climaxed with the blackout of Wikipedia, Google and Facebook campaigned side by side with librarians, conspiracy theorists and Hollywood celebrities. Old categories like left/right and progressive/conservative don’t always make much sense in this volatile political field.

This problem is evident in two recent books, Robert McChesney’s *Digital Disconnect* and Jaron Lanier’s *Who Owns the Future?*. Both present a broadly left-liberal critique of the internet society, focusing on the data economy. Both reserve particular scorn for Web 2.0. Both are unapologetically polemical. Yet there are deep differences in their thinking, reflecting the ideological gulf that separates Marxist and cyber-collectivist theories of the internet.

Let’s start with *Digital Disconnect*. McChesney, a well-known political economist from the University of Illinois, has been writing about broadcasting, advertising and journalism for decades. He is the co-founder of Free Press, a US media reform organisation, and a tireless campaigner on media ownership and regulation. *Digital Disconnect* is his thirteenth book. Like its predecessors, it is lucid and alarming. The book explores what McChesney describes as “the marriage of capitalism and the internet and the resulting crisis of communication and democracy in the digital era.” It is an ambitious study, which tries to get at the underlying economic logics of the digital age and how they shape everyday communications. His focus is mostly on the United States, and on topics like the search engine market, app stores, technical standards, cloud computing and net neutrality.

Readers familiar with McChesney’s previous work won’t be surprised to hear that he is gloomy about the wired economy. “It is supremely ironic,” he argues, “that the internet, the much-ballyhooed champion of increased consumer power and cut-throat competition, has become one of the greatest generators of monopoly in economic history.” The book’s general argument is that we are moving into “a private sphere of increasingly closed, proprietary, even monopolistic markets” and towards the “capitalist colonisation of the internet.”

McChesney is good at foregrounding big-picture questions: why the structure of the digital economy matters; how it affects our lives; how it produces power, freedom, inequality and exploitation. His cynicism is a refreshing palate-cleanser after the liberal technophilia of writers like Yochai Benkler and Lawrence Lessig. But I worried that McChesney’s interpretation was a little too pat, a little too easy.

From the outset it is clear that the internet will play a predetermined role in McChesney’s story, as the latest surface for capitalist expansion and domination. This is in line with McChesney’s early work on broadcasting; anyone who has read those books will know the narrative well. But McChesney’s is a one-sided account: it leaves all the grey areas unexplored. His observations about digital markets magically seem to fit his longstanding template.

In this sense, *Digital Disconnect* recalls an earlier moment of media critique when the enemy was clearly defined and the role of the critic was to provide consciousness-raising intelligence. As a manifesto against the internet economy, *Digital Disconnect* is powerful. But as an analysis of how that economy operates and where it might be
headed, it has rather less to say.

WHILE McChesney writes as a hard-headed political economist, Jaron Lanier adopts a rather different persona: the disillusioned insider. A Silicon Valley computer scientist, virtual reality pioneer, and former Microsoft employee, Lanier has a long history in the US tech industry. These days he makes a living as a critic of this world. *Who Owns the Future?*, like his previous book *You Are Not a Gadget*, offers us a distinctive vision of the internet society and its failings. Equal parts libertarian, collectivist, Romantic and cyber-humanist, his political identity seems itself to be a product of the tech cultures that he so distrusts.

At the core of the book is a critique of the data businesses – the “Siren Servers” – that divide the info-rich and the info-poor. Lanier is particularly concerned with the missing “middle-class jobs” that have been eroded by the winner-takes-all economy of Web 2.0 commerce:

> I want digital networking to cause more value from people to be on the books, rather than less…
> At the height of its power, the photography company Kodak employed more than 140,000 people and was worth $28 billion. They even invented the first digital camera. But today Kodak is bankrupt, and the new face of digital photography has become Instagram. When Instagram was sold to Facebook for a billion dollars in 2012, it employed only thirteen people.
> Where did all those jobs disappear to? And what happened to the wealth that those middle-class jobs created?

In contrast to the jackpot economy of app creation and the one-way traffic of data harvesting, Lanier proposes a system of “nanopayments” as a solution (the final chapters describe the system in detail). In his view, such an infrastructure would redistribute our information capital in a more equitable way, reducing the stratification of the big data economy.

This aspect of Lanier’s argument provides a way around the debate between content companies and rights-holders (who seek stronger protection of information online) and free culture enthusiasts (who promote open, unfettered circulation of all knowledge). Lanier has no time for either side.

While it is always interesting, *Who Owns the Future?* doesn’t move far beyond the level of polemics. It is full of ideas that seem brilliant from a distance but tend to dissolve when examined up close. Take, for example, Lanier’s Instagram story. The comparison between Instagram and Kodak works as an attention-grab but does it tell us anything meaningful about the internet economy? These two businesses are not directly comparable: one is a software company and intermediary, while the other is in hardware and services.

No doubt many economists would argue that, rather than simply disappearing, the “good” jobs Kodak provided have actually been dispersed across a number of other sectors, including mobile phone producers and IT maintenance companies. There may even be more such jobs today. But Lanier is not interested in complications like this.

Despite his professed concern for real workers, I got the feeling that Lanier prefers to keep his ideas at the level of free-wheeling abstraction. *Who Owns the Future?* is a speculative text: its modus operandi is to translate problems in software design onto a wider socioeconomic plane. This is exciting at times, but it can also be frustrating. The issues that Lanier raises seem too important to treat casually.

While I found much to like in both of these books, neither Lanier nor McChesney provide a wholly satisfying account of where the internet economy is going. As polemics, they are a lot of fun. But as theories of the digital economy, they need a defrag. •