



INTRODUCTION

THE MATRIX

In the end the Party would announce that two and two made five, and you would have to believe it.

—George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

“I was amazed. . . . I wasn’t prepared for it to be a good movie,” Rick Clerici, a Massachusetts therapist, told the *Boston Herald* newspaper. “*The Matrix* reminded me of Huxley and Orwell in that vision of control over the larger reality. . . . We have some measure of control in our tiny personal lives but the larger reality is manipulated by far greater forces.”

Clerici was not alone. In 1999, the movie took in more than \$450 million worldwide, making it a huge hit for Warner Bros. Studios.

In *The Matrix*, thirty-something Thomas Anderson (Keanu Reeves) plods through life as a software programmer at the mega-corporation Metacortex. Anderson often arrives late to his cubicle, weary from a late night of moonlighting as a computer hacker who operates under the alias “Neo.”

Neo intuitively suspects that something is amiss in the world. He can’t put a finger on what’s wrong, but the search for answers consumes him. Neo starts receiving cryptic messages via computer

and telephone about “the Matrix” from a mysterious voice who calls himself Morpheus—played by Laurence Fishburne. As the story unfolds, Neo is guided to Morpheus.

In response to Neo’s longing to learn the meaning of the Matrix, Morpheus explains:

It’s that feeling you have had all your life. That feeling that something was wrong with the world. You don’t know what it is but it’s there, like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad, driving you to me. But what is it? . . . The Matrix is everywhere, it’s all around us, here even in this room. You can see it out your window, or on your television. You feel it when you go to work, or go to church or pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.

Morpheus reveals that the date is approximately 2199, and that the 1999 life that Neo thought was reality is actually a computer-generated virtual experience. Most human beings, Morpheus reveals, are physically warehoused in stacks of gelatin cocoons filled with fluid and tended to by man-made artificial intelligence. The machines hard-wire the humans with a program to create what the humans perceive as their lives. This dreamscape is much more comfortable than reality. People in the Matrix casually dine on virtual steak, for example, while Morpheus and his band of rebels survive on bowls of slop that resembles cottage cheese. Morpheus explains that the villain is not a single physical machine or entity, but instead “a neural-interactive simulation that we call the Matrix.” The simulation placates most human minds into unquestioning acceptance of their captivity, while the parasitic machines drain energy from the encapsulated human bodies.

Morpheus leads a band of underground rebels and nurtures Neo’s gifts to remake the Matrix and liberate humankind from its

own creation. “[C]ontrol the Matrix,” Morpheus explains to Neo, “and you control the future.”

The *Matrix*'s script drew from biblical texts, higher-level math, classic literature such as *Alice in Wonderland*, and Greek mythology. While the popularity of the movie arose in part from its action scenes, the theme of questioning invisible systems that control our lives also spoke to contemporary audiences.

“Many people these days are questioning the reality they have been socially conditioned to perceive,” John Bates, a forty-three-year-old computer consultant who saw the film six times, told the *Herald*. The theme of questioning the systems that organize our “reality” also spoke to the actor who played Neo. “It starts with my character asking, ‘What is the Matrix?’ and from there you’re asking, ‘What is reality? What is around me?’ ” said Keanu Reeves. “The film also introduces themes of choice and what happens when you make choices. You can either learn about reality . . . or you can go on living in ignorance.”

“The idea of *The Matrix* is that it’s very easy to live an unexamined life,” *Matrix* co-director Larry Wachowski explained. “It’s not just computers; it’s about anything you allow to think for you, systems of thought.”

VIRTUAL DEMOCRACY

Most people have a relatively simple understanding of American democracy. Each person has a right called a “vote.” A person casts the vote for a candidate. The candidates who receive the most votes win and make laws. Candidates win by supporting popular policies. “Free” citizens thus govern themselves.

But contrary to conventional perception, American democracy is not an organic, grassroots phenomenon that mirrors society’s pref-

erences. In reality, the will of the people is channeled by a predetermined matrix of thousands of election regulations and practices that most people accept as natural: the location of election-district boundaries, voter-registration deadlines, and the number of voting machines at a busy polling place. This structure of election rules, practices, and decisions filters out certain citizens from voting and organizes the electorate. There is no “right” to vote outside of the terms, conditions, hurdles, and boundaries set by the matrix.

Although most people are oblivious to the matrix, it has very real consequences. In our closely divided political environment, even an obscure election rule in a single state can determine who sits in the White House or which party controls Congress. Collectively, the various rules and practices result in a class of politicians that control various aspects of Americans’ lives, such as the number of students in a second-grade classroom in Detroit, the level of mercury in the air we breathe, and the matter of whether a student in the Army Reserve will sleep in his University of Iowa dormitory or in a barracks in Baghdad, Iraq.¹ And because the United States is a military and financial superpower, the matrix affects not just Americans but also hundreds of millions of humans around the globe.

The matrix is *not* a grand conspiracy orchestrated by a single mastermind. Instead, it is a collection of ever-changing rules and practices employed by various partisans and bureaucrats that converge to shape who goes to the polls and which votes are counted. Although no single individual is in control, some enjoy more influence, such as legislators who draft election law, secretaries of state, election commissioners, county election boards, poll challengers, and poll workers. These individuals justify their actions using seemingly innocuous terms like “budgetary constraints,” “states’ rights,” “administrative convenience,” or “prevention of fraud.” But whatever the stated reason, their decisions often exclude particular voters, enhance the power of certain politicians, and advance specific policy preferences.

This is a critical moment for American democracy. Evolved technology—which can process each voter’s address, race, gender, political affiliation, and likelihood of voting—enhances politicians’ ability to tailor election-district boundaries to include voters who favor them, purge selected voters from registration rolls, and manipulate the matrix in other ways. Cash-strapped municipalities and states hesitate to spend limited tax dollars on better voting machines or more staffing at polls, while better-heeled counties have the resources to ensure that every one of their votes gets counted. An influx of immigrant populations from Latin America and Asia threatens the political status quo in certain communities across the nation, but bilingual ballots and translators are often not provided. Efforts by the United States to promote democracy abroad are compromised by the fact that our political process falls short at home. At this pivotal juncture we should not accept the matrix passively, but question it.

There is no way to eliminate the matrix completely. Voting requires ground rules. But we can remake the matrix so that it more fairly empowers all voters rather than simply privileging the insiders who know how to manipulate it. America’s founders divided government power among executive, legislative, and judicial branches in order to prevent abuses. By manipulating election rules and tolerating election flaws, however, politicians weaken the most effective check on government abuse—the people.

Rather than obscure the matrix with the soundbites of self-interested political insiders or the dry jargon of academic elites, this book uses real-life stories to show how the matrix affects all Americans.

Chapter 1 shows how the fox too often guards the henhouse in American politics. Incumbent politicians draw the boundaries of their own election districts to ensure that they cannot lose an election, and partisan secretaries of state feign neutrality in administering elections but issue decisions that too often follow the party line.

Chapter 2 explains how local control allows for unequal and underfunded elections, as well as partisan manipulation that excludes voters. Chapter 3 grapples with the provocative question of whether race still matters in twenty-first-century American politics. Chapter 4 explains the continued need for provisions of the federal Voting Rights Act that ensure that changes to voting rules made by state and local politicians are not discriminatory. In response to English-only advocates' attacks on bilingual ballots, chapter 5 explains the need to make voting accessible to all citizens. Chapter 6 describes an emerging antifraud movement that proposes measures such as photo-ID requirements, which threaten to exclude many more legitimate voters than fraudulent ones. The book concludes by focusing on a few average Americans who—despite the demands of business and family—make time to work on democratic reforms in their community.

Americans are not inevitably destined to a fate in which a narrow class of political elites controls the matrix. Change is possible. This book is a road map for bringing the power of the vote back into our hands.²