

Liberating Technology: Moral Evolution and the Amplifier of Liberty
By Michael Hammer

Abstract

The thesis of this essay is that the technology required for the triumph of tyranny and the technology required for the triumph of liberty is the same technology. The decisive key in this struggle, which daily has higher stakes, is not morally-neutral technology but rather the strength of the social and cultural institutions of liberty. The fate of individual liberty will be decided by whether or not the evolution of morals can keep pace with the evolution of technology. The case study for this essay will be the potentially most liberating technology, and yet so easily controlled, of the 21st century: telecommunications and the Internet.

Introduction

Is technology aiding the cause of freedom, or has it finally given authoritarian regimes the tools they need to snuff out the cause of liberty once and for all? The late Professor Hayek offered his gloomy assessment that the greatest threats to freedom lay in the future, perhaps in our very own time. This fearsome yet wide-eyed assertion demands a serious analysis of what was certainly the most troubling question of the 20th century – and what Professor Hayek was undoubtedly correct in asserting would be the most pressing question of our own time.

An analysis of the complex relationship between technological progress, society, and individual liberty may perhaps most closely resemble the story of three blind men speaking describing an elephant. These three men each used their sense of touch to describe what an elephant is like. One man told the others, “Clearly, elephants are short, narrow and brushy.” The second man replied, “No, elephants are flat and rough.” The third man adamantly corrected the other two. “Elephants are very, very long, and air comes out of them at the end.” Each of the men perceived a different part of the elephant (the tail, belly, and trunk, respectively), and they described the whole experience of the elephant based on one part. In this way, our perception of the political and social uses of technology can inspire fear or hope based on which particular moments we perceive and how we knit them together into a coherent theory. At this point in human history, this statement is no trite tautology. The spectrum of opinion between fear and hope – and the concomitant need to understand the effects that technology has on liberty – grows wider and more pronounced by the day. This fact is amplified when we consider the specific focus of Hayek’s concern: the ability of technology to control the human mind.

The thesis of this essay is that the technology required for the triumph of tyranny and the technology required for the triumph of liberty is the same technology. The decisive key in this struggle, which daily has higher stakes, is not morally-neutral technology but rather the strength of the social and cultural institutions of liberty. The fate of individual liberty will be decided by whether or not the evolution of morals can keep pace with the evolution of technology.

The technology I will discuss in order to support this point is not the hard-and-fast technology of control that has become available. RFID chips used in commerce,

passports and even in human flesh¹ are but the beginning of a new 21st century style of surveillance unlike anything the world has ever seen. This surveillance could be used, in nightmare scenarios, to fulfill all the fears that George Orwell or Alexander Solzhenitsyn could imagine. Similarly, Hayek feared that governments would use drugs in water supplies to control minds²; today, we face the coming reality of gene therapy, a potentially vital new technology but also one which literally gives doctors and parents the power to shape the mind and body of a human being that cannot yet even be able to consent for itself. All of these possibilities may one day represent mind control in a very concrete sense.

However, for the present, and in order to prevent such a future, we must focus on a different kind of mind control – a different means of shaping “human personality.” By this I mean not mind-controlling technology but technology enabling mind control. I speak here of the “soft” means of control in which technology is but a pawn in controlling the agenda, perspectives, and education of society – all of which do not control a mind by literally acting upon it but rather by giving incentives, disincentives, social censure and even political and legal punishment in order to promote, destroy or otherwise shape the values and actions of society.

Fears of social control are nothing unique to classical liberalism. “False consciousness” doctrines – the idea that an individual accepts the values of society against their own rational self-interest – have been in circulation since at least the time of Karl Marx. Religious teachings, of course, promote a similar teaching, based instead on the notion of inner freedom, as Hayek calls it, rather than the materialistic dialectic of Marx. In other words, socialists see false consciousness as an economic function; older teachings, particularly Christianity, focus on the false consciousness that arises from spiritual defects (“fallen” humanity and original sin) and from sinful individual choice.³

However, Professor Hayek undoubtedly had a distinct type of mental enslavement in mind when issuing his fearful proclamation on the future of technology. His concern was not a rejection of an established order for the sake of a utopian vision; rather, his concern was to establish a society in which every individual could seek truth under the auspices of liberty. In relation to technological innovation, his greatest fear for a free society which enabled this individual pursuit was the extent to which a society or government may use or deprive technology in such a way as to render human minds powerless:

In an age of radio and television, the problem of free access to information is no longer a problem of the freedom of the press. In an age when drugs or psychological techniques can be used to control a person’s actions, the problem of free control over one’s body is no longer a matter of protection against physical restraint. The problem of the freedom of movement takes on a new significance when foreign travel has become impossible for those to whom the authorities of their own country are not willing to issue a passport.⁴

Hayek saw the time – our present day – when the hard fist of authoritarian police power would no longer be the greatest threat to liberty. He instead predicted the “soft cage” of authority, won through controlling information, environment and movement, as the real means of isolating and eventually controlling minds and people. Consequently, the case study for this essay will be the potentially most liberating technology, and yet so easily controlled, of the 21st century: telecommunications and the Internet. No developments in

human history have been so lauded and feared as wireless communications and the decentralized, lawless frontier of the Internet.

The Boundless Possibilities of Telecommunications

In the 21st century Western world, it seems that every new technology that possesses world-changing possibilities is met with a wave of delight and wonderment. The Internet was no different, hailed as a technology that would revolutionize communications, commerce and governance. The great promise in all of these areas was the potential for decentralizing information. This decentralization has only now even begun to impact traditional structures of society and government.

The political possibilities became evident soon enough. Those who study the media very quickly saw the potential for the destruction of the media's "gatekeeping function."⁵ Political bloggers became a force to be reckoned with. Chinese dissidents and Burmese protestors could share their perspectives with the whole world. American political bloggers could break stories before the major news outlets were even aware – sometimes producing devastating stories about those news outlets themselves. Two recent books, *Crashing the Gates: Netroots, Grassroots, and the Rise of People-Powered Politics* and *An Army of Davids: How Markets and Technology Empower Ordinary People to Beat Big Media, Big Government, and Other Goliaths*, have documented the rise of the powerful new blogging medium.⁶ While these works primarily attend to American politics, the possibilities and risks for bloggers in overtly totalitarian regimes provide an even clearer picture of the potential for this new medium.

The rise of multimedia cell phones, with the recent high profile example of the iPhone, and other digital tools such as digital cameras, has armed every individual who carries them with the tools to record their side of the story in an encounter with law enforcement, distribute pictures of riots and protests to the world, and otherwise help the citizen to "watch the watchers." More than the pictures themselves, the Internet, and particularly newer user-directed sites such as YouTube, provide a way for these pictures to be distributed in a cost-free manner. At times, these pictures are stunning, such as video from the recent student protests in Venezuela and other uprisings in Pakistan, Burma and Tibet. At other times, this technology is used for more trivial purposes, such as a small group of students who record and share their local fight against repressive local ordinances by holding Annual Skateboard Day in their Arkansas town.⁷

Even under such minor circumstances, the effect of such footage can be shocking. Incidents of police beatings, massive protests, tasings, and other confrontational actions by law enforcement and military officials can produce easily-distributed, graphic footage of incidents that otherwise occur apart from the public gaze, beyond the realm of traditional media. Although not every instance of this footage is a ground-breaking production for liberty, such images can force a public discussion on events that happen in the remotest corners of the world, similar to (but on a grander scale than) the horrifying images of dogs and water hoses turned on civil rights protestors in Selma, Alabama that turned a corner in the discussion on civil rights in the United States. Yet while a generation ago viewed images on a nightly news broadcast, subject to the interpretation and discretion of the local session, the Internet makes "viral" video a reality of the political and social world.

The same pattern continued into the very administration of government. Internet sales have wrought havoc on the traditional means by which American governments collected sales taxes. The moratorium on the Internet sales tax demonstrated the political clout that this new technological frontier continues to have among tech-friendly members of the American Congress. While a deregulated Internet is surely a net gain for the world, the massive size of the tax revenues being lost through online purchases will force state, regional and national legislators around the world to reconsider and re-design the entire concept of the income tax.

The Internet has similarly become the focal point of other current and pending efforts to decentralize and democratize public administration. One key aspect of this effort is transparency in government spending. A recent initiative in the United States, USAspending.gov, is the first of its kind: a federally-sponsored, fully searchable database of all non-classified government grants and contracts.⁸ While such innovations may not, in and of themselves, hold government accountable, these developments proceed on the assumption that a greater level of knowledge will enable the American public to hold their government accountable. At least one American state has sponsored an identical database for state spending.⁹

Another important development is the use of “e-government” in the development of greater citizen engagement in government. A recent survey in the United States showed that an overwhelming percentage of American citizens prefer to conduct regular business with local, state and federal government online.¹⁰ Such e-government may, as with tax revenues, become the basis of a complete shift in the way public administration is conducted.

In short, the rise of 21st century telecommunications has created previously unimaginable possibilities for ordinary citizens to influence their society and government.

The Underbelly of Technological Innovation

However, it would be naïve, at best, to ignore the dark side of these brilliant innovations: the truth that these technologies are still subject to repressive laws and cultures, and very often themselves become the tool of the oppressor.

In very realist terms, the liberating effect of technology was not enough to prevent the route of pro-democracy forces in Burma. While a brave young woman, whose primary passion is shoe shopping, kept the world posted on events during the recent turmoil there, she could do nothing to stop the brutal realities of the events around her. Burma’s military regime further demonstrated its control over communications in the territory by refusing entry to foreign journalists.

The “realist” grounding of technology has been apparent from other recent and sustained disruptions of free communications. The Chinese government has long been known, with the aid of some American companies, to have tracked and arrested those who have used blogs and online forums to post messages on “unlawful” subjects. The recent blackout in nearly 25% of the world’s access to the Internet, commonly thought to have originated in Pakistan, demonstrates the vulnerability of the Internet’s real world infrastructure. In the United States, the complicity of telecoms in the warrantless, illegal wiretapping of American citizens, possibly beginning even before the September 11th

attacks, demonstrates the ways in which the source of these technologies can be co-opted by the very regimes that are destabilized by their existence.

In reality, however, the most direct threat to “human personality,” as distinct from the body of rights enabling privacy and free press, is and always has been *propaganda*. This aspect of “thought control” has been capable throughout history of motivating and sustaining the most brutal abuses of individual rights and dignity; capable of convincing individuals to sacrifice themselves to some higher purpose; and enabling nations to sustain long periods of war and suffering. Even in the hands of benign governments, the very power of their influence creates among citizens a presumptive authority (or what Randy Barnett calls a “halo”¹¹) around communications and actions stemming from government. Even individual representatives and officials gain credibility through their work within government.

In his book *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition*, Dr. Jack Snyder convincingly develops a theory of international relations based on the fears and paranoia of domestic regimes.¹² *Myths of Empire* examines the role that domestic political agendas, and particularly political communications between branches of government and citizens, played in formulating five nations’ foreign policies: Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, Victorian Britain, the USSR, and the post-Cold War United States. The central concern of the work is Snyder’s attempt to understand what domestic processes make some regimes into hostile belligerents and others into nations that can achieve foreign policy interests, even if these interests are imperialistic, without overt aggression. Without oversimplifying the complex and in-depth case studies and conclusions, Snyder hits the relevant issue on the head when he writes:

All the states justified their policies through a recurring set of arguments for security through expansion. These included the domino theory, its Thermopylae corollary, paper tiger images of the adversary, bandwagon and big stick theories of alliance formation, belief in offensive advantages, perception of windows of opportunity for preventive action, and El Dorado arguments about the benefits of conquest. The prevalence of such ideas correlated closely with the inclination toward overexpansion. Such ideas were most common, most extreme, *and least tempered by openness to contradictory evidence* in Germany and Japan, and during the periods of greatest overextension in the other countries.¹³ (italics added)

While communications are only one part of Snyder’s framework, the lack of openness to opposing viewpoints is an especially critical factor in maintaining oppressive, aggressive regimes in their general attitude toward the control of media. In other words, the closed decision-making processes of oppressive regimes dovetails perfectly with an innate tendency toward maintaining strict control over the media. This framework may then help to explain why every major foreign policy effort is accompanied by a massive public relations effort by the incumbent regime – and why foreign policy is so interconnected to domestic policy.

Consequently, the difference between “government communications” and “propaganda,” in the popular usage, may be nothing more than the moral judgments we apply to the particular case. John Mueller, in a recent article entitled “Terrorphobia: Our False Sense of Insecurity,” discusses the process by which the Bush Administration has helped keep the threat of terrorism before the American public.¹⁴ While a terrorist threat

is certainly a real possibility (Mueller does not deny this out of hand), Mueller documents how the process of communicating the threat creates a heightened willingness to comply with the restrictions of civil liberties necessary to fight the “Global War on Terror.”

Mueller argues that this process of communication becomes an essential part of the strategic rubric for decision makers:

Some have argued that unjustified fears (or “hysteria”) about the Communist enemy within was created by the media, and some now say the same thing about apprehensions of the terrorist enemy within. But the fear of domestic Communism persisted long after the press had become thoroughly bored with the issue. This suggests that, while the media may exacerbate fears about perceived threats, they do not create them. That is, the fears often have an independent source, and then take on a fictional life of their own.¹⁵

This dynamic of fear would seem to be a global, rather than purely American, phenomenon. Such a dynamic would seem to be the most parsimonious way of explaining the specter of the “American Empire” as a foil by authoritarian regimes throughout the world to justify their anti-liberal policies and principles.

With public sentiment being so unwieldy and unmanageable, the management of information and appearances, particularly in the 21st century, continues to be a central part of strategic considerations, just as Snyder and Mueller suggest. The *New York Times* recently printed a deeply-investigated piece detailing the connections between military analysts on American network news and the Pentagon.¹⁶ The story details communications between these “independent” analysis and Pentagon communications strategists, many of the former also serving as lobbyists for military industries. Many of these analysts were given access to internal Pentagon briefings, and many of the same openly discussed the fact that they felt they would lose access (and, implicitly, disadvantage their clients) if they presented a set of facts critical of current policy. In fairness, no one can say whether or not individual analysts violated their conscience; while some resigned because of the real or perceived ethical dilemma, the real story for our purposes is the extent to which the control of information was perceived to be an integral part of the domestic and foreign strategic agenda.

In short, modern governments recognize the need to control the flow and content of information, from the blunt and oppressive to the more subtle means of monitoring communications between private citizens and shaping the flow of information about strategic priorities. Moreover, 21st century telecommunications means that government cooptation of communications, if successful, can have far more decisive and influential results than ever before. The exhilarating climb of telecommunications makes the existence of a military-communications complex even more potentially threatening to liberty for the sole reason that the very tools which provide a cheap, inexpensive amplifier for tyrants. We should not forget, in the midst of a diatribe against existing states, that this principle holds equally true for those who seek to undo nation-states altogether. According to new intelligence reports, this principle has been applied by would-be terrorist recruiters themselves; in these reports, terrorist recruiters have mastered YouTube and other tools of the Web.¹⁷ Every side in global politics today recognizes the enormous power of this tool for their own agenda.

Unlocking the Liberating Power of Innovation

Does this muddled, morally ambiguous picture leave us powerless to make an informed judgment on the role of technology in promoting liberty in the coming century? Quite to the contrary, this ambiguity opens the path to one of Professor Hayek's deepest teachings: the fate of liberty rests on the evolution of moral values and social institutions that develop at the pace of technology. The "technologies" of morality, law and social custom are the traditions that Hayek understands are so important to the fate of liberty:

As a result of technological change, which constantly creates new potential threats to individual liberty, no list of protected rights can be regarded as exhaustive. ... If bills of rights are to remain in any way meaningful, it must be recognized early that their intention was certainly to protect the individual against all vital infringements of his liberty and that therefore they must be presumed to contain a general clause protecting against government's interference those immunities which individuals in fact have enjoyed in the past.¹⁸

Like any tradition, however, the principles of liberty – indeed, Professor Hayek's own words – must be reinterpreted by and for each successive generation. In this task lies the answer to the role of technology in securing human liberty. If traditions developed centuries ago, under social, economic and material conditions far different from ours, can be understood, interpreted and communicated to others, then the moral sentiments of the human race may indeed make new technologies, particularly in telecommunications, the greatest amplifier for the voices of liberty in the history of the world. Moreover, this process must be deliberate in the face of the enormous stakes involved. This deliberate effort at legal and moral interpretation is surely what Hayek had in mind when he wrote the following:

[Humanity's] continued advance may well depend on his deliberately refraining from exercising controls which are now in his power. In the past, the spontaneous forces of growth, however much restricted, could usually still assert themselves against the organized coercion of the state. With the technological means of control now at the disposal of government, it is not certain that such assertion is still possible; at any rate, it may soon become impossible.¹⁹

In what does this task consist? What type of work does this entail? It is, in the first place, not only the work of economists, but also of philosophers, public administrators, educators at every level, journalists, statesmen, clergy and all who would seek to influence the shape and path of society.

The first task in sustaining a tradition is understanding. Even some of the most ardent advocates for liberty draw from traditions that have been severed from the deep roots of the liberal, democratic, and republican traditions. Proponents of liberty are as likely to quote a blog or a news story in defending liberty as they are the words of Locke, Hayek, Montesquieu or the latest paper from James Buchanon, Edward Feulner or David Boaz. While the thought of these abstract concepts finding their way into the public square may seem ludicrous, every timely policy paper is an incarnation of the deep

philosophical roots of the classical liberal tradition. While direct quotations may be unnecessary, a familiarity with the works is essential.

This understanding is equally as imperative in education systems as a whole. Particularly in the United States and the British Commonwealth countries, there is no excuse for education in history and philosophy that does not deeply root students in the classical liberal tradition. In the legal traditions of many South American countries we likewise find the influence of liberal writings, such as *The Federalist Papers*, that can only be properly understood and placed in context with an education that encompasses the classical liberal tradition.

And so we return to the underlying philosophical premise of this paper: that it is not sufficient for a free society to merely educate students in technological mastery in the life sciences, engineering or any other scientific pursuit. In his classic work on education *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis writes of “Men Without Chests” – that is, a generation of students weaned on cynicism, materialism and a general rejection of concrete moral principles.²⁰ The spirit of this work would surely have found approval from Professor Hayek, for with such a cynical and morally relativist generation there can be no hope for liberty. Those who cannot place scientific or economic facts within a moral framework (or, as Hayek would most likely say, who attempt to pretend that social organization can be morally neutral and therefore open to central design) are a menace to classical liberal principles. Perhaps more to the point of Hayek’s concern, the moral education of which Lewis writes may help instill the value at the core of *The Constitution of Liberty*: humility. A reminder of the ancient wisdom of humanity is perhaps the best reminder to would-be social and political activists that the limits of any one human being’s knowledge are finite and extremely valuable. Moral traditions, most of which are rightly pessimistic about human nature, are the appropriate counterbalance to the euphoria and optimism induced by technological progress.

There is then the task of interpretation. This task is the burden of the educators and researchers and specialists who make the pursuit of knowledge their life’s work. Scholars and analysts play an integral role in demonstrating that classical liberal principles maintain a strict relevance to public affairs. Many such scholars have already been hugely influential in shaping the debate over national security; others have been scrupulously concerned with understanding the evolving legal and moral demands of privacy, government openness, and the proper processes of new communications technologies. These new institutions are a major source of the hope that global proponents of liberty have for advocating international institutions and norms that will protect the rights of dissidents to express themselves through digital means.

The preservation of a free society, in relation to telecommunications, is contingent upon public and civic figures that will doggedly fight not just for the rights of a free press, but also for other laws and institutions which preserve the independence of new communications technologies and to the greatest extent possible ensure access to these technologies. In concrete terms, maintaining “Net Neutrality,” sales taxes moratoriums, and continued non-governmental control of the Internet are just examples of the policies that can sustain a path of liberty. Those committed to interpreting the principles of liberty will by their nature remain at the forefront of the intersection of new technologies and old principles.

Finally, these concepts must be communicated – that is, they must shape the political and social debate and be accepted within the range of acceptable discourse. In this task is the great promise of telecommunications. But this task cannot be accomplished without the intellectual and moral understanding of the first two. Ultimately, if principled leaders shape old institutions and create new institutions that have interpreted classical liberal principles for the digital age, such ideas will naturally find their way into public discourse in relation to issues that are pressing for the fate of free and open telecommunications. If this happens, then liberty may finally prevail in the world.

Michael Hammer is currently completing a Master of Public Administration degree from The University of Oklahoma and in the fall of 2008 will begin a Ph.D. in Public Administration and Policy at the School of Public and International Affairs at The University of Georgia. He holds a B.A. in English and Theology from Georgetown University and a Master of Studies in Jewish Studies from Oxford University. His major research interests are social policy, non-profit theory and administration, public budgeting and finance, and the intersection of theories of natural law and public administration.

¹ The American company VeriChip is actively promoting its VeriMed program, a currently voluntary program that has implanted at least a dozen diabetes patients with RFID technology. More information available at <http://www.verimed.info>.

² Hayek, F.A. 1960. *The Constitution of Liberty*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 216.

³ For one detailed discussion of this aspect of Marxism and Christianity, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Marxism and Christianity*. New York: Schocken Books, 1968. The phrase “false consciousness” is believed to have been used only by Friedrich Engels, cf. “Engels to Franz Mehring (1893).” Donna Torr, trans. Marx and Engels Correspondence, International Publishers, 1968. Originally published as *Gestaumtasgabe*. Transcribed to Marxists.org by Sally Ryan in 2000. Available at http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1893/letters/93_07_14.htm.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ e.g., Williams, Bruce and Michael Deli Carpini. “Unchained reaction: The collapse of media gatekeeping and the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal,” *Journalism*, vol 1 (1). 2000. 61-85.

⁶ Armstrong, Jerome and Markos Moulitsas Zuniga. 2006. *Crashing the Gates: Netroots, Grassroots, and the Rise of People-Powered Politics*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Press; Glenn Reynolds. 2006. *An Army of Davids: How Markets and Technology Empower Ordinary People to Beat Big Media, Big Government, and Other Goliaths*. Washington, DC: Nelson Current Press.

⁷ Venezuela student protests: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jggfiiq8118>;
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nwSzcOO3DMM>. Burma:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0RGhGY4jRIU>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KtxAyJdWat8>.
Tibet: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DhjCX4KlZ4Q>;
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZLzKBvvGMg&feature=related>. Skateboarding Day:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFUpa0OwlyU>.

⁸ <http://www.usaspending.gov>

⁹ State of Oklahoma. OpenBooks: Oklahoma’s Finances: Online & In Action. Available at <http://www.ok.gov/okaa/>.

¹⁰ American Society for Public Administration. “Citizen Satisfaction with E-Government Falls to Lowest in Three Years,” *PA Times*, vol 31 (4). 1-2. April 2008.

¹¹ Barnett, Randy. 2005. *Restoring the Lost Constitution: The Presumption of Liberty*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

¹² Snyder, Jack. 1991. *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, 306.

¹⁴ Mueller, John. "Terrorphobia: Our False Sense of Insecurity," *The American Interest*, vol. 3 (5). May-June 2008.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 5 (of digital version). Available at <http://www.the-american-interest.com/ai2/article.cfm?Id=418&Mid=19>.

¹⁶ Barstow, David. "Behind TV Analysts, Pentagon's Hidden Hand," *The New York Times*, April 20, 2008. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/20/washington/20generals.html>.

¹⁷ Pelley, Scott. "Terrorists Take Recruitment Efforts Online," CBS News, March 4, 2007. Available at <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/03/02/60minutes/main2531546.shtml>.

¹⁸ Hayek, F.A. *The Constitution of Liberty*, 216.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, 38.

²⁰ Lewis, C.S. 2001. *The Abolition of Man*. New York: HarperOne.