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*I pledge my honor that I have abided by the Stevens Honor System.*

Setting the Record Straight

I believe the Internet was one of the greatest tools created during the late 20th century, and am convinced it continues to prove itself as the 21st century moves forward. It has connected the world and has allowed for communications that never would have been possible in the same capacity under any other system before it. That being said, the Internet has its fair share of issues, and its prevalence brings up some interesting moral questions that we, its users, will have to answer for ourselves. In the current state of the Internet, most, if not all, information sent using it can be monitored in some way. Even if the information itself is encrypted, you can still see the information’s source and destination. This has created the potential for a “big brother” scenario, where the government and other companies can see anything any citizen is doing, at any time they desire. Cyberlibertarians, on the other hand, have a very different view. They believe the Internet is a tool of freedom, and that it has, by virtue of its existence, spread the ideals of liberty and democracy as it has grown in size. This is, quite simply, not accurate to the facts. The Internet has improved upon individual opportunity, by means of enabling easier access to communication networks and to general information, however: not only is increased opportunity not necessarily synonymous with increased freedom, but that increased opportunity has come with potentially tremendous costs on society’s liberties. With the advent of the Internet and its infrastructure, surveillance has become more and more common, from companies like Google, to other advertisers, and even including various world governments. In some areas of the world the citizenry’s reliance on the Internet has empowered government censorship: the manipulability of the Internet lets governments make sure their populace sees exactly what they want them to see. While the Internet is an incredible technology that has the potential to circumvent all kinds of barriers, it does not, by virtue of existing, spread the ideals of liberty, freedom, and democracy.

The early development stages of the Internet were tumultuous. Once it moved beyond ARPA and the ARPANet, many organizations formed and competed to create robust standards for the new medium. Once the dust had settled, we were left with an Internet functioning pretty similarly to what we have today. The result we see now was not solely the result of democracy and freedom; many government organizations and private companies played large roles in the creations of these standards. The Internet as we know it could not have come into being the way it did without help from many places through plenty of corporate processes that would definitely not fall under a libertarian definition of democracy. Simply put, the Internet was not founded on ideals of liberty and freedom, rather those of the various corporations that helped create it.

As the Internet began to deploy across the US, the government tried its best to regulate the use of phone lines and other infrastructure being put in place. For a long time, the Internet was treated very similarly to telephone, and similar rules were applied to both. As issues with piracy and other illegal Internet activity began to arise, more laws were put in place to limit people’s access to illegal content. These were some of the first instances of governments pursuing authority over the content Internet users could access. You’d be hard pressed to find someone who disagrees with the government’s decision to block illegal content, but upon realizing it was possible to control what users had access to, some governments began to take further steps.

There are several real world examples that prove the Internet is not a tool of democracy. One of the easiest examples to look at can be found in China. The Chinese government can be considered oppressive and controlling; they censor news and monitor their citizens, so that the government may exert its will unto the people. The Chinese Internet is no exception to this. Yahoo Inc., an Internet based company, learned this the hard way. Yahoo had a long history of fighting legislation overseas: after trying to fight against French legislation preventing the sales of certain Nazi propaganda items in the country, Yahoo eventually conceded that they had to obey the laws of the country they were operating in. This took a turn for the drastic when they began to operate in China. They were told they would only be able to operate if they filtered out any content deemed unwanted by the Communist Party, and, surprisingly, they complied. Not only did they help censor information for the entire Chinese population, but when Chinese Journalist Shi Tao emailed a US democracy site with details about unpleasant things going on in the country using a Yahoo email address, Yahoo willingly gave up information about the sender to the Chinese government, getting him and others imprisoned for several years. It’s hard to argue that the Internet is an inherently good technology that spreads freedom and liberty wherever it may go when it has been responsible for the censorship and imprisonment of innocent Chinese citizens, and of the citizens of other countries throughout the world.

Looking domestically, there are plenty examples of the Internet being used in less-than-democratic ways here in the United States. After the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City, US President George W. Bush signed the PATRIOT Act into law, which, among other things, allowed for unprecedented surveillance of communications inside and outside of the United States. The National Security Agency was given tons of power, and went on to develop a system which could track the phone calls and Internet histories of anyone in or out of the US. These systems, they argued, would better enable them to find people who planned to attack or harm the United States. They kept most of their programs under wraps for many years, until they were eventually leaked into the public eye. These programs were used to spy on innocent people right under their noses, companies had data stolen from their internal networks, and the government exercised power that was seized without normal democratic processes. Seeing this, it is fair to say that the Internet is not, inherently, a tool of openness and freedom.

The Internet has revolutionized the world. It has connected people, and enabled new services and technologies to improve upon our quality of life. It has not, however, made us any freer than we were without it. Just as there are examples through the world of the Internet bring communities together, there are also examples of the Internet being used for less than scrupulous things, ranging from petty theft in the form of piracy, to outright creepy government surveillance on all fronts. The Internet, like any other form of communication, is a tool. Companies and individuals alike use the Internet to get things done, and usually do so without a second thought. Like any tool, it is not the nature of the tool that defines how it is used, rather the people that use it. The Internet may very well aid the spread of freedom and democracy, but it is up to us, its users, to make that happen.