The freedom of cyberspace

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Introduction

In this essay I shall discuss how the Internet, in its guise as ' cyberspace', has allowed its users to operate in a world that is seen by some people as being a new world of freedom and creative opportunities while others see it as a dumping ground for businesses and smut.

I shall introduce what cyberspace is and how it came to be, examine the main arguments for it being labelled as a creative tool that introduces freedom to the world, investigate the criticisms of those who champion cyberspace and analyse how both sets of arguments relate to ideas about technology, society and culture. In my conclusion I hope to be able to offer an insight into whether cyberspace has developed into a powerful tool for creative freedom, or into a weapon in the arsenal of big business.

Cyberspace

The term ' cyberspace' was first used by science-fiction writer William Gibson in his 1984 novel *Neuromancer.* He described it is a futuristic computer network that people use by plugging their minds into it. This term now refers to the Internet and lends a romantic image to a world where an almost limitless pool of information can be plucked from a network of computers and computer users around the world.

The Internet was originally developed for the US military but was recognised as the perfect system to transfer and share information for academic research. The World Wide Web was invented by Tim Berners-Lee in 1989, with the first working system deployed in 1990, while he was working at CERN (the European Organization for Nuclear Research). The introduction of the World Wide Web allowed the public to access huge amounts of data and it has now become an accepted way to receive and send information. The World Wide Web is just one service that the Internet provides; a layman's analogy is of the Internet being the transportation of the World Wide Web's content. With cyberspace being made up of more than 100 million computers in more than 100 countries it is almost impossible to fathom how much information there is available to the user.

New Frontier

Cyberspace has been able to offer its users and its contributors a vast arena to ' play' with. The rules and regulations of structured information providers such as the press do not apply to most of the content available online. This affords the Internet a creative freedom that has never before been seen. In an article in 2000, journalist Mary Flanagan stated that: " *Technology allows us an alternate space within which we can invent unique methods of telling stories, forming identities, and remembering.*" This alternate space that Flanagan refers to is typifies the romantic view of cyberspace; it is a world in which a person can break free from the shackles of the everyday world and become someone different where they are able to enjoy the freedom of creating a new identity, a new work of art or even a conspiracy theory that they would not have imagined constructing in the ' real world'. Sherry Turkle

describes this as *" People who live parallel lives on the screen are nevertheless bound by the desires, pain and mortality of their physical selves. Virtual communities offer a dramatic new context in which to think about human identity in the age of the Internet"* In her introduction to the reader author Rosanne Alluquere Stone reveals that *"…engaging in social intercourse by means of communication technologies has given me increasing opportunities to watch others try on their own alternative personae… there are some out at the margins who have always lived comfortably with the idea of floating identities, and inward from the margins there are a few who are beginning, just a bit, to question."* This questioning hints at the notion that under a veil of secrecy the truth can be surfaced without retribution. Perhaps the most famous advocate of this was Oscar Wilde when he wrote: *" Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth."*

In this new frontier the Internet user can find information on any subject they wish to. This information is not static like the printed words of a book found in a library, but it is *" organic, open, ubiquitous and creative ."* In the words of social commentator Annie Turner: *"…it has turned into the eighth wonder of the world because it has not been regulated, because anyone can put up a website, because it can be all things to all people, because it has changed the way we work, are educated and play."* The fact that content is not regulated attracts more people to it on a daily basis. These new users can then become contributors by simple interaction; be it an acknowledgment of what they have read in a user forum (a dedicated area on the Internet where people can discuss any subject matter, originally called Bulletin Board

Systems) to creating a brand new website dealing with the subject matter. This process demonstrates the organic structure of the Internet and how it has become such an important source of information across the globe.

The Internet allows freedom to share information and ideas. The vast abyss that is cyberspace can be explored by almost anyone who has access to a modem and a computer (and more recently this can also include mobile phones, televisions and even refrigerators!) People can add their thoughts and ideas to the Internet and these can then be shared amongst a mass audience. This process of sharing ideas is the backbone of the Internet. One of the contributing reasons for the popularity of cyberspace is the freedom to share knowledge with others. This ideal has been argued against by groups that feel that the Internet should be regulated but a case for its defence can be traced back to the third US president Thomas Jefferson who wrote: " *That ideas should be freely spread from one to another over the globe, for the moral and mutual instruction of man and improvement of his condition seems to have been peculiarly and benevolently designed by nature when she made them like fire, expansible over all space without lessening their density at any point, and, like the air,… incapable of confinement or exclusive appropriation. Inventions, then, cannot in nature be a subject of property.*" This was written almost 200 years ago and is still poignant today. This freedom of information is the backbone of democracy (although it can be argued that this no longer exists in its truest from) and relates to the fluidity of the Internet.

Another way in which cyberspace can be seen as a platform for creative expression is when it is used as a device to disclose information that would

normally be guarded by political parties. This ability to release information may be taken for granted in the West where tabloid headlines can seemingly uncover storylines that would be more suited in pulp fiction novels, but in suppressed countries such as Burma and China this medium has proved to be a tool to spread news that would never allowed to be broadcast by its governments. It has been reported that China is the biggest abuser of Internet freedom. The government has censored several hundred thousand websites and, according to Amnesty International, has jailed 61 people accused of using the Internet to spread anti-Communist propaganda. An interesting fact is that Yahoo! (an American-based Internet company) has adapted its search engine to filter out content unpalatable to the Chinese government; subjects as inflammatory as Taiwan independence and democracy will not be found on a network supplied in China. In addition to this, Amnesty International has accused Microsoft, Sun Microsystems, Cisco, Nortel and Websense of helping authorities track down people posting pro-democracy and other similarly subversive material online.

Criticisms

The main criticisms of those who champion cyberspace are based on the content of what can be found online. Some argue that there are subjects that should not be disclosed to the population whilst others complain that the facts are diluted at best, and completely missing in some cases.

In an article in the New Statesman, Andrew Brown reported that: " *There are two general truths about attitudes to censoring the Internet. The first is that hardly anyone admits to favouring it in principle. The second is that whoever you are, and however libertarian, it should never take more than five*

minutes at the keyboard to find something you believe should be removed

from the net, and its perpetrators locked up in a criminal lunatic asylum."
This view is hard to ignore as any Internet user can find themselves in a
harem of unsuitable websites. These sites could include pornography, neo-
Nazism, torture, etc. However, the freedom of cyberspace protects these
sites just as it protects the rights of suppressed citizens to air their
comments. The content of a website should be approached in a subjective
manner and a liberal pinch of salt should be taken with each sentence.

The most substantial argument against the freedom of cyberspace has
always been about pornography. Pornography is the biggest generator of
traffic on the Internet and the latest trend of providing pornography direct to
a mobile phone has witnessed commercial breaks on some mainstream
digital television channels flooded with semi-naked women selling images
directly to the customer. This saturation has thrown up the argument that
"…the freedom the internet potentially brings is more under threat from

some grasping commercial companies who provide access to it than

governments who seek to control that access." This threat from big business
shows a shift in power over how business and the Internet work in
conjunction with each other. It was suggested by Manuel Castells only three
years ago that: *" It would not be fanciful to say that the Internet transformed*

business as much, if not more, than business transformed the Internet."

It is not all about the simple exploitation of bodies that has brought
objections to the way that the Internet works. Because there are no real
rules or regulations to conform to there will always be content that is
considered to be so inaccurate that if it was released in the national press

there would be an immediate libel case. This lack of quality control can hinder the savviest Internet user when a trusted source has included information that may have been gathered from a secondary, unreliable source. Such an inclusion will therefore render that piece as being factually incorrect. This modern take of ' Chinese Whispers' has infected a large percentage of information to be found in cyberspace and as such its opponents' views of it being an inappropriate use of knowledge can be appreciated, and their calls to regulate its content empathised with.

Technology, Society & Culture

The technology that is now available to the public has grown in a remarkable way since the early 1990's and this has allowed access to the Internet for the masses (but it has still to reach the Third World nations).   Castells realised the link between technological breakthroughs and the Internet when he wrote that *" The culture of the Internet is a culture made up of technocratic belief in the progress of humans through technology…"* A growing concern, and one that has developed over the last twenty years, is that it is the younger generation that have accepted this technology and it is they who can fully appreciate the choice on offer. The ' establishment', such as governments, are mainly run by people over the age of fifty. Their grasp of new technology is repeatedly outdated and the fear of ' losing touch' with the youth is highlighted by the need to own a website in an attempt to speak the same language. However, this language is updated on a daily basis and miscommunication can lead to a lack of understanding on both sides. In an attempt to stop this from happening it is not impossible to see governments,

or leading businesses, curbing the development of technology to have more control over its destination.

Society therefore drives the world of cyberspace. It appears in its current state because that is how it has been formed by its users. The information that is available has been posted into the realms of the Internet by people like us, for people like us. Castells writes that: *" Technological systems are socially produced. Social production is culturally informed. The Internet is no exception. The culture of the producers of the Internet shaped the medium."* This cultural development affords the Internet to continue growing with any facet available to those who want it. It has allowed for an intellectual, utopian culture where it is up to the individual to determine what they want to see and what they choose to ignore. This is a culture in society which can grow intellectually, but only if it recognises that not all they read is true. It therefore begs the question whether or not a society can blossom if a main source of information is not monitored to be accurate. Donna Haraway writes about the ' Network Theory', a theory proposed in the 1970s by the Nobel Prize-winning immunologist Niels Jerne. He hypothesised an immune system that was self-regulated. Edward Golub explains that the network theory *" Differs from other immunological thinking because it endows the immune system with the ability to regulate itself using only itself."* This theory can be viewed within the structure of the Internet where the organic nature of cyberspace is continuously updated and added to by its own infrastructure; its users and contributors.

Conclusion

The Internet is a vast and powerful tool and as such it is there to be used or

abused by anyone with access. The arguments that the Internet should be regulated are important and should not be completely ignored. The power that some governments and big business corporations have over the flow of information is very real and this is something that should be examined closely. However, picking out certain aspects from cyberspace to be scrutinised will open a precedent for all content to be regulated. This could then lead to a misuse of power and the freedom of creative input could draw to a halt. Haraway expressed her concerns about this exploitation and the ways in which new technology can be hijacked for anti-social use: *" The new communications technologies are fundamental to the eradication of ' public life' for everyone. This facilitates the mushrooming of a permanent high-tech military establishment at the cultural and economic expense of most people…"*

It is my belief that the ability to take on board information and decide whether to accept it on your own terms is far more important to personal and social development than being told what you can or cannot digest. As such I believe that the World Wide Web, the Internet, cyberspace, or whatever moniker it falls under does constitute a new world of freedom and creative opportunities and the fact that it is not regulated by self-appointed censors should be applauded and defended. In the words of Rosanna Stone: *" In the space between [immense threat and immense promise] lies the path to our adventure at the dawn of the virtual age, the adventure which belongs to our time and which is ours alone."*

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