

## Nonline community: freedom, education, the net

By Dougald Hine,  
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There is frequent and widespread criticism of the way that governments around the world attempt to manage or control the internet. The imprint of the global network's origins [0] in the United States's cold-war era military-research programmes seems ever present in the tensions between states and citizens that appear in so many of the net's "civic" contexts - from the Chinese government's massive monitoring and blocking operations to western authorities' moral censorship and European Union legislation requiring service providers to retain [1] details of customers' internet use.

In such cases, those who speak out for the civil liberties of internet users often tend towards a techno-libertarian [4] position: their commitment to individual freedom being matched only by a belief in the "transformative potential" (a key couplet) of the internet. Two current examples are not untypical:

- a Centre for Policy Studies pamphlet [5] on *Politics, policy and the internet* (published on 18 February 2008); its author, Robert Colville, writes that "the internet age is coming - and the people who embrace it will have a decisive advantage over the dinosaurs who resist" (see "The web will force politicians to be open [6]", *Daily Telegraph*, 18 February 2008)
- an interview with Jay Adelson, chief executive of Digg, in which he champions "the kind of digital democracy the internet enables"; this "democratisation of information" on the internet creates boundless possibilities where "(there's) virtually no time or space limit, like you find in print or broadcast media, beyond our own attention-spans and ability to make use of all the content and information available to us" (see "How the world wide web has ushered in a new age of digital democracy [7]", *Times*, 18 February 2008)

Dougald Hine is co-founder of schoolofeverything.com [2], an internet startup providing new ways to organise learning, where he is in charge of research and partnership development. He also writes a blog called Changing the World (and other excuses for not getting a proper job [3]) Also by Dougald Hine on **openDemocracy**: "China's days of protest [3]" (16 June 2004) "Climate change: a question of democracy [3]" (2 March 2007)

The (again) not untypical combination of breathless enthusiasm and urgent social and political commitment here may tend to deflect attention from the fact that such propositions are less radical than they seem - or than they used to be. In the mid-1990s, when John Perry Barlow issued his flamboyant "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace [8]", there was truth in the accusation that legislators were both ignorant and suspicious of the net. In the intervening years, however, the very success of this technology has led to an increasingly evangelical enthusiasm for its benefits on the part of politicians - and not just of think-tankers or technologists.

There is always a danger that the frenetic embrace of new freedom disguises an updated form of old conformity. The benefits facilitated by the internet can be acknowledged, and the threats to online freedoms by states and governments challenged, while other important freedoms that its spread may infringes are neglected. One of these in particular increasingly requires defence: the freedom to remain disconnected, to refuse citizenship of cyberspace, to keep both feet firmly in [First Life](#) [9].

## The limits of the possible

This is no longer an academic question. In England, the government announced in January 2008 that it is considering making it compulsory for parents to provide broadband access at home for their school-age children. The [initiative](#) [10] is motivated by an honourable desire to ensure that technology is not out of reach of families on low incomes. Ministers hope to reach deals with major IT firms to provide affordable access. However, this would be reinforced by the requirement that parents subscribe to the service - presumably accompanied by some kind of sanction for those who wilfully fail to comply.

The government's schools minister, Jim Knight, argues that this is no different to the expectation that families provide pupils with a school-uniform, pencil-case and gym-kit. Yet such comparisons serve only to highlight the unprecedented nature of the proposed requirement. When governments begin to oblige people to [instal](#) [11] a communications technology in their own homes, this raises serious questions about the role of the state and the rights of citizens.

The now routine references to pupils and students as "consumers of education" highlight what underlies the effort to get every family in England online: that is, a model of the way that new products spread through society, used for decades by marketers in their quest for customers, and increasingly taken up by policy-makers. Everett M Rogers's "[diffusion of innovations](#) [12]" curve plots the take-up of a product over time, mapping consumers into five categories, according to the stage at which they buy in. These range from "innovators" (who make up 2.5% of the overall market) and "early adopters" (13.5%), through the "early / late majorities" (34% each), to the 16% of "laggards" at the back.

The model - first developed by researchers who wanted to know why some farmers were slower than others to adopt agribusiness practices - wears its value judgements on its sleeve (who would prefer to be labelled a laggard than an innovator?) The basic assumption is that the product or technology in question is an uncontested good; that everyone ought to have it; and that its universal spread is only a matter of time.

In the case of a business promoting its product in the marketplace where "customer choice" is meaningful and not just another mantra, this leaves a space for free decision (Coca-Cola may believe that it is "the real thing", but, if I disagree, it cannot force its authenticity upon me). But governments - even ones claiming democratic authority - are not subject to constant competition; they are granted a temporary monopoly on power, and, where persuasion fails, they may resort to compulsion. This makes it important - in this area as in others - for citizens to demand that politicians' power is both limited and

Also in **openDemocracy** on the internet, privacy and education:

James Crabtree, "[The Internet is bad for democracy](#) [11]" (5 December 2002)

Bill Thompson, "[The Democratic Republic of Cyberspace?](#) [11]" (13 September 2005)

Mark Vernon, "[Social networks: after privacy, beyond friendship](#) [11]" (24 October 2007)

Mark Vernon, "[The politics of friendship](#) [11]" (29 December 2006)

Tony Curzon Price, "[Das Google Problem: is the invisible mouse benevolent?](#) [11]" (19 April 2007)

Susan Bassnett, "[What is education for?](#) [11]" (29 October 2007)

accountable. There are few things which are so overwhelmingly good that everyone should be forced to adopt them; and, to put the same point from a different angle, people often turn out to have surprisingly good reasons for refusing an innovation that others have decided is without drawbacks.

Some years ago, in a café in Bratislava, I heard a story which illustrates this. In the mountains of central Slovakia, there is a valley which was the last place in the country to remain unconnected to the national grid. Now, mains electricity is just the kind of innovation which people often see as an uncontested good - and, sure enough, in the absence of power lines, the valley's population dwindled. This continued through the 1970s and 1980s, until many of the remote farms stood empty, and only the elderly remained. But, at that point, something happened. In the years after the "[velvet revolution](#) [13]" of November 1989, which ended communist rule in Czechoslovakia, some young people in Bratislava heard about the valley. Faced with the prospect of raising families in the grim tower-blocks of Slovakia's capital, they chose instead to move out there and start renovating the abandoned farmhouses. In the years that followed, new settlers continued to arrive and the valley has slowly revived, while remaining off the grid.

There is no easy way to measure the value of growing up with mains electricity against the value of growing up with a grassy hillside on your doorstep. The two need not be mutually incompatible, but if people find themselves with a choice between them, it is hard to see why their decision should be prescribed by the state. With most "goods" in which governments deal, there are likely to be legitimate grounds for non-adoption. So, is broadband really an exception?

For most people raised in the rich countries of the industrial west and schooled in the pre-internet era, television was the significant educational technology of its day. Yet to compare what is accessed online today to the TV schedules of that generation is to question whether the proportion of educational material has gone up (leaving aside the amount, which in this as in other areas has increased almost uncountably). By the 1980s, when I started school in England, only the most sluggish of laggards were without a TV. In fact, I had barely met anyone from a television-free household until I arrived at university. Yet, among my contemporaries there, not only did this group seem over-represented, its members also took a disproportionate share of academic honours. Whatever else it had done, lack of television access did not seem to have disadvantaged their education.

An internet-connected PC is not a television set. But in important ways, they are alike, and quite unlike a set of pencils or a pocket calculator. Both are magic boxes, full of endless, seductive distractions, with the capacity to absorb far more time than their users intend to spend with them at the moment they press the "on" button. The pull they exert is in contrast to - and in competition with - the kinds of focused attention required in activities such as learning a musical instrument, mastering a foreign language, or even reading a book. As [Marina Warner](#) [14] has written in a valuable [essay](#) [15] on the net as "a user's manual": "(The) web does not create a way of reading that imprints memory traces or enriches embodied understanding.

Yet for all their similarity, the reputation and "reception" of the television set and the computer are sharply different. The virtually ubiquitous television in my childhood was nonetheless viewed with a healthy scepticism. "You'll get square eyes!" our parents would tell us. In the school holidays, even the BBC joined in, with a programme called "[Why Don't You... \[16\]?](#)" (Its full title was "Why Don't You Just Switch Off Your Television Set And Go Out And Do Something Less Boring Instead?") We may have ignored the advice, but there was certainly no government push to increase our access to TV.

That intelligent, educated people might choose not to connect their home to a technological system is unthinkable within the "diffusion of innovations" model. Laggards, according to

Rogers, are recognisable by their social isolation and low intelligence. Yet among my friends, a significant minority have made just such a choice over broadband. Their reasons vary, but a common theme is the amount of time it can consume, and the other uses to which that time could be put. Nor are they ignorant of the advantages of the technology: many spend enough of their working day in front of a screen that they are unwilling to adopt the same posture when off-duty.

## The off-grid internet

None of this is to argue that the internet is a "bad" thing. As co-founder of an educational [internet startup](#) [17], I am convinced that it can have immense value. But I am also worried about the excessive, uncritical celebration of its educational (or indeed political) potential. In most cases, there is nothing more "interactive" [18] than being in the same room as someone who knows something that you want to learn and is interested in sharing it. If schools are too often unable to provide that experience, increasing the number of hours a week which children spend online is unlikely to improve matters.

Moreover, governments are right to pursue the goal of putting internet access within reach of all families, including those on low incomes. The question is how this can be done in a way that best achieves social benefit, including enlarging the freedom and capacities of the families and individuals themselves. When (as in England) the aim of procuring "millions of new customers" for companies such as Microsoft and BT is part of officialdom's ambition, it is time to be on guard.

There are other progressive models in social-technology policy, such as community media-labs based on open-source software and locally recycled computers - a method developed by projects such as [Access Space](#) [19] in the northern English city of Sheffield. Brazil has pioneered such an [approach](#) [20] on a [national scale](#) [21]; to date, more than 600 centres have been created, and there are ambitious plans to increase this number to 20,000 by 2010.

The Brazilian example demonstrates that governments can indeed play a positive role in widening opportunities for access to technology. Beyond such community provision, there may come a point at which broadband should be subject to a "[universal service obligation](#) [22]" - as applies to electricity, water and telephone services in many countries. This would guarantee availability and affordability to any household which seeks a connection. But the crucial variable must remain at the level of the citizen and nuclear group (family or small community). It is the role of the state to serve social needs and citizens' interests - not to reverse that relationship and dictate which networked communications or media technologies people cannot be allowed to live without.

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[1] [http://www.theregister.co.uk/2008/01/02/german\\_data\\_retention\\_objection/](http://www.theregister.co.uk/2008/01/02/german_data_retention_objection/)

[2] <http://www.schoolofeverything.com/>

[3] <http://otherexcuses.blogspot.com/>

[4] [http://xianrenaud.typepad.com/weblog/2006/08/viva\\_la\\_technol.html](http://xianrenaud.typepad.com/weblog/2006/08/viva_la_technol.html)

[5] <http://www.cps.org.uk/newsarchive/news/?pressreleaseid=74>

[6] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/main.jhtml?xml=/opinion/2008/02/18/do1804.xml>

[7] [http://business.timesonline.co.uk/tol/business/industry\\_sectors/technology/article3386033.ece](http://business.timesonline.co.uk/tol/business/industry_sectors/technology/article3386033.ece)

[8] <http://homes.eff.org/~barlow/Declaration-Final.html>

- [9] <http://getafirstlife.com/>  
[10] <http://www.gnn.gov.uk/Content/Detail.asp?ReleaseID=343933&NewsAreaID=2>  
[11] [http://www.dfes.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn\\_id=2008\\_0006](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2008_0006)  
[12] <http://www.hightechstrategies.com/profiles.html>  
[13] <http://www.czech.cz/en/czech-republic/history/all-about-czech-history/the-velvet-revolution-and-its-consequences/>  
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