

# Chapter 18

## The Computer as a Democratizer

by Michael Hauben

“...only through diversity of opinion is there, in the existing state of human intellect, a chance of fair play to all sides of the truth.”

John Stuart Mill, “On Liberty”

“In a very real sense, Usenet is a marketplace of ideas.”

Bart Anderson, Bryan Costales, and Harry Henderson, Unix Communications

Political thought has developed as writers presented the theoretical basis behind the various class structures from aristocracy to democracy. Plato wrote of the rule of the elite Guardians. Thomas Paine wrote why people need control of their governments. The computer and the Net connect to this democratizing trend through facilitating wider communications from individual citizens to the whole body of citizens.

James Mill (1773-1836), the Scottish philosopher, who was the father of John Stuart Mill, took a look at the principles of democratic government in his article “Liberty of the Press” in the Supplement to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1825). He wrote about the question of a government that works as it should – or the advantage and gain of the people instead of the advantage and gain for those in control. Mill saw that the government will be necessarily corrupted if the chance exists. Those in the position to rule would abuse their power for their own advantage. Mill felt, “If one man saw that he might promote misrule for his own advantage, so would another; so, of course would they all.”<sup>1</sup> Mill believed that people needed a check on those in government. People need to keep watch on their government in order to make sure that it is working in the interest of the many. This led Mill to conclude that there is a crucial need for a press to watchdog over government. “There can be no adequate check without the freedom of the press,” he wrote. “The evidence of this is irresistible.”<sup>2</sup>

What Mill often phrased as freedom of the press, or liberty of the press, is more precisely defined as an uncensored press. The uncensored press provides for the dissemination of information that allows the reader or thinker to do two things. First, a person can size up the issue and honestly decide his or her own position. Second, as the press is uncensored, this person can make his or her distinctive contribution available for other people to consider and appreciate. Thus what Mill calls “freedom of the press” makes possible the free flow and exchange of different ideas.

Thomas Paine, in *The Rights of Man*, describes a fundamental principle of democracy. Paine writes, “that the right of altering the government was a national right, and not a right of the government.”<sup>3</sup> Mill also expresses that active participation by the populace is a necessary principle of democracy. He writes: “Unless a door is left open to the resistance of the government, in the largest sense of the word, the doctrine of passive obedience is adopted; and the consequence is, the universal prevalence of the misgovernment, ensuring the misery and degradation of the people.”<sup>4</sup>

Another principle to which Mill links democracy is the right of the people to define who can responsibly represent their will. However, this right requires information to make a proper decision. Mill declares: “We may then ask, if there are any possible means by which the people can make a good choice, besides liberty of the press? The very foundation of a good choice is knowledge. The fuller and more perfect the knowledge, the better the chance, where all sinister interest is absent, of a good choice. How can the people receive the most perfect knowledge relative to the characters of those who present themselves to their choice, but by information conveyed freely, and without reserve, from one to another?”<sup>5</sup>

Without information being available to the people the candidates for office can be either as bad as the incumbents or worse. Therefore there is a need to prevent the government from censoring the information available to people. Mill explains: “If it is in the power of their rulers to permit one person and forbid another, the people may be sure that a false report, – a report calculated to make them believe that they are well governed, when they are ill-governed, will be often presented to them.”<sup>6</sup>

After electing their representatives, democracy gives the public the right to evaluate their representatives in office. The public continually needs accurate information as to how their representatives are fulfilling their role. Once these representatives have abused their power, the principles established by Paine and Mill require the public to replace those abusers. Mill also clarifies that free use of the means of communication is an extremely important principle in order for democratic government to exist.

“That an accurate report of what is done by each of the representatives, a transcript of his speeches, and a statement of his propositions and votes,” Mill writes, “is necessary to be laid before the people, to enable them to judge of his conduct, nobody, we presume, will deny. This requires the use of the cheapest means of communication, and, we add, the free use of those means. Unless every man has the liberty of publishing the proceedings of the Legislative Assembly, the people can have no security that they are fairly published.”<sup>7</sup>

Ignorance, Paine calls the absence of knowledge and says that man with knowledge cannot be returned to a state of ignorance.<sup>8</sup> Mill shows how the knowledge man thirsts after leads to a communal feeling. General conformity of opinion seeds resistance against misgovernment. Both conformity of opinion and resistance require general information or knowledge. Mill explains: “In all countries people have either a power legally and peaceably of removing their governors, or they have not that power. If they have not that power, they can only obtain very considerable ameliorations of their governments by resistance, by applying physical force to their rulers, or, at least, by threats so likely to be followed by performance, as may frighten their rulers into compliance. But resistance, to have this effect, must be general. To be general, it must spring from a general conformity of opinion, and a general knowledge of that conformity. How is this effect to be produced, but by some means, fully enjoyed by the people of communicating their sentiments to one another? Unless the people can all meet in general assembly, there is no other means, known to the world, of attaining this object, to be compared with freedom of the press.”<sup>9</sup>

Mill champions freedom of press as a realistic alternative to Rousseau’s general assembly,

which is not possible most of the time. Mill expands on the freedom of the press by establishing the criteria that an opinion cannot be well founded until its converse is also present. Here he sets forth the importance of developing one's own opinion from those that exist. Mill writes: "We have then arrived at the following important conclusions, – that there is no safety to the people in allowing anybody to choose opinions for them; that there are no marks by which it can be decided beforehand, what opinions are true and what are false; that there must, therefore, be equal freedom of declaring all opinions both true and false; and that, when all opinions, true and false, are equally declared, the assent of the greater number, when their interests are not opposed to them, may always be expected to be given to the true. These principles, the foundation of which appears to be impregnable, suffice for the speedy determination of every practical question."<sup>10</sup>

The technology of the personal computer, of international computer networks, and of other recent contributions embodies and makes it feasible to implement James Mill's theory of liberty of the press. The personal computer makes it affordable for most people to have an information access and broadcast station in their very own home. The international computer networks that exist make it possible for people to have debates with others around the world, to search for data in various data banks, and to allow people to post an opinion or criticism for the whole world to see.

If a person is affiliated with a university community, works at a business which pays to connect to the Internet, is connected to a community network or Free-Net, or pays a fee to a commercial access provider, he or she can connect to an internetwork of computer networks around the world. A connection to this international network empowers a person by giving him or her access to e-mail, Usenet news and perhaps ftp and telnet capabilities. E-mail makes it possible to send and receive messages electronically to and from people around the world who have electronic mail boxes. Usenet is the public message and news posting system that allows its users to be part of world wide debates and discussions.<sup>11</sup> These systems begin to make possible some of the activity James Mill saw as necessary for democracy to function.

The importance of Usenet also exists in that it is an improvement in communications technology from that of previous telecommunications. The predecessors to computer networks were the Ham Radio and Citizen Band Radio (CB). The computer network is an advance in that it is easier to store, reproduce and utilize the communications. It is easier to continue a prolonged question and answer session or debate. The newsgroups on Usenet have a distribution designation which allows them to be available to a variety of areas - local, city, national, or international. This allows for the person posting the message to determine how broadly or narrowly it will be available. The problem with the Internet is that in a sense it is only open to those who either have it provided to them by a university or company that they are affiliated with, or who pay for it. This limits part of the current development of the computer networks. Until free or very low cost access is universally available, the Net will be short of its potential.

An example of a step toward universally available and affordable access is the community computing system called Free-Net in Cleveland, Ohio. Cleveland Free-Net is operated by Case Western Reserve University as a community service.<sup>12</sup> Anyone with a personal computer and a modem (a device to connect to other computers over existing phone lines) can call a local phone number to connect to the Free-Net without charge except for the phone call. If members of the public

do not own computers, they can use the Free-Net at some branches of the Cleveland Public Library. Besides Usenet, Cleveland Free-Net provides free access to a variety of community information and local discussion forums. Cleveland Free-Net is just one example of the community computer networks that are becoming much more readily available to broad sectors of society. As part of its newsgroups and discussion forums Cleveland Free-Net offers Supreme Court decisions, discussion of political issues and candidates, and debate over contemporary laws. Free-Nets like the one in Cleveland demonstrate that it is now possible to meet the requirements of more democracy which include the “use of the cheapest means of communication, and, we add, the free use of those means.”<sup>13</sup>

This is an exciting time to see the democratic ideas of some great political thinkers beginning to be practical. James Mill wrote that for government to serve the people, it must be watched over by the people utilizing an uncensored press. Freedom of the press also makes possible the debate necessary for people to form well founded opinions. Usenet and e.g., Cleveland Free-Net are contemporary examples of the uncensored accessible press required by Mill. These networks are also the result of hard work by many people aspiring for more democracy. However, to keep these forms developing and spreading requires constant work from those dedicated to the hard fight for democracy.

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#### Notes for Chapter 18

1. “Essay on Liberty of the Press, Essays on Government, Jurisprudence, Liberty of the Press, and Law of Nations, (reprint) New York, 1967, p. 20.
2. Ibid., p. 18.
3. “The Rights of Man” in Two Classics of the French Revolution, New York, 1989, p. 341.
4. “Essay on Liberty of the Press,” p. 13.
5. Ibid., p. 19.
6. Ibid., p. 20.
7. Ibid.
8. “The Rights of Man,” p. 357.
9. “Essay on Liberty of the Press,” p. 18.
10. Ibid., p. 23.
11. Usenet consists of many newsgroups which each cover a broad, yet specific set of topics. People who utilize Usenet typically pick certain newsgroups or topics to focus on. Every group has several items of discussion going on at the same time. Some examples of newsgroups include serious topics such as talk.politics.theory, – people “talking” about current issues and political theory, sci.econ – people discussing the science of economics, soc.culture.usa – people debating questions of United States society; and recreational topics (which might also be serious) such as alt.rock-n-roll – discussing various aspects of rock music, rec.sport.hockey – a discussion of hockey and rec.humor - jokes and humor. The discussions are very active and provide a source of information that makes it possible to meet James Mill’s criteria

for both more oversight over government and a more informed population. In a sense, what was once impossible, is now possible; everyone's letter to the editor is published. What is important is that Usenet is conducted publicly, and is mostly uncensored. This means that everyone can both contribute and gain from everyone else's opinion.

12. See for example, "Freenet helps Case Western fulfill its Community-Service Mission," by Beverly T. Watkins in Chronicle of Higher Education, April 29, 1992, p. A21.

13. "Essay on Liberty of the Press," p. 20.

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