

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,”
Three Essays, Oxford, 1975, p. 60)

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

(Bart Anderson, Bryan Costales, and
Harry Henderson, *Unix Communica
tions*, Indiana, 1991, p. 224)

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 connects to this democratizing trend through facilitating wider communications among individual citizens to the whole body of citizens.

James Mill, the father of John Stuart Mill, takes a look at democracy in his article “Liberty of the Press” from the 1825 Supplement to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. He writes about the question of a government that works as it should – for the advantage and gain of the people instead of the advantage and gain for those in control. Mill sees the government necessarily being corrupted if the chance exists. Those in the position of rule, would abuse that power for their advantage. Mill describes, “If one man saw that he might promote misrule for his own advantage, so would another; so, of course would they all.” (James Mill, “Essay on Liberty of the Press,” p. 20) Mill says that the people need a check on those in government. People need to keep watch on their government in order to make sure this government works in the interest of the many. Mill thus concludes, “There can be no adequate check without the freedom of the press. The evidence of this is irresistible.” (Mill, p. 18)

What Mill often phrases as freedom of the press, or liberty of the press, is more precisely defined as the 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 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.” (p. 341) 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.” (Mill, p. 13)

Another principle Mill links democracy to, 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?” (Mill p. 19)

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.” (Mill, p. 20)

After electing their representatives, democracy gives the public the right to evaluate their chosen representatives in office. The public continually needs information as to how their chosen representatives are fulfilling their role. Once these representatives have abused their power, Paine’s and Mill’s principle allows the public to replace those abusers. Mill also clarifies that free use of the means of communication is another extremely important principle:

“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, 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.” (Mill p. 20)

Ignorance, Thomas Paine calls the absence of knowledge and says that man with knowledge cannot be returned to a state of ignorance. (*The Rights of Man*, p. 357) James 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.” (Mill, p. 18)

In the previous quote Mill places his championing of the 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 setting the rules. An opinion cannot be well founded until its converse is also present. Here he sets forth the importance of developing your 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.” (Mill, p. 23)

The technology that is the personal computer, international computer networks, and other recent contributions embody and put into practice James Mill’s theory of liberty of the press. The personal computer makes it affordable for most people to have an information access station in their very own home. There are international computer networks that exist which allow a person to have debates with other people across the world, search for data in various data banks, or even play a computer game.

If a person is affiliated with a university community, works at a business which pays to connect to the Internet, or pays a special service fee, he or she can connect to a network of computer networks around the world. A connection to this international network empowers a person by giving him access to various services. These services include electronic mail, which means the ability to send private messages electronically to people across the world who also have electronic mail boxes. The public alternative to this is a service called Usenet News. This service is an example of James Mill’s democratic principles.

Usenet News consists of many newsgroups which each cover a broad, but yet specific topic. People who utilize Usenet News 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 fulfills 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. (Hauben, Interview with Staff Member, *The Amateur Computerist*, vol. 4 no.2-3 p. 14) What is important is that Usenet News is conducted publicly, and is uncensored. This means that everyone can both contribute and gain from everyone else’s opinion.

The importance of Usenet News 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 News have a distribution designation which allows them to be available to a wide variety of different size areas – local, city, national, or international. This allows for a variety of uses. 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.

An example of a public enterprise, however, is a computer service called Freenet in Cleveland, Ohio. Freenet is operated by Case Western Reserve University as a community service. 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 Freenet. If members of the public do not own computers, they can use Freenet at the public library. Besides Usenet News, Freenet

provides free access to a vast variety of information databases and community information. Freenet is just one example of the computer networks becoming much more readily available to broad sectors of society. As part of its databases, Freenet includes Supreme Court decisions, discussion of political issues and candidates, and debate over contemporary laws. Freenet is beginning to exemplify Mill's principle that democracy requires the "use of the cheapest means of communication, and, we add, the free use of those means." (Mill, p. 20)

This is an exciting time to see the democratic ideas of some great political thinkers beginning to be practiced. James Mill wrote that for government to serve the people, it must be watched by the people utilizing an uncensored press. Freedom of the press also makes possible the debate necessary for the forming of well-founded opinions by the people. Usenet and Freenet are examples of the contemporary electronic practice 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, they still require more help from those dedicated to the hard fight against tyranny.

Bibliography

Anderson, Bart, Bryan Costales, and Harry Henderson, *Unix Communications* Indiana, 1991.

Hauben, Michael, "Interview with a Staff Member," *The Amateur Computerist*, vol. 4 no. 2-3.

Mill, James, *Essays on Government, Jurisprudence, Liberty of the Press, and Law of Nations*, reprint, Kelley Publishers, New York, 1967.

Mill, John Stuart, "On Liberty" in *Three Essays*, Oxford, 1975.

Paine, Thomas, *The Rights of Man in Two Classics of the French Revolution*, Anchor Books, Doubleday. New York, 1989.

Watkins, Beverly T, "Freenet helps Case Western fulfill its Community-Service Mission," April 29, 1992, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. A21.