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FREEDOM IN THE INFORMATION SOCIETY: TOWARD A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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The paper analyzes the impact of digital technologies upon modern societies, specifically on the issue of freedom. It summarizes some of the most discussed arguments of scholars about whether digital technologies expand or contract freedom. The approach used in this paper divides them into two broad camps, namely cyber-enthusiasts and cyber-skeptics. While the first camp believes in an endless progress of humanity caused by digital technologies, the latter camp warns against their grave threats that may result in an unprecedented oppression. This paper argues that despite valid arguments may be found on both sides, there is also a middle territory that neither denies the liberating potential of new technologies, nor slips into their complete rebuttal. Instead, it maintains that we need to keep in mind and discuss the threats if we want to embrace the opportunities. Finally, since our country is about to introduce the reform of state apparatus entitled the “digitalization” the discussion about opportunities and perils of the digital age should no longer be regarded as a purely academic topic but also as a public-policy issue.

Key words: digital technologies, information society, freedom, cyber-enthusiasts, cyber-skeptics, techno-utopianism, digitalization.

The rapid technological development that humanity underwent over the past one hundred years has brought about both challenges and opportunities. While in the first half of the last century we harnessed the power of atom that led both to large sources of peaceful energy and the deadliest weapons ever created, the most extraordinary scientific and technological accomplishment of its second half were computer technologies. We managed to orchestrate the dance of quadrillions of electrons inside the arrays of silicon microchips and put them to work to make complex calculations within fraction of a second. With this power, humankind can endeavor into extraordinary opportunities, unimaginable for previous generations – from space exploration to deciphering the human genome. But can this extraordinary power, if used improperly, become a destructive force, like the nuclear weaponry? Hundreds, if not thousands, of books, have been written with praises to the computers, but those scholars who warn about their potential misuses often see their arguments discarded as neo-Luddite attempts to oppose the progress. However, like any other human invention, computer technologies can be used both for good and ill. And if we want to make our world a better place to live, we should let these voices speak, especially in the age when progress becomes so rapid that it leaves us with little time to look back and analyze its effects.

At this point, it is compelling to ask how this age, in general, may affect human freedom. Throughout the vicissitudes of history, brave men and women were willing to sacrifice their lives opposing tyranny, rather than give away their freedom. Yet, despite freedom is one of the most significant human values it is also one of the hardest to define. Following Isaiah Berlin’s famous *Four Essays on Freedom*, it may be argued that there are two broad dimensions of freedom,

namely *negative freedom*, which implies the absence of constraints for action (including physical, social, legal, and mental barriers), and *positive freedom*, or the ability to sustain control over one's own life and realize one's fundamental purposes [4, p. 120]. Negative freedom is also named "freedom from," while positive "freedom to." These freedoms exist not in a vacuum, but in the social realm consisting of multiple political, economic, social, technological, and cultural forces, which shape, direct, and circumscribe them.

One of the most authoritative discussions about freedom may be found in John Stuart Mill's philosophical essay *On Liberty* (1859), in which he explored the relationships between freedom and authority and famously argued that the challenges to freedom may come not only from tyrannical governments but also from the society. "When society is itself the tyrant, wrote Mill, – society collectively over the separate individuals who compose it – its means of terrorizing are not restricted to the acts which it may do by the hands of its political functionaries. Society can and does execute its own mandate; and if it issues wrong mandates instead of right, or any mandates at all in things with which it ought not to meddle, it practices a social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression, since, though not usually upheld by such extreme penalties, it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the soul itself" [1, c. 15].

Now, it is widely argued that the world is entering a new stage of development, named information, or digital, society. How this new stage of development may affect freedom? Does it promote or circumscribe it? Can this type of society be detrimental to freedom, as Mill famously argued? While important arguments can be found on both sides, we should first define the concept of information society and describe its basic features.

According to Manuel Castells, one of the most authoritative researchers of the concept of information society, it indicates "the attribute of a specific form of social organization, in which information generation, processing, and transmission become the fundamental sources of productivity and power because of new technological conditions" [5, p. 21]. Like the steam engine and electricity during the industrial revolution, computer technologies have radically transformed our societies. It is estimated that, as of 2018, there were 22 billion devices connected to the Internet, or Internet of things connected devices (IoTs) that is almost three times more than the number of people on earth. This quantity is expected to rise to 38, 6 billion in 2025, and more than 50 billion in 2030 [9]. These devices generate and process humongous volumes of data. By 2015, 76 exabytes of data were traveling across the Internet every year (one exabyte equals 500 billion pages of text), and this number is growing along with the number of IoTs. As digital technologies become cheaper, faster, and more widespread, they reconstruct politics, economics, and culture, while establishing the new phenomenon of "information society". "Informational technology revolution, writes Manuel Castells, is, at least, as major historical event as was the 18th century industrial revolution, inducing a pattern of discontinuity in the material basis of economy, society, and culture" [5, p. 25]. Some of the features of this discontinuity can be summarized as follows:

- Societies in this age are organized around decentralized networks, which produce, transfer, and process data, rather than hierarchical bureaucracies of the industrial period. "The Goliath of totalitarianism", according to the famous quote by Ronald Reagan (1989), "has been brought down by the David of the microchip".

- Its key asset is knowledge (like land in the agrarian society or capital in the industrial), the processing of data, in order to generate knowledge, is the main focus of economic activity, and the control over knowledge is the chief source of power.

- Economic, social, and political transactions take place in the hyperspace of networks and are no longer limited by physical time and space. Eventually, new forms of time and space emerge, which Castells calls "timeless time" and "space of flows".

– The transition to the “informational society” entails a crisis of traditional political institutions. The nation-state gradually loses its political monopoly. Life becomes simultaneously globalized and localized.

– Rapid development of digital technologies combined with their market applications surpasses the ability of millions of people to adapt to ever-changing economic conditions and leaves them in precarious living circumstances. Migration becomes a global phenomenon. It weakens traditional collective identities, but, at the same time, fosters the ardent pursuit of new forms of self-identification.

How does the cumulative effect of political, cultural, and socioeconomic changes, spurred by technologies, affect freedom? One way to think about this impact is to drawing parallels with the Industrial revolution – the previous historical precedent of profound political and socioeconomic changes driven by technologies. This impact was twofold. On the one hand, since the late 1700s industrial capitalism greatly expanded the scope of human activity and freed people from harshly preordained social roles. It became possible for them not only to choose their professional occupation but also whom to marry and how to live – something that in the past only a few had enjoyed. Industrial transport (steam locomotive and later the automobile) and communication technologies (telegraph, telephone, radio) carried the range of travel and the speed of knowledge transfer to a new level, ushering new possibilities of self-fulfillment. At the same time, since the American (1776) and the French (1789) revolutions, the wave of democratic political movements has leveled down the traditional feudal hierarchies and replaced them with universal political freedom and equality that we enjoy in the world today. On the other hand, though, some of the most despotic societies that had ever existed – Nazi and Soviet Communist regimes – were born in the exact same historical framework of industrialism. Paradoxically, the same technologies that enlightened people, like radio, were used for mass indoctrination in the totalitarian regimes, while Nazi and Soviet death camps greatly emulated the workings of industrial factories.

The scholars are divided in their views whether the information society as a new stage of social development expands or curtails freedom with proponents on both sides of the debate. On the one side, there are so-called *cyber-enthusiasts* who claim that the Internet acts as a potent force of political and social liberation leveling long-standing inequalities and bringing in new opportunities for collective action, free speech, and political participation throughout the globe. On the other, there are *cyber-skeptics* who claim that digital technologies are capable of instituting severe and unprecedented forms of oppression, control, and manipulation. Developed nations, according to them, are already drifting in that direction.

Clay Shirky, Professor of New Media at New York University, is, perhaps, the most famous representative of this group’s viewpoints. “As the communications landscape gets denser, more complex, and more participatory, he suggests in his paper *The Political Power of Social Media*, the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action”. [11] Their views were met with eagerness during a number of recent political upheavals, including the Arab Spring, in which social media, like Facebook, arguably, played an important role in the organization of mass protests that demolished several corrupt and authoritarian political regimes. Wael Ghonim, a Google’s representative in the Middle East and founder of the “We are all Khaled Said” Facebook page, which sparked the mass gathering in the Tahrir square in Cairo against the President Hosni Mubarak in 2011, said in his interview on the CNN channel that the Internet and social media were the most important contributors to the success of the Egyptian revolution: “If you want to liberate a society, said Ghonim, just give them the Internet” [12].

Shirky's views are largely based on a mindset known as Californian ideology. The term "Californian ideology" was coined by English media theorists Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron in their 1995 essay of the same name. They define this ideology as a "new faith" that has emerged from "a bizarre fusion of the cultural bohemianism of San Francisco with the hi-tech industries of Silicon Valley...the Californian Ideology promiscuously combines the free-wheeling spirit of the hippies and the entrepreneurial zeal of the yuppies" [3]. This is a weird combination of anti-authoritarian attitudes from the countercultures of the 1960s with libertarianism and technological determinism. Instead of seeking freedom in political and social escapism, as the "hippies" did, or adjusting to the existing status quo, like the "yuppies," a number of computer engineers from the Silicon Valley accepted the belief that a better, freer, and more equal society will appear via the application of digital technologies alone. According to the American media theorist Douglas Rushkoff, there are seven precepts of this so-called "techno-utopianism":

1. Technology reflects and encourages the best aspects of human nature, fostering "communication, collaboration, sharing, helpfulness, and community".
2. Technology improves our interpersonal communication, relationships, and communities.
3. Technology democratizes society.
4. Technology inevitably progresses.
5. Unforeseen impacts of technology are positive.
6. Technology increases efficiency and consumer choice.
7. New technology can solve the problems created by old technology [10].

According to the views, held by techno-utopians, the progress of technologies will inevitably lead toward a free society. Similarly to Karl Marx who argued that: a. Communism is unavoidable; and b. Communist society will be the freest due to the elimination of exploitation of man by man, techno-utopians share the same attitude toward the information society, which they treat as a pinnacle of human freedom.

Not everyone accepts these views, though. On the other side of the debate, there are scholars, the so-called *cyber-skeptics*, who argue that as long as the information age advances it brings not only opportunities but also challenges for freedom. They claim that digital technologies are capable of instituting an unimaginable tyranny, unprecedented in the history of mankind. The Israeli philosopher and historian Yuval Noan Harari believes that "the main challenge liberalism faces today comes not from fascism or communism but from laboratories" [6]. "Liberalism, he writes, has developed an impressive arsenal of arguments and institutions to defend individual freedoms against external attacks from oppressive governments and bigoted religions, but it is unprepared for a situation when individual freedom is subverted from within, and when the very concepts of 'individual' and 'freedom' no longer make sense. In order to survive and prosper in the 21st century, we need to leave behind the naive view of humans as free individuals – a view inherited from Christian theology as much as from the modern Enlightenment – and come to terms with what humans really are: hackable animals" [6].

The Harvard Professor Shoshana Zuboff claims in her book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019) that big tech companies such as Google and Facebook adapted digital technologies for an inhumane and highly exploitative business model, which she calls "surveillance capitalism" [13]. This business model feeds on the extraction of personal information from the users of these platforms, which is sold to third parties (primarily, advertisers) and makes the main source of their profit. Since human experience online becomes a commodity, Zuboff argues, the pursuit of these firms for profit entails the destruction of their users' privacy and their progressive exploitation by aggressive business strategies.

The Stanford Professor Evgeny Morozov in his book *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of the Internet Freedom* (2011) quotes a multitude of cases how the Internet (and digital technologies, more broadly) have been adapted by authoritarian regimes throughout the globe – from China to Russia – to strengthen their power, manipulate people, and suppress the opposition [8]. In his home Belarus, writes Morozov, the Internet has helped to create “a digital panopticon: its networks, transmitting public fear, were infiltrated and hopelessly outgunned by the power of the state” [7]. And in the same way as the case of Wael Ghonim and his Facebook page “We are all Khaled Said” serves to support the argument that digital technologies empower individuals against state oppression, Edward Snowden’s revelations in 2013 about global surveillance run by the CIA backs the opposite position.

Between the positions of cyber-enthusiasts and cyber-skeptics, there is also a middle territory. Digital technologies, in our opinion, should be seen as neither the weapons of liberation nor the tools of oppression. Instead, they create a complex and interconnected web of possibilities and perils, in which it is often hard to discern between the two. I believe that the ability of humankind to operate and transmit immense volumes of data via silicon microchips at fraction of a second (what we call the “information technologies”) and the new social order that is emerging due to this ability (the “information society”) indeed have a great potential to make our world a better place to live. Therefore, I appreciate cyber-enthusiasts and their arguments. However, I am also convinced that if we aspire for these goals, we are obliged to discuss such applications of digital technologies when they may be used to gain a one-sided and illegitimate power (morally, legally, or both) over individuals and push the world into a sort of digital totalitarianism.

As of 2020, Ukraine is undergoing an administrative reform named the “digitalization.” The task of this reform is to transform the institutions of state power via new technologies in order to make them more transparent, user-friendly, and, possibly, less corrupt. The state elites seem to share a cyber-utopian view toward this reform, i. e. the belief the society can be improved via technologies alone. For example, minister of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine (2016–2019) Oleksandr Saienko said that “innovative technologies are the most powerful instruments to fight corruption in Ukraine” [2]. However, it is also necessary to keep in mind that the progress of technologies is like fire: it heats our homes, but if used improperly, it can burn them to the ground. Therefore, I am strongly convinced that we need a profound discussion about the possibilities and perils of new technologies in our country – both in academia and beyond.

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СВОБОДА В ІНФОРМАЦІЙНОМУ СУСПІЛЬСТВІ: ДО КРИТИЧНОЇ ПЕРСПЕКТИВИ

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Стаття аналізує вплив цифрових технологій на сучасні суспільства, зокрема стосовно свободи. Автор наводить низку аргументів щодо того, чи цифрові технології звужують, чи розширюють обсяг людської свободи. Ці аргументи згруповано у два табори, які названі кібер-оптимістами та кібер-скептиками. Поки перший табір переконаний, що прогрес технологій провадить до прогресу свободи, другий табір стверджує, що цифрові технології здатні спричинити безпрецедентні форми гноблення і тиранії. У статті стверджується, що між двома таборами існує середній шлях, який не заперечує емансипативного потенціалу сучасних технологій й водночас не зводиться до їх неолуддистської критики. Натомість, згідно з цим підходом, сповна використати позитивні аспекти сучасних технологій можливо лише у тому разі, якщо обговорювати їхні загрози. Україна сьогодні стоїть на порозі великої реформи органів державного управління, яка носить назву «діджиталізації». В контексті цієї реформи обговорення впливу інформаційних технологій на свободу людини повинне відбуватися не лише в академічному середовищі, але й у руслі публічної політики.

Ключові слова: цифрові технології, інформаційне суспільство, свобода, кібер-ентузіаста, кібер-скептики, техно-утопія, діджиталізація.