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## The Internet as Utopia: Reality, Virtuality, and Politics

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### ***Abstract***

Literary utopias have the important function of social critique. They point out flaws in society by way of implicit comparison to an imaginary ideal place and society and help to create a desire for change. Like most technologies, the mainstream adoption of the Internet was surrounded by utopian rhetoric. But the Internet is more than just technology; it offers a virtual reality that is designed to simulate place, and this makes the Internet a utopia in itself rather than merely the subject of utopian thought. Simultaneously, the Internet is a firm part of traditional (non-virtual) reality, subject at least in part to the control of business interests and territorial governments. This weakens the social critique of the Internet. I argue that because of its unique character as a virtual reality, the Internet possesses a powerful transformative potential that inspires public and private attempts to control it. This tension is inherent in the relationship between reality and virtuality and manifests in legal clashes over issues of intellectual property and free speech.

### ***Introduction***

A utopia offers alternative visions of the “good life” that challenge the nature of current social, economic, and political relationships. It is an ideal imaginary world created usually—but not always—through literary fiction within which new ideas can be explored. The early pioneers of the Internet envisioned a world without states in which abundant “free” information would equalize social relations and challenge traditional (pre-digital) property rights. Long before the Internet became mainstream, Ferkiss (1980) wrote about the political importance of technology and the utopian visions attached to it by society. He considered technology a hidden variable in American politics that would surface in unpredictable ways and, if not addressed adequately, cause a political crisis. Others have written at length about the social and political importance of utopias and utopian thought (Goodwin & Taylor, 1983; Jacoby, 1999, 2005). In this paper, I considered the unique implications the Internet holds for politics and society as more than just a technology and as something that is not quite a traditional (fully fictional as well as ideal) utopia. I argue that the political implications of the Internet must be understood in the context of the inherent tension created by the utopian potential of the Internet in order to challenge and alter traditional social,

economic, and political power structures. This tension has been most clearly evident in legal struggles over intellectual property. These struggles have inspired private and public attempts to regulate and limit the Internet. At the same time, the Internet's status as "partially real" (its physical infrastructure and its use as a tool, as opposed to the virtual world it engenders) limits its ability to serve the traditional role of utopia, that of social critique.

Study of the Internet offers a range of politically significant questions and perspectives on utopia. However, intellectual property is likely the most salient issue for considering the Internet as a utopia for two reasons: (a) it is related to abundance, which is a utopian theme as old as the genre itself, and (b) this abundance is only possible because of the Internet. That is, much of what the Internet is used for is merely an extension of things we do without the Internet, such as online banking or shopping, placing classified ads, and booking plane tickets. What is truly novel and utopian about the Internet is the ability to create unlimited copies of information or creative work at no cost. This point is even more significant if these bits of information are to be considered "property," because of the importance of the disposition and control of property in the history of political thought.

In order to evaluate the Internet as a utopia, some groundwork is necessary. First, I argue that the Internet *is* technology, but is not only technology. It is more than a technology and can even be considered a utopia in itself. Then I consider the meaning and political significance of utopia and present features of the Internet that make it a utopia. In particular, I focus on intellectual property and, to a lesser extent, government monitoring and regulation.

### ***Internet as Technology***

The Internet *is* technology. It is the most recent plateau in the development of communications technologies, preceded by radio, telephone, and television. But the Internet is not just a technology. Throughout history, the development of new technologies has been closely intermingled with utopian aspirations with each new technology providing the necessary prerequisites for a utopian future. The Industrial Revolution introduced the idea that some day production would become so efficient that human beings would be able to spend most of their time at leisure with their families. At the time, promoters of the new radio technology suggested that the radio could bring world peace because it made long-distance communication instantaneous. Utopian aspirations may actually be a natural part of the technology development process. Nye (2004) noted an interesting cycle in our perception of developing new technologies. Initial development is closely attached to utopian aspirations and prompts a dystopian reply—a warning about the negative possibilities for the technology's impact on society. As technology becomes mainstream, it becomes clear that its utopian potential will not be realized, and a sense of disillusionment sets in, which Nye referred to as *real-topia*. After the technology has been rendered obsolete, a sense of *nos-topia* (as in nostalgia) may set in. *Nos-topia* is similar to utopia in that it pictures perfection of the technology and its use; however, *nos-topia* is the coloration of memories of things that have been real and mainstream, while utopia is attached to technologies that have not yet exhausted their potential.

So how does the Internet fit into this cycle, how is it more than just a technology, and why is this important for politics? Nye (2004) wrote that some

technologies may exist in more than one part of the cycle simultaneously, and the Internet is one such example. The Internet has not yet exhausted its utopian potential, so it still inspires utopian visions and dystopian replies. It is also quite real, and its failure to meet past utopian expectations generates disillusionment. Finally, for some early pioneers, the Internet has taken on a nos-topian character and inspired a longing for the unregulated frontier days, even as obsolete and irrelevant as they may seem today.

The Internet's existence in each of the stages of the cycle simultaneously is a result of the "platform" nature of the Internet. That is, unlike most technologies, the Internet could more accurately be called a platform for technology. The revolutionary aspects of the Internet are not technological, in the traditional sense. In fact, much of the physical infrastructure of the Internet consists of the old telephone and cable networks. Computer inter-networking has been grafted onto the telephone system from the fiber-optic backbones all the way to the last mile, lines that run directly into homes and businesses. As a platform for communications technology, the Internet can contain all of the technologies listed earlier: radio, telephone, and television. Removing the physical infrastructure costs allows the development of new communication technologies: chat, instant messaging, e-mail, World Wide Web pages, and many others. Viewing the Internet as a platform for technology is important to understanding its utopian potential because it is this difference from other technologies that allows us to consider the Internet as more than just a tool with attached utopian aspirations—it is, instead, a kind of utopia in itself.

Perhaps even beyond being a platform, the Internet's role as a "place" supports its utopian potential. From the beginning, and within the very protocols that dictate its operation, the Internet has been designed to simulate place. It is meant to be a virtual world, able to contain infinite places accessible by various locators: IP addresses, URLs, chat channel names, etc. Even in the language we use to describe the Internet experience, it is evident we do not consider it simply a communications medium. For instance, we talk about *visiting* a Web site but we never talk about *visiting* a television show. The term implies the more participatory nature of the Internet, which is important because it is exactly that ability to experience and change the virtual world that makes the Internet's utopian potential different from previous technologies. After the Internet moved beyond military and academic research, many early adopters attempted to codify, in a literary sense, the Internet's role as utopia. Delaney (2004) outlined some of the early utopian visions of the Internet including a now well-known piece by John Perry Barlow titled "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace." This piece asserts a new "civilization of the Mind" that is borderless, free of tyranny, and without privilege or prejudice, where anyone, anywhere may express themselves freely. This piece and a loose set of other writings and ideas—when combined with this sense of online place—form the basis for the utopian Internet.

### ***Utopia Matters***

As a fictional vision concerned with the future, utopia acts as a critique of, and sometimes a blueprint for, reality by using an imaginary place to portray an ideal society. Although the word *utopian* has negative connotations and is often used to describe ideas that are considered fatally unrealistic, utopian thinking has certainly

left its mark on the history of politics. From the liberal ideals of individual rights and autonomy that led to the founding of the United States, to failed Marxist experiments around the world, to the values of social democracy, utopian thought is deeply embedded in politics. When utopia and reality meet, it often results in social and political tension as competing ideas reach a loose equilibrium and elements of utopian thought are integrated into the society and political reality.

Looking at utopia more traditionally as a body of mostly fictional writing, there are some themes shared by many, if not most, utopias. Going back to some of the oldest utopian writing such as *The Land of Cokaygne* and Vergil's *Fourth Eclogue*, well before Thomas More's *Utopia*, perhaps the most common theme is abundance without labor (Claeys & Sargent, 1999). It remains common even in the most recent utopian writing. In early works, abundance came as a result of magic or the grace of God. In later works, such as John Adolphus Etzler's *The Paradise Within Reach of All Men, Without Labour, by Powers of Nature and Machinery*, abundance was the result of human ingenuity. In many utopias, abundance formed the foundation of the utopian society (Claeys & Sargent). For example, if there is no conflict over abundant resources, there is little need for police, money, and even government in some more recent anarchist utopias such as Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Day Before the Revolution* and *The Dispossessed*. Anarchist utopias offer interesting parallels to the Internet as a utopia because of the Internet's decentralized power structure. Indeed, early utopian writings like those of Barlow are colored by anarchism. However, as discussed below, the Internet is trending less anarchic and arguably always had control structures in place even if they were at times bizarre or solely pragmatic and not about power (Goldsmith & Wu, 2006).

As the origin of abundance changed in the evolution of utopia, so did the objects of abundance. The earliest utopias focused mostly on feasts, wine, and sensual pleasures. Then, material abundances and access to tools became a part of modern utopian abundance. Finally, the nature of abundance in the post-modern utopias, including the Internet itself, has become intellectual. This represents a shift both in possibilities and in desires, or "felt needs," as discussed below. It also underscores the importance of intellectual property to the Internet as a utopia, since this new kind of abundance may help to create some intellectual, if not economic, equality by giving individuals access to information and empowerment. Equality and distribution are challenges for capitalist societies, but, at least for those who are able to get online, the Internet offers a measure of equality in terms of access and distribution of abundant resources—in this case, intellectual property. Unfortunately, the very inequality that the utopian Internet attempts to remedy is also limiting factors for Internet access, both within developed countries and in the developing world at large.

### ***Utopia in Politics***

The word *utopia*, when applied to ideas in reality rather than fiction, has taken on a negative connotation. It is used derisively to describe ideas that are considered idealistic to the point of irrelevance or even misguided attempts at racial purity through ethnic cleansing. It is no wonder that the serious use of utopia in politics has fallen out of favor for many. However, utopia remains, in essence, about humanity's search for the "good life" and is inseparable from politics, whether its influence is direct or indirect.

Goodwin (1983) defended the role of utopia in politics through several arguments. She suggested that utopianism is a loose political theory, similar to utilitarianism in some respects. As a theory, it is “specifically directed towards the creation of human happiness” and “aim[s] at the provision of well-being in a way that does not set the individual above the community or vice versa, and makes virtue secondary to, or coincident with, happiness” (p. 207). Utopians are perfectionists who seek “a fixed, definable, perfect goal, not the infinite increase and acquisition that maximization implies” (p. 208). Because of this focus on perfection, most utopianism presents a problem for diversity and liberalism. In its arguably false assumptions about the sameness of people, utopianism seems to face a choice between the imposed uniformity of authoritarianism and the ordering of priorities for the particular goals and values to be achieved in utopia—a compromise that undermines the perfectionist basis of utopianism. This prioritization and compromise is the great inherent problem with any attempt to realize utopia. While it is necessary to reconcile utopia with reality, the end result may be far from the intended result.

On the other hand, Goodwin defended utopia by writing “some of the innovatory values which utopians promote as means to happiness need time to penetrate our consciousness and to become *felt* needs” (1983, p. 209). It is in this ability to create new “value-conceptions” that utopianism is valuable and important over the long term. “Utopians take a fuller and richer view of happiness, well-being, and satisfaction than other political thinkers, who tend to take a stipulative, non-exploratory view of the ends of human life” (p. 209). Taken together, these elements of perfectionist happiness-seeking and the alteration of value conceptions loosely form the political theory of utopia.

Utopian models also serve as thought experiments, or “counterfactuals” (Goodwin, 1983, p. 210). This justification of utopia has its own problems, namely the inevitable disagreement about which utopias are “possible” enough to be worthy of theoretical consideration as plausible worlds. Nevertheless, it is clear that despite failed attempts to implement utopia in reality, utopia as a mode of thinking has not been discredited and, in fact, remains quite important in political thought.

It should be noted, however, that most utopias are not written as political treatise. They are stories written as entertainment for a broader audience and have a greater opportunity to subtly influence public political preferences. They serve an important function in guiding societies to look at themselves critically by presenting a potential alternative where alternatives were previously absent or unknown. In offering a taste of utopia, these stories rouse a hunger for something better in reality.

The virtual nature of Internet activities may change its ability to act as a utopian critique. For example, the ability of individuals to experience utopia in a virtual setting may offset the felt need to bring these utopian features into reality. Conversely, being at least partially controlled by the “rules” of reality, the utopian critique may be diluted and offer little beyond what is already real outside the virtual world. To an extent, the outside world is replicated within the virtual one. It is for this reason that it may be valuable to study the Internet not only as a utopia but also as a unique new kind of utopia that exists simultaneously as a *virtual* ideal other place, and as a firm part of traditional reality. This leads to a social and political tension that is most clearly evident in the legal struggle over intellectual property rights, which threatens traditional

notions about property and business models based on the ability to control copying and distribution of intellectual property—an ability the Internet has given to all users.

### ***Internet as Utopia: Implications***

If the Internet is not exactly a traditional utopia, then the features that justify its inclusion as a utopia should be defined. As stated earlier, the Internet is designed to simulate place by presenting a virtual world of locations that may be visited, whether Web pages, chat rooms, file servers, or other resources. Peer-to-peer networking has opened the door to communication and access to resources that transcends even the metaphor of place and allows direct communication and resource access that is decentralized. However, it could be argued that in this case the communication protocols themselves act as a de facto place in that they hold together a network of peers.

One of the most common themes of utopias throughout time has been abundance without labor. In traditional utopias, the abundance has generally been of food, treasure, or other property. The closest equivalents for the Internet are the bits of culture, creativity, and scholarship that fall under the protection of copyright. This includes most static resources on the Internet: Web pages, software code, journal articles, photos, movies, songs, etc. The Internet and any form of digital technology solve the problem of resource scarcity for resources that can be expressed digitally by enabling the copy and transfer of intellectual property at little to no cost, creating abundance. For example, I can send a copy of an essay to a friend, and then we will both have a copy of the paper at no cost. Similarly, the friend could send my paper to hundreds or thousands of people who will all then have the paper at no cost.

This accounts for much of the Internet's utopian potential but also creates a great deal of tension between the ideals of the Internet, the reality of common property, and business interests with competing traditional intellectual property rights claims. That is, those who make money by creating and selling pieces of digitized intellectual property are being directly confronted by the practice of unauthorized copying and dissemination of that property by Internet users and the diminishing revenue that results.

Some resist the change and attempt to isolate themselves from it by restricting access to their work through technological controls ("digital rights management"), lobbying efforts, and aggressive legal action. Lessig (2004) has argued that this approach is overzealous and endangers the future of creativity and innovation by eliminating the cultural commons of ideas that many creators and innovators of the past have built upon. Expanding copyright terms combined with aggressive legal action and new laws create an atmosphere that stifles innovation. The Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998, among other things, essentially gave technological controls the force of law. This legal environment forces creators and innovators to choose between starting from scratch with wholly original ideas (a rare occurrence in the history of creativity and innovation), finding and gaining permission from those whose ideas they wish to build upon (often at great cost, or with great difficulty if the work has been "orphaned"), or building upon the work of others at the very real risk of being sued (Lessig).



While the simple potential of the Internet has elicited these anti-utopian reactions, a multi-pronged and organized counterresponse has emerged to preserve the utopian potential of the Internet. Part of the counterresponse has its roots in software development in the 1980s at MIT. Frustrated by his inability to alter proprietary computer software because of technological access controls, Richard Stallman began work on an operating system that would be freely modifiable and distributable. Though the operating system did not fully materialize until years later with the addition of independent work by Linus Torvalds, Stallman had created something else: a license that, rather than restricting the user of copyrighted work by laying out the conditions of use as was the traditional purpose of a license, instead listed key freedoms granted to users such as the rights to modify and redistribute the work (Williams, 2002). This new kind of licensing, a concept Stallman referred to as “copyleft,” introduced new ways of developing and distributing software and new ways of conducting business. Lessig created his own permissive licensing scheme called “Creative Commons” that took the concept of copyleft and made it more readily applicable to creative work such as songs, writing text, and photos (Lessig, 2004).

Copyleft takes existing copyright law and builds a utopian workaround on top of it. Another prong of the counterreaction works to circumvent or actively violate the law. Copyleft depends on the voluntary consent of the author or creator. While the “commons” of free works continues to grow, proprietary work under a standard “all rights reserved” copyright still accounts for most of the work available on the Internet. Only by circumvention or violation of the law can this work be made available. Technologically, this manifests as a software arms race between those who create technological access controls and those who create software to defeat them. It also leads to the development of anonymization technologies and the exploitation of international political boundaries. For example, The Pirate Bay, a Swedish service that offers access indirectly to copyrighted movies, music, software, and other files, was able to exist in Sweden even as similar services were shut down in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and elsewhere because the legal and political climate allowed it. Even after The Pirate Bay’s servers in Sweden were confiscated in 2006, the operators responded by decentralizing and exploiting political boundaries further:

The various servers’ locations are obscured behind a load balancer configured to lie, the crew says. Once the failsafe is triggered, a determined adversary with an international team of litigators might be able to track down the servers, but by that time—according to the plan—the pirates will have deployed mirrors in even more countries. In theory, the corporate lawyers will eventually tire of this game of international copyright Whack-A-Mole. (Norton, 2006)

This presents another interesting aspect of the Internet that could be considered either an inbuilt protection of the utopian Internet or a piece of the utopian potential of the Internet in itself: Who controls the Internet? As a global commons, the Internet as a whole is not controllable by any single party. But, similar to the reaction of business interests to the loss of control over their intellectual property, governments have reacted to reclaim some authority and control over the Internet. In the early days of the mainstream Internet, utopians like Barlow envisioned a borderless Internet that would be a new frontier—unreachable by the territorial governments and primarily



under the control of its inhabitants (Goldsmith & Wu, 2006). What really happened, in reaction to disputes and potential crimes occurring on the Internet, was the intervention of territorial governments in the parts of the Internet they could control—the network at the border and their own citizens. One of the most extreme examples of this is the Great Firewall of China, which attempts to censor politically sensitive information at the border of the network and to punish Chinese citizens who use the Internet as a vehicle for dissent (Goldsmith & Wu). Even within Western democracies, the Internet is increasingly regulated and monitored in order to protect against child pornography, fraud, copyright infringement, and, most recently, terrorism.

As with the copyright issue, a small but determined counterreaction to preserve the Internet's utopian potential exists. Barlow, along with wealthy Silicon Valley partners, created the Electronic Frontier Foundation that set out (with some success) to shield the Internet from misapplication of old laws, based on the idea that everything on the Internet could be considered speech and was protected by the First Amendment. Anonymization and encryption technologies like the Tor onion router (an anonymizing tool that masks the user's origin by routing Internet requests through a number of intermediary hosts) also help to defeat filtering systems like that of China's (Harrison, 2004).

### ***Conclusion***

Each of the previous examples has shown the inherent tension of the Internet as a utopia. The Internet is limited, first of all, by its very existence in reality. Simply by existing it cannot be fully ideal. The Internet's utopian potential is limited further by corporations and governments attempting to control it and make it more like traditional reality by imposing rules and trying to create artificial scarcity of information and other digital "goods." Because of these limitations, the Internet cannot fully perform the utopian function of social critique and must be considered a weak utopia. It may even have the opposite effect—by offering a virtual utopia that can be experienced, it reduces the perceived necessity to strive for more perfection in reality or for an alternative good life. Yet, the utopian potential of the Internet is plainly apparent, and the resulting tension is what inspires attempts at its control. The Internet's status as partially real, or a virtual reality contained within, and interactive with traditional reality may make it a strong utopian model in the sense that the utopian ideals of the Internet are much closer to practical application than most. Where the tension between the utopian desires of the Internet and the needs of traditional reality can be satisfactorily reconciled without abandoning utopian goals, there may be serious opportunities to improve our politics and our lives. For example, maintaining free access to a wide variety of information helps to maintain an informed populace and helps address inequality by eliminating barriers to access. The Internet offers a relatively low-stakes way to experiment with utopia. Society will continue to be exposed to the Internet with its full utopian potential simmering just below the surface. Over time, these utopian ideals may become, as Goodwin wrote, "felt needs" (1983, p. 209). People who have used Napster (the original) and other file-sharing services—especially young people who grew up using them—now expect free (or at least inexpensive) access to music and other works. But the true importance of felt needs lies not in free (gratis) work, but in free (libre) works (Williams, 2002). By

creating a felt need for more freedom in the use of intellectual property, the Internet may change the way we think about copyright law and its purpose. Moreover, the general sense of equality, individual autonomy, and empowerment offered by the Internet may generate greater felt needs as well, fulfilling Ferkiss' (1980) ideas of technology as a "hidden variable," helping to steer political preferences. As we struggle through the clash between utopian possibilities and realistic limitations, we must carefully weigh the value of utopian ideas against the value of an unchallenged traditional reality when deciding just how diluted our visions of utopia must become to be integrated with reality.

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