

Internet: Make Us or Break Us?

There are basically two views of the likely effects of the internet, one that it will free everyone up to a life of leisure and creativity, the other that it will concentrate power and wealth in the hands of increasingly few owners of key elements of the information super highway, like Google, Apple, Microsoft, and the mobile network owners.

I used to believe the first, Utopian view, but now I am more and more convinced that the second is the more likely. In the end, in business affairs, if there is a way that enterprises can increase their profits or cut costs you can be sure they'll take it, no matter what it costs the rest of us. You can see this in the failure by the food companies to withdraw sugar and fats in spite of the obesity epidemic, the failure of the drinks companies to accept responsibility or make recompense for the damage done by alcohol and the slow withdrawal fighting every step of the way by the tobacco companies in the face of incontrovertible links between smoking and cancer.

Essentially all these enterprises cite freedom of choice as their first line of defence. 'It's only fair to let consumers choose what they want. We don't want a nanny state! If people don't want to get fat they need to moderate their consumption of fats and sugar, if they don't want to become alcoholics they need to moderate what they drink, if they don't want to die of lung cancer, they should cut down or switch to low tar or e-cigarettes.' Freedom is powerfully attractive and few would argue with the notion that we should be free. Closer inspection however, will show you that the amount of freedom you really have is closely related to your resources - and in this I include your wealth, education and networks.

For many, the reality is starkly different. If you can't afford fruit and vegetables over processed food, or don't know how to estimate calories or think that drinking is just the pathway to happiness, you need to increase your wealth or knowledge to gain a full picture of the consequences of your choices. In every market it is the poor and deprived who buy the lowest quality, most dangerous products. This is dealt with superbly by David Smail in 'Power, Interest and Psychology'. A thin but well argued book about the way that culture determines choice and how compelling the relationship between low income, social deprivation, illiteracy and poor physical and psychological health is. And how such people cannot find properly paid work, are limited by the low minimum wage, low attainment and low expectations.

In the Internet situation the 'freedom' argument is put differently: 'if people don't want to be part of it, they don't have to sign up, give their information etc.' But with every kind of institution and business putting more of its operation online to cut costs and force consumers to do the work once done by the enterprise, it is very hard to administer your daily life in 2014 without the internet, when your local Post Office, Police Station and Council 'One Stop Shop' have all closed. You can find alternatives, but you may have to walk for miles or take the tube/bus/train/car to a place where you can complete your task in person. All these journeys cost time and money.

The most readable and convincing account of how the internet is changing our thinking is called, 'The Shallows' and is by Nicholas Carr. Very readable and informative. The opposite point of view is taken in 'Digital Natives' which claims some kind of 'difference' between those born with the internet and those who had to learn how to use it. It's the old argument really, 'if you want to fix your TV give the remote to someone under 20 and they will figure it out...'

Finally, a book on the effects of the internet on industry and employment is by Jaron Lanier, an internet guru with dreadlocks, and is called 'Who Owns the Future?'

Here is a link to reviews of it: <http://amzn.to/1s6mr4U>

I found it interesting but a bit too complicated in argument in some parts which I didn't quite understand. If you want to develop your own view, first look at your own life and whether you are prospering in line with the growing economy. If so, then good luck to you, but you are almost certainly part of the information age services. If not, start with the Shallows, read Power, Interest and Psychology and then Who Owns the Future and use your power at the ballot box to ensure we are represented by a party that will fight for the majority and not be a facilitator for big business.