

Optimism and Technology

by

Timothy Grayson

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It turns out that at least among technologists there is a clear, nearly religious moral divide on the subject of Edward Snowden and his revelations of government electronic snooping. This I found out by provoking the issue while discussing privacy at a technology conference in Banff. There are fundamental ethical and legal questions about whether governments should be allowed to acquire data that seems private, and under what conditions. But I suggest that some of the “Snowden is saint/satan” and “government is villain” reaction comes from the same sense of betrayal felt by a spurned lover or an NRA regional president the day after a mass shooting in a day care centre. Let me explain.

It shouldn't be a wonder that technology advancement, particularly if it affects consumers' lives, happens most actively in the United States. Americans are, by-and-large, an optimistic bunch: always looking for another sunny “Morning in America.” That perfectly harmonizes with technology and innovation's very nature of optimism. It is, in fact, impossible to be pessimistic and work effectively in a field of technological advancement. The whole point of technology and innovation is to make a better tomorrow—to the extent of whatever the technology promises.

Although I tend toward what I believe is being realistic, which some of my colleagues refer to as cynical, I think optimism is wonderful. It is sustaining through the inevitable troughs of

bad luck and setbacks in this life. Optimism wilfully ignores the probabilities stacked up against you. And by this conscious refusal to accept the possibility of defeat—even when it is overwhelmingly self-evident, optimists sometimes achieve the seemingly impossible.

Be it gunpowder and nuclear energy, synthetic painkillers, or mobile “social” applications, neither their creators nor their enthusiasts expects anything but good from such technological advances. Within tolerable, typically commercial limits and subject to consumer happiness, it’s all good, good, good.

The dark side of being optimistic about technology, however, is blindness to the risks of undesirable, yet highly plausible uses and outcomes of those good technologies. It is all too easy to see the bright side because that is the intent. Clean, infinitely available nuclear energy begat the atomic bomb and protective firearms kill school children and other innocents. Likewise, technology that implicitly knows where you go and that you are communicating generates vast deposits of privacy-threatening metadata and other information for marketers and governments to assay.

The recent revelations of Edward Snowden expose states, overzealously perhaps, doing what they do to fulfill a higher level societal need: safety and protection. These unveilings also reveal another instance of hopeful inventors coming face-to-face with the dark side of their creations. From my seat, it’s a bit hard to know which is more troubling to them.

Like everyone else, technologists feel violated by governments inferring private information from digital exhaust. And while there may be a heavier weighting of civil libertarians in the group, never mind a clash of democratic ideals—specifically, privacy within and security of the nation—I surmise that part of the reaction is creator’s guilt. How could our wonderful child do such a thing? Or, more to the point, our creation is being used against us: and we don’t like it.

So Edward Snowden is canonized despite being a thief and traitor now suckling from an “enemy” state’s graces. Western governments are (justifiably in some senses) vilified. The consumer/citizen is maltreated at least as far as privacy goes; and that’s as far as the citizen

wants to go because venturing farther into these grey places would affect the pleasant state of consumerist narcosis. But *nobody* talks about the inherent corruptibility and affliction of the technology.

Alas, the genie is out of the bottle... again. Society will eventually metabolize these new conditions, catch up, and adjust both ideals and practices to account for these technologically driven realities. Innovators will create solutions to the problem they themselves created. And balance will be restored... before the cycle repeats. Because that's the great thing about optimism: it's sure to be better tomorrow.

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