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The World Wide Web Turned upside down: An exploration of the internet as an information utopia versus as a technology of surveillance and control

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ABSTRACT

Social networking sites have succeeded in building quantitatively large communities, but are those communities utopian? This question is asked especially in the context of the the rise of disturbing phenomena such as data harvesting or data mining without the consent or even knowledge of the user. The commercial and political usages of the harvested data are also used for manipulation user behavior.

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I. A Prologue:

This paper was conceived amidst the controversy that came in the heels of the exposure of the Cambridge Analytica data scandal in 2018; terms such as 'big data', 'data theft', 'online surveillance', and 'online privacy breach' no longer remained technical terms comprehensible only to a numerically small number of internet-savvy technological elites. The story of 'harvesting' of personal data of millions of Facebook users without their consent by third-parties such as the Cambridge Analytica, an internet based company, in order to influence their behaviour during 2017 U.S. Presidential elections, and the UK referendum for exiting the European Union, made the world with its two billion Facebook users, wake up to the hitherto little-understood problem of online surveillance. John Lancaster (2017) observes, "Internet companies are working in a field that is poorly understood (if understood at all) by customers and regulators. The stuff they are doing, if they are doing any good at all, is by definition new. In the overlapping area of novelty and ignorance and unregulation, it's well worth reminding employees not to be evil…" And yet, ethical hackers such as Julian Assange have been trying awareness about the invisible leviathan of a surveillance mechanism that the internet has turned into, since as early as 2012 when he observed in his book, *Cypherpunks: Freedom and the Future of the Internet*, that, "The surveillance is far more evident now than it was when bulk surveillance was just being done by the Americans, the British, the Russians and some other governments like the French and the Swiss. Now it is done by everyone and nearly every state, because of the commercialization of mass surveillance. And it's totalizing now, because people put all their political ideas, their family communications, and their friendships on to the internet." While on the one hand, communication and exchange of views has increased and become more seamless, thanks to the internet; on the other, these exchanges have been transformed into data, which can be harvested; which can render possible massive online surveillance, and which can be used to influence internet users' behaviour more effectively than any other ideological state apparatus could have dreamt of achieving before. It is in the backdrop of rising alarm over data harvesting, privacy breach and growing commercial surveillance, that the present paper was conceptualized.

While Facebook's current mission statement is to 'give people the power to build community and to bring the world closer', that of Alphabet, the firm that owns Youtube, is 'to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful'. With two million users and one and a half million users respectively, Facebook and Alphabet (better known as

Google), have certainly succeeded in both 'building community', and to make data 'universally accessible' (Lancaster, 2018). The question which arises at this juncture is what is the nature of the community that social networking sites build? And what kind of information is accessible to all on them? Is the community of Facebook users, anything close to the ideal communities the dreams of which utopians have cherished for centuries? The aim of this paper is, therefore, twofold:

1. To analyze and delineate some of the most cherished ideals which utopian literature celebrated, and to construe the ethical and social implications of those ideals; and
2. To try to explore the nature of community which social networking sites such as Facebook claim to strive to build, and the impact of phenomena such as data theft, data harvesting, data surveillance, and net neutrality on the communal aspects of these platforms.

II. Utopias in pursuit of Happiness and Reason

"Either it's a bad thing to enjoy life, in other words, to experience pleasure – in which case you shouldn't help anybody to do it, but should try to save the whole human race from such a frightful fate – or else, if it's good for other people, and you are not only allowed, but potentially obliged to make it possible to them, why shouldn't charity begin at home? After all, you've a duty to yourself as well as to your neighbour, and if Nature says you must be kind to others, she can't turn round the next moment and say you must be cruel to yourself."

-- Thomas More, *The Utopia*

More's 16th century masterpiece, which is one of the most influential works in utopian literature, tries to grapple with the one question which occupied the attention of many later utopians: the role of the individual vis-à-vis the community or the social, and vise-versa. It will not be far-fetched to argue that utopias are visions of the rights and responsibilities, freedoms and duties of the individual in an ideal society. The term utopia which was coined by More is a combination of two Greek words, *ou* (which means no) and *topos* (which means place). Utopia, therefore, literally means a 'no place'. Utopia connotes both an ideal place as well a non-existent place; one may wonder is it an ideal place because it is a non-existent place, or is it a non-existent place because it is an ideal abode? Utopia may be defined as vision of a future or alternate society based on the concerns of the present or existent society.

A vision of change though it is, the concept of utopia has been critiqued from various perspectives. Karl Popper in *Open society and its enemies* (1945) states that utopia is afflicted by the disease of determinism because it claims to know exactly how an ideal society ought to be. Isaiah Berlin, who was an admirer of Popper, does not refer to utopia but does mention in his *Inevitability of History* (1954) that the problem of determinism is that it considers 'that reality is wholly knowable' and hence, tries 'to press all human history and experience into all sorts of elaborate and unreal systems, categories and generalisations' (Deutscher, 1955). From the Popperian perspective, therefore, the problem ailing concepts of utopia is that it aims to capture and predict all aspects of an ideal society, leaving little agency to the movement of time in

future. The Marxist critique of utopia, on the other hand, is that the ideals which the utopia stand for are sometimes unattainable because they are not derived from existing socio-economic conditions. Secondly, the utopian literature does not state how to achieve those ideals. One sees therefore that if the liberal critique of utopia is that it delineates too clearly the characteristics of an ideal society; the Leftist critique of the same concept is that utopians did not explicate how to attain those characteristics. Engels observes in *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* about utopian socialists that to them, "Socialism is the expression of absolute truth, reason and justice and has only to be discovered to conquer all the world by the virtue of its own power. And as an absolute truth is independent of time, space and historical development of man, it is a mere accident where and when it is discovered." Whether utopian literature and theory actually suffers from the flaws of determinism and of being divorced from material conditions of existence, is something that will be taken up later in the paper. But the reason for introducing the criticisms right at the beginning is to enable an exploration of utopian ideals, which also looks for traces of determinism and excessive idealism in it.

II.I Individualism as the basis of utopia

What should be the role of the individual in the utopia or the ideal social state? Thinkers who are proponents of individualism assert the autonomy of individuals as the highest goal of human existence. Some of these thinkers call themselves libertarians, which has incurred them the ire of certain schools of anarchists who argue that term libertarian was used by anarcho-communists to designate themselves until the name was appropriated by votaries of neoliberalism in America in the 1960s. These American self-styled libertarians include in their ranks, thinkers such as Ayn Rand, Milton Friedman, Frederick Hayek and Robert Nozick. In *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), Hayek enumerates the two defining characteristics of a libertarian utopia are a). minimum burden of social responsibility on the autonomous individual; and b). a free market in which price is the sole determinant. Hayek observes that it is only in primitive societies that the individual was saddled with societal obligations which only straightjacket her freedom; the more advanced a civilization is, the lesser should be the social's claims on the individual. Secondly, an ideal society is one in which the state has little or no role to play in the economic sphere. In a free market driven only by prices, which in turn is driven by the natural flow of demand and supply, state regulations in the form of planning, or price control etc. only to serve to impose unnatural barriers upon the natural freedom of the market. Much later, in *Development as Freedom* (1999) Amartya Sen would ask if free markets, which are characterized by monopolies and information asymmetry, are ever driven solely by prices determined by the demand and supply mechanism? The paper shall revisit Sen later but at the moment, it suffices to say that in the Hayekian framework, while the autonomous individual ought to have minimum social obligations; the free market should not be fettered down to state regulations. Peter Sabatini (1994/95) states that the two tenets of libertarianism are a). no role of the state in the private lives of the individual; and b). championing of ' laissez-faire neoclassical economics', and faulting 'the state for corrupting natural capitalism'. Sabatini further points that while libertarians intensely dislike the state, they still wish to retain a 'minimum state' the role of which is to maintain its 'coercive apparatus of law, police and the military'. Michael Sandel makes a similar observation in *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* (2009) that libertarianism wishes to retain the state as an enforcer of

contracts and protector of property. Further, he points out that libertarianism has no ethical problems with economic inequalities as long as the inequality (of wealth) is not an outcome of an illegal or coercive activity. Of course, as early as in 1516, Thomas More explicates how laws such as legalization of the enclosure of cultivable lands for breeding of sheep resulted in homelessness and loss of employment of thousands of farmers in England, leading to vagrancy, crime, and utter destitution. It indicates that something does not become just merely because it is legal. In the libertarian discourse, however, an ideal society is one where i). the individual's autonomy comprises of freedom from social responsibilities; ii). Markets should be free of any form of regulation by the state; and iii). The role of state should be limited to being a police state which enforces contracts, and protects property.

II. II. Is individual autonomy really synonymous with freedom from social responsibility?

The libertarians create a distinction between individual autonomy and social progress as if the two are necessarily antithetical to each other. But is that really so? Is individual interest necessarily hampered by the pursuit of the common good? This question can be pursued from two distinct lines of inquiry: a). a materialist-socialist line of inquiry, and b). an idealist line.

The first line of inquiry maybe begun with the following observation by the 18th century French philosopher Claude-Adrien Helvetius, made in his celebrated tome, *On Mind* (1759):

"Man is not wicked but subordinate to his interests. One must not therefore complain of the wickedness of man but of the ignorance of the legislators, who have always placed the particular interest in opposition to the general interest."

The key point to take from this laconic quote is that for Helvetius the conflict between individual interest and general interest is a false one, and therefore, it is not wicked or unethical of man to pursue his self-interest. This resonates with the observation of More above if the aim of ethics is to improve the lot of humanity, then the ethical human cannot harm himself or herself in order to further the social good. The arguments of Helvetius and More constitute the foundation of the principal argument of this paper which aims to challenge the libertarian axiom that individual interest and the common good interest are antithetical to each other, and that one cannot be pursued without sacrificing the other. Following from More and Helvetius, this paper aims to argue successfully that the individual's self interest and her autonomy are worthy objects of pursuit but that neither can be safeguarded in a degenerate or unjust society, without a conception of common good. From the materialist perspective, individual interest cannot be pursued independently of social interest because the individual is, in this framework, a product of his habits, which in turn are formed and influenced to a very large extent, by the social institutions which nurtures and raises the individual. Marx writes in the section on French Materialism in *The Holy Family* (1845) that socialism, especially of the French variety, owes its genesis in Lockean empiricism. John Locke, the English empiricist philosopher, observes right in the beginning of *Of the Abuse of Words* from *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1689) that:

"Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas; how comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store, which the busy and

boundless fancy of man has painted on it, with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the material of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from *experience*: in that all our knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives itself."

This Lockean emphasis on experience made materialists like Helvetius argue that if experience is the basis of all mental developments, then it is of utmost importance that social institutions such as educational institutions are so designed and maintained that they serve to enhance mental and moral and physiological development of the individual. The utopian Robert Owen too emphasized that man's character was shaped to a great degree by 'the environment of the individual during his lifetime, and especially during his period of development' (Engels, 1880). The socialists and the materialists thus hold the view that the individual can neither develop his mental and physiological faculties fully, nor can he be in a position to pursue his self-interest, unless the social institutions and the social order nurture his talents and capabilities. The individual's freedom, in other words, lies in the development of the social good. Brian Barry explores the relation between individual development and social conditions very evocatively in *Why Social Justice Matters?* (2005) where he traces the determining role of social institutions through a study of the British education system. He states that since working class parents spend larger parts of their day at work in order to earn a living, the children at home, in the lack of exposure of language, acquire far smaller vocabularies than their middle class counterparts. As a result, when the child of working class parents competes at school entrance test with children of more affluent families with her limited vocabulary, it is but natural that she does not perform as well as her wealthier counterparts, and then the advocates of infallibility of the IQ test mark her as intellectually backward, without taking into account the material disadvantages which has plagued her since birth. Barry's observation in the second millennium about social constraints inevitably resulting in lack of freedom of the individual to develop her intellectual faculties, resonates with Thomas More's observation in the 16th century that:

"You allow these people to be brought up in the worst possible way, and systematically corrupted from the earliest years. Finally, when they grow up and commit the crimes that they are obviously destined to commit, ever since they were children, you start punishing them. In other words, you create thieves, and then punish them for stealing!" (More, pp. 18).

II.II.I. Social Institutions' role in the Capability Approach

This argument about intrinsic and inseparable link between the social order and individual development which starts from Locke's empiricism, then develops through French materialism (of Helvetius), utopian socialism (of Owen), democratic socialism (of Barry) and even finds resonance in the enlightenment humanism (of More) finds another powerful advocate in Amartya Sen. Sen's theory of the Capability Approach as developed in his two celebrated books, *Development as Freedom* (1999) and *The Idea of Justice* (2009) claims that the individual is endowed with talents and capacities which he terms as 'capabilities' but those capabilities can develop and flourish and thereby, enable the individual to pursue her 'functions' or aspirations and life-goals only if the necessary social structure exists to ensure the development of the capabilities. Sen is critical of the idea which equates social development with increase in growth rates of a nation; wealth is one but not the only, and never a self-sufficient indicator of

development of individuals. He points out in *Development as Freedom* that the African American community in the United States enjoys a higher per capita income than the middle class people in developing countries such as Srilanka but still their life-expectancy rate is much lower than that of the people of these developing countries because rampant racism in certain parts of the American society render their social opportunities, rather limited. Development, therefore, ought to be measured not in terms of income or growth rates but in terms of opportunities for development of capabilities, which in turn depend on the development of social infrastructure and institutions such as education, public health, transport, communication etc. Sen's capability approach therefore focuses on social indicators such as life expectancy rate, infant mortality rate, and school drop-out rate as real indicators of development of the individual as well as of the society.

Brian Barry makes a similar argument when he insists on maintaining a distinction between equality of rights and equality of opportunities to pursue those rights. He states that equality of rights merely means absence of legal impediments for individuals from all walks of life, and all genders, classes, races and sexual persuasions to pursue a goal or an interest. Equality of rights does not automatically mean substantial equality which can be achieved only if there is equality of social opportunities to assert and pursue the legal rights. For instance, in India, the right to education has been granted the status of a fundamental right but this right, important though it very much is, makes little substantial difference, unless there are procedures in place to ensure that poverty, gender discrimination or lack of access to educational institutions does not hinder a person from accessing her right.

Returning to the question which is the title of this section of the paper, that is, is individual autonomy really synonymous with freedom from social responsibility, one sees that the answer is in negative. Individual autonomy is not in conflict with social good; rather, it is substantiated and bolstered by the common good, this paper argues drawing from the materialist and socialist line of inquiry. The libertarians' claim that individual freedom is hampered by the social has therefore been demonstrated to be a specious argument.

II.III. Happiness, Rationality and the individual

Before turning to the idealist line of inquiry of the relation between individual autonomy and the common good, it is imperative to ask what do the libertarians mean by individual autonomy? According Michael Sandel and Peter Sabatini, individual freedom has two components: civil freedom which maintains that private life of the individual should be free of all kinds of societal and state regulations, and economic freedom which argues for the complete freedom of the individual to pursue wealth in a free market. Sandel cites the case of an individual who sold himself to a cannibal in order to be eaten by the latter; can individual civil freedom justify such actions?, Sandel asks.

European Enlightenment made Reason the highest principle at the court of which all customs, practices, principles, it demanded, ought to be judged. In the idealist schema as developed in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), Immanuel Kant argues that a true moral principle is one which is characterized by 1). Freedom from heteronomy, or subjective

inclinations and fears, and preferences; 2). Freedom from being a hypothetical imperative, or a means to another end; and 3). Pure will. For Kant, thus, the true moral principle is the categorical imperative, a principle which is pursued for its own sake and is a-priori. In the *Groundwork,* it is important, to remember, Kant defines a-priori as not only that which is not formed from experience or empirical observation, but that which is an end-in-itself and hence, is freed from having to serve as a means to some other end. Individual autonomy for Kant comprises of the rational individual making and giving a moral law or principle to himself and he, then, pursuing it for its own sake. In the *Groundwork* therefore Kant defines autonomy as the capacity of the individual to create and pursue his own laws which in turn are free from dictates of heteronomy as well as hypothetical imperative. Or in other words, the moral law is neither affected to the individual's subjective biases nor is it renounceable if an end changes, since the law is an end in itself. Materialism might object to the idea of a pure moral law which is formulated without any reference to actual conditions of existence and circumstances, but the conflict between materialism and idealism over the basis of a moral law is not the object of study of this paper. Even if Reason and the Categorical imperative which it formulates are apriori in the Kantian schema, what is significant is that for Kant, autonomy of the individual lies in his capacity to use his rational faculty to make his own laws, and pursue them for their own sake. The gift of Reason to humanity is therefore the gift to articulate laws and principles which are not merely aimed at aiding self-preservation through whetting of appetites and instincts. Those laws are not subject to the whims of individual subjects either. The apriori categorical imperative of Kant is both an outcome of exercise of man's reason as well as universalisable. In the essay, *What is Enlightenment?* (1784) highlights the significance of the former characteristic when he argues that man who cannot or does not wish to exercise his own capacity for reason is veritably 'immature' since he has complacently acquiesced to being led by others, whether it be individuals or inherited dogmas. One sees that for Kant, individual autonomy is not merely the freedom to do what one pleases in one's personal life or to pursue profits in the economic domain, but that it comprises of the capacity to exercise reason which in turn enables man to formulate and pursue his self-made laws, which ought to be universalisable. Imagine the consequences if the principle of freedom to be cannibalized was treated as an universal?

Though Aristotle is markedly different from Kant in so far as he emphasizes on the role of practical wisdom or *phronesis* in the formulation of moral principles, what is common to them is the celebration of reason. For Aristotle, happiness is the highest end-in-itself of human existence, and happiness is to be gained only in the pursuit of one's 'characteristic activity' (which is akin to but not synonymous with essence), and for Aristotle, the characteristic activity of humans is their capacity to reason. Happiness, thus, lies in being rational for Aristotle. Thomas More too considers happiness as the summum-bonum or the highest good of human life, and just like Aristotle, he too thinks that happiness is pleasurable. Happiness however does not lie in the pursuit of just about any pleasure. More too makes a distinction between pleasures which contribute to happiness and the ones which don't; reason is to guide in separating the real pleasures from the meretricious ones. Reason enables, according to More, the capacity to distinguish between what made actual improvements in existence, and what didn't. He argues that the utopians (the dwellers of the realm of utopia) value iron but have the scantest regard for gold unlike people of other domains because they realise that gold acquires its value because

humans has bestowed so much value upon it, whereas, iron is useful for building homes and industries, and can, materially improve human life.

One concludes that if the materialist line of inquiry helps to counter the first claim of libertarian individualism that individual interest is separate from and in conflict with social interest since it points out that humans are products to a large extent of their environment, and environment is shaped by social institutions and customs, and thus, without social development, individual development is impossible; the idealist line of inquiry drawn mostly from Kant aids in refuting the second claim of libertarianism that individual freedom comprises of freedom to do as one wishes in personal life and in economic life because for Kant, autonomy consists of universalization of self-made moral principles, and if individual whims and caprices and inclinations are universalized, then life itself will become a sheer confusion wherein everyone does however she pleases.

This paper therefore argues that balance between individualism and the communal or societal should be the basis of a blue print of an ideal society, in which neither is sacrificed at the alter of the other. Neither can the individual flourish unless social institutions geared at protecting and furthering each and every individual's goals (and thereby of the common good) exists; nor can society be progressive if there is no scope for expression and pursuit of individual's aspirations in it. Some of the characteristics of a desirable utopia which this paper has identified are follows:

1. In an ideal society, the individual and the social cannot flourish at the expense of each other. The relationship between the two ought to be symbiotic or complementary in nature, in which it is recognized on the one hand that unless society and its institutions are progressive and inclusive, individual cannot pursue her autonomy in the true sense of term since she will not be able to develop her faculties or capabilities fully.
2. On the other hand, it ought to be recognized that common good cannot be pursued by dismissing individual aspirations and goals as mere egoism. The individual ought to have full freedom to pursue her self interests and the social and state institutions should contribute towards honing of the 'capabilities' of the individual, who on her part should acknowledges that others have the same freedom as she does, and that she has no right to trample upon the rights of the others. Both Immanuel Kant and Thomas More argue favourably about such a conception of individual freedom.
3. In the ideal society, there will be formal rights but it ought to be recognized that formal rights amount to precious little without the substantial freedom of equality of opportunities through enabling social institutions.
4. Individual autonomy, significant though it is, should not be conflated with merely the freedom to act as per one's whims or to pursue any kind of pleasure. Autonomy ought to nurture the skill of reflection and reasoning, and the capacity to imagine a principle as a universal.
5. The utopia must ground these abstract principles such individual autonomy, reason, common good, formal rights and substantial rights in actual socio-political conditions of existence.

III. Is internet an information utopia or a surveillance dystopia?

Right at the beginning, the paper acknowledged that social networking sites have succeed in building quantitatively large communities, but are those communities necessarily utopian? Tim Berners Lee, the inventor of the world-wide-web, had envisioned it as an horizontal structure where information and data circulates freely, rather than percolating vertically. But the rise of disturbing phenomena such as data harvesting or data mining without the consent or even knowledge of the user, and then commercial and political usages of the harvested data for manipulation user behaviour, hardly resembles the original horizontal structure of the web. The Cambridge Analytica data scandal's exposure revealed that 1). People are largely ignorant of the uses to which their personal data which they part with on the internet , are put. 2). Lack of regulation has resulted in the individual becoming a mere pawn in the hands of powerful interest groups, whether political or commercial; 3). They are pawns because their data is being used to profile them socially, economically, geographically, linguistically etc. and then the data is used to send them targeted ads, which influence their mindset through phenomena such as fake news, and filter bubble. 4). This, in turn has resulted in the destruction of net neutrality, in whatever form it existed on the internet. 5). Along with data harvesting and manipulation of people through targeted ads which often contain spurious information, internet has turned into a vast surveillance mechanism.

Earlier, we had recognized balancing between the common good and individual interest, substantial right to equal opportunities, and nurturing of the individual's capacity of reason in order to exercise her autonomy, as the characteristics of a utopia which the paper favours. But if these characteristics are juxtaposed with the various facets of online surveillance and data mining which ails the internet today, one realizes, that the communities built up the social networking sites is anything but utopian because the individual's freedom granted by these sites have still not resulted in making people capable enough to exercise their faculty of reason, whereby, they can become 'mature' in the Kantian sense of the term. People are still ignorant of their formal rights regarding privacy, let alone being capable of exercising the substantial right of intervening actively to secure their privacy. Aristotle's concept of the practical wisdom is based on the idea that ethics lies in active pursuit and practice of the ethical principles; in so far as large sections of internet users still are not actively thinking about the deleterious impact of data harvesting or surveillance or fake news, and merely passively consuming the data on the social networking sites, they are far from moving closer towards forging an ideal society, a utopia.

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