

21044 How do liberty and human rights survive the age of the Internet?

David Von Drehle, *The Washington Post* (opinion section), January 9th, 2021

One of the great questions of our time — perhaps the greatest question — is whether liberty and human rights can survive the digital revolution. Big, abstract questions such as this can be difficult to pin down, but two events on Jan. 6, half a world apart, made the abstract painfully concrete.

In Washington, a collection of distortions, delusions and outright lies galvanized a mob of thousands to storm the Capitol in a brief but deadly insurrection. This unprecedented event was fomented inside a digitally networked community in which extraordinary claims are widely accepted on the basis of the tiniest nonsense. Selectively edited surveillance camera images become “proof” of massive election fraud. Hearsay testimony — so-and-so told me they heard such-and-such was true — becomes gospel.

Meanwhile, in Hong Kong on the same day, China dramatically underlined its answer to the question. More than 1,000 police officers fanned out across the formerly free city to arrest more than 50 pro-democracy activists. The Communist Party in Beijing has no intention of permitting anything like a freewheeling Internet to exist anywhere under its control. Digital technology is highly regulated in China, used to control the population rather than to liberate it.

If, in coming years, China’s approach tends to produce stability and order while, in the United States, digital freedom continues to produce the sort of chaos we saw at the Capitol, governments around the world will draw certain conclusions. The trend toward greater liberty and human rights that has enlightened the past half-century will peak and begin to recede.

As history teaches, where anarchy and repression are the alternatives, repression wins.

A century ago, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. wrote that freedom of expression can’t coexist with reckless misuse of that freedom: “The most stringent protection of free speech would not protect a man in falsely shouting fire in a theatre.” We can, and do, argue over where the freedom ends and the misuse begins, but unless a line is drawn somewhere, the freedom cannot endure.

I don’t want to live in a world where the line is drawn by a central authority, nor do I relish a world in which the line is drawn by corporate titans. The only alternative is for members of a free society to draw a line on their own behavior, starting with our leaders; to be accountable for the content we broadcast and consume; and to prove that our liberty is compatible with our technology.

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