

Digital slavery

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It is so easy to be taken in by the positive spin surrounding ICT. We are bombarded with the latest declarations about new technological advances which will make our lives easier and more enjoyable, saving us time and money. Technologists, traders and politicians extol the virtues of new applications and decry any attempt to hold on to existing ways of doing things. More and more of the services and products we consume and the way we interact with public agencies, such as the Inland Revenue, are made available online. Eventually many, if not all, of these services, products and interactions will only be available online, thus forcing us into the virtual world.

In this virtual world we exist through a myriad of personal data and electronic interaction. We are digital beings who live in data repositories and travel along the conduits of data communication. Conduits and repositories are owned by others but the claim that our personal data and electronic interactions are owned by others is tantamount to accepting that we, as digital beings, can be owned by others, albeit in some form of distributed cooperative. With ownership comes the right to use, trade and dispose. Existing legislation such as data protection is concerned with the legitimate use of data items. It does not consider data items to be the organs of a digital being and so is not concerned with the welfare of digital beings protecting them against servitude and slavery.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms." Today that must include both physical slavery and digital slavery. Two hundred years ago in 1807 the Abolition of the Slave Trade in Britain heralded the beginning of the end of slavery as a legal and legitimate state of being, although it was not until 1833 that the abolition finally occurred with the outlawing of slavery in British territories. The parallels between physical slavery and digital slavery are striking.

The economic imperative which led to the growth of slavery was the need for substitute labour to replace the indigenous population of America wiped out by European diseases coupled with the demand for increasing labour as the new world economy expanded. Similarly, there is an economic imperative fuelling the growth in digital slavery. This is the result of the need to develop the conduits to sustain virtual trading.

Slavery thrived through a combination of power and ignorance. Some of the first slaves to be traded in West Africa were "sold" to European traders by powerful local chiefs, complicit in the subjugation of their own people. The trade continued to flourish partly as a result of cultural differences between the owners and their slaves. The former believing, in some cases, that the latter were almost sub-human, and so their enslavement could be justified in the same way as ownership of any other animal. The same combination of power and ignorance has enabled digital slavery to flourish as well. There remains public ignorance about ICT in terms of its capabilities, limitations and applications. It is this which has enabled personal data items to be considered as proxies rather than organs of data subjects. It is the technologists who have knowledge and with that knowledge comes immense power. It is this power which has resulted in society becoming increasingly dependent upon technology. In these conditions digital slavery can incubate.

The winners and losers in physical slavery are obvious. Those enslaved will lose and be forced to live in a world of oppression and degradation whilst the owners of slaves benefit economically and socially. In digital slavery we are all losers because at some point even so-called owners will themselves be enslaved as they themselves seek to consume products and services which are only provided online.

In 200 years the wheel seems to have turned full circle. Digital slavery exists, unrecognised, unnoticed, unfettered, and, in many cases, unconsciously supported and promoted. Governments, for example, with the creation of biometric identification, have created the shackles of slavery. Digital beings are traded online as owners try to maximise market share and increase profit. Such trading is unacceptable and contravenes human rights. In 2007 it is time to call for its abolition and so mark the end of digital slavery.

Please send your views on ethical and social responsibility issues and cases of ethical dilemmas to:

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