

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

Editor's Note
Three Cheers for Regulation
By Eric Nee

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Three Cheers for Regulation

Before I joined *Stanford Social Innovation Review* in 2006, I spent almost 20 years in Silicon Valley reporting and writing about the technology industry for a variety of business publications, including *Fortune* and *Forbes* magazines. One of the most exciting developments I covered was the emergence of the Internet and the World Wide Web.

Many of the Web's early supporters believed that it would usher in a utopian world where the powerless would be on an equal footing with the powerful. There was no central authority controlling access to the Web, or regulating who could create a website or what they could publish. A man living in Des Moines, Iowa, would have the same ability to reach everyone on the Web as the editors of *The New York Times*.

Software standards for the Web were open, license-free, and controlled by an international community—a far cry from

the top-down profit-seeking approach to technology then pursued by the likes of IBM, Microsoft, and Apple. The possibilities for the Web were endless: open government, open data, open access, free education, and free information. The new crop of Web-based companies embraced that belief, arguing that the Internet and Internet-based companies shouldn't be regulated. Libertarian ideology reigned.

But as we all know, the Internet became dominated by these same rebels—Facebook, Amazon, and Google—all of whom pursued profit and market dominance as aggressively as Standard Oil or US Steel ever did. The Internet not only has become dominated by these powerful companies but also is being used by companies, governments, and others to gather information on people and to actively misinform them.

But it doesn't have to be that way. During the Industrial Revolution, big business was also largely unregulated and took advantage

of a laissez-faire environment to pollute, to pay low wages and compel people to work long hours, and to use its monopoly control to squeeze suppliers and gouge customers.

But labor organizations, social movements, the media, and government came together to create regulations that changed the way companies operate. And guess what? Capitalism wasn't destroyed. In fact, companies thrived, and a balance was struck between business and society. That balance has been undone in recent years, but it does provide a lesson for how society might similarly control Internet companies.

One of the organizations that have been fighting for the digital rights of individuals and society for nearly 30 years is the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF). Much of its efforts have focused on limiting government control and preserving individual freedom on the Internet, issues that continue to be important. But other organizations are beginning to take on business as well.

In this issue of *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, we take a close look at the history of the EFF in our Case Study, "The Invention of Digital Civil Society." The article's author—Lucy Bernholz, senior research scholar and director of the Digital Civil Society Lab at SSIR's parent organization, the Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society—has been active in this field for many years. —ERIC NEE

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