2000 Debate Topic

by
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GATHER INGREDIENTS

-- STIR GENTLY -- **-- DO NOT SHAKE --**

A Rationale for Establishing Long Term Privacy Parameters Now

Consider for a moment why the modern world is experiencing medical and scientific breakthroughs every day -- and every day seems to bring more and more rapid change. We have more people, you say -- very true. Half of all the people who have ever lived are alive right now. But, that really only explains why we are producing such vast winds of carbon dioxide and oceans of other waste and why we are consuming forests of goods daily. People have proved they don't need to do much thinking to be consumers. There must be more to it than that. Examine these major components of change to see why taking action too little too late has much more drastic consequence today than it would have had in the past. Three compelling facts explain why modern life has changed more in the last hundred years than in the previous 5000.

Knowledge Base First, we stand on the shoulders of giants. Clever people have offered theories about the universe in ever-increasing numbers over the last three centuries. Europe ascended from the dark ages by steps. The independent thinking of Copernicus made Galileo possible which meant Newton could arrive. But, any new way of thinking was a hard sell -- and took centuries. After all, people were understandably reluctant to go from being the center of the universe to being not -- terribly significant creatures on a medium sized glob of rock tied by unseen forces to a rather ordinary star.

Person-Hours Second, more people working either together or separately are capable of solving more problems. That seems obvious. One reason why earlier civilizations did not "progress" as quickly as we are was that mere survival made all other problems seem mere trivia. It's a fact of life. People's brains don't work well when their stomachs are empty. Humans could only make time for thinking after solving a good many of our food problems through improved agriculture. Once we no longer had to trust to haphazard hunting and gathering, we could devote time to other things. Next we had to find better ways of clothing ourselves. Then we had to invent superior building materials to put roofs over heads so they stayed dry when we wanted to use them for thinking. Of course, time alone is not enough. The growth of higher education for people with leisure had to exist as well. Now we have millions more people; and those millions have vast amounts of leisure, not to mention access to the capital needed to bring their ideas into reality.

Transmission of Knowledge Third, it was all well and good for the body of knowledge to grow and for more people to have the leisure and the access to education to increase our knowledge by studying the natural world and beginning to codify what they saw there. One thing more had to exist for the rapid development of all things new. The information must be able to get out to those people who are able to do something with it. Consider this. Heinrich Hertz produced the first man-made radio waves in 1888. Wouldn't he be amazed at the cell phones, TV's, radar, satellite relays, ultrasound medical diagnoses and microwave ovens made possible by his breakthrough? Yet, it took many people possessing much knowledge to branch electromagnetism into the multitude of uses possible today. That's the bottom line of why we need education. In our era of incredibly rapid change, we need people who are capable of solving and who are at this very moment actually working to solve the problems created by the problems we have already manufactured on our road to "progress." The internet now offers a quantum leap in information which became possible only a few years ago.

The thing to remember is that, with the help of mother nature, in the past we have always been able to atone for our mistakes. That may be our greatest comfort as we seek the future. Certainly our greatest challenge is to look to the long term. We can no longer afford to just dream up innovations and throw them out into the world without considering their long term effects. If we don't test and adapt, we will surely face a string of new catastrophes to mop up after. Consider these which were all once considered to be wonderful solutions: thalidomide, phen-fen, atomic energy, genetically altered foods, breast implants, corporate farms, BST, and the automobile.

Please note that if Y2K had materialized, we would have to include the computer in that column also. Personally, I won't be ready to give a clean bill of health to those low-dose radiation devices which flood us on every side -- television, microwaves, cell phones, beepers, medical diagnostics, computers and heaven knows what else, until at least two more generations are past. Already, some evidence suggests that the antenna placement on some cell phones may have a link to certain types of cancer. Let's stop the helter-skelter ever-faster rush to get stuff to market when we do not have even rudimentary knowledge of the long term results.

How does this all relate to personal privacy? It suggests that we call an all-out halt to certain types of information gathering. If a consumer research business calls and gets your answers to questions with your permission, that is a choice you should have. But, should a business -- or anyone else have the right to track your online movements which they very easily can do -- and without your knowledge? Armed with such knowledge, anyone and everyone from the government who might at some time want your e-mails as evidence if you should ever wind up in court -- to businesses who might slam the doors on your insurance applications because they can find out your medical history -- to clever crooks who can steal your identity and spend all your money in a matter of hours.

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