A Shepherd for the Naïve: Images of Future Government in Huxley, Bradbury, and Forster

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Abstract
Intellectuals of the 20th century bore witness to society’s injustices. They viewed and commented on erosion of rights and humankind’s callousness to itself. For example, Huxley’s Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited illustrate with contempt a society that had renounced personal individuality and rejected freedom, choosing a drugged totalitarian state set adrift from any sense of morality. Huxley’s work is a familiar touchstone, in that it presupposed a world that seems increasingly real to us, even though a faithful portrayal of the future was hardly Huxley’s intent. Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451 soberly reminded the world of the wages of intolerance to divergent ideas, in envisioning a government solidifying its hold on power by banishing the spectrum of human emotion in literature and mass media. Forster’s ambitious short story “The Machine Stops” countered the naiveté of a positive equal utopia, with a world cruel in its homogenization and dependent on a defied machine for all facets of its existence. In each instance, government is an ominous, questionable character. Technology, in these texts and in today’s world, is a foundational element with muddled aims—a rich virtual society on one hand, but frightening levels of assimilation, control, and loss of interpersonal communication and privacy in the crumbling arena of the real on the other. In this article, a future technology-led existence is examined through the lenses of these fictional works.

Keywords
literature, culture and technology, communication technologies, mass communication, media and society, public administration and public policy, political science, political communication, politics and social sciences

Those who would give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety.  
—Benjamin Franklin (1756)

Present society may be characterized by its relentless search for context—a desperate need for commodified knowledge (Lyotard, 1984) and entertainments without the superfluous touch of humanity. Dominant among motivations has become “stability. The primal and the ultimate need” (Huxley, 1932/1978, p. 39). People have eschewed ability to interact with each other and their environment for the sake of an artificial peace and the absence of suffering. Trade in competing ideas that has characterized civilization has been swapped for a sort of technological despotism, even if universal and democratic. Tocqueville (1904) feared a “servitude of the regular, quiet, and gentle kind” that keeps people in a childlike ignorance, through exhaustive rules that break the human will; a government of this sort “compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupifies a people, till each nation is reduced to be nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd” (p. 811). With a reliance on the notion of perfect information, of instantaneous truth available at the touch of a button through any home computer, tablet, or smartphone, the need for simple above real has sowed disaffectedness at its root. With media attention channeled to the latest extremist flavor of the day, we are in the twilight of a sort of media-technological arms race, with the possibility of humanity trampled under the boot of the promise, and ultimate failure, of perfect knowledge and instrumental rationality.

Intellectuals of the 20th century bore witness to society’s injustices. They viewed and commented on our erosion of rights and humankind’s callousness to itself. For example, Huxley’s (1932/1978) Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited (1958/2000) illustrate with contempt a society that had renounced personal individuality and rejected freedom, choosing a drugged totalitarian state set adrift from any sense of morality. Huxley’s work is a familiar touchstone,

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in that it presupposed a world that seems increasingly real to us, even though a faithful portrayal of the future was hardly Huxley’s intent. Bradbury’s (1953/1991) Fahrenheit 451 soberly reminded humanity of the wages of intolerance to divergent ideas, in envisioning a government solidifying its hold on power by banishing the spectrum of human emotion in literature and mass media. Forster’s (1909/1997) ambitious short story “The Machine Stops” countered the naiveté of a positive equal utopia, with a world cruel in its homogenization and dependent on a deified machine for all facets of its existence. In each instance, government is an ominous character saturated in Franklin’s warning, and the shepherd Tocqueville warned us about. Information technology, the foundation of each vision, has in today’s world become the embodiment of a collective mind-set with muddled aims—instant access to information, including medical, financial, and personal records—and a rich virtual society on one hand, but frightening levels of assimilation, control, and loss of interpersonal communication and privacy in the crumbling arena of the real on the other.

In this article, a future technology-led existence is examined through the lenses of these fictional works. First, we examine literature on the role of government, and briefly consider the impact on this role in recent years by technology and mass media, to provide context to the discussion. Next, each story’s vision of governance and interaction of government with the public is discussed. We find that the relentless grasp for knowledge and control through technology becomes a fool’s errand, dissociating people from their essential mercy and encouraging a worldview that is increasingly self-centered and vulnerable. The revelatory words of both Franklin and Tocqueville should give us pause when literary works of the past, intended to shock through their absurdity, start to ring true.

The Role of Government: Resource Allocator, Referee, or Shepherd?

The role of government is a primary point of debate in common and scholarly discourse alike. Some hold that government’s role is that of a resource allocator and, through its use of power, has a responsibility to achieve some semblance of equality or equilibrium in the populace, particularly when issues of vulnerability arise (Kohn, 2014). Douglass North (1990) held that institutions provide the “rules of the game in a society . . . they structure incentives in human exchange” (p. 3). In this view, and following Coase’s (1960) argument, parties enter into contracts because transaction costs are low—they are kept low by a government of laws reducing potential obstacles to contract process and potential negative impacts of externalities in the general marketplace. This is not a new conversation—Hobbes (1651), for one, noted the release of personal power and rights in exchange for creation of the commonwealth, “for their peace and common defence.”

Public participation is also an issue for many governments (Muhammad, Masron, & Majid, 2015). There remains a considerable normative contention for public involvement in policy- and rulemaking in the literature (Head, 2011), and these discussions tend to hinge on the legitimacy of public institutions. Involving the public increases consent for public policy choices, in that the public might support what it had a hand in creating—and therefore, the legitimacy of government may increase. This goes beyond representative government through elections to the level of administrative rules, where it could be said that those members of the public most likely to participate in such policy outreach activities are those with most to gain or lose from a proposed policy measure. In the Administrative Procedure Act, a U.S. law requiring public participation, it is a stated requirement that an agency shall give interested persons an opportunity to participate in the rule making through submission of written data, views, or arguments with or without opportunity for oral presentation. After consideration of the relevant matter presented, the agency shall incorporate in the rules adopted a concise general statement of their basis and purpose. (Administrative Procedure Act, 1946)

To the law’s credit, or detriment depending on one’s view, there are no parameters on what might constitute a manifestation of the public’s interest in regulation, or the level to which agencies must consider such input; the law is vague on those points.

However, full participation, if such a thing exists, almost never occurs in government, and pretensions to the legitimacy of government might be based on the silence or passivity of the majority mistaken as assent. Even as an ideal, the notion of full participation of everyone in a community, and a government entity attempting to act as referee for competing priorities in a manner that would satisfy the populace, seems far-fetched. Public participation takes time, and the process often lacks clarity of purpose (45-day public comment periods are common in Federal government in the United States, and little guidance from regulatory agencies is offered as to what constitutes beneficial feedback or input or how to discern whether the comment period has been efficacious). This increases the cost of government and potentially delays needed change, leaving bureaucracy mired in an unresponsive monotony. It is sometimes dubious how or if public input once offered is incorporated in the making of public policy. Perhaps the machinations of government depend on a lack of interest amongst the public—an apathy that allows for someone’s idea of progress; this perspective makes the call for participation from anyone interested somewhat disingenuous.

Consider for a moment that Tocqueville’s warning could already have come to pass—that control of the population is ultimately more important than active civic engagement. Imagine that even when public participation is invoked or required, the involvement is purely one of going through the requisite contrivances. Time is allotted for giving opinion,
the opinion of the public is given, and then politicians and government do whatever it was they had planned to do anyway. The right one has to state one’s opinion seems offered primarily to mollify the process going forward, so that control and stability can prevail. In such an environment, the role of government might be threefold: control of populations through rules, as suggested by Tocqueville; regularization of identities in a manner that limits individual boundaries, limiting opportunities for destabilization; and stabilization of relations among people and groups through various forms of intervention, policy, and otherwise. All three are grounded in system maintenance, rather than responsive, transparent governance. To some extent, government must still act as a resource allocator and referee, but these activities are in support of guiding the flock.

The problem in evaluating quality of government, or of soundness of government performance, is complex, and similar to the problem that confronts the divide between the natural and social sciences. Social science, like public policy, is not value-neutral (Bernstein, 1978). While there is (sometimes) consensus from the scientific community on natural sciences, in the social sciences, there are often sharp disagreements about even the most basic of considerations. When it comes to policy, as Hauser (1969) noted,

Social accounting [becomes] possible only after consensus is achieved on social goals . . . development of social goals . . . is a function that must be performed by society as a whole . . . presumably [reflecting] the desires of the majority of the people. (p. 15)

It is rare for people to agree on conceptions of public policy matters, so the ideal of honestly accounting for the outcomes of policy, and the connection of policy goals to some imagined will of the public-at-large, might be nothing more than a serviceable fiction, perpetuated to maintain control.

Media, too, has changed considerably even in the past decade, fundamentally altering the terrain upon which the public encounters its government. Marshall McLuhan (2011) reminded us that “the medium is the message” (p. 19), and this appears to be increasingly the case in how government communicates. Government agencies have Facebook and Twitter presences, and heads of government have YouTube sites for “interaction” with the public. One can follow and “like” leaders in a virtual way, contributing to one’s own virtual public persona. The public can even create petitions, and if enough people agree and sign them, action might be taken.1

The actual interaction is superficial at best, but there is the appearance of involvement, and the chance at least that action might be taken if enough people speak up. As of January 2013 on the White House petition site, “to require a response, a petition must reach 100,000 signatures within 30 days.”2 Validity in the common market of ideas appears based in this environment on whether 99,999 others agree with the point and the manner of its proclamation, though it should be noted that petitions become searchable on the page when 150 signatures are obtained. If the “medium is the message” here, the message is that great ideas are widely held, or they do not get a hearing.

Others suggest that constant fidgeting with smartphones and the Internet, including Google searches, is interfering with human intelligence, reducing abilities to concentrate and solve problems, and making people think they know far more than they actually do (Carr, 2011). Recounting a classroom exercise requiring an “e-media fast,” Andrew Postman (2011) comments that students actually begin to have conversations with others and think about doing things that they would not have thought to do otherwise. The constant distraction—entertainment and information—stifles creativity and extra-virtual involvement with others. How people even look at technology has changed, from an intervening step in communication, to a thing-in-itself. As Aluquère Rosanne Stone (2011) suggests, computers might be either “engines of calculation . . . inside the little box is information,” or “computers are arenas for social experience and dramatic interaction . . . like a public theater . . . inside the little box are other people” (p. 204). For how they see the public, governments do not seem firmly placed in either camp, and the reality is perhaps a bit of both.

Given our present context, we see the works of literature presented here quite differently than they were intended by their authors, who were informed by the events and advances of the day. Nevertheless, the 20th-century literary community produced often nightmarish visions of tomorrows, which bear some resemblance to our todays. Huxley, Bradbury, and Forster all challenged readers then as now to contemplate an awful future, driven into being at least in part by a dispirited, unengaged public more and more interested in entertainment than in obligations.

Brave New World

As Lombardo (2014) mentioned, “science fiction provides an arena for imagining and thinking about the possibilities of the future, including the future of consciousness” (p. 332). Grech, Vassallo, and Callus (2012) addressed the issue of state manipulation of sex drive in literature, with Huxley’s vision mentioned prominently. Goux-Baudiment (2014) mentioned the bioengineered society of Gattaca as an additional touchstone, which in my view is openly Huxley-esque. Huxley’s work has importance beyond these articles, and specifically to the idea of future government and how government maintains order. Consciousness and choice are evident in Huxley’s oeuvre, and his treatment of such matters must give us pause about the extent to which the public might be manipulated for its desire to be stable and comfortable. But unlike some visions of the future, Huxley suggests that consciousness will not expand; under the World State, consciousness and personal control are greatly diminished, and with them the possibility of representative and participative
government. Not only does there appear to be some credibility to this line of thought, but it may also be that many in the public could go into the darkness willingly, for very little in return for their subjugation.

“A squat grey building of only thirty-four stories. Over the main entrance the words, CENTRAL LONDON HATCHERY AND CONDITIONING CENTRE, and, in a shield, the World State’s motto, COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, STABILITY” (Huxley, 1932/1978, p. 3). Huxley’s grotesque picture of a state built upon the minimization of emotion, the maximization of pleasure, genetic engineering, and order through propaganda bears an increasingly uncanny resemblance to our world today. The first two maxims of the world state, community and identity, are in actuality stripped in the form we know them from the citizenry, to produce the third maxim, stability, as a result. Other trappings of society are subverted and uprooted—a recurrent example being the interjection “Ford” replacing “God” as an expression of exasperation, and “his fordship” as a reference for Mustapha Mond, the Controller (Huxley, 1932/1978, p. 31).

Huxley’s world is built upon the deliberate suppression of the individual and of human emotion in general. The stability achieved as a result is an artificial, regimented world that is kept in balance only through the presence of a public entity wielding total authority—an authority given willingly by the population for the sake of order.

People belong to genetically engineered castes for the purposes of maintaining social order; children are formed to think along the lines of the state’s “suggestions,” or what the state believes and finds to be important (Huxley, 1932/1978, p. 26). From the moment one is born to the moment of death, there is rigidity to the social order; a lower class gamma reads gamma newspapers and does not associate with an alpha or a beta. Essentially, deltas are drones that do the dirty work of society; they are polluted in their fetal stage so that they may not attain a degree of intelligence that would allow them independent reason. Alphas engage themselves in some thought but actively keep their emotions in check through the use of soma, or tranquilizers. Community and family are not a consideration because birth and socialization processes have been up-ended. Promiscuity is encouraged, because the latter promotes strong feelings. The system of genetic engineering holds full sway—with a motion from the Controller, production can cease and thousands of people can die. The World State is fully in charge of human origins, and the populace is reminded of the dangers of independent thinking: “We are not our own any more than what we possess is our own. We did not make ourselves, we cannot be supreme over ourselves” (Huxley, 1932/1978, p. 212), in a quotation Huxley removed from its original context in the Newman reader (1878, p. 59).

Considering the idea of lower classes, they are portrayed as “the gyroscope that stabilizes the rocket plane of state on its unswerving course” (Huxley, 1932/1978, p. 203), given that higher thinking castes could not be made to do menial work without resenting it and chafing under the demand. While Huxley may have been responding to the segregated nature of the society at the time, current events continue to suggest breaks and disintegration along racial, ethnic, religious, and other divides. As Huxley’s world had “suggestions,” this disintegration might be seen as advantageous to those who would inspire dependence in seeking control.

An interesting motif in Huxley’s story is a maudlin conversation of pleasure-seeking, juxtaposed with comments on a “Nine Years’ War” and a “great Economic Collapse” with “liberalism . . . dead of anthrax” (Huxley, 1932/1978, p. 45). The implication is that a war of sufficient gravity encompassed the globe, and rather than succumb to destruction, a power group seized control with promises of stability in exchange for basic rights. All of the trappings of culture at the beginning of the century had receded, and are replaced with drug-induced complacency, sensory pleasures, and enough brainwashing to assure total order. “Glum, Marx, glum . . . What you need is a gramme of soma” (Huxley, 1932/1978, p. 51). Consumerism was not so much encouraged as demanded: “Every man, woman and child compelled to consume so much a year. In the interests of industry” (Huxley, 1932/1978, p. 46). We then find out that when people sought to avoid consuming, they were executed en masse.

To accomplish this level of domination, Huxley’s world state has employed efficient and effective use of information control and the conveyance of disinformation. The use of soma is particularly obvious in terms of brainwashing, as it leaves the recipient open to the power of suggestion. Huxley addresses this later in Brave New World Revisited:

That a dictator could . . . make use of these drugs for political purposes is obvious. He could ensure himself against political unrest by changing the chemistry of his subjects’ brains . . . making them content with their servile condition. He could use tranquilizers to calm . . . stimulants to arouse enthusiasm . . . hallucinants to distract the attention of the wretched. (Huxley, 1958/2000, p. 75)

Unlike the other visions of the future discussed in this article, the citizens in Huxley’s world would not necessarily make a conscious decision to follow this framework, and it is clear in both Brave New World and the essay Brave New World Revisited that such a decision would not be necessary at any rate. Huxley’s thinking is counter to that of Franklin and Tocqueville, who relied on the idea of the conscious decision of the citizen. Hearts and minds of citizenry might be had even if they do not willingly give up power. Huxley (1958/2000) writes,

A society, most of whose members spend a great part of their time . . . not here and now and in the calculable future, but . . . in the irrelevant other worlds of sport and soap opera . . . will find it hard to resist the encroachments of those who would manipulate and control it. (p. 36)
The World State of *Brave New World* has Bureaus of Propaganda and Colleges of Emotional Engineering, and the population and its humanity are sitting targets. It perhaps does not matter whether or not the public is aware of the plot. The plot is so far gone that there is precious little interest in overcoming it and encouraging any sort of conscious citizenship, or involvement of the rank and file in the business of government. It could be said that with voting rates and public participation in regulatory aspects of government in their present state, media and political infighting alone have conspired to induce a level of general apathy among the population without benefit of soma.

A recognition that those with relevant knowledge and the ability to control it will use it to their advantage, and possibly to the detriment of a free society, is at the heart of Huxley’s argument. An understanding of information technology, agenda setting, and policy selection is therefore central to avoid the sort of society that is portrayed in Huxley’s work. Knowing how information and technology can be used against a population in the creation of institutions that raise questions of the public interest is vital in guarding against dystopian visions of the Huxley type.

**Fahrenheit 451**

Like Huxley’s World State, Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* provides a model of an authoritarian state government that polices thought in an effort to provide a sanitized version of happiness palatable to all. Again, the mode of operation is simple: to keep the emotions of the population in check, and therefore maintain the social and political order. Bradbury’s firemen start fires instead of putting them out—they memorably burn books instead of reading them.

Bradbury’s citizens are the targets of much propaganda, all developed in an effort to keep them happy. In this respect they share a common link with Huxley’s dystopian future. Citizens are expected to stay tuned to their interactive TV Walls, where they are offered a thin range of entertainment that is actively inclusive and encompassing, wrapped in the soothing tones of family; the programs’ stars even ask viewers for their input in the scenes’ action. The programs show humanity as something other than what it is in reality; Mildred, the wife of protagonist fireman Montag, wants four walls of TV so that their room is not theirs at all, but “all kinds of exotic people’s rooms” (Bradbury, 1953/1991, p. 21). It is a meager rendition—sort of a comic book world of unsatisfying archetypes. Yet, people have succumbed to it as a form of entertainment, and a replacement for family and social structures. The TV Wall is the government’s principal motivational force, in terms of its information technology. Through a constant drumbeat of information, citizens have been conditioned to stop questioning official stories. One would imagine that the entertainment system keeps track of all citizens and their activities through the wall; a database of information surely exists in this world to allow the level of interaction, given the presence of an interface that delivers two-way communication. While we might find the collection and use of information by social networks and even smart televisions to be intrusive, Bradbury’s dystopia warned of it in 1953.

Fireman Montag is a public servant. Throughout his life, he went without questioning his actions, thinking he was “happy.” His initial resolve gradually fades over the course of the novel, as he absconds from fire calls with books of various sorts. Beatty, a senior fireman, speaks of government’s role in distracting the public:

> Cram them full of non-combustible data, chock them so damned full of “facts” they feel stuffed, but absolutely “brilliant” with information. Then they’ll feel they’re thinking, they’ll get a sense of motion without moving. And they’ll be happy, because facts of that sort don’t change. (Bradbury, 1953/1991, p. 61)

Beatty expounds,

> We stand against the small tide of those who want to make everyone unhappy with conflicting theory and thought. We have our fingers in the dyke . . . Don’t let the torrent of melancholy and drear philosophy drown our world. (Bradbury, 1953/1991, pp. 61-62)

While Montag drifts from the authoritarian culture toward book reading, a crime against the State, it is obvious that most in this society have internalized its norms. They are comfortable with the loss of freedom they have experienced. It is likely that most of the people in this novel are several generations removed from book reading. This important point is one of perspective. Even the firemen themselves are “rarely necessary. The public itself stopped reading of its own accord. . . . firemen provide a circus now and then . . . few want to be rebels anymore” (Bradbury, 1953/1991, p. 87). Government has positioned itself as responsible for upkeep of morale, at all costs; even fear looks less dangerous when painted an unobtrusive beige—anything remotely threatening is banned.

People do not recognize the loss of freedom because it is already gone. This is all they have ever known, and notions of liberty are relative matters. The *unhappiness* present in books is actually worse than not having books at all. People who maintain collections of books in this culture refuse to give up a freedom, even if it means their own demise, and to others, this behavior is madness. They would rather live counter to the society out of the glare of the TV Wall than happily within its grasp.

**A Final Vision: When “The Machine Stops”**

Forster’s short story “The Machine Stops,” originally published in 1909, envisions a civilization forced under the earth, with each person compartmentalized in a unit of one’s
own—fed all interaction and nourishment by a Machine. It is frightening not only because of the images it contains, and the ultimate denouement of the tale, but also because it anticipates the widespread use of the Internet and the prevalence of computers by decades. Much of what Forster raises has a direct relationship with public organizations and information technology. The earliest of the three works addressed in this article, its suggestions on the future of technology, government, and people are perhaps most present.

People of the Machine seldom leave their underground compartments in this world, so all of their intellectual and sensory stimulation is provided by the Machine itself. This removes them sufficiently from the bother of one-to-one human interaction; even at the beginning of the current century, many citizens expressed the need for sanitized relations through constant interaction with the Internet. With the advent of Facebook and other social networking, and the use of cellphone technology, the amount of time people spend connected to our own Machine is impressive. Tellingly, the refuse of this underground civilization is expelled (the book uses the term vomitories when referring to its vents onto the surface, as if the entire system is a living being), through vents onto the earth’s purportedly uninhabitable surface (Forster, 1909/1997). Within, the system is portrayed as sanitized, but the artificial cleanliness betrays the underlying rot.

As in the Facebook status updates, pictures of vacations to far-away climes on Instagram, and tweets on Twitter of 2015, Forster’s citizens live vicariously and virtually through the Machine. This dissociates them from their basic notions of the value of human interaction. They laugh at a time when they traveled to places, when they can get the same stimulation by having places brought to them virtually. Forster’s Machine strips human communication of nuance, disconnecting it from latent meaning in a manner suspiciously like email. The Machine feeds us and clothes us and houses us; through it we speak to one another, through it we see one another, in it we have our being. The Machine is the friend of ideas and the enemy of superstition: the Machine is omnipotent, eternal; blessed is the Machine. (Forster, 1909/1997, pp. 110-111)

From a governmental perspective, the Committee of the Machine casts this giver and protector of life in god-like ways, adding an unsavory touch of democratic despotism to a public content to live in bondage, so long as it is without pain.

Gone are notions of the moral and the ethical—of the value of community; such notions are replaced entirely by “a generation that had got beyond facts, beyond impressions, a generation absolutely colourless, a generation seraphically free from taint of personality” (Forster, 1909/1997, p. 110). Indeed, the citizen is exhorted to “Beware of first-hand ideas!” (Forster, 1909/1997, p. 109). Forster (1909/1997) writes, “Let your ideas be second-hand, and if possible tenth-hand, for then they will be far removed from that disturbing element—direct observation” (p. 109). The value of direct observation and interpretation has been cheapened by a constant flow of information between the Machine and the citizen.

Because humankind has traded so much of its ability to conquer its environment, ignoring the importance of interpersonal relationships for the sanitized version offered through the Machine, it is wholly unprepared to handle the problems that occur when the Machine begins to fail. The Committee of the Machine, an organization supposedly founded for the public good but heavy and sluggish under its bureaucratic weight, is unable to meet the crush of complaints regarding the Machine’s outages. The peoples’ ability to handle things for itself has atrophied.

It may seem a ludicrous matter, but from it we may date the collapse of humanity. The Committee responsible for the failure was assailed by complainants, whom it referred, as usual, to the Committee of the Mending Apparatus, who in its turn assured them that their complaints would be forwarded to the Central Committee. (Forster, 1909/1997, p. 114)

As it turns out, the downfall of the Machine was the failure of the sleeping apparatus; even in the highly virtualized world of Forster’s vision, people still cannot do without sleep.

Subterranean citizens had long ago forgotten big picture concepts, concentrating instead on the reality fed to them through the Machine. People became more vulnerable because they could no longer solve problems and think for themselves; capacities in the practical matters of being human or keeping the system operational were proscribed by investment in entertaining the public and keeping it docile. The failure of the Machine to provide for its dependents is therefore a life-ending proposition for the entire civilization. It is not so far-fetched to see that, in the decades since the invention of the Internet, we might swing dangerously close to Forster’s warning of the collapse of society. People may have lost a sense of civilization by believing a Machine could be human, or even a suitable replacement for humanity. The public is easily enamored with the beauty and facility of invention, so much so that it has put great trust in it; it is there we rest ourselves in self-denial. People who have barely enough resources to survive insist on having the very latest cellphone technology and “apps.”

Government has difficulty attracting not only voters but also involvement in the day-to-day operation of government, so that rules and rulemaking are far removed from the realities of the public. Public participation in government is limited to a few minutes in a council meeting, and when that is completed, too often, the body politic goes on to make exactly the same decision, informed by special interests, that it would have absent any pretension to public involvement. The public lives only virtually, through the despotic governance of the Machine, and through commission or omission, we have
committed an unpardonable sin against the body; we have made it dependent and unable to respond to its environment. Unlike the citizens of Forster’s story, though, our Machine has not yet stopped; there may yet still be time to change the nature of our public institutions, and our interaction with machines, to return to an allowance for individuality.

Concluding Thoughts

While the power of technology is undeniable, it is worth considering that it “is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral,” as Kranzberg (1986, p. 545) noted. It can be a tool with great potential for the sharing of knowledge, as in Lyotard’s view. To Lyotard, free access to information technology is a facilitator to the development of local narrative and essential to the increase of meaning and understanding throughout a larger society. By the same token, information technology can be an elite tool of power over the masses—the privileged have legitimated themselves by tradition and the falsehood of scientific totality to decide what constitutes truth. This dual nature of information technology is in keeping with its guise as a tool of power, whether it is shared or hoarded (Lyotard, 1984).

The world of Kranzberg’s “laws” of technology and history when the article was published in 1986, and today are startlingly different, and technology’s reach into our lives has likely outpaced reasonable individual control and our ability to effectively say “no” to its use, yet still retain a place in society. In this respect, we are all compelled to enter technology’s door (White, 1962), whether we like it or not. Cellular telephones, electronic mail, and the Internet were all an invitation to simplify lives, but resulted in something else entirely—an inability for many to ever step away from connectedness, with people at the same time feeling less linked than perhaps ever in history. Hatred hides behind screen names; terror confronts us in the news even as we feel ourselves with a modicum of security, living near people with whom we never speak, even as we converse across the globe in seconds.

Kranzberg’s fourth rule is also relevant to this discussion: “Although technology might be a prime element in many public issues, nontechnical factors take precedence in technology-policy decisions” (Kranzberg, 1986, p. 550). There’s gravity to this truism and an implicit potential for trouble. It could be that technological considerations have outpaced the public interest, and allowing technology to lead in the name of innovation at the expense of other priorities has left something terribly important for humanity out of the equation. It was and is government’s responsibility to know that, but the reality of the situation is that the technology too often outpaces regulatory processes and slow government. The close relationships of business and government, with government still keen to convince the public of its businesslike nature, suggests a public apparatus that will not stand in the way of any pretension to progress, even when it has good reason. The result is a government that sometimes fails to understand why it exists.

The texts of Huxley, Bradbury, and Forster all raise important issues about the use of power in our society to maintain social and political order, and the implements used in the seizure or transfer of political control. Clearly, government is portrayed as a force with potentially negative, self-serving interests in the works presented here. What is interesting is the willingness of the three citizen populations to part with some measure of their power, freedom, identity, and individuality, in exchange for social and political order. Science in all three works has left the world in a vacuum—government tends to step in when the population has gotten nervous, threatened to destroy itself, or otherwise devolve into outright anarchy. Government in each case promises stability in exchange for a portion of humanity’s essence, in effect, and yet is not able to assuage the wound left by freedom’s loss. In Franklin’s words, the world has given up liberty, and therefore, now should not expect it from other quarters, including science and information technology.

It is left to our world to decide its ends. Like appeasers before World War II, some may not “listen to warnings because they [do] not wish to hear” (C. P. Snow, quoted in McLuhan, 2011, p. 28). We are not yet at the point of final resolution that would make the conclusions of these texts inevitable. But these dystopias, through their often painful view of the nature of the human experience, have much to say about our propensity to sell our freedom to the highest bidder in exchange for an antiseptic, artificial view of peace. Real peace, Huxley might say, can come only from perception and attentiveness. The victim of democratic despotism often does not recognize that he or she has been victimized. But it should also be recognized that the worlds of Huxley, Bradbury, and Forster could only come to pass if the population allowed that end or if citizens failed to maintain vigilance. The moral of these writers may be simply this: We reap what we sow, be it politically, socially, or spiritually. The spiritually devoid society driven to distraction is ripe to have its unused freedom usurped. Freedom left unprotected is seldom held for long, and our institutions of public service will ultimately be reflective of the choices made, or not made, by the citizenry.

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Notes

1. See, for example, the “We the People” site offered by The White House: https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/
2. https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/how-why/terms-participation
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