Control and Freedom

Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics

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Preface

During the Afghanistan War, the second Gulf War, and the subsequent occupation of Iraq, T-shirts, bumper stickers, and politicians reminded us, "Freedom is not free." This phrase, engraved on the Korean War Memorial in Washington, D.C., would seem simply to say that freedom comes at the cost of soldiers' lives and civilian sacrifices. Freedom is not without cost; someone has to pay a price. This phrase, however, is open to another reading: when freedom is conflated with security, freedom loses its meaning—freedom is no longer free. If freedom is reduced to a gated community writ large or becomes the ideological watchword of a national security state, then it can turn into nothing more than the partner of, or the alibi for, control. The very phrase "freedom is not free" can make freedom unfree when it calls on people to accept unfreedom as the cost of freedom. *Free* can also mean priceless, a gift. In English, the word *free* stems from the Sanskrit word for "dear" or "beloved." The phrase "freedom is not free" should never make sense, for what is free should never be devalued. The value of freedom underlined by its etymology is erased when we shift the emphasis away from the action of giving something freely—not in return for something else—to the economism or opportunism of a recipient, looking for a bargain, who refuses to acknowledge this liberality and thus literally cheapens this act. This cheapening of freedom is crucial to the conflation of control with freedom.

Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics examines "freedom" through the rubric of the Internet, more specifically, through its emergence as a mass medium. Emphasizing the roles of sexuality and race, this book traces the ways in which a technology, which thrives on control, has been accepted, however briefly, as a mass medium of freedom. Moving from utopian narratives about cyberspace to the

underlying hardware the Internet seeks to obscure (and about which we often forget), it traces the structuring paradox of information and communications: without control technologies, no freedom (of choice or movement). But the linkage is not an identity: freedom is not the same thing as control. Their conflation is a response to the failures of both liberty and discipline and marks a significant shift in the apparatuses of power: it is a response to the end of the Cold War and to the successes and failures of containment (in Paul Edwards's words, its "closed world"). This conflation of freedom with control also produces and is produced by paranoia, a paranoia that stems from the attempt to solve political problems technologically. To be paranoid is to think like a machine.

In this book, I do not condemn the Internet—if anything, I hold it dear. Liking it or hating it, as such, is as pointless as being "optimistic" or "pessimistic" about its future. Rather, what we need is a serious engagement with the ways in which the Internet enables communications between humans and machines, enables—and stems from—a freedom that cannot be controlled. Because freedom is a fact we all share, we have decisions to make: freedom is not the result of our decisions, but rather, as Friedrich Schelling and Jean Luc Nancy have argued, what makes our decisions possible. This freedom is not inherently good, but entails a decision for "good"—habitation and limitation—or for "evil"—destruction. The gaps within technological control, the differences between technological control and its rhetorical counterpart, and technology's constant failures mean that our control systems can never entirely make these decisions for us.

Fiber-optic networks, this book argues, enable communications that physically instantiate and thus shatter enlightenment; they also link together disparate locations that only sometimes communicate. We must take seriously the vulnerability that comes with communications—not so that we simply condemn or accept all vulnerability without question but so that we might work together to create vulnerable systems with which we can live.