

# Freedom, enslavement and the digital barons: a thought experiment



[Magna Carta, 1215](#)

Tim Unwin

Keynote for IFIP 9.4

25<sup>th</sup> May 2022



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Educational, Scientific and  
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**Keynotes are intended to provoke: should be to challenge the taken for granted, and encourage thinking in new ways**

But, increasingly we are told to provide health warnings about sensitive issues in case people take offence

**Health warnings**

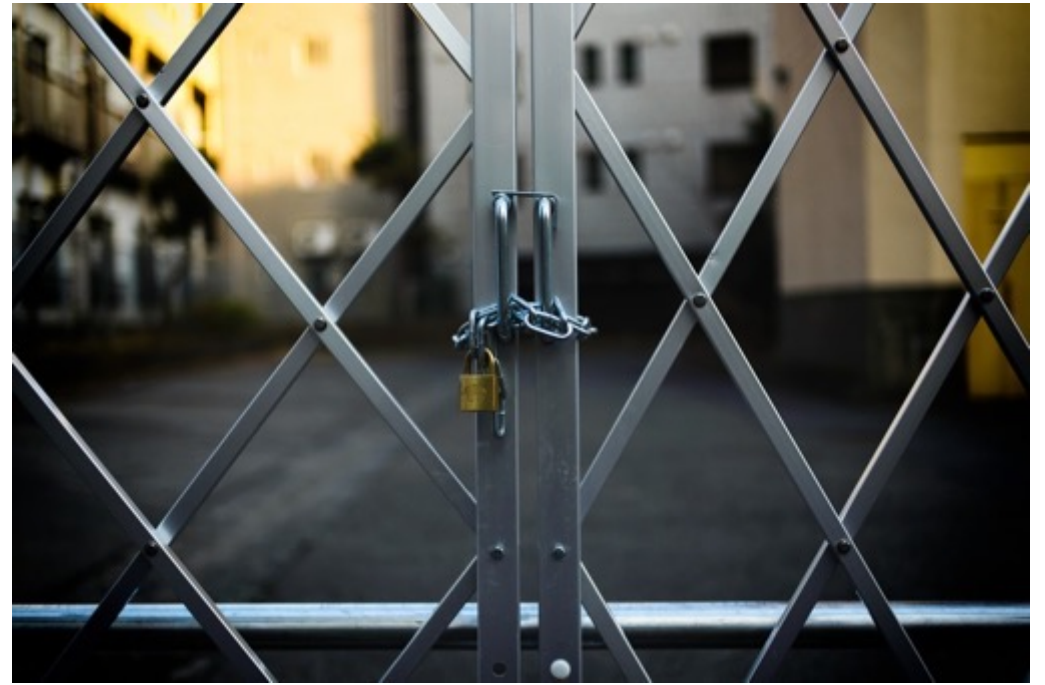


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# But is this not in itself a restriction of freedom?



By pushing boundaries in the pursuit of knowledge and truth, we might well cause *unintended* offence



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# My aim



How can an exploration of the “unfree” help us better understand the intersection between freedom and digital tech?



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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serfdom#/media/File:Reeve\\_and\\_Serfs.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serfdom#/media/File:Reeve_and_Serfs.jpg)

<https://ict4d.org.uk> <http://unwin.wordpress.com>

# Outline

- Introductory
- Freedoms and ICT4D
- Understanding “Unfreedom”
- Examples of digital enslavement
- Freedom, rights and responsibilities
- Looking to the future



Pico Arreiro

# My Central Argument

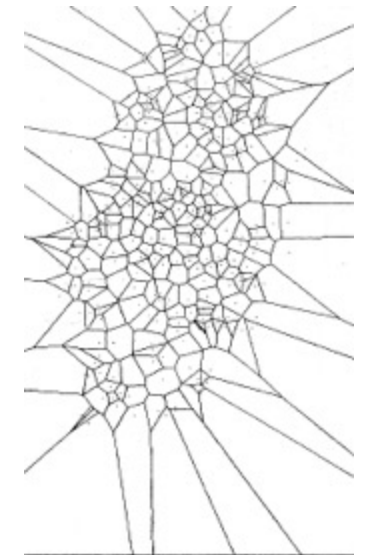
- We are all in danger of becoming enslaved by the digital barons (and their knights)
- We have a *responsibility* to work hard to create ways through which people can break free from the digital shackles with which they are bound



<https://www.historytoday.com/archive/normans-and-slavery-breaking-bonds>

# Four personal influences from the 1970s

- Rural India
  - Inequality rather than growth
- Computing – both hardware and programming/coding
  - Excitement, novelty, “purity” ...
- Medieval society
  - The wine trade
  - Socio-economic transformation
- Critical Theory
  - Structuralism (structures rather than systems)
  - Marxism – labour theory of value, modes of production
  - Habermas – interests and emancipation



# 1. Freedom, ICT4D and IFIP9.4 2022



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_mountains\\_in\\_Peru#/media/File:Ausangate.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_mountains_in_Peru#/media/File:Ausangate.jpg)

Ausangate, Peru





# Focus of this conference on freedoms

- Theme: *Freedom and social inclusion in a connected world*
  - Interestingly, only one of the 13 track description titles mentions the word “Freedom”
- This keynote is intended to encourage us to think about some of the big issues around how we understand freedom
- Drawing particularly on my early background as a medievalist
  - And remembering Richie Havens’ *Freedom* at Woodstock (and Marley’s *Songs of Freedom* in late 1960s and early 1970s)



Click image for video - at 1 min

# Interesting ways in which free(dom) and digital tech have been conceived (i)

- FLOSS – Richard Stallman’s (Free Software Foundation) four freedoms:
  - Using
  - Studying
  - Sharing
  - Modifying
- Amartya Sen: Development as Freedom
  - Five freedoms
    - Political freedoms
    - Economic facilities
    - Social opportunities
    - Transparency guarantees
    - Protective security
  - Widely used in ICT4D research, but problematic (see [O’Hearn, 2009](#))



# Interesting ways in which free(dom) and digital tech have been conceived (ii)

- Freedom and Rights
  - The right to be digitally connected
  - Individual rights (and communal responsibilities)
  - Human rights and liberal democracy
    - Free to sell our labour power
    - Free to purchase in an open market
- Freedom of opinion
  - Especially in the context of social media and regulation
  - Freedom of expression
  - Minority rights



# 2. Understanding unfreedom



13<sup>th</sup> century slave market in Zabid, Yemen, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS arabe 5847, fo.105

“Not free”  
“Lacking liberty”  
“Constraints on free will”



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# “Unfreedom” in historical perspective

- A gradation of rights, dues and possession making up unfreedom throughout history
- Medieval/feudal society (Bloch, *La Société Féodale*, 1939)
  - Knights holding land from king in return for military service
  - Gradations of “Peasantry” (simplified)
    - Slaves: owned “body and soul” by another; as a chattel/property
    - Villeins: tied to land (arduous dues and labour for a lord)
    - Free peasantry and urban burgesses
  - The manor: a system to provide the wherewithal for knights to fight
    - Essentially how to extract a surplus
    - The life of a slave could be better than that of a villein
- Much subsequent confusion over terminology
  - “Serf” (derived from Latin *servus* = slave) often used to refer to “peasants” in general
  - Indentured labour (and apprenticeships) as slavery

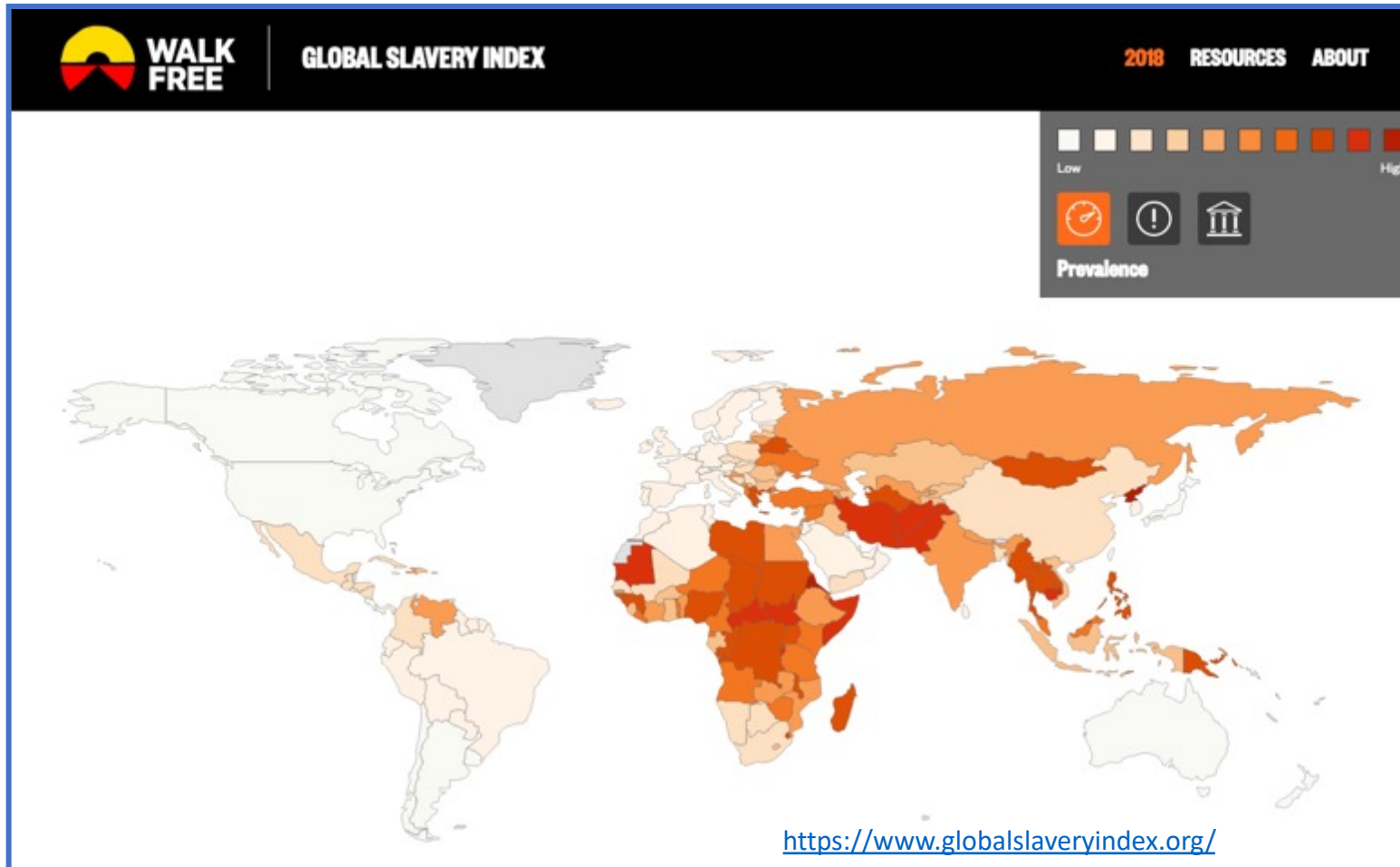


# Ubiquitous slavery

- Slavery has existed for millennia in varying forms in almost every “civilisation”
  - Sumer c.3,500 BC
  - Classical Greece and Rome
  - China (Tang Code of 7<sup>th</sup> century)
  - Across Islamic Mediterranean and Africa
  - European colonialism and transatlantic slavery
  - Ottoman empire
- Abolitionism and modern slavery
  - From late 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards
    - Moral and economic grounds
  - But still extensive
    - 2017 [ILO](#) estimates 40 m people (5.4/1000 of world population)



# The extent of modern slavery



[Excluding digital enslavement]

# 3. Digital enslavement



Collared Roman slaves / Ashmolean Museum,  
Photo by Jun, [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Six diverse examples of claims to  
digital enslavement



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# Six examples of digital enslavement

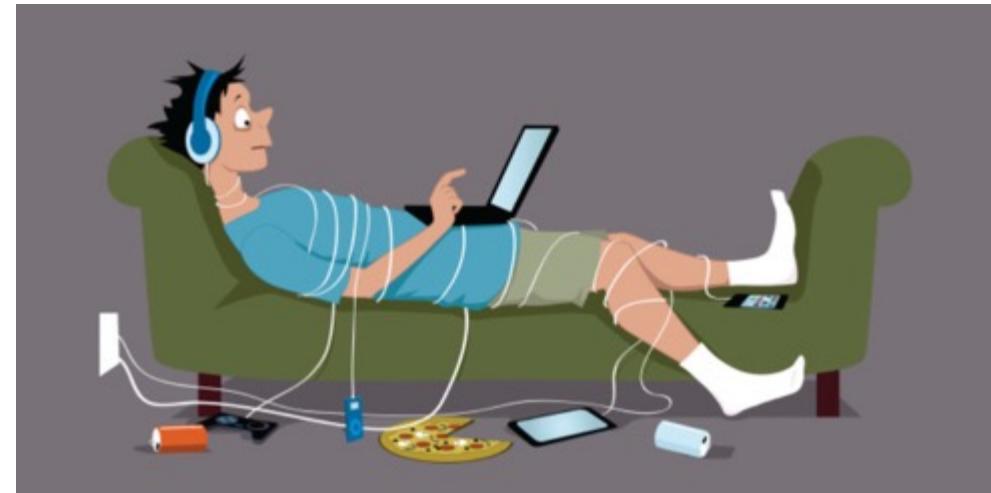
- Digital addiction
- We are the data
- Governments enforcing use of digital systems for government services
- Labour exploitation (through extending the working week)
- Digital poverty and education
- Digital tech contributing to modern slavery



<https://medium.com/predict/the-rise-of-digital-addiction-f1f24c9e7640>

# Digital addiction as slavery

- Addiction as slavery: no longer free to choose and act rationally (Alter, 2017)
  - Companies deliberately designing social media to be addictive (triggering dopamine release)
- Estimates that >400 m people are addicted to the Internet worldwide ([Web Tribunal](#), 2022)
  - 12.4% of users spend longer online than planned
- How long can you “survive” without using your digital devices?
  - Most users have difficulty even for a day
  - #1in7offline
- Substantial physical and mental health issues



<https://liccv.org/digital-safety/digital-addiction/>

# We are the data

- Average European user's data is shared 376 times per day; for US users 747 times daily (ICCL, 2022)
- Virtual production (tempted to say new mode of production)
  - A new twist to our economic system
  - Extracting a labour surplus from people using "leisure" time
  - Companies giving something for "free", in return for something much more valuable (their data)
- Combined with powerful data analytics
  - Those who cannot analyse the data themselves in their own interests can never be empowered by it
- "Voluntary enslavement"
  - Possibly similarities with indentured labour



<https://www.striking-women.org>

# Enforced government services

- Digital seen by many governments as being better value for money, easier, and more efficient
  - But not all persist in offering alternative modalities (audio, braille, paper, multilingual...)
  - Better for whom: governments or citizens?
- Assumption that everyone is connected and able to use digital
  - Forces the unconnected to be connected
  - Parallels with enslavement?
    - Certainly loss of freedom
  - Opportunities for mass-surveillance
- Debates over value-for-money and costs
  - Governments selling/giving data to private sector companies
- Linking to rights-based discussions in next section
- Neoliberal agendas: governments complicit with private sector companies



<https://gx.ae/>

# Extending duration of labour

- Marx: “The surplus-value produced by prolongation of the working day, I call *absolute* surplus-value” (Capital 1, ch. 12)
- “Home working”
  - e-mails at any time, online training in evenings, always on call...
  - Digital brutality (as part of enslavement?)
  - Processes already underway were accelerated by COVID-19
- Most digital management systems pass on burdens of time and cost to employee or consumer
  - Consuming yet more time and reducing others’ freedoms
  - Forcing employees to use particular digital systems
- Some companies are, though, trying to grapple with these issues

Working from home | Ergonomics | Anxiety | Conditions | Hybrid working

## Digital overload, long hours and isolation – welcome back to home working

by Nic Paton | 13 Dec 2021



Image: Shutterstock

<https://www.personneltoday.com/hr/digital-overload-long-hours-and-isolation-welcome-back-to-home-working/>

# Digital poverty and education

- Assumptions that *all* children should have access to good quality digital connectivity, devices and content
  - Awareness of these issues raised by COVID-19
- Absence of this is seen as a dimension of “Digital Poverty”
- Who would “universal digital” really benefit?
  - And it can never actually happen
  - There will always be “outsiders”
- Surely this is another form of enslavement, forcing a particular system on everyone?
  - Starting with children
  - In the interests of global capital
  - Not least cultivating the labour power of the future



THE, March 2022

# Digital tech's contribution to modern slavery

- Extensive evidence of use of digital tech by traffickers (Mirjam van Reisen, UNODC)
  - Fake promises of employment
  - Extorting money from families
  - Becoming indentured labour
- Sex trafficking: profile, recruit, control and exploit
  - Sexual abuse and harassment – images sold, locations identified...
    - Also parallels with enslavement through “revenge porn” and sexual harassment more widely
  - Dating sites and social media for recruiting
- Internet provides easy access to victims
- But note too that digital tech is increasingly being used to tackle digital slavery
  - The positive rhetoric usually dominates



# 4. (Un)freedom, rights and responsibilities



Eleanor Roosevelt UDHR (English), 1949

Teasing out some conceptual issues around rights and responsibilities from these examples, as a basis for changing what “we” do

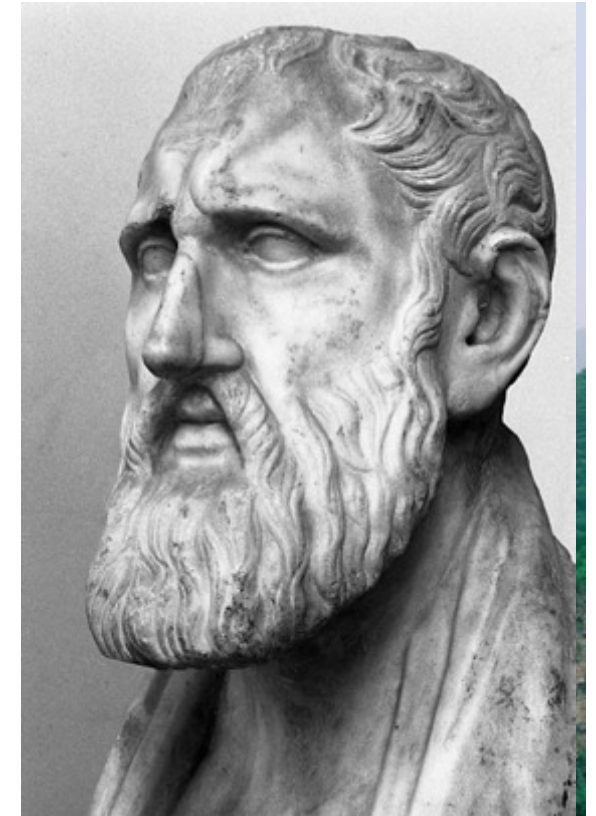


[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal\\_Declaration\\_of\\_Human\\_Rights#/media/File:Eleanor\\_Roosevelt\\_UDHR.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_Declaration_of_Human_Rights#/media/File:Eleanor_Roosevelt_UDHR.jpg)



# Rights/Responsibilities

- Formal notion of “human rights” is relatively new (c.mid-20<sup>th</sup> century), but built upon earlier notions of natural rights
  - Ultimately derived from 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Stoics’ (Zeno, later Epictetus\*, Seneca...) notion of “law of nature”
  - It is largely of “European” origin as a concept
- But if you don’t believe I have any rights, what would stop you from enslaving me, or exploiting me, or killing me?
- Simply stating that people have rights says little about how or why these rights should be delivered
- So, any rights must be balanced by responsibilities, or “obligations” (Onora O’Neill)
  - Communal responsibilities of individuals to each other
  - Governments responsible for ensuring rights for citizens

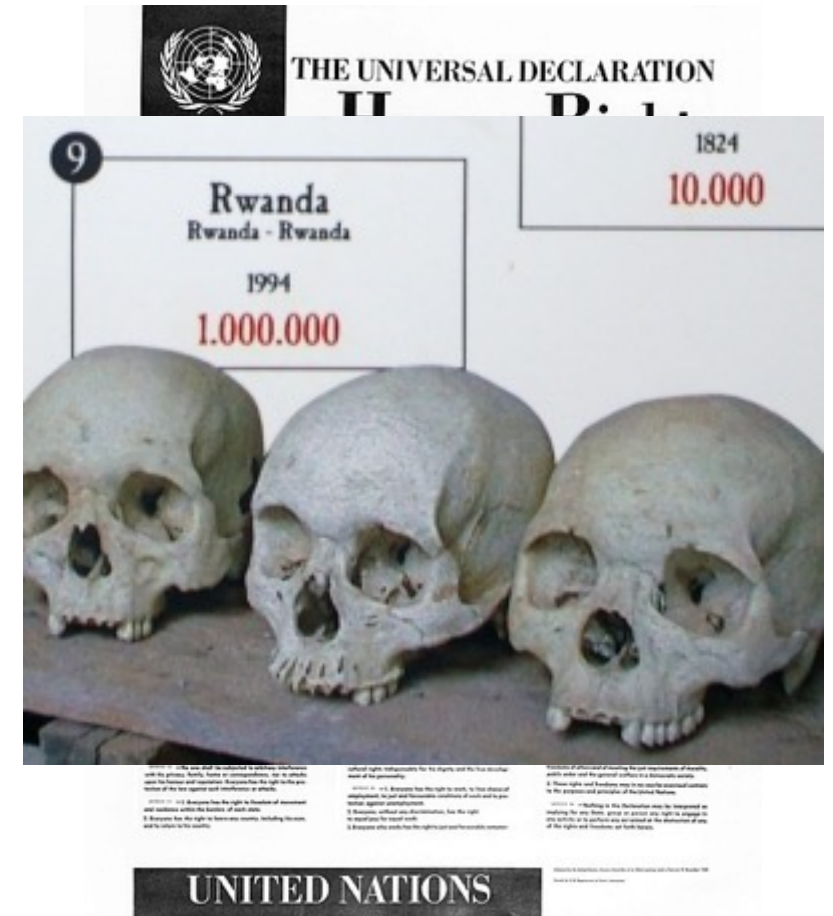


Zeno of Citium

\*Epictetus was born into slavery

# Challenges with the notion of universal human rights

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is rarely contested
  - It underlies much of the UN's work
  - Digital tech now often seen as a human right
    - Because, for example, it is “essential for education”
- But this has failed to save people from those who do not believe in such rights
- Is “universal” compatible with “relative” perspectives and diversity?
  - How to manage minority “rights” that disrupt other “rights”
- Does the “freedom” of “rights” primarily serve the interests of global capital, in the name of liberal democracy?
  - Individual freedom to labour
  - Individual freedom to purchase



# The interests of neo-liberal democracy

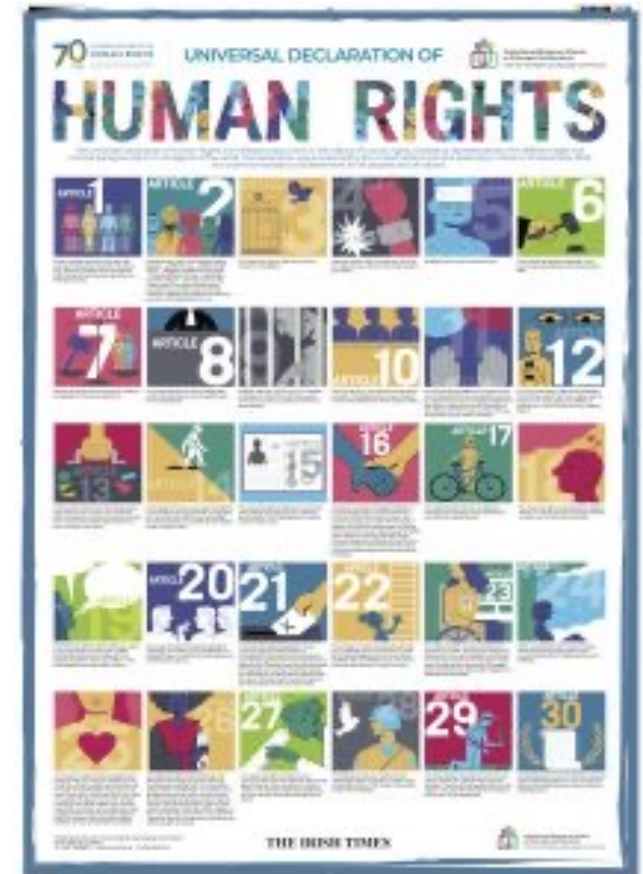


David Held, 1951-2019

- There is no single thing called “democracy”
  - David Held’s (2006) multiple democracies
    - Corporate power curtails possibility of genuinely democratic power
    - Inequalities of gender and race curtail benefits of citizenship
  - So, what kind of democracy is digital tech (social media) meant to support?
- Historically those in power have always used technologies to maintain their positions of power
  - Why should “now” be any different?
- Neo-liberalism: still globally dominant (China an exception?)
  - Market oriented reform, privatisation, and reduction of state influence in economy
  - Unparalleled global power to major digital tech and social media corporations
  - And co-opted the UN system
    - Focus on role of digital tech for economic-growth at the expense of “equalities”
- A rich environment in which digital tech and social media can flourish
  - Serving a very specific set of interests: those of the digital barons

# Is affordable access to digital tech a “Human Right?”

- Digital as a human right
  - Proliferation of “human rights” within the UN system
  - Right to education accepted, but because much education is now delivered through digital tech, the argument has been extended to a right to have access to affordable digital tech
- Many are advocating for digital connectivity to be a human right, because once something is a right...
  - They can then claim they are contributing, and
  - They can demand that governments pay them to deliver the right
- UN system has been co-opted
  - [UN SG’s roadmap for digital cooperation](#)
  - ITU and UN SG Office Digital Envoy: [Partner 2Connect](#) or [Giga](#) (connecting every school to the Internet)



<https://www.ihrec.ie/documents/universal-declaration-of-human-rights-poster/>

# European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles (Jan 2022)



<https://www.euractiv.com>

- Offers a rather different perspective:
  - Not that access to digital tech is a human right, but rather that
  - Digital transformation should put human rights at its centre
- *“The Union should promote the Declaration in its relations with other international organisations and third countries with the ambition that the principles serve as an inspiration for international partners to guide a digital transformation which puts people and their human rights at the centre throughout the world”*
- But still does not resolve the issue of responsibilities for delivering this
  - Although implicitly emphasising the role of governments
  - Needs a changing balance of regulation

# 5. Looking to the future



We are already cyborgs | Elon Musk | Code Conference 2016

**We have a *responsibility* to work hard to create ways through which people can break free from the digital shackles with which they are increasingly bound**



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**Of course the use of digital tech has many positive benefits...**



Mudgee, 2022

**But it also has undoubted harms  
– by focusing on these today, I  
don't deny the potential  
benefits**



# My aim was



To think about how an exploration of the “unfree” might help us better understand the intersection between freedom and digital tech



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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serfdom#/media/File:Reeve\\_and\\_Serfs.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serfdom#/media/File:Reeve_and_Serfs.jpg)

<https://ict4d.org.uk> <http://unwin.wordpress.com>



# ITU and UN SG Tech Envoy 2022, 15 new targets for 2030



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## Achieving universal and meaningful digital connectivity in the decade of action Aspirational targets for 2030

Achieving universal and meaningful digital connectivity – the possibility for everyone to enjoy a safe, satisfying, enriching, productive and affordable online experience – is key for enabling digital transformation and meeting the Sustainable Development Goals.

As part of the implementation of the UN Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation, the International Telecommunication Union and the Office of the UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology have established a set of aspirational targets for 2030 to help prioritize interventions, monitor progress, evaluate policy effectiveness, and galvanize efforts around achieving universal and meaningful connectivity by the end of the decade.

More information:  
[www.itu.int/umc2030](http://www.itu.int/umc2030)

Notes: \* Mobile network of the latest technology is the most advanced technology available in the country with at least 40% of the population already covered. † Party is deemed reached when the share of women using the Internet/ owning a mobile phone/ using a mobile phone with specific digital skills, among the female population is equal to the share of men. ‡ Download speed: Mbit/s = megabits per second; \* Mbit/s = kilobits per second.

Universality targets	
	of population aged 15+ uses the Internet
	of households have Internet access
	of businesses use the Internet
100%	of schools are connected to the Internet
	of population is covered by a mobile network of the latest technology <sup>†</sup>
	of population aged 15+ owns a mobile phone
>70%	of population aged 15+ has basic digital skills
>50%	of population aged 15+ has intermediate digital skills
Gender parity	
	is achieved for Internet use, mobile phone ownership and use, and digital skills <sup>†</sup>
Technology targets	
100%	of fixed broadband subscriptions are 10 Mb/s or faster <sup>‡</sup>
20 Mb/s	Minimum download speed at every school
50 kb/s	Minimum download speed available per student <sup>‡</sup>
200 GB	Minimum data allowance for every school
Affordability targets	
	Entry-level broadband subscription costs less than 2% of gross national income per capita
2%	Entry-level broadband subscription costs less than 2% of average income of the bottom 40% of population



Is this really the  
future that *everyone*  
wants?



Havaiana shop window in Funchal, 2022

Whose interests does  
it really serve?



# What about those who for good reasons do not want to use the Internet, or cannot use it?

The elderly, those who do not have the “ability” to, those who cannot afford to, those who don’t know the language, those who are not allowed to, those who wish to be “free” ...



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# A return to the Digital Barons: “in whose interest...”

- Going beyond just the use of history for digital games
- Fascinating seeing this as an analogy of spread of digital tech
  - And environmental impact!
  - But...



# A reminder: barons, knights and the peasantry

- Knights held land from a baron in return for military service
- Barons were granted land from a king
  - Or competed among each other to be king
- Two fundamental groups in society
  - Those who were free
    - Barons, Knights, free peasantry, burgesses...
  - Those who had restrictions on their freedoms
    - Villeins, slaves...
- How pertinent is this in a digital context?



[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/62/S. V. Ivanov. Yuri%27s Day. %281908%29.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/62/S._V._Ivanov._Yuri%27s_Day._%281908%29.jpg)

# The interests of the barons behind digital tech

- All digital tech is built, designed and sold by people with a particular purpose and interest in mind
- Throughout history tech has been used by those in power to retain their positions of power
  - Digital tech is no exception
- Oxfam (2022): the 10 richest people in the world have six times more wealth than the poorest 3.1 billion
- The digital barons (8 of the top 10, March 2022)
  - “Capture” as many people as possible
  - Exploit them as much as possible
  - Integrate data about them to maximise surplus extraction from them



1. Musk



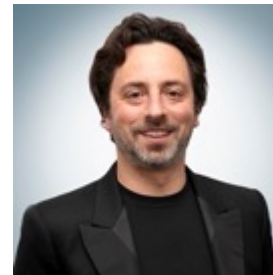
2. Bezos



4. Gates



5. Page



7. Brin



8. Ballmer



9. Ellison



10. Ambani

**Note: All of these are men**

(Source: *Investopedia* 10 March 2022)

# Digital knights, villeins and slaves

- “Once upon a time” there was a relatively free peasantry
- Digital barons competing to be king
- The barons saw an opportunity to enslave more and more of the “peasants”, through the use of digital tech
  - A new way of extracting surplus value
  - Their inward identities as raw material
  - Their leisure time as “labour” time
  - Overwhelmingly powerful surveillance
  - With the *illusion* that this made them free
- The digital knights were granted (virtual) space to develop new ways of enslavement and exploitation (entrepreneurship; digital disruption)
  - But mostly in the interests of serving the ultimate interests of the barons, or of becoming barons themselves



# Overcoming the costs of earlier forms of slavery

- Slavery has taken many forms in the past
  - But central has been the loss of personal freedoms for those enslaved
- Digital barons no longer have to pay the considerable costs involved in
  - Capturing slaves
  - Transporting slaves
  - Feeding slaves
  - Breeding slaves
- Reduces the violence and physical brutality
- It also creates the illusion of freedom
  - That in reality is increasingly being taken away from people through the use of digital tech



Rugendas (c.1830) slave ship

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slave\\_ship#/media/File:Navio\\_negreiro\\_-\\_Rugendas\\_1830.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slave_ship#/media/File:Navio_negreiro_-_Rugendas_1830.jpg)



Bridgens, 1836)

<https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/diet-and-food-production-enslaved-africans>



# Is this thought experiment so far-fetched?



<https://www.yourtechshow.com/2020/06/are-we-becoming-slaves-to-technology.html>

## Am I perhaps pushing the boundaries a little too far?

But see also [Chisnall](#), 2020



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# How can “we” (especially as academics) change things?



Who do we wish to serve?

How many of us really want to change  
things for the better of others?

Who should be in our sights?



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# Emancipation or Revolution?

1861 – Emancipation of the Serfs: can the rich ever truly emancipate the unfree?



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Reading\\_of\\_the\\_Manifest\\_\(Liberation\\_of\\_peasants\)\\_-Kustodiev,\\_1907.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Reading_of_the_Manifest_(Liberation_of_peasants)_-Kustodiev,_1907.jpg)

1917 – Russian Revolution: Is direct action and revolution the only way?



<https://fineartamerica.com/featured/5-russian-revolution-1917-granger.html>

Or

# Finding a middle way

- Emancipation and empowerment
  - Huge literature on these issues
  - Who are the agents of change?
  - Empowerment has to come from inside
    - Digital empowerment by the powerful is an illusion
- Revolution – in Russia resulted from failure really to deliver freedom to the people after 1861
  - Physical violence and destruction remain all too real today
  - If we are conflictual politicians, ultimately we must be able to resort to violence
- The need to find a middle way between these extremes
  - Mediation in practice
  - The role of academics as the psychoanalysts of society
  - Locke's (1689) rights and duties...
  - "We" may indeed remain slaves and become cyborgs, but at least we will have tried to change things



<https://www.britannica.com/topic/revolution-politics>

# UNDP (2015) *Human Development Report* – a reminder

“Even with all the economic and technological advancements at the world’s disposal, people do not have equitable benefits from progress, human capabilities and opportunities do not always flourish, human security is at stake, human rights and freedoms are not always protected, gender inequalities remain a challenge, and future generations’ choices do not get the attention they deserve”.

# Rights, responsibilities and freedom

- Need to rebalance the emphasis on *rights*, by focusing more on the *responsibilities* of individuals, governments and companies
  - And a focus on *communal* rather than individual interests
- If we argue for a right to connectivity, we should also argue for the *right to be unconnected*\*
- Revealing the *illusion of freedom*
  - We are persuaded to think that digital makes us free, but actually it is used to enslave us
- Key importance of *regulation*
  - Shift away from emphasis on corporate advantage to serving the needs of citizens (and outsiders)



Geneva, 2013

\* Acknowledging conversation with Robert Davison

# Looking to the future – as individual humans

- Many of us at IFIP 9.4 are still remarkably “free”
  - But not so the “market” of the poorest and most marginalised; the next billion...
- We are (still) free to resist the moves to shackle us
  - Insisting on the platforms we wish to use
  - Demanding “reject all” as default
    - But haven’t achieved this yet
- Craft multiple-identities to confuse the barons
- Use/create alternative platforms
  - But “winner takes all” challenge (Facebook/Elgg)
- Free to use virtual/digital less and rediscover the wonders of the real world
  - #1in7offline
  - Will also negatively impact corporate profits
- Engage actively in the politics of digital tech
  - Speaking truth to power
- Sharing these ideas with our “neighbours”



# Remember the advantages of being unconnected

- Re-living in “nature”
- Saving time wasted in digital life
- Retaining more of our personal data
- Less harm to the physical environment (see [DESC](#))
- Escaping digital abuse and harassment
- Not forced by managers to self-exploit
- Avoiding online scams
- Avoiding online addictions (gambling, pornography)
- Remaining freer... <https://unwin.wordpress.com/2021/12/01/the-advantages-of-being-unconnected-to-the-internet-a-thought-experiment/>

(See also, Andrade and Techatassanasoontorn, 2020)





# Our roles as academics?

- We still have a *choice on what we do research* and whose interests we serve
  - Although increasingly being curtailed
- Seeking to be the *servants of the poor*
  - Letting them shape our research agendas
- Serving as the *psychoanalysts of society*
  - We are incredibly privileged, but in return have huge responsibilities
  - Being part of society, and yet able to reflect on society
- Ensuring *Open Science* remains “free” and does not become yet another system of control
- Engaging in *political action* and *international governance*



<https://www.occupycorporatism.com/secrets-of-the-transhumanist-agenda-revealed-at-2013-conference/>

# What I have been trying to think about with you:



Ice melting in the Berner Oberland, 2021

- Being in danger of becoming enslaved by the digital barons (and their knights)
- Having a *responsibility* to work hard to create ways through which people can break free from the digital shackles with which they are bound

# Discussion and Questions



Kelabit Highlands, Sarawak, 2017



• UNESCO Chair in  
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