

**Ethics and the Fall of American Growth**

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BUS 5114: Management and Information Technology

March 18, 2023

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For the last forum post of our course, dear classmates, we were asked to comment on three things: the role of information technology in globalization, the digital divide, and information technology ethics. Since it is so near and dear to my heart, I will begin with the last of these.

I have long identified the philosophical and moral views of Brazilian revolutionary educator Paulo Freire as being those with which I most closely identify. In the first sentence of the first chapter of his most well known book, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire says that "the problem of humanization has always, from an axiological point of view, been humankind's central problem" (2000, p. 43). The very essence of what it means to be ethical is to fight for the restoration of the humanity of the oppressed through the shared praxis of our quest for liberation (Freire, P., 2000, p. 45). If information technology ethics is the study of the ethical issues arising out of the use and development of electronic technologies (Nissenbaum, H., 1998), then the central question for me is what impact information technology has on our quest for liberation.

In a timely blog post titled *What Has Done More to Improve American Living Standards: Indoor Toilets, Air-conditioning, Television or Smart Phones?*, Stanford University Professor Emeritus of Education Larry Cuban follows this provocative question by saying that, "Living in the heart of Silicon Valley – where bullet-proof coffee, gluten-free muffins, and traffic gridlock prevail – I am surrounded daily by unrelenting optimism about the promise of technology making our lives better. I would guess, then, that fellow Valley-ites, if given the above choices, would pick smart phones." (2023,

March 17). Dr. Cuban spends the rest of his blog post answering the title question from the point of view of economic historian Robert Gordon's 2016 book, *Rise and Fall of American Growth*, whom he quotes saying, "economic growth since 1970 has been simultaneously dazzling and disappointing. This paradox is resolved when we recognize that advances since 1970 have tended to be channeled into a narrow sphere of human activity having to do with entertainment, communications, and the collection and processing of information. For the rest of what humans care about - food, clothing, shelter, transportation, health, and working conditions both inside and outside the home - progress slowed down after 1970, both qualitatively and quantitatively", concluding decisively that it is indoor toilets, not smart phones, that have improved our lives the most (Cuban, 2023).

I agree with Robert Gordon's evaluation of the immediate, direct impact of information technology on our lives. Information technology has had a profound effect on the way food, clothing, shelter, transportation, health and working conditions are produced and distributed under our regime of neo-liberal capitalism, but in the United States, at least, these changes have not made our lives significantly better, certainly not nearly as much better as the indoor toilet did.

With the current revolution in robotics and artificial intelligence, it appears highly likely that information technology will soon have a broad impact on our lives well beyond entertainment, communications, and the collection and processing of information. How we end up using these technologies in the production and distribution of the wealth we produce will determine the shape of our shared future.

## References

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<https://larrycuban.wordpress.com/2023/03/17/what-has-done-more-to-improve-american-living-standards-indoor-toilets-air-conditioning-television-or-smart-phones/>

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