Chapter 17
Formatization Unleashed

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ABSTRACT

We propose the thesis that the evolution of information technology, which promises nearly unlimited possibilities, is actually not leading to an increase of individual freedom, but to the very opposite. Since a seemingly increase in individual user-freedom is accompanied by a de facto-increase in preformatted devices for achieving it, and hence, does lead to the actual decrease of this very freedom. All in all, the evolutionary process of information technology described in the following has led to an increasing number of abstraction layers the hierarchy of which can be interpreted as a pyramid of formats. The top of this pyramid is a format in itself that builds upon formats of lower layers. As the final consequence we as the users of these technologies are losing our actual degrees of freedom, with every layer introduced.

INTRODUCTION

The growing usage and availability of user-specific information technologies – which promise a concomitant increase in individual freedom – have led to that promises' very opposite: in terms of possibilities actually available for real self-expression with the help of digital devices, the freedom of the user actually decreased over time. This is our central thesis to be outlined in the following. Relating to the thesis, the notions of freedom have to be investigated: what freedom means, within the contexts looked at here, and how the respective variants of 'being free' relate to our central thesis that actually, an overall loss of lived freedom occurred, due to specific technological tools. Tools that underwent an increased formatization over time in two dimensions simultaneously: in the technological, and in the economic one. Whereby processes of economic concentration aiming at market leadership both enabled and triggered a formatization in the technological realm, leading to the overall effect of a freedom *managed*, i.e. strictly speaking

to an illusion of freedom. The users are provided with handsomely designed, easy-to-use tools for his or her "personal" expression of seemingly "self-created" content. But instead of having tools at hand for true self-expression and freedom of use, the user has to obey to a relatively limited set of economy-guided technological possibilities and therefore, generate content which aren't self-created at all but determined by economic and technical means. It is a phenomenon which gained ground during the second half of the last century, and which gained an additional momentum quite recently. In particular in the current era of apps and the upcoming trend of cloud computing, the generation of "personal contents" has nothing real personal any more but follows (in fact) the rules of mass marketing, and mass consumption. Irrespective if user-generated or provided by professionals, "content" has to fit into the economic systemic and the rules of conduct of companies that dominate the distribution channels. Due to this, the promised (and advertised) freedom of expression became in fact a freedom *managed.*

CRITICAL PATTERNS OF DEVELOPMENT

As in other historical processes, a relatively high variety existing at the processes' start declined during that processes' course. As a systemic phenomenon, such a pattern has been observed in the late 1970ies already, in investigations of the emergence of city-states and related historical phenomena (Pfeiffer 1978). The general pattern underlying such processes was that a rich variety of entities present at the start of the process – e.g., of city-states in early Sumer (Sumer was an ancient civilization and historical region in southern Mesopotamia during the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age.), of enterprises at the beginning of industrialization, of cultures before globalization – was increasingly narrowed, due to factors generating certain *path dependencies* the process in question had to follow, in its further course. An important variant of such processes was that a cultural and economic variety present at the start of a process consequently declined, sometimes even up to the point where the society in question doomed; as recent investigations of the matter reveal, comparing different cultures and historical times (Diamond 2005).

At least as cultural variety is regarded, the process we postulate in our thesis seems to follow that very pattern; based on the premise that phenomena of cultural variety can too be addressed in terms of actual freedoms of user-specific possibilities. Our sketch of an evolutionary process focuses on computational devices which serve as frameworks for different ways of software-based information processing (referred to in the following as "systems"), of processors and last but not least, of "users": the very individuals who should play the central role for those systems, according to their own advertisements.

In these regards, the role of economic processes has to be emphasized – despite they are not looked at in full detail, their general logic and the mindset underlying it play a crucial role, as will be shown. Because the technical processes portrayed are not solely a "matter of technique", i.e. of technological developments alone, but of a specific kind of technological development that had been triggered by profound economic interests. Interests which recently depend more or less on the "Big Four" active in the world of Technology who dominate the Internet: Google has all of the world's information; Apple is the king of design, and of user experience; Facebook is where your social life is; Amazon is where you get your electronic content and where from you buy physical products. In financial terms, these Big Four are worth more than a trillion dollars (http://www.forbes.com/global2000/list). They all try to gain additional market shares, either by investigating in the business sectors of the other (e.g. Apple's iTunes and Google Play vs Amazon, Google's Google+ vs Facebook), or by cooperating in case of failure (e.g. having no success with Ping, Apple replaced it in iTunes, with a Facebook- and Twitter-integration).

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