

[William J. Bernstein - Review](#)

The Stasi could place a hidden camera in a room in any large hotel one two hours' notice.

After the regime fell, citizens rummaging through Stasi facilities came across rooms filled with numbered, sealed glass jars containing bits of cloth. In time, their purpose was discovered: each specimen was impregnated with sweat, obtained from men's armpits and between the thighs of women, so dogs could track them, if necessary, at some future date.

Between 1920 and 1980 -- the decades of the primacy of radio and television -- the world saw a sharp upward spike in the number of nations considered despotic.

In a free market economy, communications and surveillance technologies rapidly become cheaper and more accessible to and -- more important -- controlled by the general population. Any device that increases the speed and volume of communication enhances the ability of its user to influence event; and, after all, such influence is the very essence of political power.

By 1960, only armies, governments, and very large corporation operated computers; by 1970, even small organizations had acquired them. By 1980, hobbyists happily assembled kits; by 1990, inexpensive personal computers had entered the home; by 2000, most citizens of the developed world had access to the Internet; and by 2004, residential broadband penetration in the United States, by no means in the vanguard of high-speed access, exceeded 50 percent.

Once we are aware of the connection between political power and access to communication technology, it becomes obvious throughout all of human history. These technologies are not in and of themselves oppressive or liberating. Rather, it is relative access to them that determines political reality.

When ordinary people eventually gain access to and control of leading-edge communication technologies, they can more effectively oppose the power of the state. In the democratic Greek city-states, the alphabet proved mightier than the sword; in the medieval era, the printing press was mightier than the Roman Catholic Church; and the modern world, the cell phone camera is mightier than the surveillance camera.

Boorstin's Law - Beware of optimism about the social and political benefits of the Internet and social media, for while technology progresses, human nature and politics do not.

The first writing arose not from the desire to record history or produce literature, but rather to measure grain, count livestock, and organize and control the labor of the human animal. Accounting, not prose, invented writing.

Humans abstract and record information in five major ways: with writing, mathematical notation, painting/photography/videography, maps, and clocks -- that is, we can abstract and record verbal, numerical, visual, spatial, and temporal information.

"Writing exists only in a civilization, and a civilization cannot exist without writing." -- Ignaz Gelb

One of the most sacred of the (Roman) Republic's unwritten rules forbade military weapons within the confines of the city.

The sum total of things wrought by the humble blank space between words -- the ease of both reading and composition; the improved efficiency of copying and education; and the control, autonomy, and privacy afforded the individual -- is such that the Reformation and enlightenment would scarcely have been possible without it.

In tenth-century Egypt, an ounce of gold, enough to sustain a middle-class family for several months, bought only about 150 sheets (of paper).

As in England, the newly independent United States government practiced-secrecy in some of its most basic processes; the Senate closed its doors to the public and press for the first six years of its existence. Even more amazingly, the nine delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1787 who took notes withheld them for at least thirty years, and the best-known record, that of James Madison, was not made public for half a century.