

# For some, Internet defines freedom

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Driving down the Alaska Highway gave me the opportunity to listen to CBC radio earlier this week. I was particularly struck by an interview of people in various villages in Nunavut, the new Inuit territory north of Quebec, such places as Iqaluit, Kimmirut, Rankin Inlet, Kugluktuk, Gjoa Haven, Resolute Bay and others I keep tabs on weekly through Northern News Service. The interviewer was doing a feature on how the Internet has changed life in these places. As in Alaska villages, perhaps the greatest impact has been the upgrade of medical and health services. But the interviewer keenly focused his attention on the personal level, and what most of the respondents wanted to talk about was freedom.

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The Internet -- e-mail and Facebook particularly -- has liberated people in those northern villages from isolation. Virtually every person interviewed used the word "connection" and described how exhilarating it was to be able to talk to relatives -- family members -- in sister villages hundreds of miles away, to know who was having a baby when, and how it went, who was working for the village council and who not, who was in trouble and how bad. The Internet has become the new "mukluk telegraph," and people spoke with considerable apprehension when asked how they would feel if they lost Internet access. The same is true of Alaska villagers with whom I have spoken.

In common discourse, the surge of anti-government angst abroad in America today is often framed in terms of freedom. A friend we visited east of Gakona on the way out, living on perhaps the most spectacular homestead on road system Alaska, with an expansive vista of the Copper River and the Wrangell Mountains, talked of his fear of losing many of his freedoms, to be able to shoot a bear if necessary without hassle from Fish and Game, for example, or nurse a beer while driving to Palmer for supplies. He was grateful for the U.S. Supreme Court's recent decisions proclaiming the right of individuals to bear arms (District of Columbia v. Heller, 2008; McDonald v. Chicago, 2010). Tea party enthusiasts vigorously express their desire to be free of government constraints on how they educate their children, which doctor they see and when, and, at a different level, how they invest other people's money and how much environmental sensitivity they must manifest in mining coal and pumping oil. Most of all, they feel they are "taxed enough, already."


Talking to a few people in western Canada, I heard much of what I've heard there before. People grumble about taxes, especially the new carbon tax, which is added to the cost of all forms of fuel. But on the whole, they're supportive of government investment in their society, figuring that the higher taxes they pay are worth the higher quality of life they enjoy, including a higher life expectancy than in the U.S., a higher secondary school graduation rate, lower rates of alcoholism and of woman and spousal abuse. Some agreed that personal use of firearms diminishes the ability to negotiate one's relationship to society with whatever skills fate has provided. Unsurprisingly, virtually all agreed that Americans have more freedom than Canadians.

But it's fair to ask, if more freedom does not provide a greater opportunity to realize one's capacities and potential for discovering the meaning of human life, is it worth it? Few would dispute that much American freedom is not only squandered in such meaningless pursuits as shooting up old cars and road signs, wasted days and wasted nights playing "Grand Theft Auto IV" and "Super Mario Galaxy 2," and watching the 15th rerun of the "bubble boy" episode of "Seinfeld," but also in just shooting up, and in the vicious exercise of domestic violence and abuse of the homeless and powerless.

That's apparently not what freedom means for most of the villagers in Iqaluit and Rankin Inlet. There, and in Mekoryuk, Wainwright and St. Mary's, Alaska, people are grateful for the government subsidy, paid by national taxes, that facilitates their connection with ever-widening circles of society, in Taloyoak and Cape Dorset, and Montreal and Ottawa, and far beyond.

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