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From the Dec. 2008 Issue

Technologies are not inherently good or bad. The same Gutenberg printing press that brought Bibles to the common people and led to the Age of Enlightenment also flooded Europe with low-cost pornography and created the need for the first copyright laws.

Likewise, the telegraph that linked the American continent was abused for the purpose of dirty jokes, libel and cross-country extra-marital affairs. The telephone brought telemarketing, television eroded traditional values, and cell phones empowered a new generation of drug dealers. And on and on.

The point is that the technologies themselves are not at blame, but rather it's a matter of how we use and abuse them. In the case of how the U.S. government uses technology, we now have two clear-cut examples that should serve as a warning against the impending third.

Let's begin in the 1920s, in the era just after The War To End All Wars. Students of history will remember that the government of the United States learned during the Great War that telephony was a national priority essential to rapid communication. It did not take long to decide that telephony was therefore a matter of national security. In rapid succession, the government pushed to limit competition, establish standard fixed rates, and then declare that every household must have a telephone.

This succession led to the formation of a single national telephone company that stifled innovation, curbed growth and crushed competition. In 1983, the government finally admitted its mistake and broke up the old telephone company, ushering in a new generation of telecommunication miracles.

But the government did not learn. As we so sadly know now, members of Congress

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them into the square peg of social justice can have very bad results. But we have not learned that lesson.

Already we have taken the broadband industry and declared it a national priority. In the wake of 9/11, we have declared the networks to be a matter of national security. And Congress is, even as you read this, pushing legislation that would nationalize the broadband structure, fix standard rates for it, and declare that every household must have a broadband connection. Some irony exists in the fact that one of the leading broadband companies they have targeted for this massive social intervention has the same name as the telephone company they corrupted some 90 years ago. That irony, I fear, is lost on the government.

When technologies are used to support public policy goals, the results can be powerful and positive. The computer ushered in a new age of American productivity.

The Internet took communications global. Even the modest little hand-held calculator

re-invented small business. And I won't even begin to talk about cell phones and how they have changed the world. But the use of technology in support of social goals needs to be tempered with an understanding of economic realities as well as human foibles. It must be carefully evaluated to side-step as many of the unintended consequences as possible. And it must never, ever become the sole path to the achievement of a social goal.

We learned those lessons the hard way with telephony and with banking. Let's hope we don't have to learn the lesson again with broadband Internet access.

REALITY CHECK

Skype. I've never had much use for the third-party Voice over IP (VoIP) vendors. Vonage has always been on the verge of going under.

And eBay's purchase of Skype is now viewed as one of the worst tech investments

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Not good news going into tax season. The culprit is most likely a register setting related to the DVD stack. There's a fix in the Microsoft KnowledgeBase. But also check any third-party video codecs and other video-related software. There's lots of help online for this problem, so don't panic!

QuickBooks 2009. Say what you want about QuickBooks, it remains integral to the practices of accountants serving small business and the mid-market. So the newest version should be of great interest to accountants due to a very beefed up Client Data Review feature that helps identify and correct problems in the client's data files. Accountants can review and fix errors in account balances, charts of accounts and several other categories, all from a single screen. Intuit claims this feature will save accountants more than 30 percent of the time spent on each client, resulting in hundreds of hours saved per year. Fair 'nuff.

WiMax. Sprint is still holding parties to congratulate itself over the launch of Xohm, its wireless WiMax service in Baltimore. But in spite of the party favors and happy talk, there are real problems with the underlying WiMax technology. It's limited. It's Expensive. And it is encumbered with silly marketing rules that make it less convenient to use. Worst of all, WiMax was conceived in a time before cellular 3G and higher services jumped into the fray. All in all, I don't see WiMax working anywhere outside of third-world countries.

Street Atlas/GPS Combo. As long as you're lugging that laptop off on trips (and driving to save on air fare), you may as well have a GPS navigation unit with you. Delorme is offering the new 2009 version of Street Atlas USA bundled with a Garmin GPS unit. The software runs on a laptop

as well as other mobile devices, and the GPS unit plugs into any USB port. Total

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Technology

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