NEW HAVEN — In an arresting presentation framed in a first-hand account of the creation of the early internet and focused on the hyper-sophisticated sensors we carry everywhere in the form of our smartphone, marking our every behaviour and element of our life for commercial and state use, Free Software legend and privacy advocate Prof. Eben Moglen gave a speech this week at Yale Law School on privacy, the “machine,” and the jarring threat humanity is facing. There is at least one sign of hope, he said: the FreedomBox.
Moglen, a professor of law and legal history at Columbia University Law School and founder of the Software Freedom Law Center. He was also one of the chief architects of the GNU Public License.

The substance of his 25 September talk was as eye-opening and concerning as its title foretold: "Better than Rage Against the Machine: Saving Privacy in One Hell of a Dangerous World." The event was hosted by the Yale Privacy Lab, a new initiative of the Yale Information Society Project (ISP) in celebration of PrivacyLab's FreedomBox implementation at Yale Law School. The archived video of his talk is here.

“What happened to the human race over the last 30 years was a series of what we might call the 'unintended consequences' when [he and others] were building a little thing called 'the Internet.'" From their point of view, he said, the internet was the greatest machinery the human race had ever devised for achieving what is really meant by democracy and the vanquishing of ignorance, making available to every brain every creation and idea ever had.

“This is not where we live now," he said. The materials being used now are those which he and others like him constructed for that lofty purpose, but instead, “We are living inside of one of those science fiction stories which so heavily shaped my generation.”

What happened was that “we allowed that network which we faced outward to allow every brain on earth to learn … and liberate people by the destruction of ignorance, to turn inward, and acquired as its primary role the acquisition of capitalism-fueled gain.”
When Abraham Lincoln said in 1854 that when the white man governs himself that’s self-governance, but when he also governs another man, that’s despotism, “he might as well have been talking about Mark Zuckerberg,” said Moglen. The state too, has use for all that sensing and data.

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The smartphone’s sensing sophistication far exceeds that of any spy satellite in orbit, he said, adding, “And it is aimed at you.” The purpose of all that sensing is to turn a human being into a collection of behaviour for collection and analysis to be used for want creation.

Of the smartphone, he said, “You buy, you charge it, you maintain it. It spies on you.” He added later, “Your cell phone knows a lot about you.” For instance, he said, “the camera facing you can detect the tiny changes in the colour of your facial complexion from moment to moment... The machine knows your pulse rate. Your rate of walking. It hears your speech. The machine is a pretty good polygraph.”

The machine, which is leading us to “live in the now” and lose the ability to think deeply, “is altering the human race in a disappointing and ultimately destructive” process, he said.

He cited another internet researcher who said, “This is the last generation that has a choice." “We still have some choices we can make,” said Moglen, “and while they may seem grossly inadequate ... they are of deep importance.”

Those science fiction writers the early developers read “were teaching us” to understand these unintended consequences. Writer Isaac Asimov taught us that robots must be coded first to do no harm, not be able to kill. We must insert that into our robotics now.
“If every book had been reporting its reader to headquarters every single day for the last 500 years, we would not have what we are pleased to consider the human rights of citizens...,” he said.

There is still a fight over preserving “network neutrality” (essentially ensuring everyone has equal access to the internet), but Moglen said we are well past that and are into “repelling network hostility.”

He also noted that nations cannot seem to view the internet without considering cyberwar, but that the world lacks a concept of what “cyber peace” would mean.

**FreedomBox**

And so, he said, “If we are going to change any of this, it means changing the space around us first.” And we can take incremental steps. Enter FreedomBox.

As Moglen says on the FreedomBox Foundation website: “We’re building software for smart devices whose engineered purpose is to work together to facilitate free communication among people, safely and securely, beyond the ambition of the strongest power to penetrate. They can make freedom of thought and information a permanent, ineradicable feature of the net that holds our souls.”

“This isn’t over yet,” he said this week.

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