

# Comments after listening to the 2020 Massey Lectures: “Reset: Reclaiming the Internet for Civil Society” by Ronald J. Deibert

**Hart will** PhD, CPA, CMA

University of Victoria, Professor Emeritus of  
Information Systems and Computer Auditing, Canada  
Inventor of ACL and Founder of ACL Services Ltd., Canada  
<https://doi.org/10.53106/256299802020120201004>



The Massey Lectures of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) were established in honour of the founder of Massey College at the University of Toronto, the former Governor General of Canada Vincent Massey [1]. Since 1961 CBC Radio has been broadcasting the CBC Massey Lectures, bringing Canadians and other listeners around the world some of the greatest minds of our times, exploring the ideas that make us who we are and asking the questions that make us better human beings [2]. In the 2020 Massey Lectures renowned tech expert Ronald J. Deibert explores the disturbing impact of social media. The lecture series titled “Reset: Reclaiming the Internet for Civil Society”. Drawing from his work as the director of Citizen Lab, which has made headlines for its cyber espionage research, Deibert talked about the personal, social, political, economic and ecological implications of social media [3].

After listening to Dr. Deibert's lectures I wrote the following letter to Nahlah Ayed who is the host of the nightly CBC Radio program Ideas and the Massey Lectures. - Dr. Jack Huang felt that it amplified my earlier comments on big data and information systems in the previous issue of the JCA and wanted me to relate them also to our readers in this issue.

Dear Nahlah Ayed:

Congratulations on your creative and critical involvement in the CBC IDEAS programs and the Massey Lectures! The enlightened and enlightening lectures by Prof. Deibert prompt me to send you my by now somewhat antiquated “Academic Swan Song” based on a lecture that I gave at Chung Cheng National University in Taiwan in March 2007. It was published as a commentary in the inaugural Journal of Computer Auditing in the Spring of 2019 as “Big Data: Ideology vs. Enlightenment.”

(Some JCA readers may have wondered about the “philosophical content” of my earlier comment and paper in our

technical journal, but the editor thought that my remarks then and now below could help us further in our efforts to remain relevant in today's world as "agents of enlightenment" - if that is what we would want to be. As computer auditors we are certainly at the forefront of the digital wave that is crushing us increasingly as individuals and members of families, organizations, societies, states and our world. We are constantly developing new tools and techniques; however, do we also dare to address the real threats and dangers? Can we contribute to reclaiming the internet for civil society?)

Enlightenment implies "daring to know" (Kant) as the courage to ask critical questions courageously also in response to information systems issues. The concepts and questions applied to the "Big Data Ideology" suggested "Data Governance" as a framework for enlightened control of data technology and its abuse, misuse or proper use. They can and should also be applied to computer algorithms and models in terms of "Model Governance" or to the use and waste of natural resources for information technology as "IT Resource Governance." As accountants, auditors and computer auditors we certainly know about governance in various contexts - but do we really dare to know what that means or should mean today? Are we "hiding" behind antiquated accountability and auditability concepts and constructs?

Professor Deibert's lectures contain enough "food for thought" to ask the critical questions and to debate the issues - even in the context of decolonization.

The "We have always done it that way!" mantra is no longer tenable in resource-rich or resource-poor, capitalistic, still colonially administered and by now multicultural democracies. Colonial and capitalistic ideology has influenced too many uncritical generations of citizens and created intolerable inequalities here and around the world. Already in 1776 Adam Smith made important distinctions between wealth and welfare (in terms of "productive and unproductive labour") both privately and nationally. Why should "smart entrepreneurs" and their monopolistic corporations be permitted today to reap the whole wealth derived from claiming and (ab)using private resources such as our personal data or public resources such as water and land containing valuable and increasingly rare materials? Seducing whole populations to interface constantly with personalized "tempting offers to buy, listen, read or view" on the internet causes numerous private and common welfare costs. These are eventually payable by the rest of us and even by future generations. - Would Adam Smith consider these practices today as "productive labour" deserving monopolistic wealth?

Obviously it is very hard to break ideological fixations anywhere and everywhere, but I hope that Prof. Deibert's eloquent and profound Massey Lectures will be convincing to more people here at home and around the world to remember the lessons of the (European) Enlightenment and to practice critical thinking in tackling the following questions:

1. How can we encourage critical thinking in all societal contexts?
2. How can we encourage the development of governance methods and models for all facets of information technology: data, algorithms, networks and machinery?
3. How can or could we select and empower "Infotech Governors"?

## References

1. Wikipedia, 2020, Massey Lectures, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massey\\_Lectures](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massey_Lectures) wanted me to relate them to my <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/past-masseys-lectures-1.4439273>
2. CBC Ideas, 2020, Massey Lectures: Renowned tech expert Ronald J. Deibert to explore disturbing impact of social media, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/2020-massey-lectures-renowned-tech-expert-ronald-j-deibert-to-explore-disturbing-impact-of-social-media-1.5640204>