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Hazlett vs. Biden

Posted By [Don Boudreaux](#) On November 9, 2010 @ 10:53 pm In [History, Myths and Fallacies, Other People's Money, Video](#) | [10 Comments](#)

Reacting to [this short video](#) ^[1] of me discussing Joe Biden's phantasmical delusion that government is the source of all good ideas of the past 300 years, my GMU colleague (and former Chief Economist for the F.C.C.) Tom Hazlett sent to me the following e-mail – posted here with Tom's permission:

It is notable that the state is very good at staking claims to 'ownership' of all sorts of innovation. Consider one of the premier, history-changing inventions of all time, the Gutenberg press. Its origins were claimed by the Tudor kings in England, who held that the technology came to be discovered and developed under a royal patent. The claim was fraudulent, but provided the rationale for legal authority over printing presses which were then were then licensed — and regulated — by the Crown.

Fast forward to 1943 when, in the case of *US v. NBC*, the US Govt defended its licensing scheme for broadcasting — a prior restraint and a particularly severe infringement of freedom of the press — by asserting that, without licenses issued in the "public interest" under the 1927 Radio Act, there would be only a 'cacaphony of competing voices' (yes, the Supreme Court mis-spelled it). In essence, wireless communication was an invention of the state. This, like the Gutenberg press claim, was factually incorrect — but sufficiently plausible to sneak past Mr. Justice Felix Frankfurter, who wrote a 6-3 opinion upholding broadcast licensing (and content regulation) as perfectly legal under the First Amendment.

One wonders how government asserts — in Mr. Biden's ambitious rendition — creation of the telephone, radio (did I just answer that?), television, personal computers, cell phones (that one too?), or social networking (no, DARPA did not create the network of networks)? Indeed, perhaps we should put together a list of suppressed technologies, like cable TV, thwarted for 15 years while the state sought to protect (licensed) broadcasters. Of course our list will lag from the counter-factual problem, like when an august member of Congress demanded of an FCC official: "Name for me even one technology that the FCC has prevented from coming to the market?"

Sometimes those counter-factuals are tough to deliver.

Best

Go Tom!

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URLs in this post:

[1] this short video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DanCsvCmrMk>

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