Forbes

Looking for Feedback: How Has Non-Conformism Pushed America Forward?

By: Timothy B. Lee – February 27, 2013

In the wake of Aaron Swartz's suicide, I've been thinking about the culture of disobedience I wrote about here. The first American colonists were religious dissidents, and the American revolution was sparked by a group of trouble-makers dumping other peoples' property into Boston Harbor. I believe our healthy disrespect for authority, and our willingness to do what makes sense whether or not it's legal, is an important source of America's economic and cultural vitality. A few more examples:

-Hollywood was founded by "independents" fleeing Thomas Edison's New York-based movie patent monopoly. Today, the software industry has been able to thrive only because entrepreneurs are willing to ignore the many patents thy're infringing as they build great technologies.

-The American frontier was settled by illegal immigrants who squatted on land that technically belonged to absentee East Coast landlords. The government initially tried to evict them, but eventually they gave up and passed the Homestead Act to formalize the process.

-When the US government tried to ban alcohol consumption, millions of Americans shrugged and continued drinking. Eventually the federal government gave up and repealed the 21st Amendment. Today, millions of Americans, especially on the West Coast, are ignoring laws against marijuana consumption and waiting for the law to catch up.

-Almost every important new media technology of the last half-century—the VCR, the MP3 player, cloud music services, YouTube—has faced a copyright infringement lawsuit from incumbent content producers. Progress has continued because entrepreneurs have focused on building great technologies without worrying too much about whether they were legal.

There are also many examples of non-conformism outside the domain of law:

-When the government refused to recognize gay and lesbian couples' marriages, they ignored the law and declared themselves married anyway.

-Everyone thought Richard Stallman was crazy in the 1980s when he tossed out the rules of the conventional software industry and started trying to develop a completely free operating system. Today, his work forms an important part of the GNU/Linux operating system that's inside billions of computing devices.

-Disruptive innovation involves <u>discarding conventional assumptions</u> about how a particular product category works. Buzzfeed, for example, is<u>building a new kind of news organization</u> that horrifies traditionalists but has attracted millions of visitors.

-Getting a college degree is a traditional mark of middle-class respectability. Yet dropping out of college has become almost a rite of passage for ambitious technology entrepreneurs. <u>Bill Gates</u>, Steve Jobs,<u>Larry Page</u>, and <u>Mark Zuckerberg</u> all did it.