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Information, Globalization, and Democracy: The Utopian Moment?

May 2, 2008 | Volume 2 | Issue 1
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The diffusion of information and the arraignment of all abuses at the bar of public reason, I deem [one of] the essential principles of our government, and consequently [one of] those which ought to shape its administration.

Thomas Jefferson: 1st Inaugural Address, 1801. ME 3:322

The time has come for information democracy as a utopian moment. The term is currently used by Bill Gates (2006) to signal the public world of information available globally to ordinary citizens through their PCs. Gates says: ‘While information wants to be free, knowledge is much “stickier”—harder to communicate, more subjective, less easy to define.’ He indicates that as software gets smarter it will help people synthesize and manage knowledge with the help of technologies that promote consilience and just-in-time information. Gates’ argument is another demonstration of a kind of technological determinism, yet the general point he raises—the changing relationship between democracy and information—has a venerable past in democratic theory. In some quarters the term has come to mean no more than information sharing with attention directed towards different models—dictatorship, anarchy, democracy, embassies—that might be employed in businesses to enhance productivity.

At the 2007 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, the participants—among them, Gordon Brown and Rupert Murdoch—acknowledged that the ground rules for democracy have been permanently altered by an ‘explosion of self expression’ (Murdoch) and a changed economy of information (Brown) that favors individual consumer-citizens who use the Internet to by-pass much of the media mainstream. This is a constant streaming torrent of opinion with millions of ‘information transactions’ that breaks stories, circulates endless commentaries and ’gets the facts out there’ (Murdoch) via a kind of public scrutiny that acts as a source of constant feedback. No government, no state, now is immune to information; no state or government can adequately police or control information borders. The ‘information state’ is thus the first politically porous state that with all its contradictions, mutations and imperfections looks the most likely model for a world public space.

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Information has always been central to accounts of democracy from its early modern formulations where the emphasis was placed on the necessity of an informed

citizenry through to more recent movements like that of open government which began in the 1960s. Open government opposed reason of state, state secrecy and national security, often popularized as ‘big brother’ and ‘faceless bureaucracy’, with a system of public accountability based on principles of freedom of information tied to Article 19 of the Declaration of Human Rights.

Even before the movement for open government democratic theory held a special place for the free press and assumed a benign relationship between the media, democracy and citizenship. On some accounts processes of media globalization have diminished the public sphere as the centralization of media control and the intensification of ownership and commercialization has led to the growth of the media transnational conglomerates. Media outputs are trivialized through ‘edutainment’ and also commodified thus serving market rather than citizenship needs.

A new paradigm of communication, however, has emerged that seems to facilitate individual interactivity and enhance democracy, autonomy and justice. Yochai Benkler (2003, 2006), the New York law professor, has been at the forefront of a movement that argues the political economy of the sphere of liberal communication has now changed with the radical decentralization of information production. The new paradigm of social production in the networked global information economy has diminished the significance of the corporate and transnational media conglomerates to create meaning, to influence the public agenda, and to control the format (sound-bites) of news discussions.

This argument places strong emphasis on the logic of decentralization such that no individual actor (person or corporation) can exercise control over the totality and allows individuals to ‘build their own window on the world.’ In Benkler’s terms the individual access and user (inter)activity alleviates the ‘autonomy deficit by an exclusively proprietary communications system’.
Finally, Benkler (2003) identifies a third leg of his argument concerning ‘justice’ where he states that commons in communications and information provide a sustainable way to provide equal access to information resources while providing a means to ameliorate inequalities. Benkler and Nissenbaum (2006) go a step further to aruge that commons-based peer production provides an atmosphere that supports virtuous behaviour (Flanagan, Howe & Nissenbaum, 2005), challenging the traditional basis of hierarchical economic management and neoliberal theories

based on assumptions of rationality, individuality and self-interest.

A range of initiatives and movements including Free and Open Source Software, Open Access and Wikipedia, now tend to throw into question neoliberal assumptions within the global network information economy. The empirical fact is that self-interest is an inadequate explanation for the active engagement of millions of users worldwide who contribute without monetary reward in these projects and many thousands of smaller ones.

From the early reflections of Thomas Jefferson and the architects of the U.S. Constitution on the role of information in a democracy to the work of Stallman, Benkler, Lessig, James Boyle and others in the realm of international law on copyright and the emergence of the intellectual commons based on peer production, a central place for information has emerged. Information, within large and complex, representative democracies has been accorded a special place and one of growing importance as the most advanced economies move from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 and eventually Web 3.0 platforms that purportedly will enable not only an active and creative users in a world increasingly comprised of millions of users but also eventually a new set of public information spaces that overlap and nest within one another, built on the ability of the individual and autonomous user to develop their own info-infrastructures and programs.

We must also face the prospect of greater state and corporate surveillance, a new open-system panopticum that tracks, monitors and defines the digital self, as well as acknowledging that the information economy is also structured according to the logics of disinformation and misinformation creating a public ‘structured ignorance’ even with increasing flows of information.

Then we might plausibly talk of three senses of information freedom—the freedom of expression at the level of content; the freedom of code; and, one day in the not too distant future of global satellite communications, the freedom of infrastructure—that among them define the global information commons.

Yet despite this genuinely utopian moment it is also important to understand that the information paradigm developed as a radical re-interpretation of the importance of language during the course of the twentieth century implying: an underlying

transaction (information flow between sender and receiver that grows with application); a code system (transfer in terms of systems of arbitrary signs); and a mathematical measurement of the information content of the message (Adriaans, 2006).

It is also important to recognize that ‘information’ emerged from the combination of the development of modern military intelligence (breaking codes, deciphering messages, encoding information, resolving conflict of sources etc.) and the development of new communication technologies, often related to the military context and the cooperation between the military and business sector (think of the U.S. Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) developed in response to Sputnik, the contribution of RAND to packet switching through its research on the control of missiles and the ARPANET constructed in 1969 linking the University of California at Los Angeles, SRI at Stanford, University of California at Santa Barbara, and University of Utah). This historical point reminds me of the French Philosopher, Jean-François Lyotard’s (1984) analysis in attempting to describe and chart the transition in Western advanced societies to the knowledge paradigm. He argues that the leading sciences and technologies—cybernetics, telematics, informatics and the growth of computer languages—are all significantly language-based, and he indicates that knowledge in the form of an informational commodity will become indispensable to productive power, where it becomes conceivable that the nation-state will one day fight for control of information as they fought previously for control over territory.

In this new information environment we must still inquire whether all problems of democracy are informational problems of access, distribution and source. We must also face the prospect of greater state and corporate surveillance, a new open-system panopticum that tracks, monitors and defines the digital self, as well as acknowledging that the information economy is also structured according to the logics of disinformation and misinformation creating a public ‘structured ignorance’ even with increasing flows of information. Finally, information democracy—its concept, theory and practice—needs to theorize and account for the rise of the information utility and dangers of monopoly in a networked global economy.

Acknowledgement: This is a short version of a larger paper that appears as ‘The Political Economy Of Informational Democracy’ in Cushla Kapitzke & Michael A. Peters (Eds.) *Global Knowledge Cultures.* Rotterdam, Sense Publishers, 2007.

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