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Transparency for institutions, privacy for individuals: the globalized citizen and power relations in a postmodern democracy

Abstract:

The aim of this article is to observe how technologies of communication, especially the Internet - allow extensive and intensive connections between several global territories and how they begin to influence the formation of demands and the organization and participation of individuals/citizens around local and global causes. For this, the below article uses Wikileaks and the cypherpunk philosophy to exemplify how information can be both used and abused in the common space of the internet, allowing new citizenship developments as well as government control strategies.

Agenda:

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Introduction

The flow of information is increasingly present in our daily lives. We have chosen the term postmodernity because we believe that this term helps us to define a new context permeated by the information flow due to new technologies and the fluidity in social relations and institutions (BAUMAN, 2001).

Information establishes an important relationship with the formulation of interests amid civil society, whether in micro or macro dimensions. Thus, we aim to understand how new communication technologies have opened up tangible opportunities for the formulation of effective demands towards the benefit of an individual's life in society and, in turn, we will reflect on how such technologies condition individuals to imperceptible surveillance subjection.

We will conduct our work based on a historically significant but recent event: the leak and disclosure of diplomatic documents and confidential information by the investigative journalism organization Wikileaks. The main concern of this article is to perform a reflection around the following questions: 1) does information, in its virtual arena, develop an individual's citizenship in a democracy, and 2) what is the global influence on the construction and practice of local citizenship?

Based on a 'cypherpunk' philosophy, Wikileaks emphasizes and guides its actions in accordance to a precept prevalent in the current political environment, an environment permeated by communication technologies: privacy for the weak; transparency to the powerful.

An information paradox

Technological development has assisted humanity in areas of material and social progress, especially towards the second half of the twentieth century. Despite it being a catalyst to new forms of antagonism, conflict and social degradation, technological progress has also brought improved means of comfort and convenience to individuals, contributed to scientific advances and to humanity's knowledge about themselves, and exposed at greater length the environments we coexist with (BOLTANSKI; CHIAPELLO, 2007).

In all these advances, the advent of the Internet has enabled a flow of information in ways unprecedented before the arrival of the digital age and has done so on an intricately complex global scale (CASTELLS, 2003). However, this fact also introduces a new paradox: in allowing equal access for all individuals to information, data and elements that were previously inaccessible, that new found information provides knowledge that enables fresh monopolies over information, generating new privileges to owners of information that then use it to restrict access and privilege to others.

Adding to the issue of information abuse is the fact that information made available to the web is now widely used for political reasons and by market institutions as a way to optimize on trends and generate profit. David Harvey, author of *The Condition of Postmodernity*, writes

> "The emphasis on information has also spawned a wide array of highly specialized business services and consultancies capable of providing up-to-the-minute information on Market trends and the kind of instant data analyses useful in corporate decision-making. [...] But this is, in a sense, only the illegal tip of an iceberg where privileged access to information of any sort (such as scientific and technical know-how, government policies, and political shifts) becomes an essential aspect of successful and profitable decision-making."[1]

The concept that information and knowledge are synonymous with power is not new, as captured in the oft quoted 'knowledge is power'. For Foucault (1980), "the exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and,

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[1] Harvey, David: The condition of postmodernity: an enquiry into the origins of cultural change. 159

conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power" (FOUCAULT, 1980: 52). We are at present witnessing the magnitude of the consequences of information flow, exposed in part through society-wide debates on issues of access and control, calling into question the use of information as a political force, as well as exploring its influence on issues of representation, participation and the implementation of policy for an information society. Robert Putnam (1992), in a study on democracy in Italy, notes that access to information, in whatever form, is directly linked to citizenship. From the analysis, he realized that "newspaper readers are better informed than non-readers and thus better equipped to participate in civic deliberations" (PUTNAM, 1992: 92).

Wikileaks, among other similar whistle-blowing cases that are of late gaining visibility, serves as an example of the paradox represented by information-access relationships. As an event, Wikileaks made clear the importance of the potential of information-based mechanisms that assist in the intelligence and control of governments and corporations. Wikileaks also served to consecrate information as a political weapon, showing how the asymmetry of access and control leads to political shortcomings in the field of civil society. In turn, it also allowed us to see the other side of that coin, or, in other words, it enabled us to understand objectively how information-flows, when free of institutional controls, are able to unite an informed global citizenry towards taking accountability to the state of information, representing Wikileaks as example throughout the world (VIANA, 2013).

Wikileaks and the lesson of transparency

Wikileaks was born in 2006, fashioned by journalist Julian Assange and his associates, a motley crew made up of information hackers, activists and independent journalists, all with the common goal of organizing a means through which abuses of power could be denounced anonymously online through the submission and exposure of revelatory encrypted documents. Wikileaks would record these documents in its digital platform and encourage mass downloading and consequently public disclosure of incriminating files. Since its inception, Wikileaks has become more than merely an organization, but also a symbol of the times recognized around the world as a channel for global information accountability. Organizations like Wikileaks clearly demonstrate for us the power of information and the means by which the internet demands an accountability on the part of power structures to enforce transparency of information at a global dimension, allowing discussion, reflection and action around both localized and globalized routing policies.

No doubt, organizations like Wikileaks provide a useful service to the citizens of the world, providing the basic component necessary for both personal development and democratic accountability: information. Documents exposed by Wikileaks have demonstrated how transparency of information directly affects the sovereignty of nations, but also how it undergirds a global digital governance, openly revealing the face of a political and technological battle[2] that transcends national borders. From this perspective, Wikileaks has shown that the battle against censorship has no geographical borders and that it is becomes increasingly important to consider implications of transparency for information shared within democratic environments.

But why is transparency so important for policy, and in particular, for the development of citizenship?

According to José Matias-Pereira, "transparency is essential to allow those who are responsible for public management to be controlled by society"[3] (MATIAS-PEREIRA, 2008: 75). In addition, it is fundamental to public management in a democracy and it is directly related to ethics, compliance and responsibility of governments (MATIAS-PEREIRA, 2008).

It was on this precept that Wikileaks won worldwide recognition, beginning in 2010 when it exposed in detail the war crimes happening in Iraq, war crimes perpetuated by the US Army. The case of this leakage of information became known as Cablegate. Through the practice of encouraging and enabling anonymous volunteers

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[2] These and more informations can be found in the *Wikirebels* (2010), a documentary about Wikileaks.

[3] José Matias-Pereira in *Curso de Administração Pública* (2008). Our translation.

to send information to reveal secret abuses of power, Wikileaks provided Bradley Manning, who was then a U.S Army intelligence analyst, the opportunity to promote what is now considered the largest leak of confidential documents in history, something that the mainstream media, throughout its existence, had never done. Manning served in Iraq in early 2010 and due to his post had access to privileged information, information revealing crimes and corruption by the US government. In all, Manning exposed 251,287 diplomatic and confidential documents containing secret information involving 274 embassies. Most of the documents made available by Manning expose war strategies and policies that risk the sovereignty of nations. It is no wonder that, as a result, the governments involved – mainly the United States – took legal action against both the organization and the informant since both constitute threats to national security, fully pursuing informants related to the investigative organization[4].

The fallout of Wikileaks and the Cablegate debacle has not only impacted public opinion worldwide but has also paved the way for a positive contribution to an active and influential public debate about issues involving policy and information. As Assange notes, "surveillance is not an issue only for democracy and governance, but also represents a geopolitical problem. The surveillance of an entire population by a foreign power naturally threatens its sovereignty"[5] (ASSANGE, 2013: 20)

Free and controlled information: a philosophical reflection on the conduction of practices

While the internet has provided a historically unmatched means of access to information, it has also allowed invasive monitoring by authoritative bodies into the private lives of citizens. As such, in many ways the internet itself has become *synonymous* with surveillance. However, the internet is not an institutional entity and cannot be governed as an institution, being neither fixed nor visible. It cannot be held accountable as an entity for that which occurs in its space. Surveillance thus becomes an insidious act where the enablement of surveillance through the internet removes, to some extent, accountability on the part of the surveyor, since information, via the internet, is naturally inclined to becoming accessible. The complexity of the relationship between information and surveillance is nebulous when surveillance is enabled by the same mechanisms that were created for expanding individual autonomy and freedom. As Assange says,

> "We now have increased communication versus increased surveillance. Increased communication means you have extra freedom relative to the people who are trying to control ideas and manufacture consent, and increased surveillance means just the opposite."[6]

This relationship between surveillance and communication enabling mechanisms denotes a new order of structure, demanding a reinvestment of meaning and interpretation of the world and of what it means to be individuals in an information society (SAHLINS, 2011).

While few doubt that the advent of the internet is, in general, a positive improvement for individuals and societies in terms of opportunity, knowledge and autonomy, it is nevertheless, a contentious phenomenon. Slavoj Žižek reminds us that,

> "[The internet] users access programs and files stored far away, in air-conditioned rooms with thousands of computers or, as a propaganda text of cloud computing: "Details are abstracted from consumers, who have no need to know or control the infrastructure of technology 'in the cloud' that supports them." Here, two words are revealing: abstraction and control; to manage the cloud, a monitoring system that controls its operation is necessary, and, by definition, this system is hidden from the user."[7]

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[4] *Wikirebels* (2010).

[5] Assange, Julian (2013) in the American Latin preface of *Cypherpunks: Freedom & Future of the Internet*. Our translation.

[6] Assange, Julian (2012). *Cypherpunks: Freedom & Future of the Internet*. 21

[7] Žižek, Slavoj (2011). the brazilian edition preface of *First as tragedy, then as farce*. 9

Žižek reiterates above (2011) how monitoring, surveillance and information control is built and solidified through strategies and dynamics that, on the surface, appear in favour of the edification of individual knowledge and freedoms, but where in actuality, they limit both.

For Foucault (2008), this new form of control and surveillance is a type of bio-politics, where bio-political mechanisms result in regulations that measure, identify and describe patterns and behaviours with the intention of developing a diagnosis of future populations and their interests (DANNER, 2010). The internet has become the preferred method used in the proliferation of bio-political strategies. One such bio-political strategy, known as *linkability*, is a surveillance strategy through which pieces of data are reported and linked by mechanisms, data that includes credit card numbers, phone companies, transportation cards, etc., mechanisms that should instead bring convenience and autonomy to their users. Through these mechanisms, data uses are delineated to provide information on everything from user travel routes to consumer preferences to whom the user most frequently communicates with. These data sets can be amalgamated to construct and inform governing bodies and corporations about people lives, even against their knowledge or permission, and can be used as a political weapon, especially in response to individuals whose political activities or leanings are deemed transgressive or threatening to authoritative structures.[8]

How can culture, as an information society whose interests rely on both the internet and on privacy, best come to terms with and deal with the above scenario? According to information activists, the solution is to create mechanisms that provide more privacy for individuals with respect to distribution and access to information as well as a wider dissemination and enhancement of encryption techniques, while at the same time promoting additional political channels of transparency for the government and in order to guarantee the confidentiality of private information of individuals. Encryption is encouraged and actively promoted by cypherpunks movements. According to Assange,

> *"Cryptography can protect both the individual civil liberties as the sovereignty and independence of entire countries, solidarity between groups with a common cause and the global project of emancipation. It can be used to combat not only the state's tyranny over individuals, but the tyranny of the empire over the colony. The cypherpunks exercise their role in building a more just and humane future. That is why it is important to strengthen this global movement."[9]*

The cypherpunk movement allows transparency policy implementation while at the same time preserving the confidentiality of the individual's data. It does so in a manner fit for direct action, while ensuring nonviolent resistance to the abuse of governing powers (ASSANGE, 2012).

Conclusion

The internet has enabled a freedom of information through digital avenues for global citizens, but at the same time it has enabled information to be used as a political weapon. What we see is that, paradoxically, the Internet has simultaneously given us both wider possibilities for, and limitations on, citizenship and freedom. It has distributed informational elements from different parts of the world, creating a new dichotomy of localization and globalization, encouraging the practice of participation in local public life towards a global accountability. An engaged debate needs to broaden global perspectives around the dichotomy of privacy and the use of the internet as a mechanism to facilitate totalitarianism. Wikileaks and its fallout is the catalyst to a new information paradigm, the impact of which is still in process. All the same, Wikileaks as a symbol for the new information paradigm has already secured its place in history as an example of action and activism, representing more than the advent of a new society but also providing a cautionary tale of power structures and information flows that should not be forgotten.

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[8] *Wikirebels* (2010).

[9] Assange, Julian (2013), op. cit. 22

Based on the precedents of the cypherpunk philosophy, the debate around privacy and information control should be increasingly linked to citizen autonomy, endowing individuals with freedom and access to exercise their rights as concerns their citizenship, ensuring said rights are potent tools towards autonomy and more than mere lip service. Such rights, as freely exercised, should be the foundations to the building of democratic values. With the necessary actualized freedoms accompanying rights, especially as pertaining to access to information as individuals and protections from the surveillance of governing structures, the citizen becomes educated, informed and engaged, freed from the fear that would otherwise prevent them from action. It allows a global citizenry to instead question the interactions between information and governing structures as well as between information and themselves as individuals accountable to the state of information. It provides them the insight to understand when their rights are being violated. Such insights include a full awareness of how information is being stored and used, an understanding of how information can be politically manipulated, and an awareness of how information both enables and denies citizen participation in political affairs. The restriction of such rights not only affects the exercise of citizenship but it also illegitimates governments that have until now claimed to be democratic. Thus, cypherpunks are both activists and philosophers whose place it is to simultaneously hold governing structures digitally accountable and at the same time critically unpack how and when those governing structures have, through their own means, become illegitimate bodies.

Wikileaks motivates us to see the importance of partial struggles towards a global awareness process in a clear and objective way. Félix Guattari (1984) says that "it is only on the basis of immediate reach of na acucumulation of partial struggles [...] collective struggles, large-scale struggles can be undertaken" (Guattari, 1984: 220). The merit of organizations like Wikileaks and its whistleblowers for an information society is in the promotion of the elements necessary for the exercise of local citizenship through the distribution of information kept secret by global powers, and through the localization of a digital global citizenship. The greatest contribution that the Wikileaks legacy gave us, a legacy that should serve as an example for political actions in all dimensions of society for years to come, is an acute awareness of the power of information and the knowledge that it provides.

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