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Why the Internet Empowers and Disempowers

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Introduction [1]

This paper offers a consideration of why there is continuing debate and controversy over the empowering characteristics of the internet. A very simple answer is that no technology is neutral and that it inevitably becomes embedded with values which, in turn, are subject to contestation. The internet is frequently associated in the literature with the end of hierarchy and a decentralized distribution of power because of its technical architecture. The internet alternatively is associated with disempowerment especially of civil society actors. This is often attributed to the lack of transparency with regard to its uses for monitoring online behavour. Examples of this are frequently in the news as in the case of Edward Snowden's release of documents confirming the extent of US state surveillance. As he put it, 'I can't in good conscience allow the US government to destroy privacy, internet freedom and basic liberties … I don't want to live in a world where there's no privacy and therefore no room for intellectual exploration and creativity' (Greenwald et al., 2013). The issues surrounding ever more ubiquitous online surveillance are widely discussed in the contemporary literature especially in relation to the growing dependence of our societies on 'big data' and its analysis (Lyon, 2015)

In the commercial world of the digital ecology and with increasing attention being given to 'big data', attention is focusing on extracting economic value from large volumes of data. The name of the game is to enable data capture, discovery, and analysis. For global digital platforms such as Amazon, vertical integration and market dominance, give them a huge competitive advantage. This enables them to work with ever growing volumes of data in ways that are not transparent to those who use the internet. The digital ecosystem encompasses the use of digital platforms for research, for hosting content, for advertising information, for the personalization of online sales and for analyzing data for commercial, public and individual purposes. When digital intermediaries like Amazon and many others elect to close off or steer their customers through subscription access to news outlets, no matter how trustworthy they are, or whether they promise to protect citizen privacy, they are managing the content that citizens are most likely to see. They can screen out desirable content without the citizen's knowledge, just as they can screen out undesirable content. Yet, citizen advocacy groups argue that it should not be commercial operators alone that decide what is and is not desirable content. It also should not be the state, at least not without a far greater degree of

transparency and legislative oversight is commonplace today in the Western democracies. The so-called 'big data' era is enabled by complicated power relations that give rise to hierarchy, notwithstanding the flat architecture of the internet. These complicated arrangements mean that it is necessary to ask whether the digital environment is empowering, disempowering or both – and for whom.

Inequality and social injustice is a feature of today's social order alongside the permeation of the digital world into our lives. There are some who suggest that all that is needed is self-governance on the part of the corporate giants to ensure that citizen's fundamental rights are upheld in a 'big data' environment. For instance, Google chief economist Hal Varian calls for self-governance through the formal representation of data access, copyright, and privacy norms in rule-based algorithmic models. He acknowledges that 'to be effective, a data analyst needs to turn data into information, information into knowledge, and knowledge into action. You can't do this without communication' (Varian, 2015: 104) and it is hard to disagree with this observation. But he goes on to say that what is needed is 'serious benefit-cost analysis to guide regulatory policy'. How citizen concerns can be measured as economic costs is left unclear and he sees 'big data' as giving rise to a host of new tricks for econometricians, to profits for Google and to good things for consumers and citizens (Varian, 2014).

For some, digital technologies are seen as delivering a good society (Katz & Rice, 2002). For others, a digitally mediated world is not benign and it is not necessarily empowering (Mansell, 2012). If we are to make sense of these competing claims, it is important to work out what scope there is for individual and collective agency to shape the digital environment. The crucial question is - are digital harms inevitable under capitalism?

In this paper, I offer an analysis of the emerging digital landscape and citizen agency that is informed by a political economy of communication perspective. I suggest that this helps us to understand contending models of governance and agency in the digitally mediated environment. Citizens have been living with digital mediation for some time despite contemporary discussion about the latest buzz phrase 'big data' and the accompanying hype about the prospects for the commercialization of data. It is the accumulation of changes in governance arrangements in the mediated – and internet enabled -

environment that needs to be considered to make sense of what the prospects are for individual and collective empowerment in the digital age.

The contemporary digitally mediated landscape

On the supply side of the digital industry, there is a host of fixed and wireless providers, search engines, video streaming, webhosting, blogs, and social media, alongside the older media. The large players – Google, YouTube, Facebook, eBay, Yahoo!, Twitter, and Amazon are everywhere. Market concentration is the prevailing order in the economic sphere. 'Big data' analytics is growing in prominence with the goal of extracting economic value from ever larger volumes of data. These companies rely on user-generated data and content, operating as market makers - or orchestrators (Mansell, 2015). They function as gatekeepers, blocking or filtering in line with their terms of service agreements or with state policy on data protection, copyright or surveillance. David Clark and his colleagues write that these operators 'do not just route traffic in the Internet, they also route money' (Clark et al., 2011: 2). The stakes are high for these companies, but they are higher still for citizens. The benefits for citizens (or consumers) are presented to us as personalization and choice, supporting targeted and efficient marketing, but also social activism and education.

Mainstream economic analysis of these developments focuses on the price system and economic growth. Economists take it for granted that proliferating digital tools and online platforms are empowering because they optimise choice. Power asymmetries are rarely part of their analytical vocabulary, except when they consider market failure. Those scholars who do think about asymmetrical power and its consequences, understand that technologies are 'never innocent' (Escobar, 1995). This is amply illustrated in the literature on the implications of the internet and 'big data' for surveillance (Trottier, 2012).

Perspectives from the political economy of communication

If we acknowledge the presence of power asymmetries in a digital ecology framed by global capitalism, what does this imply for the empowerment/disempowerment conundrum? How are digital technologies and the mediated environment related to inequality and social injustice? From a political economy perspective the issue is how we can best understand the exploitative character of capitalism when it is articulated through digital platforms. In some

strands of the political economy tradition, scholars insist that relations between capitalism as a social system and sets of ideas about the world of action are never fixed. For instance, in an essay first published in 1979, Nicholas Garnham argues that we should avoid the 'twin traps of economic reductionism and of the idealist automomization of the ideological level' (Garnham, 1990: 23). In brief, any analysis of power asymmetries in society must examine specific time and place-based relationships. Whether the digital commodity production and consumption process is, or can, subvert the capitalist order – must be a question for concrete analysis. We need to keep this in mind when we consider contemporary 'big data' developments and their consequences for citizen empowerment and disempowerment.

We need to remember that even if there is 'no necessary coincidence between the effects of the capitalist process proper and the ideological needs of the dominant class'; there is of course 'a setting of limits' (Garnham, 1990: 23). These limits make some outcomes more likely than others. Raymond Williams put it this way: 'We have to revalue 'determination' towards the setting of limits and the exertion of pressure, and away from a predicted, prefigured, and controlled content' (Williams, 1973: 6).

Thus, there may be circumstances in which relatively autonomous subjects can take advantage of the technological environment to exploit its emancipatory potential. This nuanced view of capitalist dynamics in political economy theory often gets lost. When we consider it, it means that even when we argue that all technologies have a politics, that every stage in their production and consumption is marked by inequality, that technologies configure their users, and that unequal power relations 'determine' the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, these ends are not straightforwardly predictable. This is the ambiguity of our relation to technology in society. It is the dialectic of the material and symbolic and it means that there will always be a degree of uncertainty and unpredictability in the digitally mediated environment.

This means that there may be greater scope for individual or collective agency and choice in the digital ecology even under capitalism than is sometimes claimed. Despite revelations about surveillance, that is, the use of citizen's data that are generated each time an individual goes online, there may be opportunities for resistance and to reclaim the empowering features of the internet.

Choice in the context of online interaction and citizen empowerment, however, is only possible when those choices are not 'indifferent to the lives that people can actually live' (Sen, 2009: 18). If under capitalism there is room for agency, as Amartya Sen (Sen, 1999) suggests, and as the unpredictability embraced by a political economy analysis also suggests, it should be feasible to decide what people's entitlements are or should be – such as the freedoms to access information, for people to express themselves, and to interpret the digital world in ways that enable citizens to construct meaningful lives. Surveillance does not have to be accepted as the 'new normal'.

Since capitalism does tend to be exploitative in a neoliberal order, what are the empowering moments in today's digital world? If citizen choice can be amplified in an empowering way, at least theoretically, it is essential to locate the conditions for agency. This means that empirical evaluation of the contemporary digital landscape is essential. A democratic discussion, if it is to happen, presumes that governance arrangements are in place to enable it. I suggest, therefore, that it is essential to examine both the overarching structural conditions given by capitalism and the micro-level negotiations of individuals within that framework. This, in turn, requires that we analytically trace these developments through research framed by social studies of technology design and by analysis of the institutional rules, norms and legislation that, at particular moments, may be empowering for individuals and social groups when they occupy digital space.

Models of digital era governance

I suggest that to undertake the evaluation that is needed, concrete analysis needs to focus on institutions and governance as they are both imagined *and* practiced. How, for instance, are social imaginaries invoked by different models of governance? What moral order is constituted concerning the rights and obligations we have to each other? (Taylor, 2007). Answers to these questions can tell us something about where authority and hierarchy are both perceived to be, and actually are located, in the material and digital symbolic world. As Nicholas Garnham argues, we need to think about contending 'sets of ideas' within the capitalist order. Each set of ideas is likely to provide insight into where agency is located in the digitally mediated world. Three contemporary sets of ideas or imaginaries are being materialized in 'big data' governance practice. Each has internal contradictions and none of them is necessarily as 'determining' as is sometimes suggested (Mansell, 2012)

The first and most pervasive set of ideas of relevance in this context is the market-led technology diffusion model. Here, technological change in the digital world is emergent and unpredictable. No-one should intervene in the commercial market because that would increase the risk of unpredictable outcomes. An unregulated market creates optimal incentives for producing and consuming digital information. Intervention in the market is irresponsible in the face of complexity and an unknowable future. Unequal distributions of resources are taken as given. Any re-distribution of resources – information, money, skills - in the interests of justice or fairness - is beyond the model. When information/media market growth happens, it is necessarily empowering. In this model, the social imaginary of the rights and obligations we have to each other is missing. If in the material world, changes in technologies are in fact disempowering for citizens, this model has nothing to say. Authority and agency rest entirely with the unseen hand of the market. Citizens are not empowered although some claim that an idealized notion of the empowered consumer is embraced by this model.

The second model is a variation on the first – a state and market-led diffusion model. The social imaginary in this model is that state intervention in the market is essential to enhance citizen's welfare – that is, how rights and obligations are upheld. Markets are not free and the world is not safe. In this model, the state acts as a guarantor of individual freedoms - of expression or of privacy. Rights should only be abridged when the state must tackle terrorism or digital content piracy. This model has no room for collective citizen agency. Companies are expected to turn traces of online activity over to security agencies and digital technologies are symbolically, and often materially, implicated as weapons. Governance involves policy that is basically curative. For instance, rules of online conduct to protect internet users from identity theft or measures to insist on the take down of content. Technical change needs to be accelerated. Adapting to change is the only choice. Authority rests with companies or the state and citizens are not empowered.

In a third model – or combination of models – digital mediation in a generative collaborative commons, the social imaginary is one where civil society and technical communities ensure the rights and obligations we have to each other through governance generated by horizontal cooperation. This model is consistent with Benkler and Nissenbaum's commons-based peer production model where 'collaboration among large groups of individuals, sometimes in the order of tens or even hundreds of thousands, …

cooperate effectively' (Benkler & Nissenbaum, 2006: 394). Commons-based types of social media platforms – such as OpenStreetMap – can enable empowering action by distributed online groups. People engage in non-market participation and as a result of generative good will. Individual or collective agency may occur as a result of citizen protests or uprisings. The model draws attention to why social media users contribute, what they post, what blogs they subscribe to, and what website resources they access. This activity is imagined to be empowering.

In some versions of this model, it does not matter that the digital platforms are commercially operated. In other versions, it does matter and citizen advocacy and struggle may move to the dark web to evade commodification. Authority rests with citizens, technology professionals and collective advocacy groups. Technological change in this model is understood to be emergent and it is assumed to be possible to create the conditions for the empowering use of digital resources.

Lessons for the internet empowerment/disempowerment debate

None of these models arguably is sensitive to the contradictions that a political economy analysis signals. They are in fact ambiguous about the provenance and exercise of governing authority; that is, where it rests, how it operates, and whether it gives rise to empowering or disempowering outcomes. The world of online practice gives rise to contradictions and the idealized imaginaries at the core of these models become entangled so that the actual outcomes are only evident as a result of investigation.

In the first model, for example, the agency of consumers is supposed to result in fairness and equity. In practice, however, there is intervention by institutions – corporate and government - as well as by citizen coalitions which can give rise to a host of different outcomes. In the second model, state institutions are expected to ensure fairness, justice and safety, but, in practice, state interventions may abrogate citizen rights. Contradiction is also present in the third model. The digital commons is often inhabited by a knowledge elite including software programmers, hardware developers, and social movement activists. Empirical studies show that power asymmetries can re-emerge in the ostensibly open commons (Birkinbine, 2015). The commons is often populated by a knowledge elite – software programmers, hardware developers, and social movement activists. Despite the fact that this model embraces the ethos of self-organizing collective action, too frequently

it disregards asymmetrical power relations when they re-emerge as a result of the structuring of the online digital platforms. Open commons-based digital information initiatives are often said to be responsive to citizens, empowering them to make better evaluations and choices. For instance, open social media platforms may use freely available tools to crowdsource data for disaster or crisis relief (Mansell, 2013). Empirical studies of these commons-based activities show that they can still be disempowering because information may only trickle down from external experts to local participants (Asmolov, 2015). In a collaborative (sharing) commons, contradictions occur when empowering features of the digital platform are subverted by government institutions or by commericalisation strategies.

In practice, these models, and their variations, co-mingle together with respect to their implications for power relations. Contradictions within global capitalism mean that the authority to govern the internet is itself contradictory. So too, therefore, is the relation between the empowering and disempowering character of contemporary mediated life. Greater research efforts are needed to lay bare the principle contradictions in these institutionalized governance arrangements insofar as they are present in the digitally mediated environment.

It is helpful to conceive of an always contested continuum of governing authority. Elite institutions – corporate or government may favour what I refer to as constituted authority (Mansell, 2013). It is formal and top down. This end of the continuum involves hierarchy and it tends to disempower citizens. This is characteristic of the first and second models – the market-led technology diffusion model and the state and market-led diffusion model. Constituted authority also features, however, in the third model - digital mediation in a generative collaborative commons. This may occur when elite institutions become involved in exercising authority over the digital information activities of commons-based communities. Citizens may, for example, be treated as amateurs without authoritative status. At the other end of the continuum is what I call adaptive authority. It is generative and bottom up. This is typical of open online communities when cooperation is achieved without the commercial market and without top down managerial direction. In practice, when we move away from idealised models to institutionalised practice, the digital environment fosters many combinations of these types of governing authority.

Conclusion

It is unsafe to argue that mediated communication in the digital era is either wholly exploitative *or* that it is liberating. What it is in practice is conditioned by the ways that authority is articulated in a messy world of institutional norms and rules and how these are deployed and practiced. In fact, there is no straightforward choice between an idealised model of commodification, an interventionist state for good or ill, or a citizen empowering commons. As a result, changing configurations of power relations can from time to time give rise to empowering opportunities for citizens, even within the constraints or limits of capitalism.

Joined up research on the institutions of constituted (hegemonic - top down) governance of online mediated life and on the institutions of adaptive authority (generative - bottom up) is needed. This would help to reveal the contradictory moments when governance through policy and regulation have a chance of fostering authority arrangements that involve neither the excesses of neoliberalism, nor naive trust in the generative power of dispersed online communities.

Research is required on how digital spaces are being structured in exploitative ways in the 'big data' era and on how people are being constructed when they are 'immersed in algorithmically informed online tools', (Napoli, 2014). Additionally, research is needed to better understand the mix of governance models that is operating in practice and as well as on the extent to which this leads to disturbances that give rise to unpredictable, and potentially empowering, outcomes for citizens.

While online participation may coincide with a negation of citizen agency, this is not a universal fact. In practice, contradictory institutionalized governance dynamics yield some opportunities for empowerment in the sense of creating a space for choices that are not indifferent to citizen's lives. Research which tackles questions of empowerment and disempowerment from a critical perspective, informed by the tradition in the political economy of communication research that informs the discussion in this paper, is likely to yield insight into these features of the mediated world. When those insights start to filter into the social imaginary, they may start to condition the world of governance practice to become aligned to a greater degree with the values of fairness, equity and justice, thereby underpinning resistance to the increasingly pervasive disempowering features of surveillance.

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