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Our Tools and Our Values, text

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Thanks to the UMass libraries and particularly to Christine Turner, both for inviting me and for terrific help in shaping my talk. My remarks today are about a broad, weighty question: What does it mean to live ethically within a system that violates your ethics?

Specifically, how do you live and work in a world where the dominant economic model centers on the capture, repackage and sale of human attention? That's a model that Shoshona Zuboff describes as surveillance capitalism, and it's the model that underlies the most powerful actors on the internet, which is the space I've worked in, played in and studied for more than 30 years. It is, in a very literal sense, my home, and it's a place whose basic operations continually challenge my notions of what is right and what is fair.

From that both very abstract and depressing start, let me give you two bits of good news. The first is that most of what I want to talk about is extremely concrete and practical. The second is that this is actually an optimistic talk, though it may take a few turns before you agree with me on questions of optimism.

So let me talk about VPRO. VPRO stands for Vrizzjinning Protestantse Radio Omroep - literally, Liberal Protestant Radio Broadcaster. It's one of 11 public broadcasters in the Netherlands, which is a country of only 17 million people. But the Dutch feel strongly that public media needs to represent a broad range of views, so there are public broadcasters run by Evangelical christians, by Catholics, by secular humanists - historically, there's been channels run by socialists. This is called the Pillar system, and it's fantastically unfamiliar to Americans where we sometimes have a hard time imagining Republicans and Democrats sharing the same roads. In the Netherlands, common resources like television and radio broadcast facilities are shared by these ideological rival organizations. There's a "media city" in Hilversum where all these broadcasters work side by side - they have differing shares of broadcast time based on the membership in their various movements and based on their broadcast, and increasingly, their online audiences. Since the 1960s, VPRO has been much more

liberal than protestant, and is basically known as the artistic, avant garde and experimental television channel in the Netherlands

Like other Dutch public broadcasters, VPRO operates based on a charter, a statement of values that privilege individual privacy and autonomy, recognize the importance of media diversity and multiple points of view, and basically outlines both its operating principles and the ways in which VPRO is different from a commercial broadcaster. And this is where things get both practical and tricky.

To carry out its business, VPRO needs to use a variety of software - it uses tools to edit video and audio, but it also uses software to let people post comments on its website about what they thought about various broadcasts. It uses software like Google Analytics to track how many people look at its content online, which it's required to do by the Dutch government to measure its audience and continue to make the case for its taxpayer funding. Many of those tools - the ones VPRO uses to share its content online, to enable online conversation, to monitor its online audiences - come into sharp conflict with VPRO's values as expressed in their charter. VPRO believes people have a right to privacy, to view content without being tracked or monitored - which is a pretty easy thing to do for radio and television, but very hard to do online in the age of surveillance capitalism. And when VPRO sends people to YouTube to view their video programming, reasoning that YouTube is where audiences for programming are, they're sending their viewers into a space where algorithms may be pushing them to increasingly extreme content.

Let me pause for a moment and acknowledge that there's lots of values-led organizations out there aside from public broadcasters, and they also face these tensions. Consider newspapers - they are, at least in the US, organizations that have the commercial purpose of increasing shareholder value, which sometimes comes into tension with their social purpose, which is to inform the public and hold institutions accountable. This can lead to some very strange tensions. When Edward Snowden revealed that the US government was using commercially available tools to track

people's online communications - including ad targeting software - The Guardian ran a set of reports on Snowden's revelations, and those reports were supported by advertising, running on the Guardian's website, which was running many of the same trackers Snowden reported were being weaponized against citizens around the world. Whether or not the Guardian saw the irony in this, they made their decision - for commercial reasons, they needed to use the tools they had access to in order to live up to their mission.

Geert-Jan Bogearns is the digital director for VPRO, and he's not comfortable making the same compromise. In his view, for VPRO to be a values-led organization, it needs to think seriously about the tools it uses to carry out its mission, and it has to be open to changing how it does business in order to bring its actions in line with its values. So Geert-Jan and his team started doing something very simple - they called it "the laundry", but realized that in English it has the implication of fraud - laundering money, etc. - so now they call it the power wash.

The power wash is basically an inventory. Geert-Jan and his team looked at every piece of software they use to do their business, from the tools they use to make programs to those they use to disseminate, to comment on, to monitor their products. Then he and his team considered each of those tools in terms of how they adhere to or diverge from the organization's values. This gives them a prioritized list of cases where they are not living out their values through the tools they use. Then they try to fix things.

For instance, VPRO isn't comfortable using Google Analytics because, by default, it sets a cookie on every user and attempts to track them all over the web. But there's a way to use the tool where it's significantly more privacy preserving and has much of the same functionality. For VPRO, that's an easy win - making that change becomes a high priority for them. But it's rarely that easy. In many cases, VPRO would need to build its own tools to escape the ethical tradeoffs associated with those systems. It's expensive and risky to build your own software. And in some cases, building your own software

probably isn't enough. VPRO could build its own video streaming service to avoid the surveillance built into a platform like Netflix, but Netflix is where the audience is.

Even more challenging, VPRO could theoretically build its own social network to escape from the myriad dysfunctions of Facebook. But that's an even harder project than asking a public broadcaster to build its own version of Netflix. Social networks benefit from having a large and active membership - in that sense, it's not enough just to build one - you need to get people to use it as well. So we're potentially asking a public broadcaster not just to rebuild Google Analytics and Netflix, but to deploy and scale a social network as well.

Geert-Jan's approach to this problem is an appropriately practical one. VPRO's project has turned into an effort called Public Spaces, and now includes most of the Netherland's public broadcasters and major cultural institutions, like museums and cultural festivals. Each organization commits to doing its own power wash and sharing the results. There's a certain amount of mutual monitoring here, as the power wash is essentially an exercise in self-assessment: you can declare that every tool you use is consistent with your values and presto, you're done! But if everyone is honest on the power wash, the process helps each organization see how other values-driven organizations are solving their problems. VPRO's method for making Google Ad Sense less surveillant can be adopted by everyone else who cares about avoiding surveillance.

More powerfully, the PublicSpaces-wide powerwash starts revealing needs that might not otherwise be obvious. All these cultural organizations are sharing video content online, and platforms like YouTube - which have the largest audiences - support themselves through surveillant advertising. The Public Spaces partners might decide that it's time to build a video sharing service that is supported by subscription - perhaps Dutch citizens are given free access and a membership fee is charged to the rest of us. Or perhaps it's ad supported, using advertising targeted to the content, not to personal characteristics of the person watching the content. This is a space where it would

generally be considered madness to compete - YouTube is as close to a monopoly as exists online - but might make sense for values-led organizations to get together and imagine something very different.

I got interested in Public Spaces because of this last idea: values-led organizations might imagine and build their own infrastructures because they are dissatisfied with the tools that exist and want to move beyond merely fixing what already exists. I got interested enough that I wrote a paper about PublicSpaces this summer with Geert-Jan Bogerts and with Dutch digital media scholar José van Dijck, which we hope to have published later this year. The idea that we need to imagine and build our own tools, rather than simply fixing the ones that exist out in the world is central to the idea of Digital Public Infrastructure. I've been arguing that there are aspects of our digital world - particularly those around the digital public sphere - that are too important to be left purely to the market. We need public spaces to discuss news and policy that aren't optimized for "engagement" the way Facebook and Twitter are. We need online spaces that optimize for participation, for civility, for diversity rather than for strength of emotion. I believe that we can only get so far either asking Facebook to regulate speech or asking Congress to regulate speech on Facebook. Instead, I think we need to imagine and build social media that works in radically different, pro-social ways than it currently works.

So the idea that values-led organizations could band together and demand that the world work in different ways is fascinating to me. In our paper, Geert-Jan, José and I wonder whether the many different values-led organizations around the world could band together and demand that we be treated differently than traditional for-profit organizations. And so this paper has also gotten me thinking about what changes in business models values-led organizations have been able to force in the past.

As most people attending this talk likely know, academic publishing is a highly concentrated business, with dominant providers Elsevier, Springer and Wiley controlling almost half of the market. It's also a market with very strange labor dynamics. There is

real work done by journal publishers, but a huge percentage of the work done in academic publishing is volunteer labor from editors and reviewers. In addition to volunteering our labor to make this system work, we end up publishing in journals that average readers cannot access without subscriptions through an academic library or absurd per article fees. It's a system that doesn't work well for most other than the most powerful players, and which excludes almost everyone who is not lucky enough to work within a well-resourced developing world university, which is almost everyone. In other words, it's a system very well positioned for reimagining.

In December 2001 a small group of academics, publishers and activists began the Budapest Open Access Initiative, essentially a reimagining of how scholarly publishing could work. The declaration issued by the initiative begins:

“An old tradition and a new technology have converged to make possible an unprecedented public good. The old tradition is the willingness of scientists and scholars to publish the fruits of their research in scholarly journals without payment, for the sake of inquiry and knowledge. The new technology is the internet. The public good they make possible is the world-wide electronic distribution of the peer-reviewed journal literature and completely free and unrestricted access to it by all scientists, scholars, teachers, students, and other curious minds. Removing access barriers to this literature will accelerate research, enrich education, share the learning of the rich with the poor and the poor with the rich, make this literature as useful as it can be, and lay the foundation for uniting humanity in a common intellectual conversation and quest for knowledge.”

The document proceeds to outline a working definition of open access: “By ‘open access’ to this literature, we mean its free availability on the public internet, permitting any users to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of these articles, crawl them for indexing, pass them as data to software, or use them for any other lawful purpose, without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. The only constraint on

reproduction and distribution, and the only role for copyright in this domain, should be to give authors control over the integrity of their work and the right to be properly acknowledged and cited.”

In the twenty years since this declaration, Open Access has done something truly amazing - it's emerged as a viable and widely used alternative to the for-profit model of scholarly publishing. It's far from universal, but there are fields like mathematics and physics where OA is the default publishing model. It's also demonstrated just how difficult it is to build systems that work when reimagination meets practical realities. I know many of the people who authored the Budapest declaration and they really believed that most authors would not be facing \$1000+ Open Access fees for publishing their work, and that most of the fees would be absorbed by funders like the National Science Foundation, not by universities scraping together funds to make open access publishing more accessible to scholars.

My sense is that OA is going to become the dominant model of scholarly publishing in the next twenty years and that the dominance of closed scholarship companies like Elsevier is going to be viewed as a strange and temporary consequence of late stage capitalism where we briefly thought market mechanisms were the only way to allocate resources. It should be obvious that universities and libraries are values-driven organizations where the rules that work in other spheres, like commercial publishing, just aren't consistent with our organizational values and need to be reconsidered.

I say this not just because I am an optimistic person at heart, but because we are starting to see the impact of “transformative agreements”, where the people who fund scholarly publishing - often national science or educational ministries - make agreements with journal publishers to move funding from closed to open journals. It probably won't surprise you to hear that the Netherlands was the first country to sign a significant transformative agreement and is currently the world leader in moving its scholarly publishing over to the OA models. (<https://esac-initiative.org/market-watch/>)

More broadly, people reimagining scholarly and library publishing are using many of the same methods PublicSpaces are exploring. The Next Generation Library Publishing project is developing a checklist to help libraries align their publishing tools with their values much as the powerwash does in European public media.

(<https://educopia.org/nglp-values-principles-framework-checklist/>) Here at UMass, we're partnering locally to make resources more accessible using open source software and an electronic resources management system that brings together our university with other four colleges in the five college consortium, taking on two other important battles - open source software and access to electronic resources - that the libraries are well positioned to fight as values-led organizations.

(<https://www.library.umass.edu/news/the-five-college-consortium-adopts-folio-electronic-resources-management-erm/>) This sort of solidarity with your nearest neighbors reminds me of the encouraging example of Dutch public broadcasters - nominally competitors with one another - working together to align their tools with their values.

So the good news is that reimagination is possible, and that even a struggle that seemed impossibly optimistic can become a downhill battle over the course of a few decades. Here's the bad news. It turns out that access to knowledge is a necessary but not sufficient condition to correct the imbalances that some have come to call "information privilege". (<https://infomational.com/2014/12/01/on-information-privilege/>) This is the idea that scholarly publishing is - shockingly! - not a pure meritocracy. It's a playing field that's biased towards English speakers, towards those in wealthier nations, towards Eurocentric modes of thought as well as towards those with the best access to scholarly journals.

You can knock down the economic barriers and other aspects of information privilege remain. My friend Heather Ford, a long-time access to information activist in South Africa, has a new book coming out that looks at the ways Wikipedia has wrestled with information privilege and debates over what gets to be a fact and what's important enough to merit space in a literally limitless encyclopedia. We know that women have fewer biographies in Wikipedia than men, that historical figures from the developing

world are less represented than those in the developed world. These aren't disparities that are easily explained just by who has access to scholarly publishing, as Wikipedia is famously free to use and free to edit. But they reflect much deeper disparities - who do we study and how? Who has the time and the support to generate knowledge and what topics will gain them academic recognition domestically and abroad? How do resources like Wikipedia, built in part on western models of knowledge where individuals are credited for discoveries, handle knowledge created by communities?

All of which to say: the work of reimagining and recreating the world in more just ways is vast and ongoing. I firmly believe that Public Spaces may lead us towards a new vision of digital media where public broadcasters and other values-led organizations build truly competitive alternatives to the Facebooks and YouTubes of the world. I firmly believe that in twenty years, we won't bother having celebrations of open access because it will be the dominant model and hardly worthy of special consideration. But I also believe that we will still be struggling with questions of whose voices are heard and whose are suppressed when it comes to creating and disseminating scholarly knowledge. This isn't an argument to stop reimagining. It's an argument to broaden who gets to reimagine and to build new futures. Ensuring that everyone who is affected by an unjust system has the opportunity to reimagine and rebuild is the most powerful way we can address the paradox of living and working in systems that contradict our values. It's not enough to publish open access and use open source software. It's incumbent upon us that we open the work of reimagining as broadly as possible.

Responses from Martha

Need some pathological optimist - vital work of iDPI

Sharing the same challenges

Information commons approaches, open access to knowledge in general

Grounded approach to an existential, ethical dilemma that all info commons are finding

How do we build a commons, how does it live up to the promise of democratizing knowledge?

How does a commons-based model of knowledge production survive against the dominant commodity model of the platforms

Most access to knowledge literature deals from open source, wikipedia

Often fails to consider the contexts in which this work comes about

Looking at public service media as an information commons - around for more than a century around the world!

Media scholars talk about public media, community media, third sector media as having this very long history

Analyzing these cases in a historical moment - surveillance capitalism. The conditions in which peer production has happened has changed. We thought peer production was transformative - contextual

Netherlands as, perhaps, the best case scenario. Information commons battling and negotiating their standing, mission in this new environment

Lessons of addressing opportunities and limitations in these experiences

Challenge for the field - often hyperlocal, which makes funding extremely focused

Patchwork of privacy laws around the world

Public service approaches to social media - intermediary censorship

Need for privacy by design interventions, but need to engage with these public interest functions and needs

How do we pull platforms over to questions of social justice, fairness issues

Coalitions of public interest tech scholars, activists

Emphasis on changing the terms - what is the agenda that library systems should put together and try to bring into these discussions, seeking more representation in social media governance.