


Who Has The Power In The Information Age?

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The new power brokers?

Edward Snowden. Chelsea Manning. Espionage and government secrets. Wikileaks and Julian Assange. In the wake of the NSA scandal, everybody is worried about surveillance – are we living in a world where Big Brother is tracking our data, our movements, watching our every move on the internet? Or has newer, constantly developing technology really led to a power shift towards consumers and citizens?

Alec Ross, one-time Senior Adviser for Innovation to former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has an inside perspective on power in the information age. Polis Intern Anuradha Santhanam reports on the latest [Polis Media Agenda Talk](#).

He says that the statistics are staggering. 86 trillion text messages are sent back and forth in a single year. The average student sends about 88 text messages a day. Living in a digital world, we are more connected to one another than ever before, and this has transformed the geopolitical structure of the world we live in. No longer do governments hold all the power – increasingly connected citizens are taking over, helped by dynamic information technologies.

The power of the media has not diminished as a result, merely become more distributed.

Ten years ago, says Ross, Wikileaks would not have been ‘physically possible’. He calls WikiLeaks a ‘creature of the present day’, saying that years ago, collecting, collating and distributing the same volume of data might have taken years – but now “a guy with a bag of memory sticks can do it.”

Raising Voices

Technology has empowered the public, with more people willing and/or brave enough to air their opinions on any issue plaguing them. The anonymity of the internet has helped. In terms of raising voices against political regimes, mediation may not have caused the Arab Spring, but it certainly helped it along.

However, considering the recent issues that have come to the fore regarding surveillance, how safe are internet opinions, even if they *are* anonymous? Is the person at a monitor and keyboard, hidden behind a screen name, complaining about the atrocities committed by Bashar Al-Assad really safe, or can he simply be tracked and ‘dealt with’ just the same?

Ross mentions this when he talks about assassinations in Syria committed solely with the help of GPS technology on a cellphone – according to Mr. Ross, Syrian intelligence services traced the location of the award-winning journalist and war correspondent Marie Colvin, and killed her. Technology was being used by these governments to commit surgical assassination.

Facilitating Technology

It has not been all bad, though. Ross mentions how cellphones have facilitated anonymous crime reporting by ‘grandmas in the *barrio*’ in Mexico – leading to a 40% increase in eventual conviction, something that might not have happened otherwise out of fear of retribution from gangs and drug cartels.

We are presented an odd dichotomy. On the one hand, Ross admits that there is a loss of control by governments, and that these governments need to understand and accept their loss of control, a loss he feels is 'both good and bad'. He describes the 21st century as a 'terrible time to be a control freak'.

He also admits, however, that the 'eye in the sky' shown repeatedly in Hollywood films is fairly close to reality, and that if something is 'legally and technologically possible, agencies are doing it. This does not, however, mean it is the right thing to do.'

Accessible Tools

I believe that the tools accessible to the public (and, more importantly, to governments) are only going to grow more powerful and advanced as time progresses. Governments are going to have increasing capabilities for omniscience.

This omniscience will likely bring with it omnipotence. The physical realm is no longer the only way to instigate terror – cyber conflict gives parties a new set of weapons and framework to be used, a new domain of warfare much like sea or land. The United States government, specifically, treats it as such due to the potential of conducting wartime activity via the internet.

WikiLeaks And Snowden

According to Mr. Ross, Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning were merely 'lonely', 'confused', and 'looking for a sense of community that they subsequently found online', rather than motivated by a coherent political plan. It's a view that not everybody will agree with.

Technology and new media have, undeniably, changed the world, and will continue to transform its geopolitical structure. The information age is not just the present – it is also the future. What remains to be seen is the actual shift of the balance of power *within* this geopolitical structure.

This report by Polis Intern Anuradha Santhanam

This event was put on with [LSE Ideas](#) the LSE's diplomacy and strategy institute.

The Twitter hashtag for this event was #LSEMatrix

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