Privatized governance and "consent of the networked": Rebecca MacKinnon at Polis (Guest blog)

Today at lunchtime (Tuesday February 28) the LSE's Dr Alison Powell is chairing a talk and discussion with journalist and internet policy specialist Rebecca MacKinnon, hosted by POLIS. This is Alison's preview of the debate.

I'm especially looking forward to this talk because Rebecca's new book Consent of the Networked: The worldwide struggle for internet freedom touches on some of the ideas that I have been thinking about and working on. I've only just received the book, but already have some interesting questions to raise in our discussion, especially about how activism operates in the digital era.

The book argues that along with new government strategies to control online information, private sector actors like Google and Facebook are also becoming involved in shaping the way we access information. At the same time as the internet empowers dissent and activism (especially in contexts where they are already strong), it is also being actively shaped by regulators, governments and companies. MacKinnon urges us to consider how to make democratic politics and constitutional law function to maximize the potential good of the internet and limit the abuse of the power it can represent.

But things get complicated, because in a global network you have governments exerting influence over people who didn't vote for them, and because you also have private corporations 'governing' through the policies that they set for users, as well as through the architecture they employ. Governments with as varied political backgrounds as authoritian China, crypto-democratic Russia and theocratic Iran use 'networked authoritarianism' to enact complex controls on the kinds of content that individuals can access over the internet, as well as using the internet to collect information on individual dissidents that can help them undermine activist movements. Or they can plant pro-government information through processes of 'astroturfing'. The activist space of discussion and action is contstrained in several directions.

MacKinnon struggles with the same tensions I come across in my work: how much value can we place on the alternatives created by hacktivists or the disruptive actions undertaken by cyber-vigilantes like Anonymous? These offer attacks on, and alternatives to, a corporate and consumer internet that implicitly 'governs' without our consent. But they are still the alternative, and not the mainstream. It might not be reasonable to expect the millions of people who interact via Facebook to shift to a free or open platform that is not based on centralized data storage and analysis?

She concludes with a set of recommendations for effective internet governance that acknowledge the failures of nation-states in this area. She lauds the efforts of the Global Network Initiative, a multi-stakeholder organization that includes civil society partners as well as internet and telecommunication companies who work together to create self-regulatory codes for the industry, but she also calls for greater corporate transparency of sites blocked or throttled. Unfortunately, the existing efforts made in this area, like Google's Transparency Report, don't cover the data processing arrangements or storage agreements that constitute so much of the private 'governance' of the internet.

It's interesting to put this book in context with the latest volume to come out of the University of Toronto's OpenNet Initiative: Access Contested. This book examines the specific interplay of internet control, activism, and culture in Asia. It examines how the issues of internet governance, control, and resistance are no longer characterized by opposition by activists to state activities. Instead, activism and the cultures that it grows from emerges from within

the spaces left by both state and corporate actors. As much as we need strong policies for effective governance from both the government and the corporate sector, we also need to pay attention to how and where activism is taking place – whether its expanding freedom of expression or building internet alternatives.

This blog by Dr Alison Powell, of the Department of Media and Communications, LSE