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Imagineries of the Digital: Ambiguity, Power and the Question of Agency

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Introduction ¹

“What kind of world will be borne through the midwifery of our new and more powerful communications tools?” (Smythe, 1950, p. 2). This is a question that political economist of communication, Dallas Smythe, asked in the post World War II period. Is the digital environment empowering or disempowering, or both, for citizens? Inequality and social injustice abound alongside the permeation of the digital into our lives. For some, the digitally mediated world is not benign and it is not empowering. For others, digital technologies are delivering unto us to a good society with near-mystical qualities associated with the seductive and alluring siren of computational sophistication (Mansell, 2012). Making sense of competing claims requires comprehension of the scope for individual and collective agency to shape the mediated environment; that is, to make choices. Are the harms to fundamental rights and freedoms in the digital age inevitable and overwhelming under capitalism? In this paper I suggest that digitally mediated life is indeed disempowering much of the time, but that we should not neglect the emergence of possibilities for citizen empowerment (Mansell, 2016). An emphasis only on exploitative outcomes is unhelpful because it leads to stasis and potentially to lost opportunities to encourage improvements in people’s lives—materially and symbolically—even if these yield only marginal improvements.

In this paper I briefly introduce the contemporary digital landscape in the next section and then make some observations in the third section about this landscape from a political economy of communication perspective, focusing particularly on the question of agency. In the fourth section several perspectives are introduced which summarise contemporary imaginaries about the relationships between governance and the authority to intervene in the digital marketplace. I focus on contradictions arising from differences between these perspectives in practice as compared to the theoretical accounts. This discussion provides a basis for considering directions for research in the fifth section, the results of which might help to foster a digital future that is not as overwhelmed by the dominance of state and corporate power as is the case in the contemporary digital landscape. In the conclusion, I emphasise the importance of approaching the empirical examination of power and agency with an open mind.

1. Revised keynote presented in English at the IAMCR Conference, Montréal, July 2015. Thanks to Professor Martin Lussier, UQAM, for translation into French. Any errors are my own.

The Contemporary Digital Landscape

Smythe was writing about mass media and television in the 1950s and this was a very different digital landscape to the one many of us in the wealthier countries of the global north inhabit today. On the supply side of the industry, we have fixed and wireless providers, search engines, video streaming, webhosting, blogs, and social media, alongside the older media. The contemporary digital landscape is becoming increasingly highly concentrated with Google taking a commanding lead at least in European countries. YouTube, Facebook, eBay, Yahoo!, Twitter, and Amazon are typically counted among the top ten platform operating companies. It appears that market concentration is the prevailing economic order. “Big Data” analytics is growing in prominence as efforts are made to extract economic value from large volumes of data. Large companies are relying on user-generated data and content to operate as market makers or market orchestrators (Mansell, 2015). In this sense, they function as gatekeepers, blocking or filtering in line with their terms of service agreements and with state policies on data protection, copyright and surveillance. These are potentially lucrative markets and these companies “do not just route traffic in the Internet, they also route money” (Clark *et al.*, 2011, p. 2). As the digital platform owners “squeeze themselves” between traditional media companies, audiences and advertisers (Latzer *et al.*, 2014), the stakes are high for the companies, but they are higher still for citizens. The benefits for citizens (or consumers) are presented to us as being the personalization of online services and greater choice, yielding better targeted and more efficient marketing of consumer goods and services. It is these same developments, however, that also support online social activism and improved access to education.

Mainstream analysts generally give far greater attention to the economic benefits associated with these developments. As Harold Innis noted, “obsession with economic considerations illustrates the dangers of monopolies of knowledge and suggests the necessity of appraising its limitations” (Innis, 2007, p. 22). This cryptic observation implies a criticism of mainstream economics and, specifically, of the way that the neoclassical economic model focuses obsessively on the price system and on economic growth. It is assumed that proliferating digital tools and online platforms are empowering for consumers because they optimise consumer choice. Power asymmetries are not part of the analytical vocabulary in this model, except when a limited notion of market failure is considered. In contrast, critical communication scholars are much more likely to turn their attention to asymmetrical power relationships and their consequences for social and economic inequality, and to understand that technologies are “never innocent” (Escobar, 1995).

Power Asymmetries and Agency

In acknowledging the inevitability of power asymmetries in a digital age framed by global capitalism, must we also conclude that individual and collective agency are completely compromised as long as modern capitalism prevails? A political economy of communication perspective puts the spotlight on the exploitative character of capitalism but analytical positions vary with regard to whether exploitation is always a totalising outcome. Harold Innis noted that “history is not a seamless web but rather a web of which the warp and the woof are space and time woven in a very uneven fashion and producing distorted patterns” (Innis, 1951, p. xvi), suggesting that outcomes are likely to be uneven. The question in the contemporary era is whether these patterns consistently disempower citizens. In some strands of the political economy of communication tradition the fact that these patterns are never settled or certain is not overlooked and it is acknowledged that the relations between capitalism as a social system and sets of ideas about the world of action are not entirely fixed (Garnham, 1986; Golding, 2000; Murdock, 2011; Williams, 1978).

Garnham, for instance, says that we should avoid the “twin traps of economic reductionism and of the idealist automomization of the ideological level” (Garnham, 1990, p. 23). Taken together with Innis’s observation, this implies that the analysis of power asymmetries in the contemporary digital era should consider specific time and place-based relationships and whether the production and consumption process can subvert the capitalist order under certain conditions. Outcomes become subject to empirical analysis because as Garnham put it, there is “no necessary coincidence between the effects of the capitalist process proper and the ideological needs of the dominant class” (Garnham, 1990, p. 23). There is of course “a setting of limits” and these “determinations” or limits will make some outcomes more likely than others. Williams put it this way: “we have to re-evaluate determination towards the setting of limits and exertion of pressure, and away from a reflected, reproduced or specifically dependent content” (Williams, 1973, p. 6).

In this tradition of political economy, it is understood that there may be circumstances in which relatively autonomous subjects are able to take advantage of the technological environment to exploit its emancipatory potential. In the same vein, Smythe noted that apparently disabling structural media production arrangements are not necessarily “eternal or immune to change” (Smythe, 1963, p. 470). Unfortunately, this nuanced view of the potential for change and resistance to prevailing power structures is too often neglected in the political economy of communication tradition.

When we do pursue this line of argument, it suggests that even when we observe 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, the outcomes are not straightforwardly predictable. It is this unpredictability which leads to ambiguity in our relationships to technology and society. As the dialectic of the material and symbolic, or the “double articulation” of digital technology, works itself out (Silverstone, 1999), uncertainty offers a space for individual or collective agency; that is for choice.

Although “choice” is discussed within the neoliberal paradigm in a facile way, in the context of an assessment of online interaction and the potential for citizen empowerment, choice can be related to whether circumstances might emerge such that choice is not “indifferent to the lives that people can actually live” (Sen, 2009, p. 18). If we assume that under capitalism there is at least some scope for individual or collective agency, as Sen suggests, and for unpredictability, as some strands within the political economy of communication tradition also suggest, then we can have a discussion about what people’s entitlements to digital era capabilities are or should be. For instance, what conditions and uneven patterns of digital development might be consistent with the freedom to access online services, to express oneself, or to interpret digital content in ways that enable citizens to construct meaningful lives?

Insofar as capitalism is predominantly exploitative within the neoliberal order and this does disadvantage the many in favour of the few, where should we look for empowering moments in the contemporary digital world? If access to digital content and acquiring capabilities for searching for, sending and receiving information has at least the potential to amplify citizen choice, then it is essential that we locate and work to expand the conditions required for the exercise of citizen agency. An evaluation is needed and this requires empirical research that examines the overarching structural conditions given by capitalism and the micro-level experience of mediated life, but also the institutionalized formal (legislative) and informal rules and norms that configure governance arrangements so as to assess whether they may at times be empowering for individuals and social groups when they occupy digital space.

Sets of Ideas on Digital Governance

Undertaking the kind of evaluation that a political economy of communication analysis in the tradition discussed here calls for requires examination of institutions for governance as they are imagined and as they are practiced, that is, of both the symbolic and the material features of governance arrangements. With respect to the imagined, Taylor's concept of the social imaginary is helpful because it concerns "deeper normative notions and images" that are invoked when people try to explain "how things go on" between them (Taylor, 2002, p. 106). Developing an understanding of how things are understood to go on suggests considering how different social imaginaries are invoked in competing models of governance and how they come to constitute a moral order which tells us what "rights and obligations we have as individuals in regard to each other" (Taylor, 2002, p. 93). Such models generally tell us where authority is located in a world in which citizens make choices about how to live their lives. This is a way of approaching what Garnham seems to mean when he says we need to think about contending "sets of ideas" within the capitalist order (Garnham, 1990). Each set of ideas will have something to say about where agency may be located in the digitally mediated world.

We can isolate three contemporary sets of ideas and social imaginaries that are embedded in governance practice and then consider their internal contradictions. The first and most pervasive set of ideas or imaginary 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 outside the framework of this model. When information or media market growth happens, it is necessarily assumed to be empowering. Economists often suggest that digital platform owners are likely to price their services at a level that is "higher than is socially desirable" (Evans & Schmalensee, 2013, p. 12) and they may from time to time acknowledge that this redistributes a surplus from consumers to platform owners. Nevertheless, from this perspective, the "rights and obligations we have as individuals in regard to each other" (Taylor, 2002, p. 93) are entirely missing. When, in the material world, changes in technologies are disempowering for citizens, this set of ideas has nothing to say. Authority and agency rest with the unseen hand of the market and increasing amounts of media content that is available to citizens in terms of numbers of websites and digital services is depicted as evidence of consumer empowerment, but citizens are not empowered in the sense intended by Sen.

The second set of ideas is a variation on the first—a *state and market-led diffusion model*. In this case, the social imaginary is that state intervention in the market is essential to enhance citizen welfare in line with the notion that the "rights and obligations we have as individuals in regard to each other" must be upheld. In this view, markets are not free and the world is not safe. The state acts as a guarantor of individual freedoms—expression or privacy protection, but rights can be abridged when the state tackles terrorism or digital content piracy, for example. In this set of ideas, there is 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 employed by institutions to produce a sense of security (Mueller, 2014). Here, governance involves state policy that is basically curative (Mansell, 2012). For example, efforts to support children who are vulnerable to online risk online, rules of conduct to protect internet users from

identity theft, or measures to insist on the take down of infringing content. These kinds of issues are regarded as curable market failures which can be dealt with through accelerated technical change. Adapting to change is the only choice and authority is understood to rest with companies or the state and, again, citizens are not empowered.

In a third set of ideas—*digital mediation in generative collaborative commons*, the social imaginary is one where civil society and various members of technical communities ensure the “rights and obligations we have as individuals in regard to each other” through governance that is generated through effective, usually horizontal, peer-to-peer collaboration in the commons (Benkler & Nissenbaum, 2006). Commons types of social media platforms—such as OpenStreetMap—are said to enable empowering action by distributed online groups. People “get on together” through non-market participation and generative good will and individual and collective agency may take the form of citizen protests or uprisings. This set of ideas often gives rise to examinations of how and why users contribute online, what they post, what blogs they subscribe to, and what website resources they access and frequently this activity is deemed to be empowering. It is not relevant that many of the digital platforms are commercially owned. In some variations of this set of ideas, the ownership structure does matter and citizen advocacy and struggle are understood to move to the dark web to escape commodification and surveillance. Authority rests with individual citizens, technology professionals and collective advocacy groups. Technological change in this model is emergent and it is possible to create conditions for advancing equity among citizens through the empowering use of digital resources.

Of interest in this assessment of the potential for empowerment through choice in the digitally mediated environment (in Sen’s meaning of the term) is that none of these sets of ideas and deeply held social imaginaries is sensitive to the contradictions that arise in practice. A political economy of communication perspective signals these when we recall the observation that there is “no necessary coincidence between the effects of the capitalist process proper and the ideological needs of the dominant class” (Garnham, 1990, p. 23). Each of these sets of ideas is, in fact, ambiguous about the structure and operation of governing authority; where it rests and whether it gives rise to empowering or disempowering outcomes for citizens. In practice, institutionalised governance arrangements are not always consistent with the idealized social imaginaries that are at the core of each of these sets of ideas. For instance, in the first set of ideas, the agency of consumers in the form of choice is expected to result eventually in fairness and equity. Yet, in practice, there is always intervention by corporate, government and/or citizen coalitions through their respective institutions. In the second set of ideas, state institutions may seek to ensure fairness, justice and safety, but, in practice, state interventions often abrogate citizen rights. Contradiction is also present in the third set of ideas which is the one most often linked to citizen empowerment in the digital age and I discuss some of these contradictions in greater detail.

One contradiction is that that commons-based digital environments and the kinds of citizen empowerment they are said to favour are the result of the activities of a knowledge elite which includes software programmers, hardware developers and, frequently, social movement activists. It is members of this, often highly skilled, elite who command the “linguistic sense and meaning and the networks of communication” (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. 404). Empirical studies show that power asymmetries often re-emerge in the peer-to-peer commons (Asmolov, 2015; Berdou, 2011) and, consistent with the history of mediated communication, there is an issue of who can or will hold the “electronic monks” accountable to citizens (Melody, 1994).

In this set of ideas, the turn to self-organizing collective action enabled by digital networks often downplays the implications of asymmetrical power relations when they re-emerge

even in the commons. Open commons-based digital information initiatives are supposed to be responsive to citizens, empowering them to make better evaluations and choices. For example, open social media platforms may use freely available tools to crowdsource data that may be used to empower citizens. Disaster and crisis relief programmes may try to empower people to use digital cameras to map health or environmental hazards. Empirical studies of these commons-based activities show, however, that even those with no formal institutional backing may disempower citizens when, for example, information is organised using formats that cannot be translated into local practical use (Mansell, 2013; Mansell & Tremblay, 2013). In the *generative collaborative commons* set of ideas, contradictions emerge because the ostensibly empowering features can be subverted by funding institutions, by well-intentioned members of civil society, and by commercialization strategies introduced to make an initially generative initiative, economically sustainable.

In practice, then, the three sets of ideas mingle together and the contradictions within them created by distortions between idealised social imaginaries and the practice of institutionalised governance mean that, within the limits of global capitalism, the authority to govern is itself contradictory. So too, therefore, is the relationship between the empowering and disempowering character of contemporary digitally mediated life.

Research Implications

This observation has substantial implications for the way we should study the principle contradictions of the governance arrangements within intensely digitally mediated societies. It suggests that attention needs to focus on laying bare the contradictions in the way “the rights and obligations we have as individuals in regard to each other” are being instantiated in the symbolic and material practices of governance in the digital era. One approach is to work within a framework that encompasses an always contested continuum of governing authority (Mansell, 2013). Elite institutions—corporate and government—tend to favour constituted authority. This is formal and top down authority. This end of the continuum involves hierarchy and it generally disempowers citizens. It is typical of the practices that often are put in place by those who privilege one or other of the first two sets of ideas. Interestingly, however, constituted authority also features in the third set of ideas when elite institutions become involved in exercising authority over the digital information activities of commons-based communities. In such cases, for example, citizens may be treated as amateurs without being accorded any authoritative status.

At the other end of the continuum is adaptive or generative authority. This is generative and bottom up and is typical of open online communities when cooperation is achieved without the commercial market and without top down managerial direction. In practice, however, when we move away from social imaginaries to institutional practice, we often find that there are links to formal governance or to markets in some area and that this shapes the choices available to citizens as users or producers of online content. The digital environment fosters new combinations of the sets of ideas considered here so that any particular context will combine contradictory authority relations. These are likely to be contested and as Hess and Ostrom observe, even in the supposedly empowering commons, there may be contradictory outcomes within collaborative activities. On- and off-line actions can produce results that may be “positive or negative or somewhere in between” (Hess & Ostrom, 2007, p. 13) depending on the specific patterns and power relations that are at work within a given governance regime.

Conclusion

It is misleading to argue that digitally mediated communication in the digital era is wholly exploitative or that it is fundamentally liberating. What such communicative spaces are in practice is conditioned by the ways in which authority is articulated through the messy world of institutional norms and rules and how these are deployed. This indicates that there is no pathway towards idealised governance arrangements. Instead, while it is essential to acknowledge that changing configurations of power do from time to time give rise to empowering opportunities, even within capitalism, media and communication scholars need to spend more time evaluating specifically which configurations of governing authority are most likely to foster these opportunities. Research on both the institutions of constituted (hegemonic or top down) authority and on the institutions of adaptive (generative or bottom up) authority would help to reveal contradictory moments when these arrangements have a chance of fostering the conditions under which citizen choice might become more meaningful in the sense intended by Sen.

Continuing research is needed on how digital spaces are being structured under capitalism in exploitative ways and on how people are being constructed when they are immersed in online services that depend on algorithms and sophisticated data analytics (Napoli, 2014), for instance. But a richer picture of the mix of institutional regimes for governing the digital environment and their contradictions is also needed. This assessment can be developed through the study of the political economy of relevant formal and informal institutions with a view to explaining both how power relations are emerging and replicating asymmetries and injustices and also how these relations occasionally are disturbed with unpredictable and potentially empowering outcomes.

Complexity leads to confusion as Harold Innis said repeatedly and there is no doubt that the digital era is increasingly complex. It gives rise to uncertainty and to unpredictability especially when the underlying sets of ideas and social imaginaries mingle together in new ways. Any answer to Smythe's question about what kind of world is being borne through the midwifery of today's communications tools requires that work is done to make sense of confusing and contradictory governance regimes that are both disempowering of citizens and occasionally empowering. As critical scholars of the mediated world, we have an obligation to conduct research that can help to bring the contradictory and constantly changing features of authority operating through digital governance arrangements into stark relief. Much of the discussion about online empowerment indeed is effectively "a cover story for modern industrialism in motion" (Smythe, 1985, p. 436). Online participation does often coincide with a deterioration in the choices available to people through their mediated participation and this negates citizen agency. But this is not a universal phenomenon. Contradictory institutional dynamics on the continuum of governing authority occasionally do yield opportunities for empowerment and choice; these moments need to be examined with an open mind.

If evidence is found of contradictory institutional dynamics that do yield opportunities for empowerment in the sense of widening a space for choice that is not "indifferent to the lives that people can actually live," then these research results may start to filter into the social imaginaries of the future. Academic interventions in the world of digital governance may begin to foster arrangements that are fairer and more equitable and just than is the case at present.

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