

Electronic Communications: It's Effect on Freedom of Speech, Rights of Privacy and Government Transparency

By Gavin Rea

The development of an accountable government has been, and surely will continue to be, a long-term project. It would seem, at first blush, that technological advances (as well as the invention of contemporary democracy) have allowed us to keep our governments honest and able to disseminate public information to those who need it. But such innovations present a double-edged sword, for just as technology can make information available, it can also be made to conceal and tamper with it. On the flipside, sensitive information can be leaked and stolen with ease. As a consequence regimes are forced to choose between contradictory policies: either tighten down regulations or open them up, with either option presenting its own Pandora's Box of repercussions.

If you have listened to the news at all into the past two years you will have heard of Wiki Leaks, a website started by freelancing vigilante Julian Assange with the mission to expose information that governments hide, especially relating to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Although the site was certainly a boon to journalists and the common public alike (it garnered more than its fair share of media coverage), it also compromised US agents in the field, many of whom found themselves in dangerous situations. Was it Assange's right to expose these people and to decide what information the public "needed" to know? The whole concept obviously raises the question: where should the line be drawn on "classified" information. Most of us can agree that the identities of American agents or military secrets should be kept under lock and key safely away from the public domain, but what constitutes vital information and what is simply embarrassing? One of Wiki Leaks' main public draws was videos from the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq highlighting brutality towards civilians. Clearly, this is something people need to see and on which preventative action must be taken. It was also something the government chose not to release to the public.

Cyber hacking is a problem along the same vein. Suppose it was not Assange's hands that this delicate information had fallen into, but rather a pernicious outside source seeking to steal government information. Technology has not only allowed for information to be spread, but also to be stolen. It is inevitably harder to build electronic systems of protection than to circumvent them. Corroborating this, the US government's database has been hacked multiple times. This not only results in the theft of military secrets, bank codes etc., but also information on citizens (social security numbers, birth certificates, passports etc.), leading to identity theft. Surely this threat outweighs any good gained from being liberal with information? After all, is not a government's first duty is to its citizens?

The problem with this line of reasoning is that it has been used to justify totalitarian regimes, which claim to protect information from unknown enemies seeking to exploit it, as seen in government's stranglehold in Libya. This path is a slippery slope, and it is therefore hard to lend any merit to such an

argument. Sequestering information away from the very people who deserve it to is a perversion of the benefits of technology in the first place.

Another windfall of the hi-tech revolution has been the creation of social networks and their use in organizing citizens. Such methods and sites as Facebook, Twitter and MySpace prompted collective protesting in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya (though to less success at the latter). Such communities have provided a forum for dissent and connected people in a way that was never before possible. What this meant in these countries swept by revolution was that, as people gained access to computers and mobile phones, they discovered an entire country of people also fed up with government restrictions and corruption. Totalitarianism thrives in isolation, and was much more prevalent in the past because people couldn't communicate with one another. They didn't know the conditions elsewhere, the atrocities and crimes of greed committed by government officials, and neither did they have a way to voice their dissatisfaction for fear repercussions. What these countries saw was a massive effusion of anti-government sentiment channeled via social networking into action. Before there was no clear way to act on dissatisfaction, no outlet, but as people became aware of others and realized they were not alone in their opinions they were emboldened. Protesters thronged the streets in the thousands, catching the media's eye internationally and giving a voice to their cause. Corrupt governments could not ignore the staunch opposition and were forced into action.

Smarter regimes, such as that of Egypt's former leader Hosni Mubarak's recognized the powerful connection that technology was lending to protesters and moved to ban such sites in an attempt to cripple the resistance. This may have worked as a preemptive strike, but the wheels of revolution were already turning and his corrupt administration found itself thrown under the bus.

Ultimately technology, especially that promoting social networking, seems a vital weapon in the arsenal of democracy. It allows for communication and intervention in a way previously impossible. It is no coincidence that a country's democratic systems increases in parallel with its technological development. I believe that developed countries will invariably follow a path to democracy, no matter how circuitous the route. Non-democratic institutions today such as Russia, China and North Korea are all underdeveloped and lack the technology to connect and empower their citizens, and I have to doubt they are aware of the consequences of development, which is why they govern their populace with such a stern fist. During the Cold War, the Soviets faced problems concealing the true squalor and terrible living conditions most Russians faced, as it purported to be a "workers paradise". They even went so far as to exile war veterans returning from WWII in order to prevent knowledge of foreign prosperity from being spread. Corrupt and undemocratic governments necessarily thrive on ignorance, and technology offers, at present, a convincing way to break through these barricades and gain access to the truth regardless with little cost.