Hacktivists and Journalists – empowerment versus paralyzing Fear

This article by Polis intern Szu-ting Chou

What are the perils and possibilities of technology penetrating into our lives? This week, self-checkout machines replaced nearly half the staff at my local pharmacy. I recall a similar trend on a trip to Tokyo this summer: witnessing the growing number of restaurants that had opted for automated systems to order food, making it possible for customers to have a meal without coming in contact with any of the waiters and cashiers.

Tokyo and London – both are major cities, vibrant hubs for design and technology. In Tokyo, with its accelerated speed of life and cutting-edge innovations, I felt as if I was catching a glimpse into the future. However, this time in London, seeing jobs replaced by computers, I began thinking more about how the "digital" has encroached into more and more aspects of our lives – spreading wider and deeper in different disciplines and regions in the world. Yet even though technology advances may scare us, they have the power to bring about progress, equality and empowerment as well.

Blurring the Lines: Hacktivists and Journalists

At the 2014 Logan Symposium, organized by the Centre for Investigative Journalism (CIJ), I found myself among a diverse array of individuals – hacktivists, journalists and artists. They gathered together to share ideas for the fight against secrecy, surveillance and censorship. Never before have I realized the importance of the power of an overlapping knowledge in journalism and technology and alliances between journalists and IT experts.

News organizations today can no longer ignore the reach and potential for creative storytelling of digital platforms, while the demand for digital talent is growing steadily. Investigative reporters are recognizing a need to learn technical skills to protect sources and to engage audiences. Throughout the conference, I was hearing an underlying message: Knowledge is power, but digital knowledge can lead to greater power and empowerment.

Empowerment versus Paralyzing Fear

Day 2 of the symposium came to an end with a live video appearance of Julian Assange. On the previous day, John Pilger referred to Wikileaks as "heralding an extraordinary era of disclosure."

Assange began his talk with reflections on some effects he has brought upon society. One of which is pointing out to another recurring issue in the symposium: Is informing the public of intrusive surveillance and state secrecy resulting in paranoia and despair? Before, the public saw him as paranoid, but now, it seems the roles have reversed in a way, and left the public with a feeling of despair and fear.

This is important and calls for more thoughtfulness in practice because through pouring information onto mass audiences about the abuse of technology in the hands of governments and corporations, though equipped with the best intentions, they might be causing more harm with fear-mongering rather than empowering individuals.

Keep the Whistles Blowing

How to protect whistleblowers is a major concern among guests and speakers. Whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the Pentagon Papers in 1971 said "Secrets are not kept so much much by technical means as by people,":

> *"Mainly by people who want to keep their jobs, careers, their children going to good schools… their identity as someone loyal and trustworthy."*

He noted that around 1000 people had access to the Pentagon papers, but only one whistleblower conjured up the courage to leak the papers. Many people put that one person in the heroic spotlight, but Ellsberg emphasized the fact that the other 999 people chose to keep that secret, with their own reasons.

> *"Don't do what I did. Don't wait until a new war has started. Don't wait until thousands more have died, before you tell the truth with documents that reveal lies or crimes or internal projections of costs and dangers. You might save a war's worth of lives."*

This quote of his can be seen on Exposefacts.com, an organization aimed to encourage whistleblowers to disclose information citizens need to make truly informed decisions in a democracy. After the symposium, we are reminded not only of the importance of protecting whistleblowers and sources, but also of ethics and attitudes toward technology today.

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