New Media

The Authoritarian Handbook

Fighting Algorithm with Algorithm

Freedom of Expression in Decline
Recent events have made us wonder about which changes media will go through in the near future (digital revolution?). Since cases such as Snowden’s whistle-blow or Cambridge Analytics, how much do we know about how the data we provide and the data we receive is being handled? Furthermore, could the current state of a decentralized and extremely rapid flow of information have any consequences with practices like biohacking? But we should not forget the people behind technology, and for instance, how the information is being moderated outside of algorithms; who are the people behind the reporting button?

This leads us to social media and how we interact with it; from the narcissistic use of social media to the unconsented recording of Korean women in public spaces. And also fake news, a term that has come up and been discussed all over during the last couple of years. But what exactly is fake news and how does it affect you? We hope you can find some answers with the specific case of Macedonia and how fake news managed to disband the country’s renaming referendum.

We also want to build your hopes up with a very inspiring interview with Swedish news reporter Carina Bergfeldt and her thoughts on the journalistic career, the current politics and how has she managed to do some amazing things such as reporting the KKK from within.

We should also be aware of the role of the more conventional media, by some cases such as Singapore and LGBT rights, performative violence and its treatment by the conventional media and lastly, Spain and its controversial freedom of expression. And on a bigger trend, the turn to illiberalism in democracies. So, to wrap it up, you will be able to find an “authoritarian handbook”.

We wish you a very pleasant read,

The editors,
Moa Persson and Ariadna Carrascosa
They get rid of online trash

The Moderators behind Social Media

Chloé Lhote-Bérogin

7,500. That’s the number of moderators working for Facebook as of 2018. You know, they are the people in charge of checking the data posted on social media based on the rules of each platform. Those who work on what someone, maybe you at some point, reported as being inappropriate or harmful.

Those who have to approve or reject pictures of nipples, war scenes, naked children, wounded cats, and mass murders – day after day. Last May, Facebook held its first Content Summit in Paris. The point was to address criticisms regarding the company’s content management, and it turned out to be an attempted transparency operation regarding its moderation rules. During the event, several spectacular figures were laid out one after the other. Let’s pick just a few of them. 2.2 billion: the number of active users (monthly). Over 1 billion: the number of pictures being posted (daily). Now, let’s get back to the first figure presented in this article: 7,500 content moderators. Put differently, in 2018, there are 7,500 people in charge of moderating virtually a billion picture-per day. In an investigation led in India last year, the online magazine Field of Vision found a small company that is part of Facebook’s moderation system. The executive officer of this company also had a figure worth mentioning: 2,000 photos per hour. That’s, on average, the number of pictures his employees need to assess.

A quick calculation tells us this mind-blowing fact: each of these moderators has one second, two maximum, to decide whether a picture is acceptable or not. That is something those who are hired to do the job are well aware of. They are told early in their training that they can’t make “even a single mistake, because it will have an impact”, as quoted by the Field of Vision report in India. For the brand new moderators in this specific company, this job is actually their first one ever – and as soon as they start they are told that they have to be “very good at judging, understanding the things” they see one second after the other.

In 2017, The Guardian published a powerful investigation on how the small hands in charge of cleaning social media were “overburdened”. Facebook had to answer to this criticism at the 2018 Content Summit as well, but its spokesperson at the event, Monika Bickert, refused to give any details on the moderators’ work conditions. She justified this silence by invoking “security reasons”. But she admitted that although Facebook itself has not implemented any mandatory quotas for its moderation companies, their employees are nonetheless assessed every week… based on the number of pictures they processed.

In the same logic, Bickert refused to reveal the places these people work from, and who exactly they work for. Are they Facebook employees? Subcontractors? Both? In which proportions? All unanswered, also, are the problems potentially posed not by the picture, but by the text that goes along with it. Instagram especially, owned by Facebook, is full of examples of this kind. A harmless one is the one of the French account “La Prédiction”, an account posting poetic and erotic texts along with very innocent images. The rate at which moderators are expected to do their job comes into play there as well. It is one thing to leave online a paragraph with a sexual, but artistic, connotation. Leaving online a text calling for hate crimes or terrorist acts, is on a completely different level. But if such writings come with pictures of kittens, they are likely to go unnoticed for a bit longer than a photo revealing a nipple.

The young moderators in India were warned: “you will see very offensive stuff, sometimes very disturbing… Be mentally prepared for your job!” Yet Facebook claims all these people have the right to ask not to deal with a specific kind of content. How does the firm ensure that this right is respected?

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By the time you have finished your morning coffee, made the kids ready for school or even just the time it takes you to read this article, all of your social media networks have already constructed, from millions of possible variations, what content you will be seeing that day.

From news, specifically selected from your own stance on the political spectrum to what adverts will most appeal to you in order to get you to buy something you never even considered before. All of this is based around a social networks own algorithm, a series of codes which gives the user a “Hyper-Personalised” experience.

In recent years Public Interest API’s (Application Programming Interfaces) have become a topic which consistently come up when discussing social media and its effects on society, both socially and perhaps more alarmingly in the interest of a democratic process. Many companies are trying to introduce Public Interest API’s; a separate software practice, which would integrate within Social media and provide some transparency as to when you are being profiled for content and targeted by the algorithm itself. Making websites like Facebook a broader spectrum of information for the user.

It has been questioned by social media companies as to whether this practice would conflict with a user’s privacy, although Tom Wheeler of the Centre For Technology Innovation states that the process “doesn’t open the algorithm itself, or the privacy protections of users, but it does capture select inputs and outputs”, which directly contra-

Pressure for the integration of Public Interest API’s comes from reports that democratic processes around the world are being directly affected as a result of these algorithms. Suspected Russian influence in the U.S. Presidential Election and Cambridge Analytica’s manipulation using the data of 87 million users during the UK referendum which prompted Brexit are two of the main examples where social media scandals have been prominent. Although, this has paved the way for further investigations worldwide.

Tom Wheeler goes on to say “algorithms deliver only what they want you to see, creating silos of prejudices and preferences that tear at the collective fabric required for a representative democracy”. And elaborating on the political positivity of Social media transparency says, “such sunlight will not only expose any propaganda, but also will help independent evaluation of the veracity of the information being delivered”.

Obviously, the repercussions of the implementation go beyond the monitoring of political events, this would have a huge impact on day to day life. Public Interest API’s would stop ‘Fake news’ being targeted to isolate a certain demographic of people from another and micro-targeted advertisements would stop attributing to the mental health crisis which has been shown to be a direct result of social media manipulation.

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In fact, in a 2017 investigation by The Australian, leaked documents showed that an Australian company was assured by Facebook executives that they could target adverts for them, based on the psychological insights of 6.4 million teenagers obtained by its algorithm. Stating that they knew when teenagers felt “defeated, overwhelmed, stressed, anxious, nervous, stupid, silly, useless and like a failure”.

Following the news reports, Facebook, of course, refuted the claim, but then released a statement days later stating that they would “conduct an investigation into the matter”. Admitting “it was inappropriate to target young children in such a way”.

As social media scandals become the norm, though the one’s responsible, as of yet have faced few serious penalties, Facebook, only last week released that over 50 million accounts had been hacked, there were cries from some within the U.S senate pleading for judicial intervention, with Senator Mark Warner, a Democrat from Virginia stating “This is another sobering indicator that Congress needs to step up and take action to protect the privacy and security of social media users”. Given that Facebook and other social media outlets have maintained that they will not accept a public interest API within their platform, it seems the only way to make this a reality is through legal obligation.

With calls for investigations into, and potential reforms for all social media platforms, it seems that the solution of public interest API’s is already staring us in the face.

Daniel McKenna
Biohacking: The Untested Future

Biohacking. A term so broad it can refer to activities such as trying a new diet or inserting a microchip into your hand to serve as company ID. As of 2017 the term can also be used when referring to someone injecting themselves with a homemade gene therapy intended to cure Herpes in front of a live audience, and broadcasting it on social media.

Almost all biohacking is what is called DIY biohacking, conducted by mostly amateur biologists, or citizen scientists, running experiments on themselves and their friends in in-home or small scale laboratories. The main reason for these DIY labs is to circumvent the rigorous testing and well established protocols of mainstream science. DIY biohacking started to gain popularity after an article was published in Make magazine in 2006, and since then the bond between media and biohacking has only strengthened. Being a niche practice full of intense individuals the obvious image of reckless, mad-scientists. In response to a one long time bio-hacker said “These stunts make old-school biohackers/self-experimenters (like me) look like ignorant fools.”

In the following months Aaron Traywick's gene therapy proved not to be effective and his brash, attention seeking behavior caused Ascendance Biomedical to fall apart and Traywick to be ostracized from his network of bio-hackers, before he died of a Ketamine overdose in April this year. One bio-hacker previously working with Traywick and Ascendance Biomedical, Tristan Roberts, said he and other bio-hackers wanted to “eliminate” Traywick from the biohacking community before he “hurts people”. Although many of the popular names in biohacking are active online, the way Aaron Traywick was conducting experiments. To help create a network of like-minded DIY amateur scientists and biohack practices for some four dozen similar labs."

Although DIY biohacking labs or biohackers themselves haven’t yet caused harm to the general public, or put them at risk of any serious danger there is still widespread concern for the future, and not just in amateur science labs. Keoni Gandall, a research fellow at Stanford University said “Even I would tell you, the level of DNA synthesis regulation, it simply isn’t good enough. These regulations aren’t going to work when everything is decentralised – when everybody has a DNA Synthesiser on their smartphone.” Gandall is referring to the natural or artificial creation of gene sequences that is becoming a hot topic among scientists, particularly those in the immunology and bio-security fields. A legitimate science lab, full of legitimate scientists in Alberta, Canada used DNA strands they ordered on the internet to complete a synthesis of a formerly extinct cousin of smallpox, Horsepox. Not only did they recreate this potentially devastating poxvirus but they gave step by step instructions of their process and even troubleshooting tips for synthesising similar viruses in a paper that was published in PLOS One in January of 2018. The large scientific journal PLOS One released a statement accompanying the paper stating that the internet has proven to also be a place that has managed to cultivate relationships between those interested in DIY science and establish a strong network. Although biohackers are mostly working outside of government regulations - testing on themselves and not publishing in peer reviewed journals - there is still an unwritten ethical code upheld by most of those in the field, and the labs still employ best practice measures when conducting experiments. To help create a network of like-minded DIY amateur scientists and biohacking labs diybio.org created the DIY biosphere.

In his lab Grushkin runs ‘biohacking boot camps’ where he introduces people to DIY biology

An interactive map of the world with information about dozens and dozens of biohacking labs and events operating throughout the world. One of these labs is Genspace, run by Daniel Grushkin, a prominent figure and poster boy for large scale, legitimate, safe biohacking labs. In his lab Grushkin runs ‘biohacking boot camps’ where he introduces people to DIY biology. As The Independent said “he has posted community guidelines, forbidden infectious agents in the lab, and accepted a grant of almost $500,000 (USD) to design security practices for some four dozen similar labs.”

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they had assessed the risk of publishing the information in paper with their Dual Use Research Committee and determined that “the benefits of publication outweigh the risks”. Many scientists in the community were extremely concerned by a perceived lack of disregard for biosafety from PLOS One in publishing the paper. Especially as before it was published a report from the World Health Organisation said the that the venture “did not require exceptional biochemical knowledge or skills, significant funds or significant time”.

Although the level of technology and funding is much greater in the case of professional science labs this kind of information coupled with increasingly accessible technology could give biohackers the tools to create an infectious poxvirus using the same gene editing techniques they are already practicing. This is particularly concerning considering the lack of government regulation in biohacking labs.

So, a bio security expert at the FBI had this to say when speaking to The Independent, “there really isn’t a national governance per se for those who are not federally or government funded.” Instead he says the agency mainly relies on biohackers to alert the FBI of any suspicious behaviour going on in their labs.

With any field in this day and age, particularly a new and growing one media plays a giant role in its expansion. Biohacking is no exception. Whether it is through potentially poorly thought out marketing ideas, well-constructed community networks or open access to new information in legitimate science publications, media and technology are helping biohacking to move forward at a fast pace. Enabling citizen science to strengthen and develop, for better or worse.
Zeuxis and Parrhasius, two of the best painters of their time enter a competition to determine who is the true master of their arts. In some sort of duel, both are asked to create a painting as realistic as possible which the present jury will later on evaluate. After removing the veil in front of his master-piece, it becomes obvious: Parrhasius managed to draw a bush with such detailed and realistic berries that birds fly by and try to pick them. Zeuxis however has his painting still covered by a veil. Upon this, Parrhasius approaches Zeuxis’ painting to remove the veil. At this very moment he realizes his loss, the assumed approach of Zeuxis’ painting to remove the veil. Upon this, Parrhasius declare: ‘The Devil in Love’, a young captain of Naples king’s guard and member of an aristocratic family is out partying with his friends. As the night proceeds, he finds himself alone with a stranger he just met: Soberano. The latter tells Don Alvaro that he is able to summon spirits. Don Alvaro is fascinated by this and more.“The Devil in Love”), a young captain of Naples king’s guard and member of an aristocratic family is out partying with his friends. As the night proceeds, he finds himself alone with a stranger he just met: Soberano. The latter tells Don Alvaro that he is able to summon spirits. Don Alvaro is fascinated by this and more. After a demanding, complex and mysterious ritual the presented and spectacular new Iphone Xs that appears in the form of a camels head asking Don Alvaro: Che Vuoi? (What do you want?)

According to Lacan, the subject’s desire is not directed towards a specific object (e.g. housing, wealth, certificates or their asceticism) but it’s imposed by the Other. Further, the subject’s desire is always the desire of the Other, which is not a person but rather an ideological state apparatus (e.g. norms, laws or moral). Just like the camel-head-shaped devil asking Don Alvaro: Che Vuoi? (What do you want?)

Are social media platforms so important because they are so coherent with the human psyche when it comes to imaginary content (pictures & emojis) and symbolic content (comments & hashtags) that are circulating around something? The ‘west’ may be God and s/he has been spectacularly replaced by the metaphysics of capitalism. But also the later is not resistant to change since a new source of power within the societal field is on the rise: personal information / data. The presence of the postmodern phenomena in late capitalism may be the individualistic and hedonistic subjectivation that itself transgresses through the borders of the public and private life, where the big narratives of previous centuries (religion, national state or economy) seems to be deconstructed. Anyway, to approach what the Other wants from someone in a societal context that is embedded in social media, one could try to answer for ‘oneself’ while using social media the next time: Che Vuoi?

Maximilian Weik

So what?

These three events, may they be historic, fictional or contemporary are accompanied by a driving question of everyday struggle: what does one desire? What one desires is nowadays not only approachable through psychoanalytic practice or through ‘knowing’ oneself. Who one wants to be and how one wants to be seen is also externalized and accessible through social media. E.g. Instagram, Snapchat or Facebook. This, in the first place highly individual practice in the area of conflict between conformity and emancipation, seems to be a service that is free in terms of money but expensive when it comes to revealing personal data. But it is likewise a highly collective and interdependent political struggle. How the global and normative orders are structured and reflected into the realm of social media and what is at stake became recently obvious (#CambridgeAnalytica #Metoo #Twitterbot). Social media may be highly discussed and tried to be explained by new theoretical frames acknowledging this new condition, but a likewise interesting explanation may lay in the past. Jacques Lacan, an influential psychoanalyst of the 20st century developed a set of complex assumptions about the subjects psyche as well as the subjects desire, mainly through psychoanalytic theory and practice but also by revising Freud. According to Lacan, three cornerstonees constitute the human psyche. First: the symbolic, so to say the realm of language. A word functions as a signifier that gives meaning to it’s counterpart, the signified. This is anyhow a pluralistic relation. A certain signifier signifies several signified while the signified itself is again a signifier for something else. The signified glides underneath the signifier and is opposed to a constant individual and societal struggle (read: political). Because language can never be on point or precise, according to Lacan the subject is split. Second, the imaginary may be the realm of the body. The body is of great importance for the subject by presenting the borders between who I am and who the other is. Emerged by the traumatic experience of recognizing oneself in a mirror, Lacan developed the concept of the mirror stage. Through experiencing oneself in a mirror, the toddler (likewise the ‘regular’ social media user) falls in love with itself. Being witnessed by another person (the other) and the later development of language, the symbolic is inflicting the imaginary. I want to be like mom (dad, friend, teacher, boss, neighbor, professor or celebrity) but I also do not want to be like them. This unanswerable question is therefore structuring the subject’s narcissistic state. Important to mention is that narcissism for Lacan is not a pathological diagnosis but a ‘normal’ condition of human psyche. Fundamental for this is the emerging question: how am I perceived? Third, the real is precisely what can not be expressed by neither the symbolic nor the imaginary. The real can not be identified, the imaginary and the symbolic are circulating around it and as soon as the real is grasped, the real vanishes. Just like Zeuxis’ painting from the perspective of Parrhasius. According to Lacan, the subject’s desire is not directed towards a specific object (e.g. housing, wealth, certificates or their asceticism) but it’s imposed by the Other. Further, the subject’s desire is always the desire of the Other, which is not a person but rather an ideological state apparatus (e.g. norms, laws or moral). Just like the camel-head-shaped devil asking Don Alvaro: Che Vuoi? (What do you want?)

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Spy cameras are hidden all over in public toilets and the subway in South Korea. In July this year, over 18,000 women gathered on the streets of Seoul to protest on the problem with molka, spy cameras. Through small holes poked in walls the spy cameras record women going to the bathroom and the films often end up on pornography sites.

The protest got together under the hashtag #MyLifeIsNotYourPorn and was the biggest female-only march in South Korean history and has now become a monthly protest. Spy cameras are hidden in shoes, body lotions and in holes in public bathroom walls, filming women going to the bathroom or trying to film up-skirts, trying to produce secretly recorded pictures and videos of women in public spaces for pornography. The protests against molka all started in May, when a 25-year old woman got arrested for secretly taking a photo of a male colleague and then uploaded it online. Leaving the general population of women asking whether the police actually care when the hidden-camera issue is directed to women or if its only relevant to arrest the person who conducted the crime when the target was a man - something that is very rare. In the latest march taking place in the beginning of October, people arrived with signs saying stuff like “Don’t come to Korea, your young daughter can be a porn star” and “The places of korean spy cam = in your lodging, glasses, toilet = Everywhere”. In an article published in The Telegraph in September, the organizers behind the biggest women’s march say there has been a huge backlash to the organizers saying that they have been forced to leave their jobs and need to keep their identification anonymous for the fear of acid attacks. The country has had a history with this kind pornography over the years and many people now feel that the government is not able to deal with the perpetrators who use the spy cameras or smart phones to film under women’s clothing or try to record films by secretly showing their genitals. As they only get small fines and this creates an environment in which women constantly worry about small hidden cameras in public bathrooms or being filmed from under their skirt at the subway.

The problem with women’s lack of privacy in public spheres made the government take action in 2004, making the phone companies selling mobile phones in the country to have a feature installed not allowing the turning off of the camera shutter sound. This was an action to protect people’s privacy and for the government to show they were acting on the problem.

In South Korea, internet censorship is similar to developed countries, except the part including a ban on pornography. A law that is loosely applied to many websites and social media, a forum where many people get their porn. Recently, the social media platform Tumblr agreed to cooperate with the South Korean government in censoring pornography on their website in South Korea. With the attention the government pays to censoring pornography women feel that their calls for change regarding the molka are not being listened to. Add to this the fact that when a woman takes a photo of a man she is prosecuted and not when the opposite happens. There may however, be more to face than just the government for the monthly protesters going forward, as the backlash they receive is only mounting.
The Ills of Mediatized Perceptions: The Macedonian Example

The concept of autonomy denotes self-governance, the ability of one to make decisions about themselves independently of external influences. It was upon this concept that the Treaty of Westphalia was signed in 1648 to establish and recognize states and their sovereignty. Perceptions in media, particularly social media, have arguably affected state’s ability to be autonomous in their political affairs.

The name change referendum failure in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is a fitting case study that portrays the dangers of social media perceptions on state autonomy in democratic societies where internet access is not an issue. The referendum, scheduled for September 30, 2018 was the glare of hope in solving a 27 year long dispute with Greece over the country’s name. Greece has claimed that the name Macedonia belongs to the historical region in its northern province and has blocked the country’s attempt to join NATO and the EU because of this name conflict. The referendum was to present a name change to The Republic of Northern Macedonia which was approved by Greece and that would allow the country’s accession into the EU and NATO. However opposers of the referendum used social media as a manipulation tool to get citizens to boycott the referendum.

Over 3 billion people are social media users. In this space of free space of expression and global integration, people from all walks of life have the ability to share their opinions openly in matters that they would not have been able to before. It brings world affairs into the intimacy of personal chats and sovereign matters under the influence of global social perception. Prior to the referendum date, the hashtag #6okoripav (boycott) emerged on twitter generating over 24,000 mentions and 20,000 retweets. Additionally, false information about the referendum continuously flooded news feeds. Even further, there were approximately 40 new facebook pages emerging everyday that spread the message of boycott across the platform. This deliberate disinformation campaign was helped by the fact that government initiatives such as ‘Macedonia Connects’ and ‘Fresh Air and Free Internet’ had paved the way for increased internet access across the country years before.

In this way, social media perceptions subtly removed individual’s ability to think and decide for themselves, passive-aggressively dictated what decisions were to be taken and eroded the principles of democracy in general. Social media does not conform to the rules of media literacy and media accuracy since the currency of perception is free. Thus the ability of such a platform to influence, at times forcefully and subtly, state decisions is overwhelmingly alarming. Political decisions such as referendums or elections are by no means a light-hearted matter to be skewed by ill-advised and agenda-driven opinions by the ‘loudest speaker’ on a social media platform. These are matters that determine the ability of the country to provide employment, health benefits or security for the population and have a consequential impact on everyday ordinary lives. To respect the individual and state autonomy, such intimate matters should be critically contemplated by the citizens without the influence of hashtags or hidden agenda memes in a virtual world that are aggressively targeting their attention.

Fake news spreading propaganda about the illegality of the referendum, hate speeches, organized trolls, hashtags and memes that constantly poured out on social media skewed perceptions, discouraged and at times enraged citizens.

Toni-Marie Cornwall

Disinformation campaign was helped by the fact that government initiatives such as ‘Macedonia Connects’ and ‘Fresh Air and Free Internet’ had paved the way for increased internet access across the country years before.

Om du skulle få möjligheten att få sätta ner i en timme och få intervjuen presidenten själv, vad skulle du helst vilja fråga honom då?

Jag har tänkt på den frågan ganska länge; det är det som man måste dra slutsatsen från. Jag har aldrig varit en som talar så mycket osanning, i princip sex gånger om dagen. Det är ett helt annat samhälle att ta hänsyn till vilket släkt av flera av hans påståenden är osannsamma, och fiendom som har hamnat i något "twitterkrig" då det har ansetts som mycket viktigt.

USA är ett land med över 320 miljoner människor där alla har en historia att berätta, och de här historierna kommer inte att få bli hörda på grund av något som Trump har sagt eller ljugit om. Detta funderar jag så frustrerande. Det kan göra att jag ibland känner mig mer som en reporter som är hår för att bevaka Trump än en reporter som är hår för att bevaka det som händer i USA. Vi har aldrig sett en president av samma kaliber i ett demokratiskt samhälle som säger så mycket osannsamt.

"USA är ett fantastiskt land" med människor som lever i helt parallella universum"
- Vad tror du är anledningen till att människor vägar och vill öppna sig så för dig om det som de har upplevt samt står för?


- Även om de var fientliga i början så förstod de till slut att jag bara ville veta?


- Skulle du vilja skriva ytterligare en bok, och isåfall om vad?


- Vad skulle du vilja ge för råd till dem som befinner sig i det stadiet som du en gång var i?

De svarade tillbaka att “nej, vi har inte gjort fel”. Efter det skulle du förstörda det som jag skrev. Men de synpunkter som man bara vill grotta ner sig i. Land fullt av spännande människor med spännan- de synpunkter som man bara vill grotta ner sig i. Men det finns just nu inte riktigt någon tid för det. Jag har verkligen många roligaste jobb som dock tar upp majoriteten av min tid.


- Vad skulle du vilja ge för råd till dem som befinner sig i det stadiet som du en gång var i?

Det var ungefär ett halvtur efter att jag hade vunnit mit reportage om Utöya som de ringde från journalisten och berättade att jag hade blivit tillde-lad priset som “Årets stilist”. Då kände jag bara att detta är helt orimligt. Hur lyckas man under loppet på ett halvat göra samma misslag två gånger där de utnämner fel person?

Being Gay in Singapore

Shreeya Pillai

There has been a flurry of lobbying from people in Singapore on both sides of Section 377A of the Singapore Penal Code. The law criminalizes sex between mutually consenting men is known as Section 377 and 377A of the Penal Code in India and Singapore respectively.

Section 377A was repealed in India on 6 September this year. This was despite strong opposition among religious groups. The laws were introduced into both states in the 1930s by the British when both countries were still British colonies. The law was previously challenged in Singapore in 2014 and later deemed constitutional by the Court of Appeal. The government’s rhetoric has constantly been that Singaporean society which is one that is still ‘conservative’ is not ready for the law to be repealed. There has been fear that the ‘Asian values’ and ‘traditional family unit’ that pockets of Singaporeans hold on to so dearly is under threat.

There have been many Asian countries who have in recent years started to liberalize their laws with regards to LGBTQ rights. In addition to the recent example of India, Taiwan, Vietnam and parts of Japan have passed laws to recognize civil unions in recent years. Hence, one wonders exactly what constitutes these ‘Asian’ or ‘traditional’ values.

Singapore prides itself on being a secular nation. Thus, the religious views and beliefs of different groups should not play a role in policy making and in this case the repealing of the law. In comparison, India, also a secular state, enjoys diversity in beliefs and practices. It is also the birthplace of four huge religions - Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. However, despite opposition from various religious groups, the courts – independent from the parliament and civil society – decided that it was more important to uphold human rights over the preferences of people who choose to identify with different religions.

While Singapore proudly calls itself a democracy, features of the nation suggest otherwise. Freedom of expression and speech is highly restricted. The media is heavily controlled. The Newspaper and Printing Presses Act of 1974 dictates that the printing or publishing of any newspaper is not permitted unless a permit is granted by the Minister authorising the publication of said publication. As such, there are currently only two English language newspapers in circulation in Singapore, and one in each of the three other official languages. The law is especially constraining with regards to reporting on or shows which talk about LGBTQ issues. The media watchdog, the Media Development Authority, prohibits the ‘promotion or glamorization of the homosexual lifestyle’. Doing so could lead to hefty fines being imposed on media organizations. What this means is that a happy, fulfilled LGBTQ character who has a good job or family support, is not allowed on television or radio broadcasts. But an LGBTQ character who may be sad, troubled, suicidal or suffering from mental disorders is acceptable. Because of these laws, shows like Modern Family, an Emmy winning American sitcom featuring a happy gay couple with an adopted child have never been aired on its free-to-air channels.

Furthermore, Public Order Act prohibits public demonstrations in Singapore, making it almost impossible for people to protest against laws like these which they may disagree with.

The heavy regulation of the media has led to inaccurate portrayals of the LGBTQ community. The laws in place create an environment of self-censorship where the press refrains and are forced to refrain from talking about alternative sexual orientations for fear of repercussions from the government.

The consequences of these laws are multi-faceted. Firstly, it has developed a culture of self-censorship where journalists and editors refrain from even neutral reporting for fear of the possible repercussions that would ensue. Secondly, there has been very one sided and inaccurate portrayals of what it means to be gay or transgender. And for the people who already hold on to these perceptions, there is little chance or encouragement to change their understanding on these issues - many misinformed Singaporeans on social media have voiced their approval of 377A, likening homosexuality to pedophilia and bestiality. Instead, these ideas are constantly reinforced with the present regulations and climate of reporting. Since the main argument against repealing is because society is not ready, how and when will society be ready when the information they are consuming constantly reinforces the opposite?

The media has also been guilty of reporting facts that could be seen to be misleading. For example, the Straits Times, the only English printed newspaper, published an article on a survey carried out by a market research firm. It discussed how 55 percent of the 750 Singaporean citizens and permanent residents surveyed still support 377A. The article opened with the line ‘A little more than half of the people in Singapore – or 55 percent – still support Section 377A of the Penal Code, which criminalizes consensual sex between adult men’. In reality, 750 people translates to approximately 0.026 percent of the current demographic mentioned in the survey. Failing to mention this creates a false image of public opinion in Singapore.

In a weak defense of 377A, the government has said multiple times that though the law is in place, it is not one that will be enforced. However, its mere presence dictates that it is acceptable to label innocent individuals as criminals and perpetuate the negative stereotypes already rampant in society.

The media reported that when asked about 377A at a recent conference, the Minister of Education, Ong Ye Kung, claimed that people from the LGBTQ community live without discrimination at work, housing and education in Singapore. In reality, this is far from true and was not mentioned in reports. In schools, gay teachers are discouraged from disclosing their sexuality. About 82 percent of the Singaporean population live in public housing in Singapore. It is the most affordable form of housing. Single people would have to wait till they turn 35 to be eligible to purchase such housing. Civil society partnerships are not recognized, gay couples are not allowed to purchase such forms of housing until either person in the relationship turn 35. At which point the individual would have to purchase the apartment as a single person.

Sex education providers in schools are only allowed to ‘teach students what homosexuality is and the current legal provisions’ with the main message from sex education being ‘abstinence before marriage is the best course of action for teenagers.’

Since the main argument against repealing is because society isn’t ready, how and when will society be ready when the information they are consuming constantly reinforces the opposite?

Furthermore, the mere existence of the law prevents the implementation of anti-discrimination laws which are currently nonexistent with regards to the LGBTQ community in the country.

While the media is not the sole machine preventing the repeal of this archaic law, we can see the influence it has on framing perceptions and thoughts of the general public. And when this results in the discrimination of minority groups in society, efforts and resources should be allocated to effect change. Even with opposition within the society, the government should have the primary responsibility to uphold and protect human rights. While achieving this can be difficult due to differing opinions and belief systems, efforts to educate should be made such that attitudes are changed, and acceptance cultivated. Censorship of the media to maintain the status quo is not the answer.
Performative Violence, Media & Social Change:

is the Black Bloc Tactic efficient?

Adrien Blanchard

Performative violence and media have always had a special relationship: they need each other. On the one hand, the news coverage by mass media helps activists to gain visibility to make their political demands heard; on the other hand, media seeks to be fed by the potential newsworthiness of violent protests. The recent demonstrations in May 2018 throughout France in cities such as Paris, Nantes and Rennes, have perfectly highlighted this mutual bond.

Elected one and a half years ago during the second round, opponent to the far-right, Emmanuel Macron governs extensively by ruling in order to accelerate the pace of the reforms, albeit being very contested. His various reforms on labour code, education, health systems, public services, plus his scornful reaction toward migrants and marginalized groups, are at the heart of the numerous demonstrations that happened during the spring of 2018, reunifying labourers, teachers, nurses and students. His neoliberal illiberal attitude (mixing neoliberal policies with strong police repression) is regularly denounced, for instance, by members of Black Blocs. Who fight back by using violence.

Black Bloc is a type of collective action, a tactic to conduct direct action through the anonymity ensured by their common dress code: black clothing and masks. Nonetheless, this tactic is not synonymous with violence, nor does it have the exclusivity of violence, and its members respect the diversity of protest tactics. From an anarchist perspective, Black Bloc works in a libertarian and egalitarian way and its members participate in broader activist work. Most of them also spread information about the anarchist theory and the Justifications for the use of violence. From a political and economic point of view, violence is neither senseless nor random but rather both the medium and the message of their political action. It is used to criticize capitalism and liberal state both directly (by attacking corporate branches and fighting with the police) and indirectly (thanks to the news coverage of the event making their political demands more visible and heard).

As planned, the spectacular and dramatic anarchist violence during the demonstrations in May 2018 have lured the eyes of the media which have extensively covered their actions, appealed by their newsworthiness. Unfortunately, mass media has also appropriated them for other ends. This bias can be explained thanks to the propaganda model created by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky in their book Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media. This model is composed of five filters in which any information has to go through before being printed or broadcasted. The first one is connected to the concentration of ownership into wealthy hands of the huge and profit-seeking media companies; the second one exists because advertisement (and also state funding in the case of France) remains the most important source of income for mass media and therefore, companies in them can easily threaten them to withdraw ads and seriously affect them; the third one is the importance of official sources, namely governments, experts and business associations, providing an inherently conservative tone to the news while being considered impartial. Where-as ‘alternative’ figures (anarchists for example) remain considered as unreliable; the fourth one is ‘flak’, the negative response (complaints, threat and punitive actions) to media productions in order to discipline them; and the fifth and last filter is the former ‘anti-communist and fear’ filter, which currently would be the ‘evil dictator’/‘War on terror’/‘counter-terrorism’. Thus, dominant media frames skilfully decontextualized and reinserted images of militant rebellion into a larger narrative of dreaded criminals, if not terrorists. Deviance, threatening to alienate and prevent the emergence of potential supporters and wrest legitimacy from the broader movement discrediting the anarchist political claim. Meanwhile, authorities take advantage of these images to build narratives that separate the peaceful majority (and so absorb their protestation) from the most violent minority. Allowing them to both justify brutal repression and prevent solidarity by being more clement to the most reformist (and so more containable) activists.

Performative violence is then a double-edged sword, a very tricky tactic. Actually, one may even wonder if, in these negative framing conditions which cause them to lose control over their representations, performative violence remains a relevant tactic for protesters to communicate. As mentioned earlier, Black Bloc participants are most of the time also involved in various activist activities. Part of which occur on the Internet, through websites and social media, working as counter-public relation to the interpretation of mass media. Thanks to this ‘new’ medium, performative violence works as a two-step communication strategy: Step 1: mass media covers violent protests extensively, pushed by the spectacularity and newsworthiness nature of violence, but within a negative frame; Step 2: violent protesters counterbalance this by channelling the audience to their website and their activism on social media. Thus, the criticism of mass media toward their act of violence and disruption is not necessarily problematic. The only condition being that the audience does further research than the mainstream media coverage. Although this strategy might sound risky, studies have shown that the audience on activist websites rise after violent protest. Plus, once the ‘spectator’ has learned about the existence of anarchist media, he/she is more prone to regularly challenge the mass media framing.

Performative violence should not then be automatically disregarded and despised by other protesters/activists on the sole consideration that it will be framed negatively by mass media. It is understandable that most of the ‘respectable movements’ (according to mass media and the State) denounce the Black Bloc tactic to save their position as tolerated dissidents toward the State and mass media, but by doing so they reinforce the State and mass media power and thus weaken the chance to reach social change. If these ‘respectable movements’ claimed solidarity or at least did not condemn the Black Bloc tactic, it would jeopardize the legitimacy of the mass media’s negative framing and would increase the efficiency of performative violence. Space for social change would thus be open.

Black Bloc is a type of collective action, a tactic to conduct direct action through the anonymity ensured by their common dress code: black clothing and masks.
A king going on vacation with his mistress to kill elephants while his country is in its deepest recession, a former dictator buried in a monumental site where people gather to venerate him, the fascist anthem makes it to the top charts of the most listened songs in Spotify, an actor that “shits on the Virgin Mary” taken to trial. What do all these events have in common?

They have happened in Spain. It’s true, it sounds as if I invented all this stuff or that I was talking about a dictatorial country or the very fashionable topic of countries leaning towards authoritarianism, such as Poland or Hungary. But no, these all happened in the so-called Spanish democracy. So let’s take a deeper look, shall we?

There are many examples of people being proscribed because of facebook posts, songs, theater plays and tweets in Spain. We can start with one of the most recent examples, concerning the actor Willy Toledo who has recently been taken to court for a Facebook post he made last year in which he re-posted a picture of three women carrying a giant vagina simulating an Easter procession - a symbol of the tradition to celebrate the assassination and resurrection of Jesus Christ - that was titled “Insubordinate Pussy” (Coño Insumiso). The actor attached to the image, the fascist anthem of choice, the system/terrorism and the catholic church. Can you see a pattern? Claims against the monarchy, the system/terrorism and the catholic church.

The Holy Trinity.

Ariadna Carrascosa

In Decline

Can you see a pattern? Claims against the monarchy, the system/terrorism and the catholic church.

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The number of elections being held around the world has reached an all-time high. This might lead one to assume that democracy is also enjoying its heyday. But the reality is quite the opposite.

In fact, it is not just a decline. It has become so pronounced that according to the Human Rights Foundation, about 3.97 billion people or 53 percent of the world’s population living in 94 countries are currently living in non-democratic environments. The backsliding trend on democracy is being observed in more democratic regions of the world such as India and Turkey. According to data from the Varieties of Democracy Institute, for the first time in 2017, there are more consolidated authoritarian regimes than consolidated democracies.

- Matthieu Chedjou

Furthermore, this year, the number of countries backsliding on democracy was equal to the amount of countries that were making improvements. The last time this was observed was in 1979.

The stages:
The often times populist party or candidate is democratically voted into power. Ironically, this is usually done after the party in question has taken advantage of the free press to effectively spread inaccurate and fake information to its electorate. This was observed multiple times in the run up to the US elections in 2016.

Once in power, the party then proceeds to dismantle the structures in place to secure absolute power. This is achieved by centralizing power in the executive. The separation between the judiciary and parliament is drastically reduced when the opposition voices are stifled and removed from parliament. This is followed by self-appointing replacements who are known for their willingness to comply with the people in power. This was observed in Turkey where since constitutional amendments were approved in 2017, 4000 judges and prosecutors have been removed and replaced with loyalist judges who only occasionally rule against the government. In this way, the first level of checks and balances are removed.

With these people holding prominent positions in the parliament, laws are passed without the fear of opposition. Certain rights that are essential to the proper functioning of a democracy are then slowly removed. This has also been observed in Poland where the right to peaceful protest is under threat with multiple reports of excessive use of force by the police in public demonstrations.

Another important way this is done is by controlling the media. This is achieved in two ways. New laws are first passed to restrict critical voices. Since the PiS (Law and Justice) party gained a majority in the Polish parliament in 2015, the government has been cracking down on press freedom. It took control of the Polish public broadcaster and is now aiming at foreign owned media companies. Their intolerance toward critical reporting and restrictions on speech regarding Polish history have created a climate of self-censorship and polarization. A feat easy to achieve since they would already have the power of the courts on their side.

While elections are important for democracies, it is the media that plays the integral role of information dissemination to the electorate.

Heads of the various media agencies would be appointed by the government to ensure the essence of the laws, such as the restrictions in media coverage, and the consequent penalties, such as jail terms, are carried out in practice. For example, as of January this year, there are 245 jailed journalists in Turkey. This step would further cement and cultivate the culture of fear and self-censorship which prevents the media from exercising its key role – to act as a form of check and balance on the people in power. News is curated such that governments are able to create and shape public opinions and perceptions of its citizens. The summation of all these changes would in turn ensure the party’s illegitimate power in the long run.

Interestingly, practices like these are already a common place in established authoritarian regimes. China which has one of the most restrictive media environments in the world, exercises control over news reporting via direct ownership of the media outlets and have harsh penalties for criticism of the actions of the country’s ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

The role of the media:
Proud pronouncements of plans to censor the media and journalists are hardly ever made. It is usually a quiet, conspicuous and insidious process where inducements, intimidations and co-option are carried out. This can be both violent like the surge of attacks and threats on journalists in India and non-violent like the laws that are being passed in states around the world. Tactics like these create a climate of fear which in turn leads to higher levels of self-censorship. Why question the people in power when that could lead to repercussions such as jail terms or worse, varied forms of violence?

Freedom of speech and access to varied sources of information are key components that are essential to the proper functioning of an electoral democracy. Failing to maintain these aspects would place elections on the brink of becoming a mere façade.

Furthermore, these changes do not happen to countries in isolation. Many states have emulated their neighbors who are also jumping on the authoritarian bandwagon. For example, leaders in Poland and Hungary have constantly encouraged their neighbors who are also jumping on the authoritarian bandwagon. A group of far-right leaders from European states such as France, The Netherlands and Germany met in Germany last year in what they termed a ‘counter-summit’.

The future:
What happens when media freedom is success-fully undermined? Can we pull ourselves out of it? It would be an immensely steep uphill battle, one that we will hopefully witness in the near future. Civil society would have to wrestle with the newly and deeply entrenched power.

While elections are important for democracies, it is the media that plays the integral role of information dissemination to the electorate. It also plays an important role in framing perceptions, which cannot be underestimated. We’ve seen how when absolute power to control is exercised in the absence of checks and balances, democracy stands to spiral out of control. While each individual step might seem insignificant, the gradual removal of multiple rights and freedoms hinder the electoral process from being meaningful and truly democratic.
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