

Living in the Era of Globalised Connectivity: A Two-Faced Coin

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Abstract

The advent of globalised connectivity has intricately linked local communities with worldwide information dissemination, forming a global consciousness among individuals. This essay explores the interplay between globalised connectivity and the “risk society,” analyzing its impact on democracy. Through cases such as Cambridge Analytica, the Arab Spring, and the ICIJ, it reveals the dual nature of globalised connectivity, fostering democratic advancement while compromising data privacy. The essay underscores the need for active democratic participation while managing associated risks. As society navigates this transformative phase, harnessing globalised connectivity’s potential to amplify voices and ensure accountability is crucial for a balanced future of enhanced global democracy and personal information security.

Keywords: globalised connectivity, risk society, democracy

1. Introduction

The advent of globalised connectivity stands as a crucial facet within the realm of globalisation, intricately interlinking local communities with worldwide information dissemination and individuals. According to Robertson (2015, p.2), the concept of globalisation encapsulates the heightened state of global connectivity, culminating in the gradual emergence of a “global consciousness” among individuals. The complex web of political, economic, and cultural ties spanning the globe fosters interconnectedness among individuals across the planet, thereby nurturing a sense of interdependence (Robertson, 1992). Notably, the development of globalisation serves as a foundational precursor to the phenomenon of globalised connectivity. Giddens (1990) delineates globalisation as the “second modernity,” a paradigm where societal relationships stretch beyond temporal and spatial confines on a global scale. This “second modernity” has engendered the inception of globalised connectivity, which, alongside enhancing communication dynamics, also gives rise to the notion of a “risk society” (Beck, 1999). This essay delves into an exploration of how globalised connectivity, set within the context of the “risk society,” yields both prospects and challenges for democracy. By scrutinising the emergence and perils of data monopolies through the Cambridge Analytica case, evaluating the democratic potential inherent in the era of globalised connectivity, as illustrated by the Arab Spring, and examining the transformative influence of global journalism on democracy, as exemplified by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), the essay ultimately contends that the experience of dwelling in an era dominated by globalised connectivity resembles a dual-edged coin, ushering in democratic advancement while concurrently imperiling data privacy.

2. Risk Society and Data Security

Ulrich Beck (1999) posits that individuals confront a multitude of globalised risks within the reflective framework of a “world risk society.” These global risks encompass not only environmental perils such as climate change but also extend to digital communication vulnerabilities, including the insidious threat of hacking. With an ever-growing reliance on the Internet, corporate juggernauts within the technology sector amass user data by exploiting the allure of complimentary services like search engines, social media platforms, and mobile

applications. This symbiotic exchange casts Facebook, a quintessential private commercial entity, in the role of a custodian of colossal data repositories, spanning the globe and driven by profit motives, notably through the customization of personalised advertisements (Tufekci, 2018).

However, globalised data generation isn't without restrictions. Regulations like the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in Europe mainly address regional digital policies, inadvertently engendering an absence of efficacious regulation for data in a globalised context. This regulatory lacuna becomes palpably evident when we scrutinize instances like the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which unfurled in the early precincts of 2018 and cast a glaring spotlight on the perils of data breaches. In 2013, Aleksandr Kogan, a scholar hailing from the precincts of Cambridge University, crafted an application christened "This Is My Digital Life." Having secured the imprimatur to access the data of Facebook users, the application subsequently accrued a user base of 270,000 individuals, who were prompted to furnish personal details, preferences, and interactions of not just themselves but their friends as well. Alas, the professed academic intent to amass this data transmuted when Kogan clandestinely relayed this repository of information to Cambridge Analytica, a privately-held enterprise that had rendered its analytical services to the electoral campaign of President Trump in 2016. This volte-face on Kogan's part elicited vociferous censure from the public, as he transgressed the initial sanctity of his commitments. Central to the discourse surrounding this scandal was the indictment leveled against Facebook for its perceived negligence in the custodianship of user data (Mason, 2018) and the ensuing scepticism cast over the integrity of the 2016 U.S. election results (Timberg & Romm, 2018).

Against the backdrop of these regulatory insufficiencies and temporal delays, corporate entities exhibit a remarkable adeptness in circumventing the constraints of standardised practices pertaining to data collection and utilization. A salient illustration of this phenomenon emerges when we examine the period preceding the implementation of GDPR. During this interval, Facebook orchestrated a calculated strategic shift by relocating its corporate headquarters from Ireland to California. This strategic maneuver deftly positioned the company beyond the reach of GDPR's jurisdiction (Hern, 2018). The repercussions of this strategic repositioning are weighty, revealing a corporate response that, instead of manifesting a resolute commitment to enhancing data control measures, is marked by evasive actions geared towards safeguarding its commercial interests. This has inevitably exposed the personal data of extant Facebook users to unregulated vulnerabilities. In the milieu dominated by data monopolies, the specter of substantial electronic data breaches casts a formidable shadow, dwarfing the individual user's capacity to effectively counter such risks. The upshot of this scenario is a disconcerting disrepute: the authority of user data finds itself subordinated and rendered inconsequential within the contours of a world that is typified by the dynamics of a risk society.

3. Social Media as a Catalyst for Public Sphere and Revolution

Jürgen Habermas's seminal work in 1998 introduced the concept of the public sphere, encompassing spaces within the lifeworld where the public congregates to engage in political discourse. This domain serves as a platform for deliberating on political matters and influencing democratic actions. However, in authoritarian nations, political communication is subject to governmental oversight and control, influencing and often limiting public opinion. The phenomenon of globalisation has ushered in a transformation of the public sphere into a transnational dimension. An illuminating study by Valtysson (2012) conducted in Denmark underscores the notion that Facebook can be seen as a digital public sphere where user-generated content transforms into the collective public voice. This perspective conceptualizes the public sphere as a platform oriented toward transnational and digital paradigms. Citizens, residing within the context of a multicultural society, transcend traditional boundaries by engaging in public debates through online tools. This transnational public sphere, as highlighted by Bohman (2004, p. 254), leads to the expansion of vibrant global publics as they interconnect with other public spheres.

The Arab Spring serves as a compelling case study showcasing how authoritarian regimes were toppled by leveraging social media as a public sphere. On December 17, 2010, the 26-year-old Mohamed Bouazizi, facing unemployment due to economic downturns, resorted to self-immolation in protest of his dire circumstances (Reuters, 2012). His tragic act ignited long-felt grievances among Tunisians, fueled by high unemployment rates, soaring prices, and governmental corruption, culminating in widescale social unrest. The protest movement harnessed the power of new media to disseminate images of government repression, rapidly transmitting information that cast the authoritarian regime in an unfavorable light on a global stage. This exposure garnered global sympathy and incited support for the protesters. By January 14, 2011, President Ben Ali's 22-year rule came to an end as he fled to Saudi Arabia (Associated Press, 2012). Termed the "Jasmine Revolution," Tunisia's regime change served as a beacon for similar uprisings in neighboring Arab countries, collectively referred to as the Arab Spring. By February 2011, the fervor of the Arab Spring had impacted over a dozen Arab nations (Associated Press, 2012).

The sweeping impact of the Arab Spring underscores the substantial role of Information and Communication

Technologies (ICTs) like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. These platforms facilitated political mobilization and organization during the protests, leading to the revolution's monikers, "Twitter Revolution" or "Facebook Revolution" (Ghannam, 2011). As Al-Rfouh (2017) notes, social media nurtured communication among activists, catalyzing calls for reform and enabling protesters to orchestrate and synchronize their efforts. Rapid information dissemination, often punctuated by vivid visual media, commanded national and international attention, galvanizing public opinion and influencing policies on a global scale. Nonetheless, a nuanced perspective arises from scholars like Norris (2012), questioning the assumption that digital media inherently triggers revolutions.

In my view, while digital media may not be the sole instigator, its pivotal role in the success of revolutions like the Jasmine Revolution is undeniable. Anthony Giddens (1990) introduces the concept of "time-space distanciation," delineating the expansion of social systems across both time and space. For instance, when activists upload videos depicting government suppression onto social media, platform users across the globe can instantaneously access this content. This interconnectedness leads to the experience of "simultaneity," enabling individuals to access instant global information regardless of their local time. Giddens (1990, p.64) affirms that "worldwide social relations link distant localities in a way that local occurrences are influenced by events transpiring thousands of miles away and vice versa." The Jasmine Revolution, a localised event, was virtually witnessed and shared by individuals worldwide, stretching its impact across the transnational public sphere. Consequently, the outcome of democratic revolutions within Arab countries was profoundly influenced by and simultaneously impacted global social media users.

4. The Cosmopolitan Paradigm of Global Journalism

Commencing the discourse on the Cosmopolitan Paradigm of Global Journalism, it is evident that in the contemporary journalistic landscape, a profound shift is underway, transforming the conventional model into a dynamic global connectivity paradigm. The concept of network journalism encapsulates this transformative approach, wherein journalists engage in the acquisition, synthesis, and dissemination of information through interconnected networks (Van der Haak, Parks & Castells, 2012). In the present era, journalists are leveraging an array of online resources, including social media platforms, news websites, and mobile news applications. By harnessing these digital tools and participating in transnational platforms, journalists are imbued with a comprehensive global perspective during the selection and investigation of news topics. As underscored by Beglez (2014), the age of global connectivity has ushered in a metamorphosis in global media content, fostering a departure from territorial confines towards a more de-territorialised outlook. With the escalating demand for global news coverage, network journalists are harnessing digital tools to manipulate data and enhance the efficacy of news reporting.

This transformative trend has given rise to institutions such as the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), established in 1997, epitomizing a cosmopolitan approach. Embracing the principles of cosmopolitanism, the ICIJ comprises 190 journalists spanning 65 countries. Their mission revolves around sourcing and disseminating news beyond national boundaries to generate substantial impact. A prime example is evident in the meticulous investigation of the Panama Papers, a collaborative effort engaging 370 journalists from over 100 media organizations (Blau, 2016). Confronted with a staggering 2.6 terabytes of data, the ICIJ and its partners accessed the information through a secure internal platform, complemented by the use of their personal Facebook accounts to communicate and share their discoveries. The exposé of the Panama Papers laid bare the offshore assets of political figures across diverse nations, gleaned from encrypted files belonging to offshore financial entities. The collective efforts of transnationally collaborating journalists, facilitated by digital tools, brought to light global-scale political corruption, catalyzing consequences as substantial as the resignation of the Icelandic Prime Minister (Helgadóttir, 2016).

As the once-rigid territorial boundaries dissolve in the wake of the global connectivity era, the essence of cosmopolitanism defines journalists as "citizens of the world" who carve out an ethical and political realm (Beck 2009, p. 57). Robertson (1992) postulates that the epoch of globalisation intertwines the destinies of global citizens, allowing us to perceive the veiled corruption harbored by different nations, concealed behind the veneer of political power for extensive periods. At present, the world is undergoing a metamorphosis, characterised by the erosion of established certainties in modern society and the emergence of novel dynamics (Beck, 2016). In this context, global journalists situated within the fabric of global connectivity stand poised to champion the cause of global democracy, as they navigate a landscape that transcends conventional confines and embraces the ethos of cosmopolitanism.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the epoch of globalised connectivity presents a dichotomous reality, encapsulating both opportunities and challenges for democracy. The evolution of globalisation into globalised connectivity has imbued our world with new dimensions of democracy, shaped by Information and Communication Technologies

(ICT), cosmopolitanism, and global journalism. Robertson's assertion that societies are increasingly subject to "interference and constraint" from outside emphasises the porous nature of modern boundaries (1992, p. 5). Despite its potential to foster democratic ideals, globalised connectivity is indeed a two-faced coin, simultaneously promoting democracy while compromising data security.

In this context, individuals bear a dual responsibility: to actively promote and participate in democratic processes while remaining vigilant in managing the associated risks. The intertwined nature of the global risk society and the power of globalised connectivity demand an informed and proactive citizenry, capable of reaping the benefits while navigating the pitfalls. As the world experiences this transformative phase, characterised by the emergence of a new reality (Beck, 2016), society must adeptly navigate the complexities of globalised connectivity. This journey entails fostering positive democratic change while ensuring the safety and security of its citizens' personal information.

As globalised connectivity redefines the contours of our existence, the imperative lies in our ability to harness its potential to foster democratic engagement, amplify voices, and promote accountability, all while adeptly countering the emergent risks. By striking this delicate balance, we can strive for a future where the two faces of the globalised connectivity coin coalesce into a symbiotic relationship, enhancing global democracy while preserving fundamental rights and values.

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