Access to Information in Times of "Informatics of Domination": Ethics, Entangled in a Network of Hierarchies and Power Relations

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Достъп до информация в условията на „превъзходство на информатиката": Етика, оплетена в мрежа от йерархични и властови отношения

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ABSTRACT

Open access to information and knowledge is an issue widely recognized among scholars of information ethics. Many authors define the problem of access in terms of a digital divide. This term helps us acknowledge that there is a problem of unequal distribution of informational resources, but it does not tell us much about the wider social and economic context of the phenomenon. The sphere of knowledge production is not an objective, neutral space. Knowledge itself produces power relations, not only through its application in technological development, the economy, and politics, but also because knowledge constitutes social norms, orders, and rationalities. In a network society dominated by informatics, ethics should start from a notion of entanglement, in which we as scholars and experts are participants in a system of unequal distribution. Paradoxically, ethics might also mean a struggle against perfect communication since perfect communication as one code that translates all meaning perfectly also means a code of domination.

Keywords: *Digital divide; Power relations; Knowledge; Ethics*

РЕЗЮМЕ

Свободният достъп до информация и знание е широко известен проблем между изследователите на информационната етика. Много автори определят проблема за дос- тъпа в контекста на дигиталното разделение. Този термин ни помага да приемем, че съ- ществува проблем с неравното разпределение на информационните ресурси, но не ни дава представа за по-широкия социален и икономически контекст на това явление. Сре- дата, в която се създава знание не е обективно, неутрално пространство. Самото знание създава властови отношения не само чрез прилагането му в технологичното развитие, икономиката и политиката, но също и защото е основа на обществени норми, порядък и разумност. В мрежово общество, доминирано от информатиката, етиката трябва да за- 477почне с понятието за оплитане, в което ние като учени и експерти участваме в системата на неравно разпределение. Парадоксално е, че етиката може да означава и борба против съвършената комуникация, тъй като тя е код, който предава перфектно всяко значение, а това означава и код на доминацията.

Ключови думи: *дигитално разделение; властови отношения; знание; Етика*

INTRODUCTION

Social struggles over access to information have a long history because information – that is, communication of widely understood knowledge – has always played a significant role as a means of gaining power, prestige or wealth as well as important for freedom, emancipa- tion and development of women and men.

The issue of widespread or universal access to information is related to the idea of democratic government. To a great extent, governance, and especially modern governance consists in the production and distribution of information. Thus, the question of access to information lies at the heart of disputes about the forms of democratic government. In this perspective, there are two main conceptions of democracy to be found in the huge body of literature and debate on the subject, namely representative democracy and participatory democracy. Simply put, the term "representative democracy" refers to a model of government in which a chosen group of representatives exercise authority in the name of all citizens. It is assumed that the representatives will be chosen among those citizens who possess the appropriate skills and knowledge to represent and govern others, usually elites, professionals, or the educated. This concept of democracy is thus based on the premise that certain kinds of knowledge and information skills are exclusive, and not accessible to all.

The concept of the participatory democracy on the other hand is rooted in the idea that citizens' contribution to governance goes far beyond the act of voting. Citizens participate in policy decision making at the community level as well as the national level, in times of globalization also at the international level. They actively participate in culture, negotiation of social values and interpretation of social relations in various fields such as work, family, community and so on. All of this demands widespread access to information and education in order to develop skills of independent reasoning. Postulates of universal access to information tend to come from the tradition of participatory democracy and its underlying assumptions rather than from that of representative democracy.

The principle of general participation is fundamental in the definition of democracy. In practice, however, democratic regimes in various historical periods have tended to exclude whole groups and classes from political decision making.

In ancient Greece, for example, not everybody was granted the right to participate in the Agora – something apologists of ancient democracy tend to forget. Most people, including women, peasants, and slaves were not only excluded from the public sphere, but also deprived of the fundamental right to decide about their own lives. Formally, exclusion was justified with a definition of citizenship based on the *oikos*, the household, which was private property of men and included property of slaves, wife, and children.

The problem of exclusion has also been common in modern democracies. For many years, women had to fight for the right to vote, just to give one example. Limited access to information for excluded groups and classes has always gone hand in hand with the exclusion from citizenship, privileges, and wealth. Women had to fight for access to higher education, to science, or to professions considered appropriate only for men, like professional writing, just like they had to fight for the right to vote.

From the point of view of participatory democracy we must ask whether the interests of all social groups are equally represented in the public sphere. Who participates in it, and how? Who are the

producers and who are the consumers of information goods and services? Who sets the agenda, who defines political and social issues, who negotiates values and policy priorities. This set of questions can also serve as a guideline mapping new challenges and tasks for scholars and professionals who deal with the issue of access to information. An exemplary area of investigation might be the question how public libraries and institutions providing information services can contribute to the informational empowerment of groups who are not active or represented in the public sphere.

Another important question related to the problem of public sphere is the question how legitimate knowledge is constituted. Who is authorized to tell the truth and how is that authorization produced and reproduced? Scholars from the post-structural tradition of research like Foucault, Lyotard and others have questioned the traditional assumption that knowledge is objective. They have put more attention to the relations of power in which knowledge is entangled, such as normalization and exclusion, governance or biopolitics.

In the second part of the 20th century, new scientific disciplines like culture and media studies, semiology and discourse analysis appeared. These disciplines have analyzed the social creation of meaning in connection to power relations. Very important in this area of research have been feminist and gender studies, which uncover how the construction of meaning has been related to the oppression of women. Many feminist scholars argue that the discrimination of women regarding access to information, politics, public life, science and so on is part of the complex relations of power inequality in such spheres as economy and sexuality.

ETHICS, KNOWLEDGE AND POWER

If we look at the field of information science, we find that ethical questions related to knowledge and power are interesting not only from the point of view of epistemic responsibility but also for practical fields such as cataloging and classification. These fields, which aimed at universality and consistency in representing knowledge systems, inherently privilege mainstream knowledge. As Olson (1998) expressed it: "Classifications are bounded systems that marginalize some groups and topics by locating them in ghettoes diasporized across the system. Other marginalized groups and topics are totally excluded from these systems, being outside of their territorial limits".

Since the mid 1990s, discussions of access to information have focused on a new issue: access to digital technologies. Digital technologies with their possibilities of transforming symbolic content into electronic impulses have revolutionized all stages of knowledge circulation including production, distribution, archiving and processing, and have thereby become a significant factor influencing access to information. On the more general and complex level of social relations, information and telecommunication technologies (ICT) have served as tools in the reconfiguration of economic and political relations nationally and globally. New technolo- gies have become the infrastructure for the global economic network, around which capital, power and privileges have been concentrating.

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

However, the global network is extremely selective and asymmetrical, as Manuel Castells argues. Processes of economical globalization, with ICT playing a major role, have brought mounting disproportions in wealth and power globally and within individual states. The reorganization and globalization of production combined with cuts in social spending has resulted in growing precarious situations of workers, and worsened the situation of millions of men and women all over the world.

The global economic network gives privileges to some classes and professional groups who enjoy unlimited mobility. This is contrasted by millions of people who are tied to their localities by poverty, lack of education and borderlines. Wealth and mobility on the one hand, and locality and poverty on the other are mutually interdependent. The stratification of wealth and power within the global network overlaps with the stratification of access to digital technologies and information.

According to Haraway (1991), one of the critical aspects of the social relations of the new technologies is:

> the reformulation of expectations, culture, work, and reproduction for the large scientific and technical work-force. The major social and political danger is the formation of a strongly bimodal social structure, with the masses of women and men of all ethnic groups, but especially people of color, confined to a home economy, illiteracy of several varieties and general redundancy and impotence, controlled by high-tech repressive apparatuses ranging from entertainment to surveillance and disappearance. (p. 169)

Access to digital technologies which have become a major communication medium is not only the basic condition for access to electronic informational resources, but more generally also means inclusion in various nets of domination. Those who remain outside the networks are worst off, but many others who have been connected, have been included on very unequal conditions.

From the point of view of the access to information we must ask: Who owns knowledge? Who makes profit out of it? And whose knowledge dominates in the net?

Theoretically, the development of electronic networks has a huge potential to radically democratize the access to information, but so far that potential has not been realized. On the contrary, many reports indicate increasing stratification and growing disproportions in access to information. Advanced knowledge which is fundamental for the development of high-profit sectors like ICT or biotechnology is mainly produced in North America, Western Europe and some of the industrialized Asian countries, and it is controlled by patents and intellectual prop- erty rights.

On the other hand, there is cheap and seemingly free access to entertainment media, but this access comes at a price: Users are exposed to commercials and must increasingly give away information about themselves, which is then used to create marketing profile databases. The internet, like all traditional media has become a highly commercialized space. The commercialization of the Internet may in fact result in even deeper disproportions among media users. According to Castells (1996), "The multimedia world will be populated by two essen- tially distinct populations: the interacting and the interacted, meaning those who are able to select their multidirectional circuits of communication and those who are provided with a re- stricted number of prepackaged choices. And who is what will be largely determined by class, race, gender, and country" (p. 371).

Inequality regarding access to information is interdependent with other kinds of social inequalities. The question of access to information is multidimensional and entangled in a complex set of power relations. In fact, the very process of defining and conceptualizing the issue is a part of the power relations.

Scholars who direct their attention to the issue of informational inequality are con- fronted not only with the theoretical complexity of the problem but also with important ethical and political dilemmas, not least with the question how we define our own position, which is always a partial one.

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