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How Can ICT’s Be Used to Maximize the Good?

Kayla Rillo

The state of technology in conjunction with governments mirrors stories written in the 1950’s and in the 1930’s about the dystopian future of governmental control. The two books, *Brave New World* and *1984* show the dangers of technology and government relations with the public. George Orwell’s book, *1984*, warned of the possible power of authoritarian governments. Orwell displayed the threats of modern, technological states that combined overarching centralized power with utopian ideology. Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, shows the dystopia of entertainment and how the easily distracted, entertained, comfortable, and secure masses will willfully submit to the powers at large to maintain their lifestyles.

Technology today is shaping to adhere to the Huxley model, where citizens would prefer to forgo privacy to maintain a Facebook profile or a Gmail account. Human history has reached a point where governmental laws, public policy, and politics have not matched the copious technological advancements, with corporations reigning supreme over some of the most powerful governments in the world. When left without regulation, technology can cause an enormous amount of harm to the public, yet under control and regulation corporations can do more good than harm by promoting peace, corporate responsibility, and human rights above all else.

Various technological standards can both control technology and balance corporate power with the best interest of the public good. Corporate responsibility and having a sustainable business are mutually inclusive, forcing corporations to balance their power by responding to the public in a beneficial way. This has become a norm thanks to generations of
activists pushing for corporate responsibility\textsuperscript{1}. Investors have begun to reward corporations who act responsibly by investing in them, which offers more opportunities for bettering the corporate environment with “shared value”, demonstrating corporate ability to thrive in situations where they align their practices with society’s aspirations\textsuperscript{2}. One of the more sustainable business decisions taken by a technology company was when Google decided to stop censoring its Chinese search engines and moved from mainland China to Hong Kong to promote free speech in the country\textsuperscript{3}. Google’s decision promoted other corporations to follow suit and promote internet freedom as well as freedom of speech in countries that traditionally disallowed it.

The Global Network Initiative is a system which brought Yahoo, Google, and Microsoft together to form standards of free expression and privacy with various human rights groups, socially responsibly investors, and academics\textsuperscript{4}. The GNI’s main purpose was to solve the conundrum of how companies should conduct themselves and protect their users in countries where they are pressured to do things that may infringe on their users rights\textsuperscript{5}. It is difficult for companies to act uniformly because each countries has different laws and politics, causing different issues to arise in each situation. Companies that joined the GNI pledge to uphold core principles on freedom of expression and privacy. Expression wise, companies must commit to “respect and protect” the rights of users in countries where the governments hinder the freedom of expression and speech, remove content, or block the spread of ideas in a way that is inconsistent with international law and standards\textsuperscript{6}. On privacy, companies must agree to respect

\textsuperscript{2} Ibid: 175
\textsuperscript{3} Ibid: 177
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid: 179
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid: 180
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid: 180
and protect the privacy rights of users when confronted by governments demanding companies compromise their user’s privacy.

A success of the GNI was Vietnam, where Yahoo had to establish how to handle their business responsibly in a censored environment. After the internet boom in Vietnam, Yahoo 360 became the blog of choice for many Vietnamese-language bloggers, prompting Yahoo to create a more effective service in the country\(^7\). After the company had conducted a human rights assessment, they decided that Vietnam’s horrific record of arresting political bloggers would force Yahoo staff to turn in local bloggers who opposed the government, leading to a controversy of human rights, in which Yahoo did not want to partake\(^8\). After these considerations, Yahoo chose the proper route and decided to implement its Vietnamese language operations in Singapore, which would protect both Yahoo employees and dissidents by allowing freer speech.

Domestically, the Open Net Initiative assisted in freeing global internet users. The Open Net initiative is an academic association that studies censorship around the world\(^9\). They have been responsible for solving inappropriate instances of censorship, and have held governments accountable for their wrongdoings. The association reported the voter fraud in Iran, where text-messaging services were strategically temporarily downed by the government to prevent activists from communicating and monitoring the elections\(^10\). Open Net Initiative researchers were also responsible for the discovery of North American technology companies developing and selling censorship software to Middle Eastern and Northern African governments, which assisted dictators in maintaining their authoritative rule and stifled freedom for citizens\(^11\). Through their research, the Open Net Initiative found that American Companies were censoring prominent

\(^7\) Ibid: 181 \\
\(^8\) Ibid: 181 \\
\(^9\) Ibid: 54 \\
\(^10\) Ibid: 57 \\
\(^11\) Ibid: 60
bloggers who wrote about gender issues as “sexually explicit”, despite not running a pornographic blog. They also found that if anyone posted any comments including hate speech, advertisements for Viagra, or links to pornography on these blogs that the activist’s blog would be censored\(^\text{12}\). This helps democratic stats by holding their technology companies accountable for this actions abroad, as well as monitoring the domestic actions of these companies, which use the same technology to inadvertently block democratic blogger’s materials\(^\text{13}\).

Information communication technologies can be utilized for good through cyber activists, reporters, and organizations like WikiLeaks, Edward Snowden, Anonymous, and bloggers. Anonymous is a powerful, decentralized organizations of computer hackers who typically fight to protect internet freedom\(^\text{14}\). The organization has made the internet more open through things like DDoS attacks, or distributed denial-of-service attacks, which are used to temporarily shut down websites by increasing its traffic to an unmanageable level. These attacks were particularly helpful in making the internet more open in the case of WikiLeaks, where many different governments were working to shut the website down because of the new level of transparency it offered\(^\text{15}\).

WikiLeaks is an international organization that publishes and leaks secret, classified information from anonymous sources\(^\text{16}\). The organization’s website works by allowing anonymous sources to use drop box technology to submit documents online, with the goal of promoting transparency in governments and to shed light on wrongdoings that may be deemed classified to protect governments\(^\text{17}\). One of WikiLeaks most prominent sources was Chelsea

\(^\text{12}\) Ibid: 61
\(^\text{13}\) Ibid: 61
\(^\text{15}\) Ibid: 40
\(^\text{16}\) \textit{We Steal Secrets: The Story of WikiLeaks}. Directed by Alex Gibney. 2013. DVD.
\(^\text{17}\) Ibid
Manning (formerly known as Bradley Manning), a US Army soldier who released classified United States military documents, resulting in one of the few instances of United States military transparency\textsuperscript{18}. Manning’s leak of the Baghdad airstrike and the Afghan War logs were unexpected instances of military information being released to the public, prompting public outcry and military legal reviews of the actions the military was taking in foreign countries\textsuperscript{19}. WikiLeaks promoted transparency worldwide, using the internet and the ease of sharing information for good; Leaks like Manning’s could lead to positive change in policy and actions by governments who previously hid behind the shield of classifying unsavory or controversial information, like the United States government.

Influenced by WikiLeaks, Edward Snowden, an employee of government contracting company Booz Allen Hamilton, decided to leak damaging information about the United States National Security Agency unlawful and unwarranted surveillance of United States citizens\textsuperscript{20}. Snowden contacted Laura Poitras, a documentarian, and Glenn Greenwald, an intelligence reporter from the Guardian, to leak the classified material about the United States government because he wanted to be as responsible as possible with the material to ensure it was revealed in a proper, and safe manner, without injuring anyone\textsuperscript{21}. Snowden’s actions assisted in opening the conversation about government surveillance in the United States, where citizens were illegally being watched by the government even though they were doing nothing wrong. The NSA was undergoing an investigator by congress as to the extent of their domestic surveillance program, and each time the agency lied to lawmakers claiming they were doing no such thing\textsuperscript{22}. It was revealed that the NSA was digitally recording citizen phone calls into a NSA call database and

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid
\textsuperscript{21} Citizenfour. Directed by Laura Poitras. 2014. DVD.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid
that they had secret court orders forcing private companies like Verizon to relinquish customers’ information to them\textsuperscript{23}. The NSA was also harvesting millions of emails and instant messages and contact lists by secretly accessing the datacenters of companies like Google and Yahoo to collect information from hundreds of millions of accounts\textsuperscript{24}.

Although Snowden is still seeking refuge from the United States, his efforts have opened the lies of the NSA to the American public and raised awareness of the governmental wrongdoing. Snowden faced similar hardships from the American government than Manning and WikiLeaks faced; they were accused of compromising National Security and the safety of American troops, yet the government did not provide rational proof of this\textsuperscript{25}. Citizens are more aware of the surveillance being done to them by their government, who they expect to protect not harm the, which is a beneficial use of the internet and technology. ICT’s were utilized for good when whistleblowers like Manning and Snowden released information to the public that assisted in bettering the world and creating a more open government and political system in democratic countries.

While whistleblowers are the extreme in promoting government transparency, a more prevalent source of freedom fighting comes from the casual spread of information online. Bloggers and netizens are the major driving force in governmental change using the digital commons, a sharing community of open source technology, digital data, and information\textsuperscript{26}. The digital commons consist of the World Wide Web, WordPress, and other important technological advancements that work toward the pursuit of government and information openness as well as

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\textsuperscript{23} Ibid
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid
user connectivity. WordPress is used by communities of bloggers to create their own unique blogs which allow for the spread of information to pass quickly despite possible government intervention to hide information. The internet allows for research of an unlimited amount of information and communication, which holds people more accountable like Republican lobbyist David Mentzer, who was ousted as a liar and hypocrite at a convention where he was speaking about the importance of small donors to political campaigns replacing the “fat cats” of politics. With the help of the internet, viewers and attendees of this panel were able to submit comments questioning the validity of Mentzer’s claim, considering he himself was a “fat cat” who typically donated the maximum allowed by an individual. Mentzer was forced to respond, showing the power of the internet and online communities to shed light.

Bloggers are the new era of journalists, “the people formally known as the audience”; they are the news creators and spreaders in many instances, and are able to push hidden and obscure stories to the mainstream. Having an online presence has helped political campaigns like President Obama and 2004 presidential candidate Howard Dean, whose campaign manager created an “Ask Howard Dean” board on an anti-George Bush blog, leading to a surge in the Dean campaign’s support. Dean’s campaign gained popularity because of the direct line they offered to voters to ask questions directly to the staff, rather than have to wait to receive answers from media sources who may or may not ask these questions. The campaign blog gave power to the grassroots movement in politics, allowing the people’s voice to be heard over the money of the few elite in the United States. The positive benefit of the campaign of Howard Dean is the

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27 Ibid: 17
28 We Steal Secrets: The Story of WikiLeaks. Directed by Alex Gibney. 2013. DVD.
30 Ibid: 48
31 Ibid: 47, 49
32 Ibid: 43
33 Ibid: 42
current state of American politics, which labels candidates who do not have active Twitter accounts as untrustworthy; candidates interacting with the voters has become a cultural and political norm that came about by the people demanding more interaction with candidates who claim to speak for them. Citizens want to engage in a conversation and talk with, instead of being talked at by a candidate\textsuperscript{34}. The internet and ICTS are easy ways for grassroots bases and ideas to come to the forefront of the political world, leading to change that benefits the average American or citizen rather than strictly the “fat cat” donators.

An issue with regulating technology is that it advances far faster than our system can create and pass laws, leaving many new laws to be antiquated by the time they are signed\textsuperscript{35}. It is also difficult for law makers to create laws which would capture many technologies without being too broad and meaningless or too specific to only apply to one company, allowing others to fall through the cracks\textsuperscript{36}. Where laws fail, citizens flourish. The culture of citizen bloggers, netizens, and whistleblowers in the United States and other democracies help empower the masses instead of the elite and the corporations. They force the mass media and politicians to address issues that affect the people through social media websites like Twitter and Facebook, as well as through popular private blogs. The information brought to light by both Private Manning and the WikiLeaks team and Edward Snowden through their whistleblowing has promoted change in the United States among politicians, who in debates must now address their views on domestic surveillance and security. The people have more power now than ever, thanks to the internet, and they use it for the promotion of positive change in the political sphere. The citizen push for equality, security, and transparency online has forced many corporations to adapt their

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid: 117
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid: 174
policies to promote corporate social responsibility as the company’s base; companies must work in the best interest of their users instead of themselves. Together, both corporations and the masses have attempted to use ICT’s for good instead of evil, by maximizing the transparency of wrongdoings by democratic governments and encouraging the interaction of politicians and voters to ensure the best interest of the citizen is taken into consideration at the government level.