Controlling Information to Protect Us?

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"The control of information is something the elite always do, particularly in a despotic form of government. Information, knowledge, is power. If you can control information, you can control people." –**Tom Clancy**

"Information is not knowledge." –**Albert Einstein**

"The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have known since long." —**Ludwig Wittgenstein**, *Philosophical Investigations*

"And a new philosophy emerged called quantum physics, which suggests that the individual's function is to inform and be informed. You really exist only when you're in a field sharing and exchanging information. You create the realities you inhabit." —**Timothy Leary**, *Chaos & Cyber Culture*

"Withholding information is the essence of tyranny. Control of the flow of information is the tool of the dictatorship." –**Bruce Coville**

The era of the Internet has dramatically inaugurated, fervently boosted, and vigorously sustained the massive flow of information in a staggering proportion of global magnitude. There is a saying in reference to the ancient Roman world that "all roads lead to Rome". In our present world, however, which Alvin Toffler dubs as the "Third-Wave Civilization," also known as the "Information Age," post-modern realities, in general, are discovered both wittingly and unwittingly along the expansive cyberspace superhighway whose breadth and length are of infinite span. [Cf. Toffler's trilogy, **Future Shock**, **The Third Wave**, and **Powershift**] To be "wired" in the post-modern parlance is to be in the cockpit of a virtual spaceship capable of traveling in the "cyber-cosmos" and exploring on one´s fingertips every corner, nook and crevice of realms unimaginable or only fantastically conceivable some few decades ago. For the more sparing and focused on her/his particular field of personal interest, professional concentration, or career discipline, the Internet is a versatile "super reference" that gives automatic access to most needed information relevant and imminent here and now.

Yet, an unrestrained and "unprogrammed" exploration of cyber-information could lead us from one information source branching out to a myriad of other related sources to another source that does the same, *ad infinitum ad nauseam*. All taken seriously, this deluge of information accumulation is known as "information overload". In many instances, it unnecessarily complicates and even muddles up the specific processing of a certain amount of information specifically needed in a neat and ordered presentation of a particular concern. As a general attribute, the enormity of the cyber-cosmos is like a boundless "super-mind" devoid of personal disposition and hence utterly deficient of any moral fiber without actually being immoral. For the stupid Christian fundamentalist, the "cyber-super-

mind" could be the "antichrist" and could also be the "impersonal god" for the pantheistic intellectual who obviously can't get rid even of the metaphorical concept of "god" off her/his cultural apparatus.

In situations of information overload where cases of "garbage-in-garbage-out" are a common thing, sorting out more important and appropriate pieces for specific purposes is one of necessity. A deluge of seemingly interrelated/interconnected data could lead us from one analytic moment to another without seriously taking into consideration the need to check source credibility. With the generally subjective tendency of people to be on one side of an issue rather than on the other, information exploration and gathering could be more of a quantitative rather than a qualitative exercise. In this connection, we are commonly inclined to feed and reinforce our opinion and argument with one-sided information to the utter neglect of the necessary points vital in the opposite argument. We call it "cherry-picking". In this particular condition, unilateral information—which could at worst be coming from spurious and hence unreliable sources—appropriated to beef up a stand on a certain issue will and can never lead to a meaningful and truthful understanding of reality.

In stressing the importance of exploring and accessing trustworthy and valuable information (which of course emanates from credible sources) for worthwhile purposes contributory to a reasonable, factual, accurate, and consistent understanding of certain states of affairs obtaining in the social, political, economic, and cultural scenes, a substantial amount of "philosophical" sensitivity and prudence is of the essence. By and large, information flow should therefore be controlled to basically protect us and more expediently, to protect us from ourselves. The unimpeded course of information surge in the present era may both be beneficial and detrimental. The "metropolitan soul" engulfed in the "Internet bubble" and is constantly overwhelmed by a seemingly endless information bombardment does not act on her/his "predicament" not because s/he is paralyzed and helpless but simply because s/he is literally hooked into the system which is fundamentally endowed with the "spiritual power" to weaken one's resistance to disengage her/himself from that very system.

In the present dispensation, virtual reality is henceforth not only an aspect but an interwoven fiber of paramount reality. There is no turning back for the ladder used by the precursors of this technological ascent is nowhere to be found below. With a significant amount of external prodding, push, and shove, we have joined the uphill procession that leads to exploratory treks in the cyber-cosmos. And here we are now, all denizens, nay netizens, of a "brave new world" (with apologies to Aldous Huxley) whose tide of information dares us to envision new possibilities and create fresh realities hitherto undreamt of.

But can we really control information? How? Is the process inclusive of both the incoming and the outgoing? Is the issue of information control a legal or a moral matter?

The flow of information on the virtual superhighway of the contemporary cyber-age is perennial and seemingly uncontrollable. Activate the operating system, access the Internet and the torrent of information is set in motion. But the entire situation is actually a matter of one's individual predisposition. In other words, it is the person's decision and her/his decision alone—her/his strength of will—that bestows power to control information flow, both incoming and outgoing. Control in this sense doesn't only mean censure and disposal but also selection and appropriation. It is us and us alone who are individually responsible to control information. We need meaningful and trustworthy information. Hence, selection as a matter of control should lead us to credible sources and not to spurious and questionable

ones just to satisfy our subjective bias. In doing so, we significantly close the gap between information and knowledge as the two do not necessarily mean the same. Strictly, knowledge as a special concern of epistemology in classical philosophy, on the one hand, is necessarily true for its modified Platonic conception as "true justified belief" remains standing, as it has always been. On the other hand, information can be anything, regardless of whether it is true or otherwise. This is a crucial concern that should be seriously taken: The age of information is not necessarily an age of knowledge. Responsible netizens committed to the ascendancy of knowledge over mere information are also conscientious "controllers" of information useful, relevant, and thus consequential to what is true, good, and beautiful.

This being the case, nobody could be construed as a truly accountable information controller except someone who is committed to knowledge dissemination. This however may not really be a tough matter for anybody who really wants the truth has equal access on the same cyber-domain to verify the information s/he has been fed with. It is therefore within the sphere of our power to control the flow of information coming to us and likewise from our end, the information we issue out for others to access. Such information control is deemed to protect us.

With all the above issues taken up, information control is really a moral rather than a legal concern. It is us and us alone who are morally responsible for controlling information flow. No state or government entity has legal jurisdiction over information control at the public level. As private individual entities, we have the sole control of incoming and outgoing information within our individual orbits. Classified high-security information strictly for the official perusal of government agencies/institutions are jealously controlled within their specific jurisdictions and ranks. These are matters the public is deemed not to know but that is only from the viewpoint of government. There is however crucial information concocted by the state government yet are not released to the public despite the fact that the latter has to be informed about them.

As has been clarified earlier, information control is a moral rather than a legal issue. Its morality encompasses not only individual persons but also public institutions/organizations, government or otherwise, with significant responsibility towards their specific subjects at the least and to humanity in general at the most. It is therefore one thing to talk of information control on the side of private and individual persons and another on the side of institutions or organizations accountable to the public. For such institutions or organizations to control information as to hide the truth from the public to whom they are accountable is an obvious act of perfidy that openly desecrates the inviolability of public trust.

In the same vein, concealing crucial information about a government's foreign policy to destroy certain geographical areas inhabited by human beings through the exportation of wars and other forms of destabilization schemes is an indubitably immoral case of information control. Corollary to this immorality, however, is the morality of some conscientious individuals who came out and revealed to the world the nefarious activities taken up and despicable plans of action yet to be taken up against other countries by powerful governments these individuals had previously been officially connected with before their exposés.

Viewed from different angles, information control—both incoming and outgoing—is one critically serious issue of ethical scale aimed to protect us and other people as well.

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