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Toward information liberation

Information seems like the ideal basis for a cooperative society. It can be made available to everyone at low cost, and a person can give away information and still retain use of it. In practice, information is an important part of struggles over power, wealth and authority. Some people are able to speak through the mass media while most others are only listeners. Bureaucrats control information in order to control subordinates and clients. Surveillance is a process of collecting information in order to exert power.

In order to bring about a more just and equal society, struggles need to be waged over information. It would be nice to call the goal “freedom of information.” Unfortunately, that phrase is already taken over by legislation that is supposed to allow citizens access to government documents. FOI legislation has not been very successful in opening up government to public scrutiny. Politicians and government bureaucrats have restricted access in various ways, including charging fees that make a mockery of the name “freedom of information.” Even if FOI worked perfectly, it is a very limited freedom, since it does nothing about corporate secrecy, defamation law, surveillance and ownership of information.

Since the expression “freedom of information” has been degraded, perhaps it is better to talk of “information liberation,” which is the general project of using information to move toward a society free of domination. It doesn’t make much sense to say

that information itself is oppressed. Rather, information is often a means of domination of both humans and the environment. The goal is to make information into a tool for liberation.

Information liberation should be thought of as a process rather than an end point. What helps today in one place to move towards a better society might not be appropriate later or somewhere else. However, even though there's no universal strategy, it can be helpful to look at some lessons from the previous chapters. I present these ideas as tentative proposals, for discussion and debate.

Live the alternative

One powerful way to move towards an alternative is to begin behaving as if it already exists. If the goal is a society based on interactive network media, then it is helpful to support and use those media. If the goal is a society in which there is no censorship to serve vested interests, then it is helpful to support free speech and not to resort to censorship or defamation proceedings oneself.

It is always easy to criticise someone else's attacks on one's own speech. It is much harder to recognise the corruptions of power when one has the power oneself.

Work on the inside and outside

Setting up alternative media is valuable but it's also necessary to operate within mainstream media to bring about change. To change bureaucratic controls over information, an alliance of employees and outside activists is quite powerful. There is no single best location for action for every person. Some people are independent of institutions and free to make strong statements or take public actions. Others are inside powerful organisations and can best bring about change by working carefully behind the scenes.

There are traps for both insiders and outsiders. The big danger for insiders is becoming part of the system and serving to prop it up. How many managers in publishing or biotechnology firms seek anything other than maximum intellectual

property rights? How many police or marketeers seek to restrain surveillance? On the other hand, if insiders go too far in questioning the system, they may lose their influence and perhaps their careers. Challenging things from the inside is a delicate business.

From the outside, it's possible to be much more outspoken. But there is a risk in becoming negative and self-righteous—in speaking out in order to feel good but without being effective in bringing about change.

Be participatory

If the aim is open organisations, free speech, interactive media and useful ideas, then it's important to involve as many people as possible in the process of bringing them about. It's not wise to rely on experts to do the job. Experts on defamation law reform or on avoiding surveillance can be very helpful, but can't bring about change on their own. If speech is to be freed from defamation threats, surveillance and bureaucratic controls, plenty of people must exercise their speech in the process of bringing about the change.

Naturally, there's always a role for the individual activist, such as the whistleblower who speaks out when others are afraid. But the lesson from the experience of whistleblowers is that most of them are severely penalised and lead to no change in the problem. A collective challenge is far more powerful. Building a campaign that can involve lots of people is the only way that major systems of information power, such as mass media and intellectual property, will ever be transformed.

Change both individuals and social structures

Individual change is vital to social change. So part of the process is engaging with friends, neighbours, colleagues, clients and others in order to raise ideas and try out behaviours. Support groups and campaigns can be effective in bringing about individual change. A campaign to challenge defamation law or promote community-oriented research is a tremendous way to

learn about the issues, sort out ideas and learn how the system works.

Included in individual change is one's own self. It is one thing to bring about change in others and another to bring about change in one's own beliefs and behaviours.

Individual change is important, but so is change in social structures, which includes families, governments, capitalism, racism and patriarchy, among others. Within these big and pervasive social structures, significant changes are possible, such as in laws, bureaucratic mandates and products. Social structures are not fixed. Instead, they are just ways of talking about regularities in actions and ideas. They can be changed, but it's not easy.

Individuals affect the dynamics of social structures, which in turn affect the way individuals operate. So it's important to have a process of changing both.

These four suggested ideas for bringing about information liberation are not the final word. There are always exceptions, such as occasions to use the mass media or rely on experts. Furthermore, there are frictions between the ideas. Working for change on the inside of a large media organisation is valuable, but it is not exactly living the alternative. That's to be expected. Total self-consistency would leave little room for creative approaches.

My final recommendation is to have fun along the way. Trying to bring about a better world can be depressing, with constant reminders about the massive amount of corruption, injustice and violence that exists. Yet part of the goal of a better society is one in which there is more joy and laughter. Living the alternative means having fun along the way, whether that means exposing the absurdities of defamation law or bureaucracies or designing humorous stunts. There are certainly plenty of opportunities in the process of information liberation.