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Openness and Surveillance on Global Infrastructures Whose Narratives?

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“Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars” Walter Benjamin

Even though they tend to be studied by diverse disciplines, it is commonly accepted that writing technologies, organizational forms and public opinion have been interwoven since at least the invention and massive deployment of the printing press. Acknowledging both the centrality of communication in contemporary societies and the impossibility of identifying universal truths, Habermas put forward the proposal of the “ideal speech situation”: an open agora where any issue can be brought in and rationally discussed with the objective of democratically govern societies. Instead, media kept evolving into large conglomerates governed by specific and not rarely particularistic interests, which turned to be a concern for a democratic public sphere.

Initial enthusiasm for the so called blogosphere found ground in the resentment against established media organizations. At a few years before the turn of the millennium, the internet seemed to promise openness and democratization to every niche of societies: open participation rather than professional journalism would have counterbalanced dominant interests by watchdogging the powerful, showing their responsibilities and exacting accountability. Since then, ‘citizen journalism’ (and lay people’s data production in general, usually called web 2.0) has certainly been challenging journalism and the formation of public opinion.

Within this broad background, close-to-technology whistle-blowers revived the fourth state and challenged the established balance between stage and backstage for governments, firms and citizens. Indeed, recent revelations of intelligence surveillance are an unprecedented breakdown of contemporary communication functioning. Wikileaks and Snowden’s cases showed how the USA centrality in information infrastructures has been turned inside out from a global exposure to risks to a transnational panopticon. Ancillary studies from research on e-

government in the Netherlands, Zanzibar and Southern India confirm how information technologies are sidelining established organizations and eroding information asymmetry, but not necessarily increasing democratization.

All cases show unexpected paths to address and strategically use openness on information infrastructures. In both main cases, hundreds of thousands of highly sensitive documents make their management significant in terms of how practices unfold on and beyond information infrastructures. All cases are tense between two approaches to information management, one more closely derived from the original culture of the internet, the other sensitive to more broadly accepted social models. In those contexts, narratives and institutions continue to play a central role in explaining broad social and political phenomena and their implications.

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Bio: Gianluca Miscione joined the group of Management Information Systems at the School of Business of University College Dublin in June 2012. Previously he worked on information and organization at the Department of Urban and Regional Planning and Geo-Information Management, Faculty of Geo-Information Science and Earth Observation, University of Twente, Netherlands. Gianluca received his Ph.D. in Information Systems and Organization from the Sociology Department of the University of Trento, with a research on telemedicine in the Amazon developed also at the Sociology Department of Binghamton University New York and School of International Service of American University in Washington DC. After that, he joined the Department of Informatics of the University of Oslo, where he developed his research on information infrastructures on the global scale.

Through the last twelve years, Gianluca conducted and contributed to research in Europe, Latin America, India, East Africa, and on the Internet. The focus remained on the interplay between technologies and organizing processes with a specific interest on innovation, development, organizational change, social networks, and trust.