

Can Democracy Survive the Rise of Surveillance Technology?

Giovanni Navarria

► **Abstract:** The technological revolution that began with the Arpanet in the late Sixties has changed the world we live in. The Internet and social media have improved our lives considerably, but the changes came in with a high-price tag attached: our freedom. We now live in a world in which technology has exponentially expanded the power of the State to keep tabs on its citizens (within and across borders). If we continue on this path, democracy as we know it is doomed. Yet the future is not as grey as it might look at first sight. The ubiquity of social media and smartphones and the increasing relevance of the Internet in everyday life have also drastically changed the impact-power of citizens in technologically advanced societies. Understanding these changes is to understand which shape democracy will take in the future.

► **Keywords:** communication technologies, networked citizen, surveillance, Snowden, social media

Introduction

The technological revolution of the last six decades has arguably increased the power of the state over its citizens. Using powerful computers and software (and thanks to the cooperation provided by private Internet-service companies), many governments worldwide can now easily access an increasingly large wealth of data exchanged constantly through a growingly complex communication galaxy. They can simultaneously scan and make sense of Web traffic, telephone conversations, email texts, and video and images exchanged by users. Progressively, especially after the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, DC, many countries have introduced numerous new laws or tweaked existing ones to give some legal basis to these newly acquired powers. Technology has become the essential infrastructure of emerging and more elaborate variants of the notorious Oceania, the fictional surveillance state depicted by George Orwell in his 1949 dystopic novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Cutting-edge cases are plentiful in so-called authoritarian regimes (Deibert et al. 2008), but well-established democracies are not immune to



this trend. We are witnessing a dangerous shift, one that often makes the demarking line between authoritarian power and democratically elected government almost indistinguishable. Barack Obama's America is the most troubling example of this new trend.

In this short article I argue that, if on the one hand, it is true that new communication technologies increase the surveillance power of authorities, it is also crucial to understand that, on the other hand, the ubiquity of social media and smartphones and the increasing relevance of the Internet in everyday life have radically changed the role of citizens in technologically advanced democratic societies. This change has important implications for the future of democracy.

Edward Snowden's Revelations

Since June 2013, the confidential information released by Edward Snowden, a former National Security Agency (NSA) contractor turned whistle-blower, has shown the world how the U.S. government is using the Internet (and with it in fact the entire gamut of new communication technologies) as the centerpiece of a gigantic, secret, and complex system of mass surveillance to spy on citizens, allies, and enemies (Greenwald 2014).

Evidence shows that American intelligence agents are using hackers' tools to infect users' machines and acquire the information they need (Boon, Debrix, and Modderkolk 2013). One of Snowden's leaks is about a NSA memo named "SIGINT [Signals Intelligence] Strategy 2012-2016." It shows that the Agency's priority for the future is to "aggressively pursue legal authorities and a policy framework mapped more fully to the information age" in order to be able to track the online activities of "anyone, anywhere, anytime." The document also makes clear that the Agency needs to "revolutionize data analysis" and for this it needs to increase its influence of "the global commercial encryption market through commercial relationships," spies, and other intelligence partners (Risen 2013). Undoubtedly, Snowden's revelations bring to light the dangers technology poses to the future of democracy; however, they also raise the important question of what role citizens can play in this new social environment structured around complex mediated power relationships?

Who Is the Citizen?

The meaning of citizenship and the role of citizens within society are heavily contested concepts (Heater 2004). Broadly, however, citizens must

strike a comfortable balance between rights and duties within their communities. Traditionally that balance is heavily dependent on the social and political contexts that surround the citizen. Aristotle in 350 BCE understood citizenship as a set of rights and duties that prescribed all good citizens the active involvement in the government of their community. To be a good citizen meant direct participation in acts of deliberation or decision-making; but it also referred to the duty (among others) of defending the city from enemies in the event of a war (Aristotle, Barker and Stalley, 1998). Since Aristotle, the question of what it means to be a citizen has found many different answers. For Aristotle, citizenship was thinkable only within the assembly-based democracy of the *polis*, the Greek city-state. Other more recent understandings of citizenship are set in the background of parliamentary democracy and the nation-state – that is, a large and complex political community whose territorial borders are strictly defined and guarded (Kymlicka and Norman 1995).

More recently, American scholar Michael Schudson (1998) introduced the post-Aristotelian concept of the “monitorial citizen.” For Schudson, in complex democratic systems like that in the United States, the obligations attached to the old ideal of the well-informed citizen must be understood instead as “monitorial.” Citizens may appear often politically apathetic, but, in reality, they are like parents at a pool, monitoring the situation; they are scanning the informational environment that surrounds them. When needed, they are ready for action.

Schudson’s analysis provides us with an important theoretical framework to understand the complexity of citizenship and the many challenges with which an average citizen is confronted in contemporary society, yet the framework is far from perfect. In Schudson’s treatment there is no explicit mention of the role of media, neither mainstream (like television or the press), nor more complex, like the Internet. Schudson implicitly includes them in the group of reliable sources of information. The media’s main role in this context is to provide critique, to monitor, and to serve as a watchdog over authority. But here lies the problem: the communication revolution unleashed by the Internet in the last two decades has radically changed the environment surrounding Schudson’s monitorial citizen. There is no doubt that the ubiquity of media such as the Internet widen monitorial citizens’ scanning range, but for Schudson they do nothing more than that. They do not change the quality of citizens’ engagement. As the author of *The Good Citizen* puts it: “[T]he Internet does not erase existing structures of politics. If it gives to ordinary citizens new tools for gathering information and expressing views, think how much more it offers to political professionals who spend forty to eighty hours a week on politics, not forty to eighty minutes” (Schudson

2004: 57). I stake a different position and propose a new reading of the role citizens can play in complex democratic systems.

The Networked Citizen

From a narrow point of view, new communication media seem to play merely a supporting role in the oiled dynamics of representative democracy: they enhance dramatically the possibility for the members of the public to establish direct and privileged relationships with their political representatives; vice versa, politicians can keep in contact easily and inexpensively with constituents (Coleman and Blumler 2009; Kingham 2003). From a wider and different perspective, one that sees politics as an ongoing process of active (albeit discontinued) participation rather than simply a mere act of delegation; the marriage between politics and new media gives birth to a new type of citizen, the networked citizen.

The networked citizen is an ideal-type that helps us make sense of the way in which some people engage in politics in today's networked world. The networked citizen is highly inventive, independent, and at the same time strongly interconnected with his peers and the world. This new ideal-type of citizen is increasingly aware of her role as a vital driver of political change. Her defining element is the savvy use of communication media networks and devices as remarkably effective tools to resist and challenge hubris.

At the core of the networked citizen's actions is a simple but normatively crucial idea: to be a citizen is to grasp in its entirety the complex political role an individual can play within a specific political milieu, before, during, and after election day. Digital communication media networks radically transform the quality and effectiveness of citizens' political engagement by allowing them to form "connective action networks," which, differently than classical collective actions, are "typically far more individualized and technologically organized sets of processes that result in action without the requirement of collective identity framing or the levels of organizational resources required to respond effectively to opportunities" (Bennet and Segerberg 2012: 750).

Thanks to new communication media, citizens are in a position to alter the periodicity of the major political cycle of recurring elections that regulates representative systems. They have acquired the power to break that cycle into a stream of continuous public acts of assessment, which potentially are as politically significant as an election can be. Contrary to the latter, the former is never predictable, can be quite sudden, and can have a wide-ranging destabilizing effect.

One of the most important effects of the logic of connective action is to make public acts of contestation easily viral (Bennett and Segerberg 2012: 745). This is a crucial quality of politics in the age of minority democracy (Keane 2009). It allows actions of resistance to power to follow unconventional paths and make their outcomes rather unpredictable. Citizens acting individually or organized in networked groups simply using mobile phones, relying on Web tools (basic old-fashioned bulletin boards or news groups; or more advanced blogs, wikis, or video-sharing Web platforms) can succeed in humbling politicians and even break governments. The facility with which in this era of communicative abundance citizens can monitor, embarrass, and humble those in power reveals the long-term potential embedded within the changing dynamics of current practices of civic engagement. The Internet has become an important political space through which we form and share opinions and organize public contestation of power. As Clay Shirky (2011: 28) puts it: “[A]s the communications landscape gets denser, more complex, and more participatory, the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action.” And, despite some recent ups and downs “social media have become coordinating tools for nearly all of the world’s political movements.”

The recent exploits of Edward Snowden, Julian Assange’s Wikileaks, or the increasing influence of new political movements such as the Spanish Indignados, the Occupy Movement (Anduiza, Cristancho, and Sabucedo 2014; Bennett and Segerberg 2011), or the Italian Five Star Movement led by the comedian-turned-blogger-turned-political-guru Beppe Grillo are important examples of such radical change. These movements used the Internet to gather consensus, finance campaigns, and organize successful public rallies. The strategy paid off, particularly for the Five Star Movement, which managed to go beyond any forecasts and become the major political force in Italy on its maiden national election in 2013 (De Rosa 2013).

In this new environment the political potential of citizens’ engagement goes beyond monitoring, embarrassing, or humbling. It can be politically creative and can suggest or pursue uncharted paths to achieve their goals. In other words, embedded within the possibilities of this new complex social system, there is the possibility to break new ground about how participation in politics is understood, organized, and implemented (Dahlgren 2009). The roots of this potential can be traced to the distributed quality of networks, which are designed to disregard any single centre of power, and to treat hierarchy as an obstacle for its smooth functioning (Baran 1964). Active networked citizens can exploit

this quality to produce, more and more often, startling and chronic reversals of power.

What Future?

In his classical study *The Future of Democracy*, the late Italian political philosopher, Norberto Bobbio (1987: 34) addressed the risks hidden beneath the surface of what he called a “computerocracy”: the “ideal of the powerful,” he wrote, “has always been to see every gesture and to listen to every word of their subjects (if possible without being seen or heard).” Computer technology, Bobbio argued, makes such ideal finally achievable. Thus, the old question running through the whole history of political thought, “Who guards the guards?” can now be reformulated as, “Who controls the controllers?” Finding an adequate answer to this question is a crucial imperative, for, as Bobbio remarked, if not dealt with “democracy in the sense of visible government is lost.”

Almost thirty years later, in the backdrop of a growing spying scandal, involving the US government, a whistle-blower, and millions of unaware citizens, Bobbio’s words still ring as a critical warning about the excessive use of technology in democratic countries. The NSA scandal brought to light a worrying transformation in the relationship between state and citizen. Digital communication technology has widened to unprecedented levels the scope (both in terms of quantity and quality) of government’s power of surveillance; the reach of this kind of power goes beyond national space as typically understood, while these abuses of power (like in the case of the NSA) often lie in the grey area of no-man’s land, both legally and politically.

Democratic power should always be accountable and open to scrutiny; however the secretiveness and pervasiveness of the many surveillance systems that surround us (both at state and corporate level, within and across borders) shatter the idyllic image of democracy we have cultivated for decades. One crucial consequence is that, as the example of the NSA demonstrates, these highly complex systems literally disintegrate the spatial and geographical unity of political subjects, that is, citizens: we have gone from rights-bearing individuals into streams of rights-less digital bits of data flow. No democratic system can survive and thrive in this context.

If not adequately addressed, the NSA’s pervasive system of mass surveillance may represent the shape of things to come: a twenty-first century society of control whose sophisticated exercise of power will be invisible to most of us, while all we will be left with is a sort of phantom

version of the democratic life we thought we knew. The situation should make us ponder whether or not we have gone too far in our quest to become a fully functional cybernetic society, the sort of living environment in which our technological selves are considered increasingly as (or even more) important as our physical and political ones. This is a quest that carries with it a great danger of displacement: technology evolves, but society – that is, both the institutions that constitute it and the people that live within it – seems to lag dangerously behind.

Retreat to a low-tech analogue world is not an option either. We have come a long way since the inception of the Internet in the late 1960s, and we are now irreversibly part of the system. We are continuously and necessarily immersed in a cacophony of data streams essential to our way of life, even though most of this data is beyond our comprehension or even awareness. The solution to the problem is complex; it involves international cooperation in rewriting laws and regulations while enforcing new encryption protocols (Cohen 2012). It certainly calls for Internet service companies to re-think their collaboration with governments.

Furthermore, Snowden's case reminds us that whistle-blowers' role in our increasingly complex and secretive society is of great importance, yet more often than not they are called traitors. The opposite is perhaps true, in fact, as the Web-pioneer Tim Berners-Lee rightly put it: "[A]t the end of the day when systems for checks and balances break down we have to rely on the whistleblowers – [hence] we must protect them and respect them" (Arthur 2013).

Success and defeat of democracy are always bound to the actions of citizens. While new communication media increases the power of government to spy on its citizens, it also offers a solution to the problem by providing the networked citizens of the twenty-first century with efficient means to not only guard but strongly challenge the controllers.

Each individual must decide what kind of citizen he or she wants to be. The spectrum of possibilities ranges from its absolute negative, to be the empty vessel of rights-less digital bits of data flowing in a blissful sea of ignorance; to its democratic ideal, to become fully active networked citizens always on guard, always ready to take action against the controllers. The future of democracy depends on how the answers to that fundamental question spread across the spectrum.

► **Giovanni Navarria** is postdoctoral fellow at the Sydney Democracy Network, University of Sydney. His research interests include the relationship between authoritarian regimes in Asia and the language and tactics of democracy, the role new communication media have in politics, and the meaning of representation and the role of civil society in contemporary democracies.

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