



Information asymmetry and power in a surveillance society

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ABSTRACT

This paper fuses Lukes' (1974) three-dimensional view of power with the economic concept of informational asymmetry to explicate how access to information is organized and how power relationships arise from this organization. We argue that many observed asymmetries are deliberate and, drawing from the economics and finance literature, we posit that their outcomes are inevitably detrimental. The paper examines the techniques that foster information imbalances, such as media and propaganda, knowledge production, educational systems, legal and organizational structures, exclusive information networks, and surveillance. We conclude that in the absence of greater transparency, the deleterious effects of unequal access to information will continue and deepen. We further suggest that the analysis of the complexities of the issues warrants a broad, multidisciplinary approach and we suggest what this might include.

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1. Introduction

Over recent years there has been mounting controversy regarding the issues pertaining to secrecy, surveillance, access to information and the power relations that arise from it. There are many distinct streams in the literature and in this paper we want to bring together two perspectives that have not previously been united. First, we wish to start with Lukes (1974, 2005) 'three dimensional view' which provides a perceptive account of the different aspects of power. Lukes points out that both political action and inaction

are of equal significance, however as Lukes recognizes, this produces problems in that non-decisions are not empirically observable. By focusing on things that are not directly measurable, the approach of Lukes can be contrasted with that adopted by economists who are only concerned with the manifest. By bringing together two different lenses of social theory, we hope to provide a deeper and more nuanced picture. We also introduce a concept of 'information asymmetrification' to theorize the deliberate withholding and manipulation of the knowledge available to the general public.

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Lukes' takes Dahl's (1957) 'Concept of Power' as the first dimension – described by Lukes as a 'first, rather crude effort' (1974: 60) – that looks at situations of conflict to see who dominates the decision-making. The two dimensional view comes from Bachrach and Baratz (1970) which served as a limited critique of the behavioral bias of the one-dimensional model and covers both decision-making and non-decision-making. The latter can be related to suppression of certain political issues and making sure that only safe issues are debated in the public domain. Alternative voices are suppressed by individuals who have the means to do so. In situations like this, it is difficult to establish whether maintenance of the *status quo* is through consensus or non-decision-making. Lukes' three dimensional approach explicitly rejects the overly-individualistic approach of the first two dimensions, drawing in 'consideration of the many ways in which *potential issues* are kept out of politics, whether through the operation of social forces and institutional practices' (p. 24. italics in the original text). Through 'the control of information, through the mass media and through the processes of socialisation' (p. 23) the desires of the general public can be molded and any latent conflict may be averted.

The concern over the manipulation of the desires of the many through filtering and contorting publicly available information has been with us for centuries. Public support, frequently vital for the operationalization of power, can be seen as at least partly a function of the information available. Hume recognized this when he commented:

Nothing appears more surprising [...] than the easiness with which the many are governed by the few [...]. When we enquire by what means this wonder is effected, we shall find, that, as FORCE is always on the side of the governed, the governors have nothing to support them but opinion. It is therefore, on opinion only that government is founded.

[(Hume, 1742/1987: 11)]

Hume's concerns resonate with Lukes, and point to a key difference that he establishes from the work of Foucault. Lukes (2005: 98) argues that Foucault's ideas have launched a voluminous body of work that has attempted to solely examine 'how and to what extent the governed are rendered governable', whereas Lukes' own concern also remains 'the significance of the outcomes that the powerful can bring about' (p. 111). Although both aspects are undoubtedly important, our focus ultimately in this paper is on the creations of those asymmetries by the powerful.

This leads to the importance of considering different models of information use. In this paper, to theorize some of the more egregious developments, we use the economic concept of information asymmetry. Informational imbalances are, it seems, essential in maintaining power, yet the economics literature highlights the severe consequences of such imbalances. The theme of restricting information is one that has sporadic, but important, interest. One notable author is Innis, who introduced the concept of 'monopolies of knowledge' (see, for example, Innis (2008)). Innis identified that 'monopolies or oligopolies of knowledge have been built up in relation to the demands of force' (2008: 32). Heyer and Crowley (2008: xxxiii) note that these structures lead to 'overarching political authority, territorial expansion, and inequitable distribution of power and wealth.' Innis, originally writing in 1951, also drew attention to the importance of 'mechanized knowledge as a source of power' (2008: 195) – yet his insight comes several decades before the industrialization of knowledge that information technology would allow.

Furthermore, Innis (1999) elaborates on the enduring nature of restrictions, pointing out that the priesthood in ancient Egypt monopolized knowledge on flood patterns (enabling a degree of prediction that reinforced their position) and maintained this through the use of specialized scripts (hieroglyphics) impenetrable to outsiders (see also Athwal (2004)). This helped cement a monopolization of religious knowledge (Baines, 1990). In Babylonia, the power of the priesthood was similarly entrenched, leading to one king constructing a library and archives in an attempt to diminish religious authority (Innis, 2008: 99). Athwal (2004) suggests that this is even more clearly visible in the medieval era where the clergy not only monopolized writing and literacy but also were able to define what was legitimate thought and what was heresy. Scientific ideas, later embraced as progress, were brutally suppressed. Lukes would probably refer to this as institutionalized preference-shaping. History is, of course, littered with similar examples but here we set out to look at the present.

One key distinction between these past examples and today is the price of collecting and storing knowledge. When library documents had to be painstakingly copied by scribes, knowledge was

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