

Cyber Challenges to International Human Rights

Title: Truth-Telling in Times of Information Overflow

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Abstract:

Leaking information plays a major role in the struggle against pervasive electronic surveillance practices. The questions I wish to address in this context is how much truth can a democracy contain, how much democracy is needed for truth-telling to be possible, and what does it mean to dominate discourse in an age of information overflow.

Politically, actions of Whistleblowers such as Edward Snowden, news platforms such as Wikileaks, and political Hacktivists such as Jeremy Hammond, are all directed at changing epistemic a-symmetries within the information-sphere, by interfering with the political order of information distribution. I suggest turning to Foucault's study of parrhesia, which is "the ethics of truth-telling as an action which is dangerous and free", for better understanding the nature of such actions and its profound relations with democracy.

Snowden, Wikileaks or Hammond presents a new form of truth telling, in which the mode of veridiction is not the speaker's character, as in ancient times, but the presentation of documents. Speaking truth is no longer a verbal activity, but a mode of visual presentation. Moreover, new comers in the business of truth telling are no longer appealing to the law of a higher deity; instead, they appeal to a new secular liberal god: international law. This shift can be seen for example in Snowden's public statement made from his refuge in Moscow, declaring that he believes "in the principle declared in Nuremberg in 1945: individuals have international duties which transcend national obligations of obedience. Therefore, individual citizens have the duty to violate domestic laws to prevent crimes against the peace and humanity from occurring."

However, the connection between truth telling and democracy presents two major paradoxes: true discourse cannot exist without democracy; but formal democracy, i.e. egalitarian freedom of speech, threatens the very existence of true discourse. In other words, where everybody can say anything, the truth becomes no more than an indistinctive chatter. In the contemporary age of infoglut, where dominating information is no longer dependent on securing dominant narratives as in Marxist theory, the possibility of efficiently challenging such narratives posed by Snowden, Wikileaks or Hammond is questionable.