

Discourses of internet freedom

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Abstract

Public discourses about information and communication technologies (ICTs) mobilize the phrase “internet freedom” as they grapple with the proper roles of the state, organizations and individuals in society. This paper analyzes public instances of internet freedom discourse, using discourse as an analytical construct that characterizes language practices as expressions of systems of power. Textual analysis of press accounts, policy texts and influential digital manifestos finds that internet freedom discourses increasingly signify a system of power relations in which individual autonomy can be facilitated or limited by private enterprise organizations, but is predominantly limited by the actions of nation-states. These findings imply an ongoing reliance on classical political theories along with neoliberal and cyberlibertarian ideals, although such traditions provide a scarce and ill-fitting vocabulary to describe current ICT practices. The research suggests that examining and questioning the assumptions that inform inherited ideas of freedom might open new avenues of political possibility.

Keywords

discourse; freedom; internet freedom; politics; textual analysis

Discourses of Internet Freedom

Public discourses about information and communication technologies (ICTs) mobilize the phrase “internet freedom” as they grapple with the proper roles of the state, organizations and individuals in society. This paper identifies and analyzes discourses of internet freedom in order to examine and question the assumptions that inform inherited ideas of political freedom.

Theoretical Orientation and Methodological Approach

Language and power are intertwined: both the words that come to us easily and the cases in which we grasp for words are instantiations of relations of power (Foucault, 1982; Orwell, 1946; Taylor, 1984). Foucault (1982) asserts that discourses are systems of power expressed through language practices; discourses instantiate ‘soft’ social enforcement that produces power relations through particular types of knowledge and behavior. Foucault’s insights inform scholarly works that use the term ‘discourse’ as an analytical category (similar to genre) for use in textual analysis, yet maintain a focus on individual agency in place of the “power without agency” for which Foucault has been critiqued (Edwards, 1996; Fairclough, 1995; Grewal, 2008). This paper draws attention to the symbolic realm, in which words signify our categorizations of events by connecting particular historical and cultural moments to existing complexes of meaning (Bazerman, 2002). Discursive articulations--of freedom to information technologies, for example--matter, because they affect perceptions of what is possible and desirable in the realms of commerce, law, cultural practice, and the distribution of power in society (Balkin, 2004; Kelty, 2013; Wyatt, 2004).

This paper analyzes public invocations of internet freedom in policy, press accounts, and the statements of digital activists. I draw, here, from two bodies of text. First, I collected policy and press accounts through a database search for co-occurrences of the terms *internet* and *freedom* in U.S. and international major newspapers, and in the texts of U.S. Federal laws and regulations from June 1995 through June 2012. The resulting texts were screened to remove chance co-occurrences of terms and then grouped around key events in order to interpret the emergence of meanings over time. These press and policy accounts reflect vernacular instances of internet freedom talk.

Second, the publication of two competing “Declarations of Internet Freedom” (Access, American Civil Liberties Union, CREDO, Electronic Frontier Foundation, and Free Press, 2012; TechFreedom and Institute for Competitive Enterprise, 2012) in the wake of protests over proposed intellectual property laws SOPA and PIPA prompted me to seek out digital manifestos (see for example Dyson, Gilder, Keyworth, and Toffler, 1994; Barlow, 1996). These digital founding documents articulate understandings of the allocation of power in society in a particular historical moment by putting forth particular conceptualizations of freedom, constructing the subjects for whom freedom is claimed, and identifying threats to freedom. Areas of similarity and difference in digital founding documents indicate areas of consensus and contestation about how “internet freedom,” as a polysemic trope, fits into and functions within existing systems of meaning.

Taken together, then, these two bodies of text suggest preliminary understandings of how people employ the notion of internet freedom, both in a practical sense (to what phenomena or principles do people refer by using this phrase?) and in a symbolic sense (how does the phrase function politically and culturally within historically based understandings of subjectivity and autonomy?).

Findings

Evolving interrelations between technology and society can prompt novel uses of existing terms (Marx, 2010). Analysis of the texts indicates internet freedom served as a signifier for a diverse array of emerging practices and controversies related to digital communication. In the mid-1990s, press and policy texts used the phrase “internet freedom” to describe existing debates issues over socially acceptable expression (hate speech, pornography, and incitements to personal violence, for example) along with new issues including internet service providers’ responsibilities to monitor and limit access to content. Meanwhile, cyber-libertarian digital founding documents constructed claims to freedom in the digital age as the right to defy state and corporate bureaucracies’ infringements upon the autonomy of an entrepreneurial (and sometimes disembodied) individual. By the mid- to late 2000s, net neutrality-related invocations of internet freedom facilitated both individual and corporate claims of freedom to act in relation to information, thus constituting both human and corporate political subjects.

The emergence of another set of meanings in the late 2000s and early 2010s further highlighted the presence of the corporation in notions of internet freedom. Press accounts figured U.S. technology companies’ involvement in Chinese state oppression and U.S. social networking services’ facilitation of political demonstrations in the Middle East as issues of internet freedom, highlighting how corporations could act with or against state attempts to limit both access to information and expression of political dissent. Domestically, press accounts raised access to information and personal expression (including creative expression and political dissent) as key elements of internet freedom discourses regarding PIPA and SOPA. The competing “Declaration[s] of Internet Freedom” published in 2012 both claimed rights of access to the network, but presented differing visions of material and intellectual property rights; these points of difference constructed different political subjects for whom internet freedom could be claimed.

Conclusions and Implications

Internet freedom discourses increasingly signify systems of power relations in which individual autonomy can be facilitated or limited by private enterprise organizations, but is predominantly limited by the actions of nation-states. Post-World War II American assumptions and ideals about freedom and autonomy combined classical theories of sovereignty with fears of totalitarianism; these anxieties and ideals inform the language and ideas employed in internet freedom talk despite providing a scarce and ill-fitting vocabulary to describe current practices and the configurations of power they imply. Use of the term “internet freedom,” then, may bear out Orwell’s (1946) concern that ready-made phrases allow speakers to bypass critical thought in favor of vague but familiar linguistic tropes.

Foucault suggests that classical political theory relies upon models of sovereignty and law that are insufficient to describe modern relations of power (Taylor, 1984). The current American

understanding of freedom favors a non-interventionist, 'negative' classical ideal of 'freedom to be left alone,' bolstered by a midcentury understanding of 'positive' and 'negative' liberties that characterized 'positive' state interventions designed to facilitate individual autonomy and self-fulfillment as inevitably oppressive and/or totalitarian (Berlin, 1958; Foner, 1998; Taylor, 1979). The neoliberal and cyber-libertarian impulses of recent decades have combined these understandings with, respectively, faith in market forces' capacities to distill optimal societal outcomes from the actions of sovereign individuals, and a vision of ICTs as the best means by which to realize such visions of sovereign individuality (Harvey, 2007; Streeter, 2011; Turner, 2006).

Political philosophers from midcentury through the present time have challenged the positive/negative model in favor of relational or voluntaristic models (MacCallum, 1967; Olsaretti, 2009). Still, the influence of the positive/negative schema endures in political thought at large and in ICT scholarship; Berlin's positive/negative terms fit awkwardly to nuanced explications of how concepts of freedom are designed into and modified by digital technologies (Keltz, 2013).

Critically re-examining discourses of internet freedom provides scholars the opportunity to examine, question and possibly destabilize the assumptions that inform inherited ideas of freedom. By doing so, internet research holds the potential to open new concepts of political subjectivity and new avenues of political possibility.

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