

Circumventing Censorship

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The State of War Information

Sound science requires that explanations be testable and that evidence be public. Just politics are subject to similar criteria: to be just and justifiable, government action must be open to review by a body politic with the power to revise it. The relationship between truth, justice, and verifiability has been investigated by numerous philosophers, notably Mill, Popper, and Arendt. This philosophical concern is currently at a high point of relevance to thinkers in the United States. We are embarked in a *War on Terror* that extends to indeterminate enemies, indeterminate duration, indeterminate cost, with an indeterminate mission. We do know that *the War on Terror* is coincident with an increase in government secrecy and this nation's strongest military restrictions on press investigation. This state of war is expected to be long term. Given that the world has never been absent of terrorism, it may be a permanent state. It is well worth wondering what the state of the union will become under such conditions. This essay is a beginning inquiry into the possibilities of informed citizenry and social activism in circumstances where state controlled media coexists with the internet.

A major revision in the US government-press relationship occurred in 1991. As A. Trevor Thrall puts it in his well documented book, War in the Media Age;

The Gulf War was both the most widely covered war in history and the one in which the U.S. government imposed the greatest restrictions of the press short of outright censorship.[1]

The restrictions were initiated by Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Pete Williams, under then Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney. Williams sent a memorandum out to press organizations on December 14, 1991;

All interviews with service members will be on the record. Security at the sources is the policy. In the event of hostilities, media products will be subject to security review prior to release...You must remain with your military escort at all times, until released, and follow instructions regarding your activities. These instructions are intended only to facilitate troop movement, ensure safety, and maintain operational security.[2]

These rules ensured government oversight of what information was gathered from the militarized area and what information left that area. Along with the control of press operations, the Bush administration imposed tight internal controls on military information. Commander of the allied war forces, General Norman Schwartzkopf recalls;

So a lot of times, things were blamed on the people in the theater had been directed straight from Washington for, let's face it, principally political reasons, probably...I'll give you a very good example. At one point, we all got told that we

couldn't deal with the press anymore. This started, I think, about the end of November. From then until the war started, we were told: You cannot talk to the press anymore. None of your generals can talk to the press anymore. [3]

The closing down of sources for the press to gather resulted in a primary reliance on information produced by the government directly for the purpose of influencing public opinion. The White House and Pentagon jointly crafted the majority of the news that U.S. citizens received about the war. Lt. General Thomas Kelly, then director of operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, comments;

For the first time ever, the administration, the Department of Defense, was talking directly to the American People, using the vehicle of a press briefing, whereas in Vietnam, everything was filtered through the press. I think that was a major advantage for the government. The press, wittingly or unwittingly, between Riyadh and Washington, was giving us an hour-and-a-half a day to tell our story to the American people...the American people were getting their information from the government, not from the press.[4]

The result of these information control strategies is the appearance of an autonomous press that actually is reliant on State selected and produced information.

In the *War on Terror* the degree of government control of press information about the war has increased. In addition to very limited and highly regulated access to troops and battle areas, reporters have been detained, confined, and relieved of images in areas where casualties occurred.[5] While the Pentagon claims to support open and independent reporting, news bureau chiefs and reporters claim that no such condition obtains.[6] Says a New York Times article;

The media's access to American military operations is more far more limited than in any recent conflict, including NATO's war against Yugoslavia, the American invasion of Haiti or the American intervention in Somalia.[7]

While the press is excluded from traditionally covered war stages such as the Aircraft carrier from which operations into Afghanistan were launched, the Pentagon compensates by providing its own produced combat camera footage, which the Defense Department points out is not only intended to fill a gap in the media's news coverage but also is a way to put psychological pressure on the Taliban and other regimes around the world that protect terrorists.[8] The international press faces even tougher restrictions imposed by the Pakistan, access point to Afghanistan and recent ally to the U.S. in the *War on Terror*. Journalists seeking independent coverage of the war have been arrested and deported by the Pakistani military government.⁹ As the *War on Terror* grows in scope, scale, and duration we can expect State controlled media and information operations to increase in sophistication, subtlety, and calculation.

War and Peace in the Information Age

Thus far I have presented a brief argument in support of my position that the U.S. government exercises extensive control over information about an expanding (perhaps

global) war. I anticipate a variety of counter-arguments that would seek to reject, justify, or depreciate my position. The purpose of this essay, however, is to consider a point of political epistemology: if a government does exercise control over war news, what options remain for an informed citizenry to test the news they are given? That is, what options remain for individuals who believe that their government controls (i.e. selects, conceals, modifies, and invents) their major sources of information? The point is relevant, even if my position about current U.S. war information is taken as merely hypothetical. I maintain that the internet provides access to information in ways that are not subject to the same controls as are mass-media (i.e. television, newspapers, and radio). Thus, individuals have access to a wide variety of information pertaining to the ongoing war, if they know how to get at it.

The internet bears some radically distinguishing characteristics from the mass-media. Because of these characteristics, it is possible for individuals to find, access, and distribute information outside of traditional media controls. These characteristics are: global scale, distributed production, low cost, and logical plasticity. By intentionally employing these characteristics it is possible for individuals to pursue a powerful information campaign even in the context of a controlled mass-media.

Global Scale: The internet is world-wide. Individuals may search and collect information from a wide range of sources that are not subject to central control and that have various agendas. For example, the above information about Pakistani arrests and deportations of journalists covering the *War on Terror* come from British and Indian sources. In about the same amount of time it takes to read the morning New York Times, one may comb half-a-dozen international sources for war information.

Distributed Production: Mass-media control by governments is facilitated by the control of production by a relatively few enterprises. The internet, by contrast, is a radically distributed system production sources. Groups and individuals of all sorts may publish internet information directly without the mediation of an editor. This leads to a strong need for quality discrimination (given the lack of control). It also leads to sources of information that would be very hard to come by otherwise. For example, the Indian journalist who was deported from Pakistan in October 2001 was scheduled to interview members of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA). While that organization has received significant press coverage for opposing the Taliban, less coverage is given to the criticism RAWA mounts on the U.S. and Allied conduct in the war on Afghanistan. As individuals, however, we may access information from RAWA directly at <<http://rawa.false.net>>. This open source information networking does not replace the value of expert journalism, but when journalistic sources are influenced and silenced this open access to information becomes crucial.

Logical Plasticity: Computing produces a unique form of technology because the raw material of software is information. Individuals with sufficient programming knowledge can create programs that operate within the internet environment. In industrial age technology, even if one had the skills and knowledge needed to build a machine or tool, the resources required to produce them were expensive or inaccessible. This remains true with information technology hardware, but not so with programming. Given sufficient knowledge, a programmer can construct, use, reproduce, and distribute information tools at no cost beyond the time it takes to make it. Because of this flexibility, the internet hosts a proliferation of independently produced software. Individuals and groups may be motivated to create software by political and moral values, rather than commercial and governmental values. For example, Peek-A-Booty <<http://www.peek-a-booty.org>> is a web browsing utility designed to defeat internet censorship. Countries such as China, Malaysia, Singapore, Arabic nations, and lately the United States, restrict and filter what sorts of content citizens may access on the web (e.g. pornographic, political, classified).

In the UK, the controversial Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act calls for the placing of "black boxes" inside Britain's internet connection companies, so law enforcement agencies can easily dip into and tap data streams.[11] In the United States, after September 11 the FBI immediately transcended the obstacles of opposition to its plan of installing email and web monitoring systems such as Carnivore and Magic Lantern that allows investigators to secretly install over the Internet powerful eavesdropping software that records every keystroke on a person's computer.[12] Carnivore is installed on an Internet Service provider (ISP) server and monitors packets of information moving through it. Magic Lantern operates like a computer virus and installs itself on individual personal computers then issues reports back to the surveyor on the keystrokes entered into that machine.

Peek-A-Booty uses a combination of encryption and distributed proxy network to mask the identity of each node. So the user can route around censorship that blocks citizens' access to specific IP addresses, because the censor doesn't know they're going there. If you're a Peek-A-Booty node, you might be doing it on their behalf.[13] This strategy may frustrate government censors, government surveillance, industry controls over content (e.g. online music and movie sites). If Peek-a-booty is used by large numbers of people its use of encryption could make a mockery of any police attempts to monitor electronic communications.[14]

Peek-A-Booty is an instance of values-motivated programming. Individuals and groups are more capable than ever to impact the information environment. In the current climate it is not difficult to picture efforts such as Peek-A-Booty to be declared illegal. Were that to happen, such programming will go underground and the *War on Terror* will have to grow to encompass some domestic U.S. civil libertarian agenda. The Peek-A-Booty enthusiast motto is; *Let freedom ping.*

Data Control

The internet provides individuals with access to a huge amount and broad diversity of information. In a climate of secrecy and purposeful disinformation, the challenge is to access that information strategically; i.e. to advance one's knowledge in the areas of greatest concern. The internet is rife with speculation, rumor, and outright hoaxes. Any information used from the internet should be verified against other sources (as I have attempted to do above with my war information analysis). With the massive stream of uncontrolled data on the internet, such rigor is hard to actualize. This challenge may help explain the centrality of TV and Newspapers as sources of news: the edited and interpreted information sources have the advantage that everyone gets the same information from a variety of sources. Ultimately this information comes from a single source (the Associated Press, the Pentagon, etc.) And is disseminated by many vehicles. Thus, while attending to different vehicles, almost everyone gets the same basic information. When we compare accounts, by checking with one another or by changing channels, we satisfy the verification process in form. Insofar as these vehicles derive from a single information source, there is little genuine verification in content.

One way to broaden one's information base and verification options is to sample a wider range of sources. The internet provides a large body of news sources from every part of the world. A sample of the sources that I use include:

Afghanistan News (Afghanistan) <http://afghanistan.newstrove.com>

Ananova (UK) <http://www.ananova.com>

Arab World News (Unclear) <http://www.arabworldnews.com>

Asahi Shimbun (Japan) <http://www.asahi.com/english/english.html>

Bahrain Tribune Daily (Bahrain) <http://www.bahraintribune.com>

Canada Online (Canada) <http://www.canoe.ca>

Central Europe Online (Czech Republic)

<http://www.europeaninternet.com/centraleurope>

China Daily (China) <http://www.chinadaily.net/news/index.html>

Christian Science Monitor (USA) <http://www.csmonitor.com>

Daily Mail & Guardian (South Africa) <http://refdesk.com/paper.html>

Ha'aretz Daily (Israel) <http://www.haaretzdaily.com>

Globe and Mail (Canada) <http://www.theglobeandmail.com>

Guardian (UK) <http://www.guardian.co.uk>

International Herald Tribune (France/international partnership) <http://www.iht.com>

Irish Times (Ireland) <http://www.ireland.com>

Japan Times (Japan) <http://www.japantimes.co.jp>

Jerusalem Post (Israel) - <http://www.jpost.com>

Jordan Times (Jordan) <http://www.jordantimes.com>

London Times (UK) <http://www.thetimes.co.uk>

Los Angeles Times (USA) <http://www.washingtonpost.com>

Pakistan Today (Pakistan) <http://www.paktoday.com>

Pravda (Russia) <http://english.pravda.ru>

Sydney Morning Herald (Australia) <http://www.smh.com.au>
South China Morning Post (China) <http://www.scmp.com>
Syrian Times (Syria) <http://www.teshreen.com/syriatimes>
Terhan Times (Iran) <http://www.tehrantimes.com>
Taipei Times (Taiwan) <http://www.taipeitimes.com/news>
The Daily Star (Lebanon) <http://www.dailystar.com.lb>
The New York Times (USA) <http://www.nytimes.com/>
The People's Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea)
<http://www.korea-np.co.jp/pk>
The Times of India (India) <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com>
Turkish Daily News (Turkey) <http://www.TurkishDailyNews.com>
Vanguard (Nigeria) <http://www.vanguardngr.com>
WashingtonPost.com (USA) <http://www.washingtonpost.com>
WorldNews.com <http://www.wn.com>

Links to many of these online newspapers and many others are collected by Refdesk.com <http://refdesk.com>, a very powerful internet portal. The links to US and Worldwide Newspapers online are collected at <http://refdesk.com/paper.html>. Among the search capacities, data bases, encyclopedias, and much more collected at Refdesk.com, I find the Journalist Tools <http://refdesk.com/jourtool.html> most valuable. These are web sites created by and for journalists to aid in online investigation. In addition, the many sites and issues groups that provide analysis of the media and issues are valuable sources of information.

Media and Military Analysis

Arms Control Association; A national nonpartisan membership organization dedicated to promoting public understanding of and support for effective arms control policies.

<http://www.armscontrol.org>

Cato Institute; non-profit public policy research foundation headquartered in Washington, D.C.

<http://www.cato.org>

Federation of Atomic Scientists; A primary source of weapons and military process information

<http://www.fas.org>

Jane's Defense Weekly; A private information source on global military industry and military policy.

<http://jdw.janes.com>

MediaChanel.org; MediaChannel.org is a nonprofit public interest group dedicated to information and analysis about media. Topics regularly covered include: Media ownership, censorship, minority perspectives, and new technology.

<http://www.mediachannel.org>

MidEast Web Gateway; a US/Israeli effort to promote peace in the middle-east.

<http://www.mideastweb.org>

Project on Government Secrecy; Including Secrecy News email list

<http://www.fas.org/sgp/index.html>

War on Terrorism: Jane's Analysis;

http://www.janes.com/security/international_security/terrorism_index.shtml

One of the richest stores of information comes from the US Federal government. Hundreds of agencies have websites with policies, news, and statistics. Many state and local agencies provide similar information.

Government Sources

Chiefs of State; Who's Who Globally

<http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/chiefs/>

Congressional Email Directory;

<http://www.webslingerz.com/jhoffman/congress-email.html>

Congressional Record; The Congressional Record is the official record of the proceedings and debates of the United States Congress. It is published daily when Congress is in session. Helpful Hints provide instructions for searching the Congressional Record database.

http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/aces/aces150.html

Defense Link; U.S. Department of Defense Portal

<http://www.defenselink.mil>

Electronic Activist; research and educational organization focusing on the separation of church and state. Our database currently contains contact information for U.S. senators and representatives, governors, and some state legislatures.

<http://www.berkshire.net/~ifas/activist/index1.html>

Federal Web Locator; Links to all Federal Agency Websites

<http://www.fedweb.com>

FedStats; gateway to statistics from over 100 U.S. Federal agencies

<http://www.fedstats.gov>

National Security Agency; all information in, not much out.

<http://www.nsa.gov>

National Security Archives; George Washington University project on Freedom of Information Act procured information. If history repeats, then the collections at this site are critical reading.

<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv>

Stars and Stripes Online; US Military Newspaper

<http://www.stripes.osd.mil>

The Federal Times; Federal Government and Agency Reporting

<http://www.federaltimes.com>

Thomas; Federal Legislative Information

<http://thomas.loc.gov>

U.S. Office of Management and Budget; where the money goes, so far as publically .

<http://w3.access.gpo.gov/usbudget>

United States Intelligence Community
<http://www.odci.gov/ic/icagen2.htm>

Robot Journalism or Reverse Censorship

The good news is that the above listed sources provide the opportunity for genuine investigation and comparison of war information. The bad news is that such a wealth of information is hard for an individual to assimilate and manage. Moreover, these sources content frequently. One value of centralized media (TV and Newspapers) is that it sorts and edits for us. It is no use having access to a vast information resource if one has not sufficient time to use it. There is, however, more good news. Web robots provide a means to implement a serious online research strategy. A robot is a program that carries out internet tasks such as linking to pages, scanning content, searching, etc. Many web robots are in use to aid shoppers in finding the lowest price for an item among online vendors. Some robots are valuable in the effort to carry out personal journalism.

C4U <<http://www.c4u.com>> is a freeware web robot that links to and scans web pages for changes in text, keywords, links, images, or email addresses. A C4U button sits on the browser bar allowing you to select and configure a page for checking as you use the web. The user has control over the scanning variables. When a match is found, that page link in the program window is flagged with an icon with a report of what is new in that page. One can preview the page to see the new content highlighted. C4U is not a type of search engine. Rather, it automates a task that many of us perform on the web: link to a page and scan it for something interesting. With C4U, we stipulate the content of interest in advance and then monitor selected pages for changes in that content. If concerned with the growth in government secrecy, for instance, one might tune C4U to the main pages of the news sources listed above with the keywords Asecret, secrecy, covert, classified. A weekly check on the C4U window will show which pages have new content containing those words. Creating folders in C4U for different groups of content allows one to conduct multiple investigations at once. When a keyword is found, one previews the page to determine whether it is relevant to the investigation. If so, then go to that page and read it. I monitor more than one hundred sources for several topics on a daily basis in about the same time it takes me to read the front page of the New York Times.

The personal investigative research effort using internet sources, which is a means to circumvent government manipulation of war information, is made practical by tools like C4U. To render that information useful as knowledge, one must employ a strategy for storing and retrieving what is learned. Such a strategy should be time-efficient and robust enough to grow with unexpected turns in the information stream. One such investigative research strategy proceeds as follows:

1. Pick an issue (e.g. expanded uses for nuclear weapons)

2. Produce a keyword analysis (e.g. nuclear, nuke, nuclear AND tactical, atomic AND weapon, etc.) One way to produce a keyword set is to look for the major terms used in articles on that issue.
3. Search web for the sites with content related to the issue. A collection of news related search sites is <http://www.refdesk.com/newsrch.html>.
4. As you browse, configure C4U to those pages
5. Monitor C4U periodically (i.e. daily or weekly) to flag relevant content changes.
6. Check the relevant content changes and save relevant web pages to disk. Opera 6.1 and Microsoft Internet Explorer allow saving pages with all images intact.
7. Copy key passages from the pages to a word processor file.
8. hyperlink to passages to saved page sources.

Notes

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<http://rawa.false.net/na-appeal.htm>

Afghanistan under the US strikes, RAWA, October-December 2001.

<http://rawa.false.net/s-photos.htm>

RAWA statement on the US strikes on Afghanistan, RAWA, October 11, 2001.

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11. No Limits Browser Planned, BBC, 6 May, 2001.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/sci/tech/newsid_1313000/1313399.stm

12. FBI Is Building a 'Magic Lantern': Software Would Allow Agency to Monitor Computer Use. 2001. The Washington Post. November 23.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn?pagename=article&node=&contentId=A3371-2001Nov22>

13. Stephen Thornton, 1997

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/popper>

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http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/sci/tech/newsid_1313000/1313399.stm