Googlized capitalism, between efficiency and hegemony

Interview with Siva Vaidhyanathan, by Andrea Ballatore

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Prof. Siva Vaidhyanathan is a cultural historian and media scholar, and is currently the Robertson Professor in Media Studies at the University of Virginia. He is a frequent contributor on media and cultural issues to various periodicals including *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Nation*, and *Salon*. His publications include "*Copyrights and Copywrongs: The Rise of Intellectual Property and How It Threatens Creativity*" (NYU Press, 2003) and "*The Googlization of Everything (and why we should worry)*" (University of California Press, 2011).

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This interview was conducted via video conference on February 13, 2013.

Prof. Vaidhyanathan, contemporary capitalism is characterised by the centrality of information. How important is commodified information to capitalism today? Can we talk about an "information capitalism"? What are its differences and continuities with industrial capitalism?

It's important to remember that we're not losing old-style industrial capitalism, it's really encountering more layers of sophistication on top of it. Even if industrial capitalism tends to be shifting from Western Europe and North America to China, Indonesia, Vietnam, Mexico, it doesn't mean that we're losing it globally. By overlaying a sophisticated system of information to manage capitalism, we are enabling and speeding up that shift. Many of the technologies we have introduced in the past 30 to 40 years enable more efficient and effective tracking of goods and services, and also more efficient tracking of consumer behaviour. When I think of the shift to information capitalism, I don't see it as displacement, but enhancement of the same trend that we saw in the early 20th century with the rise of much more efficient production techniques within Fordism, with the notion that you could efficiently manage a factory as if it were a single machine. Now we see that ideas are expanded in every step in the chain, including inventory, supply, transportation, marketing, advertising, consumer profiling, the delivery of the goods to the consumer.

Google is a prominent example of efficiency applied to information retrieval and management. In your book *The Googlization of Everything (and why we should worry)*, you focus on the huge concentration of information in the hands of few private corporations. Google and Microsoft are powerful transnational entities which resist taxation and regulations, and yet they present themselves as defending the public interest. What are the dangers of this process?

There are several dangers. One is that we fool ourselves into thinking that companies like Google are actually working in the public interest, and we can fool ourselves into thinking that problems we need to solve are best solved by very smart engineers working in companies like Google. For example, a lot of them are trying to lower Google's carbon footprint. We should all applaud these efforts, and hope that at some point in the future their server farms will use much less energy, using for example solar or hydroelectric power. There's nothing wrong with this, but we should realize by now that companies have an imperative, a need, a requirement to take care of their own business first. In the U.S., we have shifted our trust to companies instead of the state, and as a result we are unable to address problems that only the state can solve. The manner of addressing climate change should be at the centre of public debate, spending a lot of money researching solutions, and adhering to international treaties. Instead, we put all that to the side, and we've asked a handful of companies to play around with technological solutions.

Sometimes, however, technological innovation can trigger unexpected processes. In the history of media, the emergence of the printing has been identified as one of the enabling factors for diverse developments such as the religious reformation, modern science, and nationalism. Something similar happened with the telegraph and financial capitalism. What are the main effects of the web on capitalism, and vice-versa?

The web has certainly distributed the power to communicate in unexpected ways, because the web is designed to enable something close to radical democracy. The web was originally designed and described in the 1990s in both the ability of powerless individuals to publish and to organize, and we have had moments where it looked like that was happening. By 2013, oppressive states have taken action to limit the ability to communicate freely, we have seen the imposition of strong copyright laws, and we've grown further away from the anarchic ideal of the web. The web has enabled almost constant surveillance of human activities, empowering states and companies in unexpected ways. The anarchist dream of the web is undermined internally by the web's power of surveillance. We made a mistake in the 1990s assuming that this technology would have necessarily liberating political effects. The printing press didn't magically create the Enlightenment, but worked within a political, cultural, and religious milieu that was already there, and it interacted with these desires, actions and movements.

In your book, you accuse Google of being techno-fundamentalist, fostering the unwarranted hope that technological progress also entails political and social progress. Could you explain in more detail the characteristics of techno-fundamentalism and its consequences?

Techno-fundamentalism is an ideology that drives many of our decisions in the U.S. When there's a problem, we try to design a technological solution to that problem, often created by a previous technology. To prevent people from dying in car crashes,

it is reasonable to invent seat belts. However, initially seat belts were not used. They started to be effective in the U.S. when we made it a legal requirement that everybody wear seat belts, and as a result driving is safer. Techno-fundamentalism would lead us to think that building the technology is enough to solve the problem, and if a particular technology fails, we just need to try another one. We have to recognize that technology does not work in vacuum. There is no clear distinction between and among culture, politics, and technology.

Interestingly, because of seat belts, people also started driving faster, resulting in roughly the same amount of road deaths. When we think about technology and capitalism, there is a tension between technological determinism, i.e. a technology leads inevitably to specific socio-cultural outcomes, and technology neutrality, i.e. the claim that technology is totally open to any cultural interpretation and usage. How do you position yourself in this spectrum?

It's important to remember that when human beings build a technology, they have an ideological approach. They're building values and decisions into the technology. That doesn't mean that others will use that technology as designed. The people who invented the turntable believed that what they were doing was creating an instrument through which a central distributor of recorded sound would sell products to a consumer who would passively sit in front of the player and absorb the sound. That was the model. It turned out that a lot of young people decided to turn the turntable back and scratch it and sample it, using it as a musical instrument, which resulted in hip-hop. Totally unexpected. From this example we can infer that technology is shaped by society, and society is shaped by technology, but not determined. The proper study of a technology should involve all of these forces. Technologies are not neutral. A gun is not neutral. The presence of a gun in a room changes the room: it doesn't dictate that somebody will shoot somebody else, but it does mean that everybody's consciousness is different. You shouldn't pretend that a gun is neutral and that it can be ignored.

Can we say the same about Google?

Yes! Often the people who run Google claim that their algorithms are neutral or independent of particular human choices. It's important to recognize that Google shapes our experience using the web, just as we shape Google. The links we choose to click influence what Google thinks it's important, because Google is trying to guess what we think it's important. If you're looking for pizza in Sweden, and you search for "pizza Stockholm", you get a list of links to restaurants that has been influenced by other web users in Sweden, who have decided that these are the best pizza places by clicking or linking to these links. You are now dropping into a set of decisions that other people have been made before you've arrived. You're a tourist in Stockholm, all you can do is hope that Google measured sentiment correctly. But Google only measures sentiment of those who are willing to create links, who click, who use Google services. So wealthy, educated people who use smartphones are massively over-represented.

Talking about the impact of Google outside the U.S., your concept of "infrastructural-imperialism" is particularly relevant. How is it different to traditional cultural imperialism? What is its impact on the relationship between the West and the periphery, especially in relation to the emerging powers?

I'm not sure that it's a centre-periphery structure, I think the mapping is between the techno-financial élite versus everybody else. Infrastructural imperialism is the fact that information engineers in California, India, Philippines, and Russia influence the way of life of everybody else. Cultural imperialism traditionally theorises a very wealthy centre of cultural production, such as Mumbai or Hollywood, pushing the products out through the use of politics and financial incentives into other cultures. Infrastructural imperialism is not about a particular songs, or videos, or films, or texts. It's much more about a way of delivering information and a way of thinking. When Google decides that Google Maps and Street View should cover the world, and the rest of us merely accept it passively, we are accepting Google's authority in how we look at the world. The ability to create the dominant map of the world is a tremendous amount of power. Google can influence where we think that the border is between India and China. Depending on the context, Google customizes information or imposes standards, but either way it's a way of doing things that is being imposed on the world. Like so many previous examples of imperialism, it's sneaking into our lives, coming in without an army, piece by piece, and we're simply accepting it click by click.

This kind of soft power is also visible in the pressure that Google and other search engines exert on how we construct websites and share information online. If you follow the rules, you are rewarded, if you don't, you disappear from the first page of results into oblivion.

The élite in Google's world are those who build web pages. If you happen to build web pages and generate a lot of links, you have power in the Google universe, and you are influencing Google more than someone that merely goes to the web to shop and bank, which is most users. Passive users of the web have a lot less influence on what Google thinks it's important.

In this sense, we can identify a tension between the individual and the collective online. The web has facilitated some forms of collective actions, but at the same time we are fragmented in a "long tail" of irrelevant micro-niches, too small to have an impact on the wider world. How do you see this dialectic?

Both aspects exist, and interact in a fluid environment. The Arab Spring in Egypt can be taken as an example where a number of factors played a role. It was one of those rare historical moments when diverse people, including Christians, Muslims, Islamists, liberals, and feminists were able to find a common cause, if only for a few weeks. A very unique moment. Digital technologies, particularly text messaging, allowed the efficient gathering of a movement. Without them, it would have been hand bills and word of mouth, like in Poland in 1989. It might have happened anyway, but it probably happened quicker in Egypt. It is a recurring pattern in which a lot of social movements unite in a single movement for a short time. Subsequently, niches emerged as being more important than the common ground, and nobody seems to be able to agree on the rules of the game. I don't think that digital technologies have changed that. It's still very difficult to run a successful revolution from start to finish. The chances of failure are higher than the chances of success. It took the French a century and half to get it right.

Talking about the web and revolutions, cyberutopian ideas emerged in California in the 1990s around the idea of the web as a radical agent of social change. In the U.S., cyber-utopians have then generally shifted to the libertarian right. What happened to them?

Sadly, that strand of cyberutopians still exists, and it still has too much of an influence. Kevin Kelly, the founder of *Wired Magazine*, still writes books, trying to sell grand dreams of transformation of human beings so that we don't have to be political. According to cyberutopianists, we don't have to worry about politics once we are collectively intelligent, and we can rationally solve all the problems through markets and technology.

Although cyberutopianism has failed, it has to be acknowledged that the web has often been used as platform to disseminate alternative ideas, and to experiment with alternative economic and production models, such as open source. How do you see the impact of Google on the possibility of imagining different social and economic states of affairs?

Google was originally built along the same ideological assumptions as Wikipedia, and open source software, but as a closed system. Everything is open within the system: within Google everything runs like Wikipedia, and yet, it's sealed, and it operates secretly, privately, in a proprietary way. I see Google's way of doing things, because it's such a successful business, influencing how other people do business, influencing how we design schools, how we think of how government should run services, and this is very dangerous. Ultimately, we see Google changing now. Google has given up on its commitment on network neutrality. It's currently re-creating itself as a mobile operating system trying to figure out how to sell ads to mobile platforms. Google is thinking down the line to become the operating system of our lives, extending to eye glasses and automobiles, so that wherever we are, whatever we are doing, we are engaging with a lot of Google-owned data. And Google would be able to guide us through life, and satisfy every need with maximum efficiency. That doesn't leave much hope for agency in the long run. It's a novel kind of hegemony, which we haven't quite made sense of yet.