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A Contextual Conceptualization of Control

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Abstract

The Internet—the ultimate convergence of numerous spaces and identities into one virtual arena (individuals simultaneously performing as consumer, sister, daughter, student, friend, colleague, etc.) (Deleuze, 1992, p. 3)—has in part, caused the dissolution of enclosures in what Michel Foucault terms a disciplinary society. Previous definitions of control were produced in the context of Fordism, which ultimately focused on physical bodies and their relationship with “spatial structures” (Robins & Webster, 1960, p. 46; Wise, 2002, p.33). The contemporary turn, however, focuses on control over the flow of information via the Internet, resulting in the conception of a distinct, paradoxical form of control in the context of capitalism: cyber control (Gates & Magnet, 2007, p.279).

Previous work on control is synthesized as both old and new dimensions of control are considered, including surveillance, fear, force, deception, perpetual movement, inclusion/exclusion, and hegemony. Various definitions at disparate levels of analysis will be surveyed as I contend to expound the prescient conceptual definition elucidated by Gilles Deleuze two decades ago.

A Contextual Conceptualization of Control

Mass communication systems have become so tremendously vital to the workings of capitalism in the United States that there is a correlation between the advancement of media systems and the development of capitalism itself (Garnham 1986, p. 9). It is no coincidence that cyberspace grows in tandem with capitalism. Economic, social, and political change is rapidly occurring with the dawn of new types of commodities and forms of labor revolving around information. With these “mutations of capitalism” also come new forms of control, and thus a need to grasp the implications of this socio-technological change (Clough, 2008, p. 20). The significance of a thorough explication of the concept of control in the context of modern-day capitalism is further emphasized in Deleuze’s concluding remark in his essay *Postscript on the Societies of Control* (1995, p.7). He pronounces a call to action to elaborate on what it means to have control in a capitalist society shifting into one unnervingly similar to his forecast (Deleuze, 1992, p.7). Cyber capitalism is a burgeoning topic, receiving increasing attention from overzealous theorists who often attempt to introduce points of resistance to combat new forms of control without first positioning themselves with a comprehensive understanding of how control is contemporaneously exercised. As will be illustrated, history has proven this to be an issue among scholars who neglect to identify the impact their ecology of media has on their theory construction. The questions guiding this paper are: how do capitalist corporations exercise control over and within the realm of the digital? Who is controlling whom and with what means? Is it control over content, media technologies, or ideology? Do media technologies enhance or undermine control in our digital culture?

Cyber, Control, & Context

‘Cyber’ is a prefix meaning ‘computer,’ ‘virtual world,’ or “the space where a telephone conversation takes place” (Cyber, 2012; Kramer, Starr, & Wentz, 2009, p. 5). Since the beginning of time, humans have sought to conquer domains through technological advancement. Land, sea, and space were transcended with wheelbarrows, submarines, and airplanes. Cyberspace itself can be seen as an instrument that transcends physical space, as it was used in the past by trains to communicate about obstructions on the tracks. The landmark event of cyberspace was the invention of Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET), and with this new territory came the desire for new and efficient ways to conquer it. In fact, ‘cyber’ and ‘control’ have a unique bond. The United States Military created it for the sole purpose of maintaining hierarchical command in the event of a nuclear attack (Tiqun, 2001). Discussing United States national security issues, Dan Kuehl, a professor at the National Defense University interestingly defines ‘cyberspace’ as

an operational domain whose distinctive and unique character is framed by the use of electronics and the electromagnetic spectrum to create, store, modify, exchange and exploit information via interconnected information-communication technology (ICT) based systems and their associated infrastructures (2010, p. 13).

This definition describes the tangible physical characteristics of cyberspace, but interestingly identifies *why* this terrain is used: “to create, store, modify, exchange, and exploit information” (Kuehl, 2010, p. 4). One only needs the addition of “for profit” to

define cybernetic capitalism. It seems the intrinsic value of cyberspace as it exists in a capitalist society is its (befitting) role as a control mechanism.

‘Control’ is defined by Dictionary.com as “to exercise restraint or direction over; dominate; command; to eliminate or prevent the flourishing or spread of” (Control, 2012). David Altheide employs such a definition, implicitly labeling control as restriction with a backdrop of FBI Internet stings on pedophiles: “concerns about the protection of children from pedophiles have resulted in the use of “filters” (e.g., “net nannies”) to *limit* the information that is available” (Altheide, 2004, p. 224, emphasis added). He continues later with a more abstract definition by stating “Control is implicated in rules, prescriptions, and proscriptions involving access, presentation, and use of the Internet” (Altheide, 2004, p. 228). The glaring flaw of Altheide is that he explicitly deems government officials as *the* formal agents of control, excluding those outside of government, for instance corporations, or potentially anyone aggregating online information (Altheide, 2004, p. 223). Unfortunately, these discussions of cyberspace and cyber control that are applicable strictly to governments only add to an already prodigious academic literature (see Rule, 1973; Ericson & Haggerty, 1997; Giddens 1987; James Gomez, 2004), while definitions produced within the circumstance of cyber capitalism are largely ignored.

Government Control versus Capitalist Control

The issue at hand here is the fact that a conceptualization of control in a political context exercised by governments is fundamentally different in an economic context exercised by corporations, thus deserving of an altogether distinct definition. As I argue

here, capitalist control of cyberspace becomes a paradox. A definition within the ecology of government proposed by Gary Marx, (2001) a frequently cited theorist, will serve as an adequate testament. Marx says “control refers to efforts to *enforce* norms by preventing violations or discovering and apprehending violators” (Marx, 2001, emphasis added). Marx allocates large amounts of power to those being controlled (citizens) by indicating that attempts of control by government fail due to resistance. He also states that a problem controllers have is repeatedly committing the same mistakes (Marx, 2001). As will be discussed, capitalist cyber control, on the other hand, does not employ force, but consent; it does not apprehend, but (seemingly) permits; it does not repeat mistakes, but reflexively corrects them.

One noteworthy disparity between government versus capitalist control is intent. Governments cite their use of control with the resolve of social good or security whereas corporations utilize control for profit. Fear is provoked by governments in order to gain consent from the population to allow for surveillance, i.e. a sacrifice of privacy. A prime example of this is George W. Bush’s approval of the United States Patriot Act (USPA) legislation activated in 2001 after the attack on the World Trade Centers. There was an uproar of disapproval over the failure to prevent the terrorist attack, subsequently leading to the creation of the Homeland Security Advisory System, a color coded terrorist threat level chart ranging from green to red (CNN Wire Staff, 2011). The implementation of this control mechanism was arguably designed to invoke fear if the warning was raised, which then resulted in justification of the USPA, if not sanctioned support for it. In contrast, capitalism does not exploit fear for security, but fortitude for profit. Autobiographical accounts of successful corporate elites recall their audacity to “risk

wealth, reputation, and career” in order to realize their innovations, often using the coined term “en-courage” to persuade others to follow in their path (Mead, 1999; Bernstein, 2009; Hill & Rae, 2010). Now that the distinction of intent is established between government and capitalism, fear can be abandoned as a dimension of control in the context of cyber capitalism.

The Shift

Capitalism has undergone radical changes since its inception, and subsequently its methods of control. Dated theoretical definitions of control in the era of Fordism are comprised of dimensions such as surveillance and force. Juxtaposing Fordism with the new era of cyber capitalism, it becomes apparent that old dimensions transform and new ones emerge. Surveillance becomes “dataveillance” (Gates & Magnet, 2007 p. 282) force converts to consent, and facets like deception (which makes consent possible), perpetual motion, and individuals are introduced.

In his ethnographic study of “short-term work, mobile communications and rolling media,” Ivor Southwood comments on life in a capitalist society, perhaps unknowingly touching on two main dimensions of control that have spawned with the advent of the digital era (Southwood, 2011):

This state of insecurity [...] is artificially maintained, while being presented as inevitable [*deception*], just a fact of life. A continual restless movement [*perpetual movement*] towards the next job, commodity or identity means that this reality never really comes into focus (Southwood, 2011 p. 3, emphasis added).

Capitalism

The family, the school, the hospital, the prison—all are ordered systems of enclosure in what Michel Foucault termed *disciplinary societies*, which he pinpointed to exist in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries along with Fordism (1975/1995). Louis Althusser named these closed systems Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) (Barker, 2008). They had rules, regulations, and norms (i.e. restrictions) of which the individual internalized for matters of self-discipline (Foucault, 1975/1995). As such, it can be said that control prior to the digital era hovered more in the hybrid realm of sociology and psychology than communication. The concrete demarcations of these environments were predicted to dissolve with the evolution of disciplinary societies into what Gilles Deleuze called a *control society* (1992, p.3). Paul Virilio recognized this transformation, leading him to “[analyze] the ultrarapid forms of free-floating control that replaced the old disciplines [family, school, hospital, prison] operating in the time frame of a closed system” (Deleuze, 1992, p. 4). This new context logically calls for a new conceptualization of what it means to have control (i.e., “ultrarapid free-floating”) in society’s new state of existence is contingent on new media technologies. Disciplinary societies modeled humans while control societies modulate them. This move from mold (substance) to modulation (form) in the capitalist system is even discernable in the theoretical perspectives of mass communication scholars.

Media Communication

Molds seek to shape content and subsequently behavior whereas modulations seek to shape interaction (Deleuze, 1992). Historically, textual analysis focused solely on the

meaning of messages as the producer/creator intended them to mean (Hall, 1980, p. 128). The methodological implication of past research is that the producer/creator had ultimate control of the meaning of the text throughout Stuart Hall's graphic illustration of the model of communication (1980, p. 130). This notion of the "distinct casting" of messages that remain unadulterated throughout the entire mass communication process marks the outdated conceptual definition of control, as it was held that these solid pieces of *content* would effectively "mold behaviors" (Deleuze, 1992, p. 3). Beginning with Hall, though, contemporary cultural studies theorists recognized that control isn't only delegated to the creator/producer, but to a multiplicity of audiences attributing their own meaning to content. However, these seemingly unrestricted subjective positions are surrounded by a sphere of delineating barriers confining the possible interpretations of a text, thus exerting relative control over the moment of decoding in the communication process. The subject's social and political *context* provide these boundaries within which meanings can be made (Hall, 1980, p. 139). The conditions in which these texts are produced must be thoroughly examined because it determines the "artifacts produced [and] what structural limits there will be as to what can and cannot be said and shown" (Kellner, 1995, p. 12). It is impossible to control a set of signs and how people will interpret them, but you can control the rules in which they operate, i.e. "mode [of operation]" or "modulations of interactions" (Deleuze, 1992, p. 5). Nicholas Garnham accentuates this point from a classical Marxist materialist perspective, widening scholars' field of view on the scope of the communication process by stating that subjectivity is indeed significant, but more attention should be placed on the *framework* these subjectivities are spawned from (1986, p.10). We then move to points of control being analyzed from a macro-social perspective

i.e. the society in which the individual lives. This realization of context summons an analysis of capitalism if we wish to come to an understanding of how cyberspace interactions are modulated.

A Cybernetic Conceptualization

Informationalization

We can capture literally any kind of information—the human voice on a cell phone, the contours of a fingerprint, the contents of the Encyclopedia Britannica, or the colors of ice and dust as “seen” by a spacecraft on the planet Mars—store that information as a string of bits and bytes, modify it to suit our purposes (Kuehl, 2010, p. 8).

Social actions previously existing in the physical world are increasingly becoming digitized to the point that there is a transcribing of reality into binary code, forming an optimum form of communication that defies time and spatial relations with the only restriction being, literally, the speed of light (Colbert, 2012). Consequentially, the defining lines of the digital world and the physical reality our bodies inhabit are increasingly convoluted. For example, Altheide describes how sexually vulgar online comments are now interpreted by the FBI to be equivalent to actual behavior (Altheide, 2004, p. 224). Telling metaphors are used for websites such as Facebook being seen as the mall, Twitter as the street corner, and Picaso as the photo gallery or the living room where one gathered friends and family to pass around film photographs upon returning from vacation (Dix, Finlay, Abowd & Beale, 2005). This (tran)scripted version of society seems to be founded on the idea that behavior can be programmed and automated.

Naturally, corporations seek this predictability as it acts to reduce economic uncertainty.

The nature of control implies that there is some opposition to be controlled. Therefore, when complete control is attained, it ceases to be control. The primary goal of capitalism is to permeate sectors that are non-capitalist (the opposition), yet if it is too successful and somehow dominates all sectors, the need to control would be eliminated, and hence the capitalist system would cease to exist. If capitalist control maintained boundaries to uphold equilibrium, it could potentially persist indefinitely. Yet, it doesn't maintain boundaries but actively seeks to abolish them. It then follows that if capitalists in the "information economy" wish to remain in existence, new information must continually be produced. This leads us to a cybernetic perspective of capitalism in that the communicative system is self-reflexive and is the archetype for interactions to be modulated. So, how is information continually produced? What efforts have corporations made to attract people to act inside of cyberspace?

Expand to Contract

Even outside the strictures of a control society the cybernetic system seems to maintain control. For societies it does not, cannot, or simply has not figured out a way to control, cybernetic capitalism affirms itself through negation. Deviance in the context of cybernetic capitalism is simply an activity occurring in the real world that is not informationalized. Negation becomes the life-affirming characteristic (Nietzsche, 1886/2006) of the cybernetic system in the sense that a conversion of the opposition into the digital realm means creation of additional sets of binary code to add to circulation. Disciplinary societies were predicted by Deleuze to eventually fade out completely, but until they do "an apparatus [is needed] for controlling those who fall outside the

established parameters” (Mejias, 2006). Subjects of control reside inside the ‘parameters’ and outside are subjects of the discipline society. Societies still operating in the disciplinary framework become the objects of desire for control societies to conquer. Capitalist control societies seek to informationalize those which “cannot productively contribute to the service economy [...] The trick is then to turn the confinement of these ‘burdens’ of society into a business opportunity by benefiting from their cheap labor or by privatizing the industry of confinement itself” (Mejias, 2006). This is only one method of self-correction used by cybernetic systems to correct their obstructions of communication. Another self-correcting instrument employed by mass media has to do with ideology.

Holistic Ideology

According to ideology as understood by U.S. scholars, it is implied that the producers of content, the reporters, the journalists, etc., are the agents of control as their *individual* ideologies influence their selection and framing of content. However, the British notion of ideology would object by saying reporters, journalists, etc. are simply components of the *system's* ideology. They see individuals creating messages as microcosms of the ideology of the larger structure in which they are a part (Mediating Message, p. 214). This is the more holistic view of ideology fitting for the cybernetic capitalist system as it takes an holistic approach as well.

Ideology in general, though, is a social integration mechanism. Shoemaker states the media's role is to draw demarcations of what is or is not socially acceptable in a given culture (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 212). The media advocate certain ideologies while

drowning out other views, thus exposing its audience to specific perspectives. Control in the ideological sense refers to ideas labeled as “other” being drowned out, annihilated, and not given consideration by the producers of content. Consequently, hegemonic views are advocated and the framework in which people make social, political, and economic decisions are restricted to those labeled socially acceptable in the media. In the cybernetic system, these two methods of negating the other, inclusion and exclusion, are both applicable. When included, the control mechanism of framing is introduced.

Framing is often used as a control mechanism. To emphasize certain aspects of an event brings into play the idea of *inclusion* with framing attached to it. Shoemaker says that journalism "plays the role of exposing, condemning, or excluding from the public agenda those who violate or challenge the political consensus. It marks out and defends the limits of acceptable conflict" (Shoemaker & Reese, p. 219). Here, “condemning” (i.e. shaping/framing) stands as a mechanism of a control society, whereas “excluding” is a mechanism of a disciplinary society.

The “enemy” or opposition of capitalism is essentially anything that does not operate in cyberspace. While framing deviance is a useful control mechanism, ideally social groups would be controlled from a capitalist standpoint. Attempts are currently being made to wipe out those who fall outside the sphere of informationalization. National Public Radio published an article on how Facebook and Google are giving away low-feature cell phones to the poverty stricken of Africa (Tiecher, 2012). Presumably, giving free products to people in poverty may seem like a gesture of kindness, but if control is informationalization, this is an exercise of control, it is a working toward the objective of capitalism to permeate the remaining disciplinary societies, making them a

new source of information and bringing them into the information circulation process. This is a microcosm of how control societies are gradually annihilating the disciplinary society. Thus, control in the capitalist sense embraces a whole new characterization paradoxically maintained with the perpetual production of “ultra rapid free forms” of information (in the form/mode of binary code) accompanied by deception and the formation of individuals. These three emergent dimensions are the basis of the paradoxical concept of control proposed here.

Deception & Perpetual Motion

Advocates of the democratization of the internet stridently call for making technology accessible to everyone to lessen the width of the knowledge gap. Wendy Chun goes so far to assert that the amount of available information in a society could potentially act as an operational measurement of freedom (2008, p. 10). But Deleuze states that “Repressive forces don’t stop people expressing themselves but rather force them to express themselves” (Deleuze, 1992, p. 6). Freedom is a hard pushed value in American society and is seen so in the touting of first amendment rights with a surfeit of Public Service Announcement Campaigns and its plastering on the sides of educational institutions erect on top of towering hills. This contradiction begs the question of deceit. Virilio goes so far as to proclaim that the “cybernetic society [is] the very opposite of freedom and democracy” (1999, p.80.) Conversely, the amount of available information may be able to act as an operationalized measure of *control*.

Individuals who are within the reach of the control society, those whose work and leisure time has been “informationalized,” are in an everlasting state of motion.

In disciplinary societies you were always starting all over again (as you went from school to barracks, from barracks to factory), while in control societies you never finish anything (Deleuze, 1992, p. 179).

Dividuals

[O]ur vision is always too blurred to orientate ourselves or see how things might be changed. Whether literally or figuratively, by way of temporary work and *perpetual* jobseeking or mobile media and aspirational consumption, this superficial movement conceals a deep paralysis of thought and action (Non-stop inertia).

The cybernetic paradigm asserts that control has an inverse relationship with growth (cybernetic hypothesis pg 18). Increase in size means the potential for an increase in communication difficulties. It appears to be a problem as capitalism's main goal is to grow. However, this is resolved with the construction of dividuals, "an increasingly powerful means of reinforcing social divisions, as the superpanoptic sort relentlessly screens, monitors, and classifies to determine eligibility and access, to include and exclude" (Altheide, 2004, p. 227). Focus is no longer on individuals, but dividuals only useful in the aggregate, thus further supporting the argument away from conceiving the notion of ideology at the individual level.

Dividuals also relate back to molds versus modulations. The individual, i.e. mold or substance, is negated and only the group or classification he is a part of is considered, creating a "plural individual, the unity of which determines and is determined by the

distribution of roles and function” (Cybernetic Hypothesis). French social theorist Louis Althusser refers to the lived formations of different people, environments, and social structures as Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) (Barker, 2008). It is through the struggles of these relations between many forces that both individual and group identities are created. With the absence of ISAs in the society of control comes an absence in the process of identity formation, specifically the context in which identity was previously created in disciplinary societies.

Nietzsche gives commentary on the ‘herd animal’ being ill-equipped in regard to leading itself and controlling one’s life. As a result, he/she searches for a person or group of people to fill the role of leader (the Governing Body) (Nietzsche, 1886/2006). As opposed to searching for a leader, when it comes to cybernetics, a *system* was created to guide, to direct, to govern. Control in cybernetic capitalism was originally implemented by humans, but is no longer in the hands of people who make the rules. It’s at the point where corporate elites are no longer doing the controlling, but they themselves are being controlled by the higher technological order they themselves helped realize. Thus, the system has spawned a void individual, unable to manage the system it has created. It has been said that corporations are people, but corporations can evolve to such an enormity that an organization’s work flow escapes the grasp of the people it consists of. Thus the *organization* becomes an *organism*, surpassing the futile attempts of its members to impose rules and regulations. When it expands to such an exponential degree, the creators/owners of the organization lose control as it is allocated to the ‘higher order’ of the flow of the “system” (i.e. cybernetics). The relationship is dependent in the sense that individuals delegate authority to the “higher system” for piloting their lives.

There stark differences between control in the context of government and control in the context of capitalism have been outlined. A synthesis of research on control in the context of capitalism in the era of Fordism versus modern-day cyber capitalism was also expounded on. A reflection is this societal change was mirrored in mass communication theory, as control has been conceptualized within multiple levels of analysis and multiple contexts. Despite these variations, dimensions have remained constant throughout the years, with surveillance morphing into “dataveillance,” force becoming consent, and the addition of perpetual movement, deception, and individuals.

This new conceptual definition of control that considers the media ecological context has included various dimensions including surveillance, fear, force, deception, perpetual movement, inclusion/exclusion, and hegemony. As evidenced, methods of control have consistently been fluid and are currently transforming to echo with the limits and freedoms provided by technology. The shift in mass communication theory (as noted above) can be partly attributed to the fact that a particular media of communication informed the respective scholars in their work. By no means does this imply a dismissal of their work, but to the contrary, a reason to embrace it to provide a more comprehensive understanding. Any theory generated today owes its debts to previous thinkers. New theories are built by combining components already present in discourse. The impact media technologies have on scholars calls for future research for a larger analysis of how this media-to-scholar relationship has panned through history.

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