Article 19 2.0 (or the New Censorship)

It used to be easy to define a democracy versus a dictatorship

We had freedom of speech – they had censorship.

Our democratic principles were defended through Article 19 of the Declaration of Human Rights, which is still the shield of journalists across the world:

*"**Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression**; this right includes freedom to seek, receive and impart information through any media"*

But while this was an effective formula for the 20th century, today it has been weaponised by a new breed of authoritarian actor much more skilfull than the old model.

Instead of merely controlling their societies by limiting the amount of information, regimes across the world overload it with disinformation and noise. Throughout the world journalists come under attack not just through governments restricting the information space, but with attacks from state-sponsored cyber militias and troll armies accusing journalists of being 'enemies of the people', coordinated campaigns to undermine their credibility.

But when journalists complain of coming under such attack the reply from the side of the government is cynical but crafty:

'These online accounts are just exercising their freedom of speech! Isn't that what democracy is all about?"

And at first glance they're right. There's nothing in Article 19 about 'disinformation' being illegal; it states only that people should have the right to give and receive information.

So have a new generation of authoritarian leaders found a clever workaround Article 19? Have they found a way to weaponise democratic principles against democracy? Are we helpless against this new assault?

Not necessarily.

Let's look closer at Article 19. The part of it that is often forgotten concerns the right not just to impart, but to 'receive information'.

The problem with the cyber militias and troll farms is not so much individual pieces of content they post, but the way they distribute them en masse in a way that looks organic, as if it's real citizens exercising their freedom of speech, when in reality these are hidden, coordinated campaigns from a single source.

This sort of mass, inauthentic campaign actually takes away people's right to receive information about its origins, to understand how the information environment around them is shaped. Individual anonymity is an important right, but this is something completely different: the warping of reality where what seems to be one person saying something online is actually a network of fake accounts all saying the same thing, at the same time, according to lines passed down from a hidden manipulator.

Regulating against this sort of disinforming behaviour is in the spirit of Article 19: it's a demand for more information, not less.

And this small issue is part of a larger problem. As usual, journalists are at the sharp point of a more systemic crisis.

We live in a strange paradox: on the one hand there's more content than ever before and less censorship, even in authoritarian countries. But there is a new form of censorship: we have no idea how the information environment around us is shaped. We do not know why algorithms 'feed' us one piece of information over another; we do not know who is behind the content that is fed to us online; we do not know which of our own data has been used to target us.

And because we do not know this we cannot interact with the content we encounter online, or with each other, in any sort of genuinely democratic way. We can't critique a political ad we see when we don't understand if the same party is showing our neighbour a completely different ad based on our online profile; we can't analyse a 'news' website, if we don't understand that it's part of a network of pseudo sites all spitting out the same message while pretending to be independent.

If we are to have a genuine democratic digital public square this needs to change.

Ultimately, we need to ask, what does it mean to be a democratic citizen online?

It should mean understanding who is targeting content at you and why. Why algorithms show you one thing and not another. How reality is shaped.

And this simple demand for more information about information is something that authoritarian leaders loathe.

Authoritarian leaders don't want their citizens to know how they monitor and misuse their data; how they rig algorithms so people see what they want them to see; how they distort public opinion through the use of state-sponsored troll farms. This is the new frontier for freedom of expression: and the new way to define the difference between democracy and dictatorship.