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NSA

### Obama, Merkel, and the Bridge to an Information Civilization

17.01.2014 · On Friday Barack Obama will talk about the future of the NSA. He will have to restore public trust in government. But what will happen if he fails?

Von SHOSHANA ZUBOFF

Artikel



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Shoshana Zuboff is an U.S.-American economist and emeritus professor for Business Administration at the Harvard Business School. For 30 years she has researched the social, psychological, and economical consequences of digitalization. She is author of the forthcoming *The Summons: Our Fight for the Soul of an Information Civilization*. In 1988 she published the book „In the Age of the Smart Machine: The Future of Work and Power“

“We’ve stumbled along for a while, trying to run a new civilization in old ways, but we’ve got to start to make this world over.”

If these words ring true to you, take heart: We’ve been here before. Thomas Edison wrote them in a 1912 letter to Henry Ford. Edison saw the U.S. poised at the precipice of a new industrial civilization, but instead of exuberance he felt despair.

Today we stand on the edge of a similar precipice. The world bequeathed by Edison and Ford lies behind us. Now we travel another road to yet a new civilization -- an information civilization that will transform the lives of all peoples. President Obama is expected to endorse changes to the NSA’s surveillance procedures in a long awaited speech at the Justice Department on Friday.

What’s at stake is of far greater significance than the NSA, Big Tech, or the politics of the moment. President Obama has been thrust into the center of the ring in the fight for the soul of the new civilization that will dominate this century. If he uses this opportunity to build a bridge to the future, he will need active support from Chancellor Merkel and other world leaders. But if he falls short, the spotlight will turn to Germany and the EU in search of epochal leadership.

Edison despaired that without epochal leadership the promise of industrial civilization would be stillborn, silenced by the weight of the old order and its will to power. Rapid industrialization challenged American and European societies beyond their imaginative limits, outstripping their ability to reconcile the avalanche of change with a larger vision of the kind of civilization they wanted.

In America, Jeffersonian ideals had turned black with soot as industrial production surged ahead of all competitors. Despite vast new industrial fortunes, life was short and workdays were long and dangerous for ordinary people. Half of all steelworkers earned less than 18 cents an hour and a third worked seven days a week without overtime pay. A cabinet level Department of Labor, first proposed in 1868, was still a year away.

Poverty was the norm, and the few dominated the many. In Germany, where the principles of social law had already taken root, the rise of labor remained deeply contested. The number of organized workers grew from 280,000 in 1890 to 2.5 million in 1914. Only then did the state finally grant legally secure status to collective bargaining agreements.

Edison understood that the challenges ahead were not technological but institutional, social, and moral. He decried the “wastefulness” and “cruelty” of the old order as “all wrong, out of gear!” He saw that everything —laws, business, work, politics, education — would have to be reinvented if the new technologies were to fulfill their promise for a successful industrial civilization.

### **A new revolution**

Today we face similar dilemmas. Information supplants industry as the template of the future, and things we thought were solid turn slippery: industries, jobs, work, education, healthcare, and even the very definitions of our rights, responsibilities, and freedoms. Every institution, practice, purpose, framework, and assumption faces reinvention. Once again the old ways are dying, and it’s hard to imagine what comes next.

As one mother told me, “I feel a sense of dread, as though the future is sliding away beneath my feet. How can I help my children prepare for a world that doesn’t follow from mine? How do I light a rocket ship with a piece of flint?” She is not alone.

According to the recent AP-NORC survey report, “The People’s Agenda,” Americans see technology as the biggest change of the last few decades, but they also report a long-term decline in their quality of life with no end in sight. Worse still, Americans are more pessimistic than ever about the ability of their government to reverse this social decline, with more than half asserting that U.S. democracy needs substantial change to work effectively.

A recent PEW Research Center report, “The New Sick Man of Europe: the European Union,” suggests that apprehension is also widespread across the EU, though less so in Germany. A median of 66% across the eight nations polled think that children will be worse off financially in the future than their parents are today. A median of 60% think the gap between the rich and the poor is a very big problem, including 51% of Germans, who face, according to a European Central Bank analysis, the most unequal distribution of wealth in Europe.

### **A greater gap between rich and poor?**

Consider that the past two decades of the information revolution have hosted the highest levels of poverty and social inequality since Edison’s time, not only in the U.S. but also across the OECD countries. A cornucopia of so-called “disruptive” technologies have produced little disruption in any of the ways that really matter for a successful new civilization: shared prosperity, democratic values, the rule of law, broad social participation, environmental problem-solving, and the resources for individual fulfillment at every level of society. All of this underscores a difficult lesson: technologies do not build successful civilizations. Only people can do that.

We are caught in the transition of civilizations, and as in Edison’s time it requires institutional invention and reinvention. Technology has outrun our shared capacity to determine what kind of civilization we want. How will we harness the digital to a larger vision of a prosperous, inclusive, democratic, and learned civilization? How will information civilization meet our urgent needs for environmental survival and fulfill individual aspirations for good work and good life?

### **Technology must be based on trust**

Right now the road ahead is a classic paradox featuring two broad scenarios that are both plausible and mutually contradictory. To put it simply, will we be the masters of information, or will we be its slaves? Look to one direction and there is cause for optimism. The digital wave leveled old institutional boundaries inviting billions to play in its waters. The UN estimates that about 40% of the world's population now uses the Internet in a new exultation of hunting, gathering, and sharing information for every purpose. From these heights one can imagine a flourishing global citizenry empowered by the digital and able to meet the diverse challenges of institutional reinvention as we learn, connect, collaborate, invent, create prosperity, and tackle the shared challenges of a new epoch.

But a shadow obscures this vision and points toward a darker future. There will be no flourishing connected citizenry without trust in the digital medium. I mean the deep, thick, fat trust that is the glue for every successful civilization or society. This is the kind of trust that lets me drive on the highway or cross the street when the light says, "walk." It lets me express myself in word or action without fear of a knock on the door in the night. This trust has been sharply eroded, and it is this fact that constitutes President Obama's most important opportunity.

Mistrust of the digital began to swell and spread long before Edward Snowden ever slipped a thumb drive into an NSA computer. While Big Tech now urges President Obama to curb domestic spying, it's easy to forget that it triggered the avalanche of mistrust without assistance from the NSA. Big Tech got big by putting users at the center of the universe. But when Google, Facebook, and others needed more profits, they sold our data to advertisers and retailers who could track and target us at will. Big Tech trashed its birthright and debased its most essential value—the notion that they were, at bottom, on our side. No longer exalted end users, we were demoted to data entry clerks, delivering content for Big Tech to hawk.

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So great is our dependence on the digital that most of us find it necessary to conform to the new quid-pro-quo until a better option comes along, but we're not happy about it. In a 2012 Harris Poll, only 8% of Americans considered social media companies to be honest and trustworthy, lumping them with only four other long-standing pariahs that garnered less than 10%: tobacco, oil, managed care, and telecoms.

Our prospects for institutional reinvention dim as trust is compromised. We can't afford to send our children to college, but do we really want to push ahead with online education if we can't control our own content? Going digital in healthcare opens possibilities for step function improvements in quality and lower costs. But what if I face the risk of my data being sent to insurance companies, banks, or advertisers? How can young entrepreneurs use digital platforms to invent new business models that aim to genuinely operate in end users' interests, if they can't trust their rights as stewards of their business data, and neither can we?

#### Information - the new power

Edward Snowden's ongoing revelations about the NSA and possible NSA-Big Tech collaboration have further compromised the trust that is essential for a successful information civilization. Most Big-Tech leaders downplayed concerns about domestic spying and saw little to criticize in their own roles, despite the disastrous implications of growing mistrust. But worldwide concerns continued to snowball.

According to experts from the German Marshall Fund, "The EU is considering holding U.S. tech firms accountable to European law....The European Commission is debating the establishment of a European intelligence agency, and subsidies are being considered for European firms to challenge the technological advantages of their U.S. competitors and to retain European data on European soil. This could spell the end of global cloud computing." Only as countries like Germany and Brazil launched

discussions of a new regional Internet structure, and evidence mounted of material risks to current and future profits, did Big Tech leaders change their tune with a well-publicized appeal to the White House.

Until recently most people thought of the NSA as a secretive but effective data-focused arm of US intelligence. The Snowden revelations convey something altogether different: a shadow regime impervious to geographic borders or political boundaries and free from accountability to any state, citizens, or rule of law. As the New York Times recently reported, the agency appears determined "to collect virtually everything available in the digital world" in order to achieve "mastery of the global network."

### A turning point for politics

The NSA's insatiable appetite for big data was triggered by terrorists, and it may have aimed to protect the world from terror. But now the picture has changed; now the NSA is poised to be the terror. From this vantage point an information civilization is a threatening prospect in which the Internet becomes the landscape for a new kind of digitally assisted totalitarianism buttressed by a fusion of corporate and state interests. We are free, but only if we agree to be naked and always in the sun. Without trust and mastery, the reinvention that we need is far less likely than a tortuous process of institutional decline. On this road, the most dismal fears of many people around the world are realized as too many are forced to compete in a savage struggle over the shrinking resources of a dying order.

Edison wrote to Henry Ford seeking a special breed of leadership: what I have called an "epochal leader." It's the kind of leader who perceives the larger historical arc typically lost in the welter of daily conflicts. An epochal leader builds bridges that help people traverse the distance from one epoch to the next with confidence.

If President Obama can still his heart and steel his spirit, he may yet hear that exhortation to epochal leadership whispered across the century. The decisions that he makes will echo far beyond the NSA or the fortunes of Silicon Valley. He can help quell the dread that infects our sense of the future with convincing unequivocal action that replenishes trust in the digital realm. If his proposed changes fail to meet this standard, the world will look to Germany and the EU to tear down the surveillance fortress in favor of a bridge to a new world. One civilization may be dying, but another is still struggling for its soul.

Quelle: F.A.Z.

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Golden Globes  
Drei Auszeichnungen für  
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Beverly Hills  
Oscar-Nominierungen  
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Schön mit Schleier  
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