

Brian Martin, *Information Liberation*
London: Freedom Press, 1998

1

Power tends to corrupt

Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. This familiar saying originated as a comment in a letter written by Lord Acton, an English historian who lived from 1834 to 1902. His full name was John Emerich Edward Dahlberg Acton. He was a fierce opponent of state power, whether the state was democratic, socialist or authoritarian.

Acton's aphorism has outlasted his other contributions because it captures an insight that rings true to many people. Power certainly seems to corrupt quite a few politicians. Early in their careers, many of them are eager to change the system. They want to help the poor and disadvantaged and to root out corruption and unjust privilege. Yet when they actually get into positions of power, it's a different story. The old slogans become memories. Instead, it becomes a higher priority to placate and reward powerful bureaucracies in both the government and corporate sectors. Most of all, it becomes a priority to increase the power and wealth of politicians themselves.

In the 1960s the so-called "new left" demanded power to the people. But how to achieve it? Some activists advocated the "long march through institutions"—in other words, left-wingers should work through the system to get into positions of power, climbing the ladder in government bureaucracies, corporations, political parties, professions and universities. *Then* they would be able to bring about desirable social change. Unfortunately, this strategy doesn't work. The institutions

2 *Information liberation*

change the activists long before the activists have a chance to change the institutions.

The idea that power tends to corrupt has an intuitive appeal, but is there anything more to it? A few social scientists have studied the corrupting effects of power.

Pioneering sociologist Robert Michels studied the tendency of political parties to become less democratic. Even in the most revolutionary parties, the leaders have gained greater power and become entrenched in their positions. The party organisation becomes an end in itself, more important than the party's original aim. Michels concluded that every organisation is affected by these tendencies.¹

Pitirim Sorokin and Walter Lunden examined the behaviour of powerful leaders, such as kings of England. They found that those with the greatest power were far more likely to commit crimes, such as theft and murder, than ordinary citizens.² This is striking evidence that power tends to corrupt.

But why does power corrupt? For the answer, it is worth consulting the excellent work by David Kipnis, a psychology researcher at Temple University.

For a person to be autonomous is widely considered to be a good thing. It is a feature of being fully human. When a person exercises power over others, the powerholder gains the impression that the others do not control their own behaviour or, in other words, they are not autonomous. Hence, they are seen as less worthy. In short, a person who successfully exercises power over others is more likely to believe that these others are less deserving of respect. They thus become good prospects to be exploited.

1. Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracies*, translated by Eden & Cedar Paul (New York: Dover, 1959; Hearst's International Library, 1915).

2. Pitirim A. Sorokin and Walter A. Lunden, *Power and Morality: Who Shall Guard the Guardians?* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1959). See also David R. Simon and D. Stanley Eitzen, *Elite Deviance* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1982).

Kipnis organised numerous experiments to explore such dynamics. In one experiment, a “boss” oversaw the work of “subordinates” in a simulated situation. The experiment was contrived so that all subordinates did exactly the same work. But the subordinate who was thought to be self-motivated was rated to have done better work than the subordinate who was thought to have done the work only under instruction. As well as laboratory studies, Kipnis examined the effects of power on the powerholder through studies of couples, managers and protagonists in Shakespeare’s dramas. The results were always the same.

Kipnis followed through the implications of such evidence in a number of areas involving technology, including medical technology, workplace technology and the technology of repression. For example, technologies for surveillance or torture serve to control others: that is the obvious effect. But in addition, the psychology of the powerholder is changed when the technology promotes the reality or impression that others lack autonomy. Those subject to the technology are treated as less worthy, and any prospects for equality are undermined.

Kipnis also deals with tactics of influence, use of rewards, inhibition of the exercise of power, motivations for power and other corruptions of power. This work is extremely valuable for better understanding the psychological dynamics of power.³

If power tends to corrupt, what are the implications? One response is to try to impose controls on powerholders: codes of ethics, agreements, laws. For example, having nuclear weapons gives governments a lot of power. So international agreements are made to control these weapons, such as hot lines to communicate in a crisis, treaties on numbers of weapons and promises to not launch a first strike. But this doesn’t get to the heart of the problem. As long as nuclear weapons exist, a great

3. David Kipnis, *The Powerholders* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, 2nd edition); David Kipnis, *Technology and Power* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1990).

4 *Information liberation*

amount of power rests in the hands of those few individuals who control them. This is corrupting and the danger of nuclear war persists.

The alternative is to abolish nuclear weapons so that inequalities inherent in the power of nuclear weaponry do not exist. More generally, the corruptions of power can be minimised by equalising power and opposing social and technological systems that foster power inequalities. This works out the same as opposing systems of domination, inequality and exploitation. In this picture, a free society is a society with the least power differences. This does not mean a stable society of identical citizens. Instead, it could easily be a society seething with action and conflict, precisely because everyone has opportunities to exercise significant power. The point is that there would be no social structures or technologies—such as bureaucracies and nuclear weapons—that give some individuals a great deal of power over others.

The idea of a free society should be seen as a method, not an end point. The idea that “power tends to corrupt” is a guide to action. Policies, technologies and organisational arrangements can be judged to see whether they contribute to equality or inequality of power.

This can easily be applied to information. Information is a part of all systems of power. Top bureaucrats try to control information as part of their control over subordinates and clients. Corporations try to control information through trade secrets and patents. Militaries try to control information using the rationale of “national security.” So-called freedom of information—namely, public access to documents produced in bureaucracies—is a threat to top bureaucrats.

In a society where not everyone can read and write, literacy is a form of power and campaigns for mass literacy are a threat to ruling elites. In a society where employees cannot speak freely due to fears about job security, bosses hold power and campaigns for workers’ control are a threat to top managers. In a society where a few owners and editors control systems of

mass communication, campaigns for multiple independent avenues for publication are a threat to elites.

This book applies Acton's insight about the corruptions of power to various areas dealing with information and communication. I don't cover every topic but try to illustrate some ways to proceed.

- The mass media are inherently undemocratic because a small number of individuals control what is communicated to a large audience (chapter 2).

- Patents and copyrights give control over use of information to corporations and individuals. This power is commonly used to benefit the rich and exploit the poor (chapter 3).

- Surveillance, which boils down to gathering information about someone else without their knowledge or consent, is a method for social control (chapter 4).

- Employees do not have free speech (chapter 5).

- Defamation law is regularly used to suppress free speech (chapter 6).

- The structure of research organisations, including universities, makes knowledge mainly useful to governments, corporations, professions and researchers themselves (chapter 7).

- Ideas that will be useful for popular understanding and action need to be simple in essence—though not just any simple idea will serve the purpose (chapter 8).

- People need to learn to think for themselves rather than accept the ideas of famous intellectuals (chapter 9).

Information plays a role in nearly every field of human activity, from art to industry, and all of these are subject to the corruptions of power. Challenging information-related systems of power is one avenue for social change. But it's only one of many possible avenues. Bringing about a just society involves more than achieving a goal involving knowledge and communication, such as equal access to information. Also needed are changes in personal relations, economics, military systems and many other areas. Challenging the corruptions of information

6 *Information liberation*

power is just one way to proceed—but it is an important and fascinating one.

Some rough definitions

- **Information** is data that has been processed, organised or classified into categories.
- **Knowledge** is facts and principles believed to be true.
- **Wisdom** is good judgement of what is useful for achieving something worthwhile.

Information without knowledge isn't much use, and knowledge without wisdom isn't much use. More information isn't necessarily a good thing without the capacity to interpret, understand and use it. Nevertheless, the focus here is on power to control information, which has consequences for developing knowledge and wisdom.