

SENSOR-CENSUS-CENSOR
Investigating Circuits of Information,
Registering Changes of State

A sensor is a device that indicates a change of state in response to an event or stimulus. A census is an instrument by which the changes in state in a given population are registered through counting. A censor is a filter which selects and screens information that can be made public. The management, control and deployment of information in society generally involves different combinations of the sensor-census-censor triad.

The origins of the contemporary processes of census taking and censorship both lie in the office of the 'Censor' in ancient Rome. The Roman censor was a magistrate who both counted and kept a record of citizens, as well as supervised their moral lives. Similar roles and functions can be seen in manuals of politics in different cultures, including the Arthashastra in ancient India. In ancient Rome, the counting function of the censor's office would create a record of persons, which then enabled surveillance, which in turn would help identify and isolate improper deeds, thoughts and expressions, as well as generate a roster of taxable persons.

In this sense, the office of the censor was both more distilled as well as more expanded than the meanings we have come to associate with the term 'censorship' today. A reiteration of the original sense of the word may help us arrive at a more nuanced understanding of even the contemporary sense in which we understand censorship. But it will also do more. It will help us evolve sophisticated investigative, analytical and critical responses to the ways in which information regimes and technologies have intersected (historically as well as in the contemporary) to produce different cultures, styles, techniques and realities of the governance of social life.

The basis of governance, in all its capillary forms and at all levels, from the level of the neighbourhood or the workplace to that of city, district, province and the nation, and continuing even at the level of the relationship between persons (as citizens and non-citizens) and different nations, and between nations themselves, can be analysed in terms of the management of information, which is a crucial axis of political and social life.

At the core of this axial reality lies a conceptual and a categorical distinction between what is seen to be a member of a population – an entity that needs to be governed, and the far more valuable category of the citizen – a subject (with sentience and volition) who participates in that governance. The recognition of subjectivity (a sensory operation, indicating an awareness of the change of state that involves the transition from a silent or incoherent statistic to a speaking, rational being) lies at the heart of politics, as the pre-condition of the political.

This recognition can operate like an on-off switch, such that a speaking subject can suddenly be switched 'off', if the circumstances so demand it, and a silent person can be switched 'on' to yield information or expression, if so desired. A historical archive can be seen metaphorically as a collection of magnetic tape sound recordings in different states of decipherability, some with the voices loud and clear, some with erasures and sudden 'drops' in audibility, and some with 'overprints' – in which some voices have been recorded onto others so as to subdue them, without altogether erasing them. A close 'hearing' of such an archive would yield information not only about the voices (and silences) that it contains, but also about the people making the recordings, and the conditions in which they were made.

The metaphorical 'control switch' can also be seen as attached to a regulator that can modulate the intensity of the demand being made at any given time. Occasionally, the switchboard can get hacked into with the aid of pirate electricians, and the wiring can be reconfigured to produce a change of state of a different order. These episodes of information disruption can be seen to punctuate a chronicle of progress and order at crucial junctures. There is persistent trouble in the archives. History can then be seen as a record of the to-and-fro traffic between the state of subjection (the subject sans subjectivity, or with a significant subjectivity deficit), a continuous insurrection of 'little' selves, and the romance of full blown citizenship. This traffic is by no means always in a single or uniform direction. People can be citizens, and less than citizens, and more than citizens, sometimes at the same time, depending on what the circumstances are, and which facet of their solitary personhoods or collective presence is under, or above, or in the line of sight of the radar of power.

A similar distinction (to the one between populations and citizens) could be made between persons who are conscious of their needs, (which would include all humans) and consumers – persons who possess the capacity to act legally and enter into socially sanctioned transactions on the basis of those needs. The harnessing and treatment of information creates the conditions by which persons and citizens, a population and a citizenry, a person and a consumer, a network of needs and a market, an identity and a demographic, can be invoked in varied and complex ways by the state, quasi-state agencies of social governance, as well as by local and global economic forces.

Though the roles and functions of the census, the sensor and the censor have somewhat diverged in more recent times, (with

the census by and large escaping the moral censure that sensors and censors often receive from those concerned about civil liberties), their fundamental convergence at the root level of information control remains evident to even a superficial scrutiny of information processes in society.

All three terms denote processes by which information is sought to be managed – by being harnessed, indexed and treated for usage or by being withheld from circulation. Territorial surveys and census forms, public and private archives, documents and databases, reports and records, surveillance cameras and electronic filters, informers and informants, fingerprints and biometrics, photographs and recordings and a host of other technologies, methods and practices register the changes of state that occur in societies. They are so general in modern societies as to be part of the banal fabric of everyday life, especially in urban spaces.

The generalised ubiquity of these practices is the key to their weakness as well as their power. However, their histories, the politics that attends to them, the ethical, epistemic and even aesthetic questions that are relevant to them (especially when they take on functions of representation) are under-theorised. Little attention has been paid to the ways in which these systems learn from each other across time and space. We do not know adequately, for instance, about how methods of identification experimented with and developed in India and other colonies were then perfected and deployed in Britain. This traffic in the knowledge of power across the circuits of empire, which takes in the work of archivists and historians, museum curators and judges, the testimonies of informants and approvers as much as it includes the activities of administrators and policemen, requires to be elaborated and detailed. And we know very little of how the switchboards of information control and management have occasionally been sought to be reconfigured. We also need to understand how historians can re-think silences and absences in the archives, and how political theorists can examine the relationships between populations, citizens, information and utterance, to yield different models of complex political realities. We need correspondences and crossovers between new and old practices of information.

This colloquium, early in the history of the Information and Society Research Cluster at Sarai-CSDS, reckons that the ‘sensor-census-censor’ triad may be a useful way in which the histories and contemporary realities of South Asia and Europe may be investigated. Here, we mean the historic affinities, networks and resonances pertinent to the traffic of information between the colony and the metropolis, especially with regard to the operations of knowledge as power. We also point towards the contemporary (and projected) operations of biometric technologies, internet filtering systems, networked surveillance and data retrieval and outsourcing systems that deflect the global traffic in information today. The rhetoric of ‘Information Society’, with its ideological commitment to notions of ‘e-governance’ and ‘e-citizenship’ and ‘ICT in development’, conveniently obscures both older continuities and inequities as well as recent parallels between the politics of different kinds of information regimes as they stretch between India/Asia and Europe.

Information and Society Research Cluster, Sarai-CSDS
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