

Does the Internet Promote Democracy?

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Abstract: Of the following three propositions, which one is the closest to being true for now, and which is most likely to prevail? What are the arguments in each case?

The Internet is the most important instrument for promoting democracy that has ever been developed.

The Internet already shows strong signs of being captured by commercial interests, and it is naïve to think that it will be much different than say, television, in its effect on democracy.

The Internet is one more addition to newspapers, documentaries, chat lines, etc, and although it may enhance democracy under certain conditions, one should not hope too much from it.

Key words: democracy, Internet

This topic comes about from an examination question in a course on “Computers and Society” that I have been teaching at the University of Toronto for almost thirty years now[1]. Although the question, on last year’s final examination, was an option, almost all of the 70- person class did chose to answer it, and perhaps surprisingly, the answers were fairly equally divided between the three propositions. There *are* valid arguments for each case (I asked the students to defend only the one that was closest to their own belief), and I suggest that you all might want to examine your own position before you allow me to sway you.

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First though, let me remind you of the definition of the Internet as a network of connected networks, with e-mail, newsgroups, listserves, and the World Wide Web as the important components.

1. THE INTERNET AS A PROMOTER OF DEMOCRACY

One often hears that the Internet was designed for military purposes as a method of communication that could not be interrupted by enemy action. A happy consequence of this is that it cannot be suppressed by those who might choose to do so, and thus it becomes a powerful way to reach the people. Moreover, because the costs of transmission and reception are so low, it can make every person "his own publisher", so that it becomes a way for individuals to reach out to all the world. This allows ideas to spread, news to be uncensored, and lays the basis for the most important prerequisites of democracy.

The most powerful evidence that the Internet is indeed working this way is the existence of the hundreds of community networks, internet political action groups, and highly organized international organizations, that exist to encourage "netizens" to actively engage in government surveillance and participation. Undoubtedly the USA has the largest number of such groups, but they are also strongly active in Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and many other countries. A few examples should make the point. In the US. "Democracies Online" (www.e-democracy.org.do) gives as its purpose "Promoting online civic participation efforts around the world throughout information experience sharing, outreach, and education." The Centre for Civic Networking " in Cambridge MA., (www.civic.net/civic.html) has similar goals. "The Markle Foundation" (www.markle.org/index.stm) has a world-wide scope, and regularly issues reports such as "Study for Calls for Democratic Elections and Public Participation", "Governing the Internet", and "Digital Opportunity Demonstrates How Information Technologies can Create Social and Economic Progress in Developing Countries". The highly respected Benton Foundation (www.benton.org) regularly has articles on e-democracy, and internet activities. The Global Internet Liberty Campaign (www.gilc.org) has free speech and privacy as its main issues, but its coverage is truly international, as its name claims. In dozens of countries governments actively encourage, and even financially support, such organizations. I am glad to say that in a recent survey, Canada was rated first among twenty countries that act in this way. (see www.gol.ged.gc.ca/index_e.asp) At my own University of Toronto, The Electric Commons/L' Agora Electronique (<http://nets.ecommons.net>) so ably

and energetically managed by Professor Liss Jeffries is a beneficiary of just such support. In the United Kingdom, even such a venerable journal as *Nature*, has conducted an extensive series of debates on scientific publishing and Internet issues (see www.nature.com/nature/debates/e-access/index.html). About China, (but definitely not in it), “Falun Dafa” (www.falundafa.ca/eng/intro.html), works to counter the efforts of the Chinese government to eradicate the organization.

In the United States particularly, at election times, and on controversial issues that suddenly emerge, the number and intensity of web sites devoted to these can proliferate to a feverish pitch. An example is “Campaigns and Elections” (www.campaignline.com/), where the position of candidates in almost every state, and on almost every issue, can be found. A particularly interesting example of the fever that can be generated occurred in the US just after the House of Representatives voted to impeach President Clinton, and the Senate was about to vote on the matter. A citizens’ web site against the impeachment was set up, and proceeded to collect pledges of money that would be used in future election campaigns against Senators who would vote for impeachment. In the short space of two weeks, over twenty million dollars was pledged, and it is hard to believe that such a strong and immediate reaction from the public did not influence the final vote, where the impeachment attempt failed.

On a much more local scale, let me describe the Newsgroup I maintain in my course on “Computers and Society”, cited earlier. As many of you who are teachers will confirm, in a class of 70 there are usually four or five students who ask questions frequently, and contribute regularly in class discussions. Most students by far, are either too shy, or simply unwilling to raise their own opinions in such a large class. But in the Newsgroup, in which participation was expected, and received credit in the marking scheme, more than half the class intervened at least once in the four months over which the class lasted. In fact, over this period there were 250 communications from the class, showing that the Internet newsgroup was an effective instrument for encouraging students to enter into the debates that were the subjects of the course.

Finally, let me draw your attention to the highly organized protests that have taken place in Seattle, Quebec City, Italy, etc., against such issues as Globalization. The World Trade Pact, failure to ratify the Kyoto Agreement on the Environment, etc. Whatever you may believe about the merits of these various protests, you have to concede that they are legitimate views about governments and the actions of global corporations, and as such, genuine expressions of citizens carried out in a democratic mode. E-mail, and communication through newsgroups and websites played an enormous role in the complicated bringing together of people from many countries on

the different issues; in fact it is safe to say that they could not even be possible to the extent that they were without the Internet, and there is every reason to believe that these will continue, aided and abetted as they are, by the Internet.

So campaigns and activities to promote democracy are certainly alive and well on the Internet. Why then, the other two propositions above, and what can be said to make *them* credible?

2. INTERNET FORCES INIMICAL TO DEMOCRACY

I have referred to the argument that the Internet is so large, diffuse, and pervasive that it defies, and will continue to defy control and regulation. The facts belie this conviction. Many countries, for example Iraq, China, and Saudi Arabia are quite successful in exercising a very tight control on who uses the Internet, and what persons who do have access, are allowed to see on it. They do this by establishing a gateway through which all information providers in the country must pass, or by making communication costs so high that only an elite few can afford access, or by the time-honoured method of having secret police throughout the country who search out those who might be trying to avert the controls.

Even in democratic countries that do not manage access as described above there are real and effective controls. The Internet is managed by a private company registered in California—ICANN—the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers. Governance of the Internet by ICANN is a highly controversial topic which would require talks longer than this one to even begin to do it justice. For a comprehensive view of the Internet's presence and its history, and governance, see "The Internet Galaxy" by Manuel Castells [2]. Suffice it here to say that ostensibly ICANN's purpose is mainly to manage the domain space, assign URL's (Universal Resource Locations), and internet addresses for routing, and to resolve disputes among those wanting to register a Web name. But ICANN's board of directors is very heavily weighted by representatives from large, multinational corporations, and its dispute resolution mechanism is largely taken from the Geneva-based World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), that manages copyrights, patents, and trademarks. Criticisms of ICANN, which come from many quarters, and especially from two of its own directors who come from the United States and Germany, centre around the charges that it is undemocratic, that it favours large, global companies, and by following WIPO it perpetuates the domination of the Internet by multinational organizations for whom profits, and not fairness or the public

good are the essential goals. The result is a growing commercialization of the Internet.

This commercialization can be seen in many ways. Perhaps the most obvious is the constant stream of boxes and banners that everyone is now subjected to when online and using a browser. These are invariably inducements to buy products, or visit sites that have products or services to sell. Even highly regarded newspapers, such as The New York Times and the Washington Post, that are now available online free (they used to try and sell the online access, but simply could not generate enough revenue this way), are dotted with offers and ads. Banks, airlines, and hundreds of other businesses are constantly trying to direct their customers to conduct transactions online, where they can be handled automatically, and data input is done by the client rather than by employees who command salaries. Never mind that the costs of building and maintaining sites to do business this way have been so large, that the small fraction of revenue generated in such transactions have so far have almost never made the effort profitable. E-Bay is probably the only dot.com company that has consistently shown a profit, and Amazon.com, undoubtedly the largest e-business company, after years of growth, only in the last quarter has managed to declare a tiny profit. The mantra is that e-business is *the* way to go, and that any company that fails to take advantage of the Internet will be toast. Look at travel agencies, where there *has* been a very noticeable shift to doing business online, and you can see the shape of things to come.

This world-wide concentration of business onto the Internet has most certainly changed the character of the technology. And there are darker sides too. Pornography (including especially child pornography) is another area that has been thriving; in fact it constitutes an appreciable fraction of internet business, as does online gambling, activities that are all too often associated with crime. These are proving very hard to deal with, because the customers are so often in one country, and the businesses in another, which means that it is very difficult to have regulations in place that protect the public against fraud.

Perhaps you feel that what I have said above is not really relevant to democracy, but rather orthogonal to the subject, not for or against. But there is more. I think that most people would agree that to have a democracy *really* work we require a well-informed public. Now beyond a doubt the Internet is a most valuable source of information, with prize-winning sites like that of Encyclopaedia Britannica, and wonderful search engines like Google[3]. But the Internet is also rife with sites that spew forth superstitions, misinformation, propaganda, and the vilest kind of hate literature. These *misinform* the public, sometimes seriously, and in so doing constitute a genuine threat against democracy. For the same reasons given

above about pornography and gambling, these activities are hard to regulate; even harder because a treaty against cybercrime, adopted after long discussion by the Council of Europe, and also accepted by other countries such as Canada, Australia, and even the United States, do not apply to them. Moreover to well-intentioned organizations such as the Global Internet Liberty Campaign, any kind of regulation is anathema, so consensus on what should be done has been impossible to reach.

To exemplify my point, on a recent NightLine program Thomas Friedman, a well-known journalist for the New York Times, who has spent many years in the Middle East and written several books about it, recounted his recent experience in visiting Indonesia, a mainly Moslem country. He found that an astoundingly large population really believed that 9/11 terrorist action involving the World Trade Center was perpetrated by Jews, many of whom knew beforehand what was to take place, and therefore stayed away on the fatal morning. This in spite of the fact that it is now known that almost all of the suicidal terrorists were Saudi citizens. Moreover, the reason so much credibility was attached to the story, was that *it came from the Internet*. Friedman elaborates on this theme at length in an op-ed piece in the Sunday New York Times [4]. Another example, is given by Manuel Castells in the book cited earlier.[5]. He writes how in a flight to Bogota, he was thrilled by the headline of a Colombian paper entitled “New Use of the Internet in Columbia”. It turned out that the article described how kidnappers were using the web to distribute hundreds of threats so as to extort monies from “rich” people who would pay so as not to be the subject of their attentions. Given such misinformation, such beliefs spread so widely and held by so many, and such practices, it is pretty hard to regard the internet as a positive contributor to democracy, or to world order.

Coming back to commercialization, many of you will remember that when television first came out, there were high hopes for it as a new medium that would transform education so as to become available to large masses of people. At my own University, in 1963, Scarborough College was created with television instruction very much in mind, and it was expected to permeate the whole educational process. A very large sum was spent in providing classrooms equipped to show television programs. I need hardly tell you what really happened. Television was captured by commercial interests, and entertainment is the really important role it now has. I do not wish to denigrate the admirable products of the Open University in the UK, the valuable role of documentaries, or the chain of public television stations in the US and elsewhere, but the truth of the matter is that the technology *has been* captured. Will this happen to the Internet? We really don't know, but I hope that I have persuaded you in the above arguments that the possibility that it will, is not to be taken lightly.

3. WHAT WILL HAPPEN? WHAT CAN HAPPEN?

Given two such divergent views, each one with at least some credibility, which is true? Which one will prevail, and what can be done to see that the desired outcome is the one that comes about?

Castells, in the book already cited, while he describes the history, growth, social impact, and geography of the Internet, makes “no prediction of the future”, because he believes the technology is in too early a stage to allow this. This caution is well taken. The history of technologies in their early stages, technologies that eventually spread worldwide and became enormously important eventually, has been such that often predictions made about them were totally off base, or simply laughable.

Examples abound. Tom Standage, in a book about Marconi’s invention of the telegraph, which he calls “The Victorean Internet” [6] because of the amazing parallels with our present situation, describes how the world was confident that the invention would help bring about world peace, because it greatly enabled communication between nations, and of course when countries talked to one another, they would settle their differences, and refrain from going to war. Within fifty years, the two worst wars that the world has ever seen, took place. When the telephone was invented by Graham Bell, no great value was seen for it, but it was felt that it would be useful in having foremen convey instructions to production line workers, so the device was worth pursuing for at least that. And two quotes referring to computers are often cited. One is by IBM’s Thomas Watson that the world might be able to use three computers—one in Europe, one in the USA, and one elsewhere; the other, made by Bill Gates, is that no one should need more than 64K of memory in a computer.

With such examples in mind, it is with some temerity that I try and expand on the title of this section. Yet surely we can safely predict some things about computers and the Internet. Chips are here to stay, and they will appear in more and more devices, so that they will become more common than thermostats, if they haven’t reached that stage already. From the very beginning, e-mail has been the most important application of the Internet; it continues at present to be the most widely used program, and it is very likely to stay fundamentally important in the future. Search engines will gain in use, especially when knowledge of some particular item is needed, and as a result, the market for encyclopaedias will diminish. The world-wide growth in access to the Internet will continue, even though there are some signs of slowdown in the rate of increase of users in the USA. China is already reported to be only second to the USA in the number of individual users (though not, of course, as a percentage of the population), and the prediction

is that by 2004 the number of individuals with access to the Internet in China, will exceed the number in the USA.

But what about the question in the title—will the expansion of the internet promote an expansion of democracy? Here I have to admit that my view is personal—there is no real evidence that I can cite to back up my opinion. And it is this. In countries where there is already a democratic tradition, we have to accept the examples given in the first section that the Internet can enhance democratic freedom of expression.

It is already a *very* important addition to the media instruments we now have for informing, expressing, and coalescing views *and* actions that can influence those in power, and advance the public interest. There is fair reason to believe that it will continue to grow in importance, and perhaps even become the single most important mechanism we have to keep democracy alive and vibrant. But other mechanisms, such as newspaper articles and editorials, op-ed articles, opinion polls, open chat lines, letters-to-the editor have been important in the past, and will continue to be important in the future. The Internet is an extremely valuable addition to this array, and *maybe* even, it will really turn out to be the most important instrument of all. Or, it might come about that in the end, commercialization *will* triumph, and the Internet will be useful, but just one more instrument in the existing panoply of aids to perpetuate and increase democracy.

However, in countries where there is as yet no real democratic tradition, it is hard to believe that the Internet will make a dramatic difference. In China for example, where there is a government-led trend to economic freedom, but a very slow approach to political freedom, it is very difficult to know whether the increasing access to the Internet will result in, or even accelerate progress to a democratic country. It is simply too easy for the government there to control how the Internet is used, and if they are unwilling, or not ready for a more open society, it is difficult to believe that the Internet, increased as the usage may be, will really bring about democracy. The same is true for other countries where genuine democracy is weak.

I regard the view that I have outlined here as realistic—your own may be more optimistic, or more pessimistic. But we will have to let time determine how far the Internet takes the world as a whole on the road to greater democracy, both in countries that are now democratic, and in countries where real democracy does not yet exist.

REFERENCES

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- [2] Castells, Manuel "The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business and Society", Ch.1,5 Oxford University Press, 2001
- [3] Even with search engines commercialization is to be found. There are dozens and dozens of companies which offer to help you design your web site so that it occurs high up on the list of citations when a search is made.
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- [6] Standage, Tom "The Victorean Internet: The Remarkable Story of the Telegraph and the 19th Century On-Line Pioneers", Berkeley Pub. Group. 1999