Democracy and the Information Revolution: Values, Opportunities and Threats

Democracy Forum 2001 Report

Prepared by:
International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
(International IDEA)

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) exists to nurture and promote democracy around the world. Global in membership and scope, independent of specific national interests, and quick in its response, International IDEA is an intergovernmental organization with a unique mandate – to support the growth of genuine, sustainable democracy.
Introduction

Will information and communication technology strengthen democracy by providing a powerful new force to facilitate public participation, communication and representation -- or will it reinforce the existing gaps between the technology rich and poor?

The last decade of the 20th century was marked by two extraordinary developments, whose importance and implications are still being digested. Politically, there was a major expansion of democracy around the world, both as a system of government and as a value system commanding the support of ordinary people. Simultaneously, spurred by major new developments in information and communication technology (ICTs), there has been an ‘information revolution’, symbolized by the spread of the Internet, personal computers and mobile phones. These two developments have rapidly transformed the ways in which people and societies can and do relate to each other.

A strong democratic system is said to rest on a balance between an accountable government, an open economy and a vibrant civil society. On the one hand, the information revolution has the potential of doing democracy a great service. In established democracies where trends of falling voter participation and growing political apathy are increasingly apparent, it can serve as a reinvigorating force in the democratic process. Citizens will not only be able to register and vote online, but also give feedback on legislative drafts and communicate directly with their representatives.

Political parties can use the Internet for campaigning and fundraising as well as for opinion polling. Governments can make themselves more transparent and accountable to the voters. ‘E-democracy’, say its proponents, has the potential to transform hitherto passive relationships between citizens and government into a more open, active communication.

On the other hand, while the information revolution is increasing the global public’s opportunities for free political expression and participation from the grassroots up, in some instances it is simply reinforcing existing patterns of inequality and hierarchical power relationships. It has the potential of strengthening the social foundations of electoral politics, such as political parties and a shared civic culture, but it may also weaken them. The information revolution has assisted pro-democracy activists to progressively chip away at authoritarian regimes’ grip on power, but it has also expanded the ability of those same regimes both to disseminate propaganda and monitor their own citizens’ behaviour.

Additionally, there may be an emerging democracy deficit wherein the political sphere is becoming less powerful than the economic sphere, the power balance is tipping towards non-elected multinational corporations and the dissemination of information is increasingly controlled by a shrinking set of global media organizations. Moreover, the digital divide threatens to make e-democracy available only to the better off, thereby further weakening the voice of the poor and minorities.

To date, these and related issues have been addressed to varying extents, particularly in relation to the experiences of the industrialized countries. Unfortunately, however, there has not been enough effort to explore them as interrelated elements of a unified field, nor on a truly global basis that takes into account the wide disparities between rich and poor countries’ abilities to employ information and communications technologies in the political sphere.
The convening of the International IDEA Democracy Forum 2001 ‘Democracy and The Information Revolution: Values, Opportunities and Threats’ was an important step toward beginning to fill that gap. The Forum explored in detail both the risks and opportunities that the information revolution raises for democracy. In addition, some of the key choices that the international community will have to confront in attempting to steer the development of ICTs in directions congenial to the spread, consolidation and enrichment of democracy were considered and addressed. It was determined that ICT’s are meant to enhance – not replace – traditional modes of democratic information sharing and communication. This paper will present many of the issues discussed at the Democracy Forum 2001 as well as suggestions for both policy initiatives and future research.

The ICT Revolution and Democracy

The ‘Information Revolution’ and its consequences evoke as much opposition as it does support. Politically one of the most critical debates concerns ICTs effects on democratic practice. On one side, many point to the ICT revolution’s potential to reinvigorate and enhance democracy by enabling citizens to become more informed, articulate, and active in public affairs, as well as to change the relationship and communication between citizens and their elected representatives. On the other side, many maintain that a digital world will be one in which existing disparities between those who are engaged and those who are not will simply be heightened. There exists an uneasy relationship between the power centres of the information revolution/new economy and those of more traditional representative democracy. It must also be understood that there is no “best method” for incorporating the power of ICTs into the strengthening of democracies.

The notion of a ‘digital divide’ has already achieved common currency in the debate over the ICT revolution and its consequences and the answers are yet to come. But what does it really mean in practice to address the issues relating to information and communication technology around the world today? For example, inequalities of access within particular societies or the overall ‘North-South’ divide may increase or diminish as a result of the ICT revolution. Professor Matti Pohjola of the World Institute for Development Economics Research (WIDER) noted during his presentation at the Democracy Forum 2001 that, “the inequalities of access to the Internet exceed the inequalities of income across the world”. For instance, in 1997 the richest fifth of countries had 86% of the world’s GDP but 93% of the Internet users, while the poorest fifth of countries had 1% of the world’s GDP but only 0.2% of the Internet users. Many believe that this gap is continuing to widen.

Additionally, the ICT revolution may lead to the locus of decision-making – even economic power – shifting inexorably away from elected representatives and towards unelected institutions such as multinational corporations, resulting in a democratic deficit. On the other hand, the potential digital dividends of the ICT revolution may provide an opportunity for developing countries to consolidate their democracy at more efficient and rapid pace. One thing that is for certain is that many stand to benefit – and to lose – from the ICT revolution.

These dramatic changes taking place in the development of information technologies will have deep impacts on societies and human behavior. Professor Pippa Norris, in her preparatory paper for the Democracy Forum, indicated three challenges that, despite the positive potential, the consequences of the new information society could be the emergence and reinforcement of a new 'digital divide'. These three challenges are the global divide, the social divide and the democratic divide. The 'global divide' concerns the substantial inequalities in the diffusion of technology that have become evident between
nations, even among the most affluent G-7 and European Union member states, let alone world-wide. The 'social divide' refers to inequalities of access by social groups; even within countries at the forefront of the emerging Internet age, use of the new technology varies widely by income, education, and generation. But even if the Internet population gradually normalizes and basic access becomes ubiquitous in post-industrialized societies, there are still major concerns about the possible emergence of a 'democratic divide' between those who do, and do not, use the political resources available on the Internet.

The Digital Divide may be overcome, however, this will involve active participation and investment from both the developed and developing countries in taking advantage of the so-called ‘digital dividend’. The digital dividend refers to economic advantages available developing countries that increase their usage of ICTs to a level where it will have a positive effect on their overall GDP. Production of ICTs may now be a point of relative saturation, however, the benefits of usage may outweigh the potential benefit of production.

The following seven sections will serve as a guide for the effective usage of ICTs in promoting and sustaining democracy as well as for narrowing the digital divide in the following 7 topic areas: reducing the digital divide, the role of governments and parliaments, strengthening political parties, technology enhancement for elections, building local democracy, opening up authoritarian states, and the role of the media and new media. All of these topics were discussed in length at International IDEA’s Democracy Forum 2001. Additionally, the sections also contain policy recommendations addressing the respective topic. These policy points have been designed to provide policy-makers with a platform to begin dialogue on the appropriate use of ICTs relating to not only promoting and sustaining democracy, but also providing higher levels of efficiency and transparency.

1). Narrowing the Digital Divide on a Global and National Scale

The past few years have witnessed a vibrant international debate about the nature, causes, and consequences of the global digital divide. Some participants in the debate have advanced a rather pessimistic view, arguing that the information revolution and globalization inevitably will deepen social inequalities and leave much of the world behind. In contrast, while acknowledging the challenge of growing inequality, other participants emphasize that today’s ICTs provide unparalleled opportunities to significantly increase wealth creation and social empowerment around the world. The technology’s speed, power, and flexibility are increasing rapidly while its costs are falling in tandem. As such, the Internet, personal computers, mobile telecommunications, and so on can be productively applied to tackle a large number of economic and social challenges, including in the poorest areas of the world. Hence, they maintain that through concerted action the international community can help the developing and post-communist countries to not only narrow the digital divide, but to reap a significant digital dividend as well.

Governments, multilateral institutions, businesses and industry associations, and civil society organizations have all joined the debate, resulting in a slew of meetings and proposals on the way forward. Collectively, these proposals point to an emerging consensus on a number of key principles and action items, including:
• the importance of establishing coherent national plans for ICT-based development;
• building national and regional Internet backbones and community access points;
• adopting enabling policies for telecommunications and electronic commerce;
• encouraging the creation and dissemination of locally relevant content and applications that
  preserve cultural heritage and linguistic diversity;
• significantly expanding education and training programs, both in general and with regard to ICTs
  in particular; and
• creating a facilitative environment in which both civil society uses of technology and business
  entrepreneurship can thrive.

But despite this consensus, political divisions, economic difficulties, and organizational turf dynamics
have arisen to make near-term prospects for the adoption and implementation of major new initiatives
mixed at best. Given these developments, among the key policy points that merit action are:

1. Industrialized countries, the international business community, and multilateral organizations are
   encouraged to strengthen their commitment to digital development by greatly increasing their
   technical and financial assistance to developing countries, while also establishing a higher level of
   coordination among their efforts.

2. Governments and businesses should undertake coordinated projects to expand connectivity and
   improve public access to national information infrastructures while taking steps to encourage the
   creation and dissemination of locally relevant content that preserves both cultural heritage and
   linguistic diversity.

3. Governments must ensure that all citizens have the opportunity to access and use ICTs for the
   purposes of political speech and participation irrespective of gender, ethnicity, income, education,
   locality, or other considerations.

4. Governments should adopt the market-enabling policies needed to grow their telecommunications,
   Internet, and electronic commerce environments and to protect the rights of their citizens and
   consumers.

5. Governments should make the rapid expansion of education and training - in general and with
   respect to ICTs in particular - a top national priority, and should pursue special initiatives to
   empower women, ethnic minorities, and other historically marginalized social groups.

2). Governments and Parliaments: Fostering E-Democracy Through Governments and
   Parliaments

How is new communication technology helping parliaments, local governments and government
ministries communicate effectively amongst themselves, with citizens, and with the international
community? This session will examine this issue from both an information communication and
service-delivery perspective and will look at the type of information being presented and the extent to
which the information is interactive or merely one-way, from top to bottom. It will also assess the
extent to which new technology promotes the core democratic values of accountability, transparency
and participation. In addition, the session will examine ethnic and regulatory/legislative issues arising from the spread and access to information by different sections of society.

Governments and legislatures around the world are beginning the transition to digital, networked organization. Predictably, a number of concerns have been raised about the potential risks of such efforts. Some observers worry that bureaucrats and politicians may not be adept at designing optimal and sustainable plans; that powerful private vendors will take advantage of their bargaining power to become the leading beneficiaries; and that states will not be able to compete for and retain the requisite skilled personnel. Furthermore, critics suggest that governments are too rigid and dependent on informal procedures and influence dynamics for e-government to make a real difference in their operations. Additional concerns are that most of the e-government initiatives adopted thus far give limited attention to interactivity with, and participation by, the general public in government affairs, and that the digital divide could limit the direct benefits to comparatively wealthy and educated social strata.

But to proponents of e-government, these and other potential problems are tractable. Proponents argue that as relative latecomers, states can adopt the best procedures and technologies from the outset; that ICTs increase governments’ efficiency, transparency, and accountability while limiting the scope for arbitrary decisions and abuses of power; and that organizational management, inter-organizational coordination, procurement practices, and the delivery of services to citizens and businesses all will be greatly enhanced. On the question of interactivity, some proponents argue that what citizens want most is a professionalized state capable of effectively providing services, not an opportunity to remotely participate in the minutia of policy making. Conversely, others envision a fundamental transformation in the relationship between states and citizens, in which agencies and parliaments will provide the public with opportunities to track and electronically weigh in on a wide range of decisions and administrative procedures. In short, whether they champion direct democracy or just more effective and modern representative democracy, the proponents of e-government insist that the benefits far outweigh the risks. This is a reasonable (and perhaps obvious) conclusion, but many questions remain as to how to make e-government serve the cause of e-democracy. A few of the relevant policy points include:

1. Governments should use ICTs to make documents and legislative deliberations progressively more accessible to the general public and, as they develop the necessary resources and expertise, should move beyond the one-way provision of services to creating interactive and participatory opportunities for citizens.

2. Governments should adopt strong policies on privacy protection, digital signatures, freedom of information, and related issues to avoid abuses and ensure that citizens will have full confidence in using e-government services by protecting citizens’ right to free speech and resisting the temptation to apply censorship in the increasingly diverse electronic environment.

3. Governments should implement coherent strategic plans for e-government and e-governance that give pride of place to democracy-enhancing rules and practices.

4. Governments should enact policies and projects supporting vibrant electronic public spheres that are open to noncommercial interaction and congenial to diverse ideas and forms of political participation, while ICT businesses should be encouraged to adopt practices and develop products that facilitate the dissemination of ideas and public participation in political affairs.
3). Political Expression in the ICT Age: the *Strengthening Political Parties and Public Participation*

Once upon a time it was technically impossible to canvas the population for their views and opinions. This is no longer the case and new technology may provide opportunities for direct democracy within the framework of representation. But, the opportunities that this technology provides could also threaten the old political party structures as citizens find new forums to organize and exchange views. One must be aware of the following issues: direct democracy, citizen-government interaction, citizen-representative interaction, political communication and participation, networking, ethics, and core values.

Political parties are another essential foundation of vibrant democracies. But, unfortunately, the state of parties around the world is rather mixed. In many developing and former communist countries, political parties are weakly institutionalized, highly fragmented, and inadequately prepared to govern. In many industrialized countries, party identification and membership is on the decline. It is possible that the information revolution may be contributing to some of the problems parties face. For example, the Internet and other ICTs may encourage a substitution effect in which certain segments of society redirect their energies into more narrowly defined political groups that are seemingly more responsive and less encumbered by the need to strike compromises between disparate objectives. The spread of direct democracy techniques, such as online plebiscites, would bypass parties even further. Alternatively, the technology provides ample opportunities for people to simply “tune out” public life and pursue more individualistic forms of fulfillment. And in addition to facilitating the erosion of public participation in parties, the information revolution may provide party members with incentives to pursue strategies that weaken their organizations from within. Most prominently in the United States but elsewhere as well, many politicians and political factions have used ICTs to cultivate their own bases of support separate from or even in partial opposition to their parties.

On the other hand, the information revolution also presents political parties with some significant new opportunities. Properly managed, ICTs can be used:

- to reach out to politically disaffected or unmotivated citizens, including youth and historically marginalized groups;
- to publicize party positions and to solicit feedback, new ideas, and new members;
- to energize party activists and build leadership cadres, both nationally and at the grass-roots level;
- to strengthen intra-party communications and create more flexible, less bureaucratic organizations.

Moreover, ICTs lower some types of entry barriers and help new or smaller parties to be heard and compete on a more level playing field. This increases the representation of diverse views and can have an energizing effect on both the public and the traditionally dominant parties (although it also can result in a fragmented polity, minority governments, and unstable governing coalitions). In sum, as societies become increasingly networked and information intensive, traditional parties may have to work harder to maintain their external support and internal coherence, while new ones will have to build their ability to use ICTs as a force multiplier. In this context, some of the relevant policy points include:
1. Political parties should use ICTs as a tool to strengthen their organization, including the links between the national and local levels and with sister parties abroad.

2. Political parties should use the new ICTs not simply to gather information and publicize their policy positions, but also to actively engage citizens and social groups in dialogues that can actually impact those positions.

3. Political parties and civil societal organizations engaged in democracy-building activities should use ICTs to pursue partnerships with governments, multilateral institutions, and (where advisable) businesses toward promoting political participation with communities.

4). Introducing Technology to Elections: A Sustainable Approach

The majority of information requests from election management bodies to electoral assistance agencies is about the introduction of technology, such as databases for voter registration, electronic voting, bio-identification systems, scanning, or geographic information systems. New technology presents innovative means to increase efficiency, reduce costs, enhance participation and facilitate communication between election bodies and the general population, voters, political parties and governments. However, careful consideration must be given to the danger of inappropriate or untimely introduction of technology – especially if it compromises transparency, local ownership, or sustainability.

If properly managed and subject to appropriate oversight, ICTs can contribute a great deal to the conduct of free and fair elections. Computerized and networked systems can significantly increase the speed and accuracy with which registrations are checked and votes are cast and counted. Broadcast networks and the Internet can be used to quickly disseminate results from the precinct level on up, increasing much needed transparency in the process. These and other improvements build citizens’ trust and desire to participate in elections, as well as their willingness to accept what they consider to be unfavorable outcomes—all essential societal bases for the development of democratic cultures and institutions.

Recent experiments with on-line voting may be harbingers of a more convenient model that could greatly increase voters’ propensity to “turn-out” and, in particularly conflictual environments, their sense of personal security in doing so. On the other hand, e-voting does raise issues of fairness in socially stratified conditions and may be seen by some as eroding democratic traditions. All of these lead to a number of managerial and political policy points, including the following:

1. Electoral management bodies must ensure that voting technologies are customer friendly and configurable to meet the needs of citizens with disabilities, limited education, or little experience in using such technologies as well as ensure that computerized voter identification, registration records and vote counts are handled in a politically neutral, professional manner by both public bodies and any private sector entities involved.

2. Governments should provide the resources needed to ensure that all polling stations and information processing centers are equipped with the most appropriate technologies.
3. Governments must ensure when remote electronic voting is made available that such opportunities are not limited to particular social groups.

4. Governments should take policy and security steps to maintain their national information infrastructures and electrical power grids at levels of readiness necessary for the reliable aggregation and dissemination of election results.

5). Local Democracy Online: Building Social Capital for Local Democracy

How do elected officials, civil society, and the media to enhance local democracy around the world use information and communication technology? If sustainable local democracy is community trust, which is built through civic engagement and active participation, can the Internet and other information technologies enhance the development of communities? How have cities around the world experimented with new forms of communication and what lessons have been learned? What are the promises of new information technologies for the practice of democracy? There have been innovative developments in online local democracy at work by municipal leaders who have designed the new opportunities for enhanced democracy through “virtual governance”. The prospects for deepening local democracy through electoral participation, citizen consultation, and conflict resolution, are investigated using as a basis for discussion International IDEA’s latest handbook, Democracy at the Local Level: Participation, Representation, Conflict Management, and Governance.

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the importance to democracy of social capital—the social networks and norms of reciprocity and trust that link individuals into societies. But some scholars and practitioners worry that the information revolution may be contributing to the erosion of this positive sort of social capital (as opposed to, say, the bonds between hate groups). They variously argue that the explosive growth of video rentals, portable computer game and audio equipment, cable and satellite television channels, World Wide Web surfing and so on encourages people to substitute individualized electronic pastimes for real-life interactions in social settings. Coupled with broader trends like generational change, suburban sprawl, and the pressures of modern life, this atomistic absorption in technology is said to result in a collective withdrawal from citizen engagement and the decay of the community bonds needed for vibrant democracy. However, other observers counter that the degree of erosion is overstated and that the information revolution is simply facilitating a transformation in the character of social capital. In their view, it may be that many people are spending less time in local community associations, bowling leagues and the like, but they are forging new forms of community in cyberspace, some of which involve strong bonds and normative commitments. Moreover, these observers add, the technology has greatly empowered and catalyzed the growth of civil society organizations and new social movements that advocate democratic governance and social responsibility.

These issues have national and international implications that can contribute to building social capital and democracy at the local level. Over the years, many communities have used technologies like computer networks and bulletin boards, videotex systems, public access cable television channels and, of course, radio and television to foster local identity and social bonds. Today, many are developing Internet web sites and portals offering access to government services, local businesses, community events and so on. Some communities are using public telecenters and kiosks to broaden that access, or are taking advantage of the Internet’s interactive capabilities to facilitate dialogues among their members and with local officials, as well as to deliver more personalized services. Particularly in light of
these experiences, the extent to which ICTs can contribute to building local social capital and countering any larger trends toward social fragmentation merits consideration. A few of the relevant policy points include:

1. Societies should be aware of the risk that some groups may use ICTs to manipulate public opinion or spread misinformation, and they should meet such challenges with countervailing views and information.

2. Local governments must take steps to engage particular social segments that have been marginalized from participation in community and political life and explore the local efficacy of approaches to guard against excessive fragmentation of the public into narrow electronic communities of interest.

3. Local governments and businesses should consider pursuing ICT partnerships with civil societal organizations engaged in buttressing democracy from the bottom up and share information about technologies, services and applications that have proven to be more or less effective in building strong bonds within local communities as well as between civil society and local governments.

6). Opening up Authoritarian States

One of the first issues that people have focused on with regard to the ICT revolution is the ability to provide greater access to information and new means of communication to people living in very different conditions. Today, comparative experiences, choices and options can be made available to people around the world. What impact will ICTs have in promoting democracy in authoritarian regimes such as China and Burma?

First, a distinction should be made between the uses of ICT in authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. Authoritarian regimes such as Malaysia and China wish to both increase ICT usage for economic purposes, and control ICTs for political purposes. In authoritarian states, democratic changes are most effective when they come from inside a state. Therefore, ICT are most effective when they are used to aid local, grassroots activists and organizations. Institutes from outside can complement efforts local efforts. Totalitarian regimes, on the other hand, such as Burma and North Korea, actively seek to limit and control ICT use by their citizens, without regard to economic benefits. Because of the lack of ICT access by citizens in totalitarian regimes, it is not a useful tool for organizing local democracy initiatives. Under these circumstances, ICT can be an effective tool for exile groups to organize international campaigns and provide advocacy.

Since the early days of international radio broadcasting, many have argued that technological advancements making information more accessible can play a critical role in opening up authoritarian regimes. Although the historical record on this score actually is rather mixed, the proposition has received renewed attention and widening popularity in the context of today’s information revolution. Proponents of this view argue that the international diffusion of everything from fax machines, camcorders, personal computers, and cell phones to global television services and, above all, the Internet will make it progressively more difficult for authoritarian regimes to control the political thought, expression, and behavior of their citizens. The consequence, they maintain, will be the erosion of authoritarianism and transitions to democratic rule. However, other observers take a more cautious view. They point out that some authoritarian regimes have proven adept at restricting access to ICTs,
or at monitoring and suppressing undesired speech where such access is allowed. This is true even of
the Internet, cyber-libertarians’ proclamations about its uncontrollability notwithstanding. Moreover,
some despotic regimes have been quite effective at using the technology to spread pro-government
propaganda or to whip up nationalist, religious, or ethnic sentiments to the same ends. And, these
observers add, even if information is more freely circulated, it is by no means certain that this will
result in effective challenges to dictatorships that are dead set on retaining power.

The use of ICTs to local and international democracy advocates offers many opportunities by
providing powerful mechanism for achieving global awareness of democracy issues through Internet
campaigns and networking. Relatively inexpensive technology such as mobile phones, text messaging
(SMS) and Wireless Access Protocol (WAP) that can aid in diffusing democracy initiatives beyond
computers to all parts of society, thereby enhancing the ability to challenge a regime’s authority,
because of its cost-effectiveness, wide-spread access, and relative anonymity. In providing away out of
isolation and a sense of community for activists, ICTs can serve as a tool for capacity-building by
strengthening the inter-communication and efficiency of local institutions.

The information revolution probably can make a difference in countries transitioning to democracy,
and even in semi-authoritarian systems that allow some opposition. But in the case of more severe
authoritarian regimes, under precisely what circumstances which types of ICT usage can help promote
(or retard) change remains an open question. Recalling the long-standing debates about international
broadcasting and national sovereignty, it may also raise controversial issues with respect to the
appropriate response of the international community. Some of the important issues to address include:

1. The international community should cooperate with civil society organizations and exile groups
   that are using ICTs to work for change in authoritarian countries and raise the profile of
   information and communication rights on the global human rights agenda and in its interactions
   with authoritarian governments.

2. The international community should promote the global diffusion of ICTs, particularly encryption
   and other technologies that increase the privacy of electronic behavior.

3. ICT companies doing business with authoritarian regimes should refrain from providing them with
   the technological means to track and suppress the electronic behavior of their citizens and
certification made that private sector activities are complementary to democracy initiatives.

4. Democracy assistance programs should give significant consideration to the potential benefits of
   ICTs for countries transitioning from authoritarian rule.

7). Promoting a Vital Public Sphere in the New Media Environment

A vital public sphere of ideas and information is a third foundation of democracy. The information
revolution is having an undeniable impact on the ability of individual citizens and organizations to
acquire, create, and publicly disseminate information of all kinds. Traditional media organizations are
undergoing rapid change in the technologies of news and entertainment production. At the same time,
the organization and governance of their industries is being transformed by trends such as
globalization, deregulation, competition, privatization, convergence, and consolidation. The result has
been an explosion in the volume, variety, and technical quality of the products delivered to consumers,
although critics contend that substantive quality and intellectual diversity have not necessarily grown in tandem. In parallel with these changes in the “old” media, the Internet and related new media technologies have essentially given many millions of people unprecedented access to the world’s information, as well as a multi-media printing press and a global distribution channel for their views. As the technology advances, many home pages will become home stations disseminating audio-visual as well as graphical and textual information, and many users will be able to send and receive it anywhere, anytime.

One must also note that the Internet provides opportunities for misinformation by states, media, citizens and organizations because of its instantaneous capabilities and lack of many of the checks and balances to traditional publishing. Since the information can easily be manipulated and exaggerated and the credibility of information is a key issue as it is a medium open to anyone, using the Internet can also backfire for both regimes and democracy advocates as it provides a medium to inflame issues and in many instances traditional media helps legitimize new media by providing follow-up reporting to claims.

A good deal of debate about the risks and opportunities presented by the emerging media environment has arisen. Pessimists variously fear that the instantaneous global spread of unreliable, falsified, criminal or inappropriate information will become the norm; standards of ethics and truthfulness will erode; societies will fragment, with shared experience and civic discourse giving way to a “digital tower of Babel”; governments will attempt to impose new forms of censorship, both within and beyond their borders; big corporations will assert their control and render the infosphere a vast wasteland of vapid consumerism; and so on. In contrast, optimists maintain that new social norms will emerge to counter the digital “dark side,” and that the technology will remain overwhelmingly empowering and subversive of top-down controls. Either way, the road we are on undoubtedly will have profound consequences for public discourse and knowledge and, by extension, the character of democracy. Hence, the policy points that merit consideration include:

1. Public policy frameworks are needed to facilitate diverse political expression in the “old” mass media, whether commercial or noncommercial in nature.

2. Governments must protect societies against allegedly harmful political expression or misinformation on the Internet without unduly curtailing speech or imposing their laws beyond their national borders.

3. Society must preserve some measure of shared civic culture in the infosphere and guard against the excessive fragmentation of political expression into narrow communities of interest.

The Way Forward

The Digital Opportunities Task Force (DOT Force) that was convened following the Okinawa G8 Summit in July 2000 and reported back to the Genoa G8 Summit in July 2001, with the task of addressing the following objectives from the Okinawa Charter on Global Information Society:

- Actively facilitate discussions with developing countries, international organisations and other stakeholders to promote international co-operation with a view to fostering policy, regulatory and
network readiness; improving connectivity, increasing access and lowering cost; building human capacity; and encouraging participation in global e-commerce networks;

- Encourage the G8's own efforts to co-operate on IT-related pilot programmes and projects;
- Promote closer policy dialogue among partners and work to raise global public awareness of the challenges and opportunities; and
- Examine inputs from the private sector and other interested groups such as the Global Digital Divide Initiative's contributions.

The DOT Force Final Report, *Digital Opportunities for All: Meeting the Challenge*, which incorporates the Genoa Plan of Action, emphasizes many points for additional action. Among these are points relating to how the proliferation of ICTs and access will impact governance issues which the leaders of the G8 countries endorsed and plan to develop policies oriented toward acting upon this unique opportunity. There is much more work to be done, however. In dialogue with the many participants at Democracy Forum 2001 and through internal research, International IDEA would like to note the following areas where it may make central contributions to the success of strengthening democracy within respective countries, but also toward the spreading and enhancement of democracy across the globe.

- Determine the potential of new information technology to reduce or exacerbate existing disparities in democratic societies;
- Test the potential for enabling a more open flow of information in countries with authoritarian regimes;
- Profile innovative means by which governments, civil society and international organizations are taking advantage of information technology to revitalize democracy;
- Recommendations and tools to assist in maximizing the democratic potentials of the new technologies;
- Gather and disseminate knowledge about information technology and democracy with a view to providing some guidance to our constituencies about choices and options regarding their democracy work;
- Understand the role that communities can play in promoting democracy, and identify ways to promote this phenomenon; and
- Identify, form and strengthen communities of practice around issues of information and technology in fostering democracy.

**Conclusion**

As the discussions at the Democracy Forum demonstrated, the information revolution is beginning to have a significant impact on the social foundations and organizational practices of democracy. And yet, we must bear in mind that in a very real sense we are still in the early stages of the Internet-based phase of the information revolution. The continued examination of the implications of the information revolution for democracy and its core values are essential to assess the opportunities and threats of rapid information flow and access for democratic governance in order to outline practical ways in which information technology is being and can be used to deepen democracy. The following
conclusory points should be noted anytime the reference is made with regard to the use of ICTs in promoting and sustaining democracy.

• ICT’s are meant to enhance – not replace – traditional modes of democratic information sharing and communication.

• There are two basic levels for how ICTs may enhance the democratic structure of not only a country, but also local areas: within and without. Unfortunately, much of the useful information seems to be targeted toward the outside audience rather than the constituency.

• The policy points elaborated herein should be considered varying to the following priorities: access, education, reliance, accountability, transparency, infrastructure, need, etc.

• Although the use of ICTs is useful in promoting and sustaining democracy, the investment in fundamental infrastructure should be made prior to planning a website (for example: roads, sewage, water, electricity, telephone then bandwidth, servers and routers, fiber optics, satellite, cable).

• Content must be structured according to need and a mechanism for updating must be decided prior to the design of any ICT-related project.

• There is no “best method” for incorporating the power of ICTs into the strengthening of democracies, however, International IDEA has begun cataloguing many of the best practices for additional consultation with those responsible and for possible integration.

• The Digital Divide may be overcome, however, this will involve active participation and investment from both the developed and developing countries.

• Once the issue of access has been remedied, there must be a plan for education, technology training and content creation/distribution.

In the decades ahead, the power of technology and worldwide accessibility will far outstrip where we are today, and in all likelihood its effects on the conduct of democracy will grow in parallel. With this in mind, it makes sense to establish an ongoing global dialogue about the challenges of building e-democracy, and to track its progress and pitfalls in a manner that facilitates collective learning and successful adaptations to changing circumstances.