

ICTs and Democracy - Good Grounds for Pessimism?

David Manasian, *The Economist*

I am an optimist by nature, but I've agreed to play the pessimist today. On the whole, I believe the Internet and all of the other new communications technologies associated with it, will bring enormous benefits in almost every walk of life, politics included. But if the Internet's benefits are going to be enormous, it's more than likely that it will also be enormously disruptive. And not all of those disruptions will be pleasant, or welcome. The invention and dissemination of the printing press helped to create the European Renaissance. It also helped to launch the Reformation—and centuries of religious warfare followed, tearing the continent apart. The same could be said of radio, cinema and television—all media which brought great benefits, and pleasure, to millions of people, but which were also quickly seized upon by propagandists for vile regimes and used to promote the racist, imperialist and utopian fantasies behind two world wars and countless other conflicts in the twentieth century.

So, in addition to the discussing all the benefits that the Internet can bring to democratic politics, and to the spread of democracy itself, perhaps we should spend a little time discussing the damage it might do as well.

Before talking about the effect that the Internet might have on emerging democracies, let's think a minute about what effect it might have on established ones. At a basic level, once the Internet becomes ubiquitous, I believe it will quickly begin to undermine many of the assumptions behind representative democracy. There have been many rationales for representative, rather than direct, democracy. But two practical considerations have mattered most. First, ordinary citizens simply do not have the time to analyse all the complex issues, which need to be legislated in modern societies. And second, the sheer physical obstacles to large

numbers of people voting frequently or participating in debates made their direct involvement in policymaking impossible.

Both obstacles will be drastically reduced by the Internet—indeed that is already happening. There's more than enough information available to those who want it—including scores of official documents and a proliferating array of media. Secure systems of voting cannot be far away. And debating with people who are physically dispersed will also become increasingly easy.

These developments are likely to create great pressure for moves towards more direct forms of democracy—referenda, initiatives, deliberative juries, more active participation at all levels. The decline in the membership of political parties almost everywhere has already laid the groundwork for this. The steady decline in voter turnouts at elections, in my view, confirms rather than disproves this trend. People know that policy is not made at elections. Sophisticated electorates have come to see elections as crude take-it-or-leave-it exercises. They know that the important policy decisions are made as a result of bargains between politicians and professional lobbyists of one sort or another. As party memberships and voter-turnout have declined, the number of single-issue pressure groups has grown.

Nevertheless any moves in the direction of direct democracy are likely to be highly contentious, and a threat to politicians and other members of the political elites who currently run things. Huge debates will occur as government structures are challenged, and then overhauled. Many people, of course, will not become involved. But those who do become involved will—usually on particular issues—want to be more involved than ever, and they'll want not just to express their opinions, but to have a say in decisions as well.

Established democracies, with their wealth, large number of existing institutions and recent history of political stability, should be able to weather these disruptions and disagreements. But what about new democracies, who do not enjoy any of these props? Already fragile, often struggling to establish the rule of law after harsh repression or armed conflict, burdened with a

bitter legacy, they could well find that Internet-driven forms of direct democracy are a mixed blessing, and mostly serve to exacerbate existing divisions.

In modern times existing forms of democracy have worked largely because great numbers of people have agreed **not** to participate in public affairs in exchange for peace and quiet. That acquiescence may evaporate if participating becomes very easy. And for all their faults, political parties have performed a vital task: forcing those with diverse views to compromise, out of necessity, around a consensus which no one may be very happy with, but which most can accept. All mainstream parties are “broad churches” of one sort or another. More-direct forms of democracy will be more fractious, more volatile, rowdier. Wealthy countries can afford to embrace it nevertheless and, I believe, in the long run they will benefit from it even if the short term proves a little rocky. Newer democracies may never survive the rocky short-term. Confronted with the same phenomenon, they may just collapse.

For example, the recent Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been one of the first with a genuine cyber component. Because of the Internet, all sides have been able to express their views to an audience that is, at least potentially, global. And they’ve been able to address each other. But it’s hard to believe that this exchange of views has done much to ameliorate the violence, or to produce a real debate, or even to build a consensus on either side of the conflict, except one for yet more conflict. Instead, Israelis and Palestinians have bombarded each other with a flood of hate messages, and tried repeatedly to hack into each other’s websites to corrupt them or shut them down.

And if that doesn’t depress or impress you, let me go on to make a few additional points. One of the biggest issues in rich countries in the future, as the Internet in all its manifestations infiltrates our lives, will be privacy. A technological battle has already commenced. On one side are technologies that allow ever more accurate tracking of what individuals do over the Internet, or for that matter, in real space and time. On the other hand there are new technologies to evade what many are already calling the surveillance society.

But this battle is very lop-sided and it seems to me certain that one side, that of surveillance, will win. That's because on the side of privacy and anonymity is a small bunch of privacy activists, human rights proponents, a dwindling band of cyber anarchists and, from time to time, a complacent and inattentive public. Arrayed against them are almost all commercial interests and the police of every nation in the world.

Businesses need to monitor our behaviour on the Internet to unlock its enormous economic potential. And they would like to do the same for all our movements and interactions off the Internet too, as these become more and more electronically based or recorded. Already they are investing large sums in location technology that will be able to identify where in the world a web surfer is. That's just the beginning. The technology already exists to track mobile-phone users. As for the police, they have legitimate law-enforcement concerns. These will, I feel almost certain, eventually prevail against privacy worries. People in rich countries will deeply regret the consequent loss of privacy, and many will want to turn the clock back. But by then, this will be impossible.

If the citizens of rich countries will regret the loss of privacy, for people in poor and authoritarian countries, it will be a disaster. Authoritarian regimes of the past century were bad enough, but their appalling nature was often mitigated by sheer inefficiency. But the same technology that will dramatically reduce crime, vastly increase productivity, and provide a cornucopia of new services in rich democracies, will also be a godsend to authoritarians determined to repress or control their populations. Finally, Orwell's vision of Big Brother will be more than a joke—in fact, he'll be all too real. It will become ever easier and cheaper to record, store and analyse information about millions of ordinary people. Escaping this web of surveillance will become ever more difficult. If you don't believe me, try paying your hotel bill or renting a car here in Stockholm, or anywhere else, with cash. As the price of computing power, video cameras, and telecommunications continues to plummet, even regimes in poor countries will be able to exploit them for the purposes of social control.

I haven't even mentioned the usual litany of concerns about the Internet raised by other pessimists, such as the destruction of traditional cultures by regular contact with the wide and wicked world, or the growth of extremism as public cultures fragment and people spend all their time over the Internet reading or listening only to news filtered to fit their tastes and communicating with others who agree with them. Personally, I don't think these are very great dangers, but there are those who do. And then there's cyberterrorism—something that does seem to me a real threat. I don't want to give anyone ideas, but blowing up a single Internet-server farm, or hacking into the computers that control an air-traffic control system or a power plant, seems to me a much more effective act of terrorism than blowing up a single airliner. However this is one threat that, eventually, governments will learn how to protect against.

No, I don't think these more lurid worries are the real danger. I'm presenting a more pessimistic view—that the very benefits that the Internet will bring, in terms of fairer and more democratic governance, in enhanced productivity and new services, will themselves be tremendously disruptive, forcing existing democracies into wrenching changes, and threatening the establishment of democracy itself where it is not already firmly rooted. Most of us have believed that the Internet represents a great liberation and one that could bring freedom and reason to the rest of the world. I still want to believe that. But I have these doubts, and I wish that someone would prove me wrong.