THE INTERNET, DEMOCRATISATION AND THE COMMUNICATIONS REVOLUTION

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At present 211 million people in the world are estimated to be active Internet users, whilst 379 million have access to it at home.

It is rapidly expanding beyond its base in the US. According to a report from Computer Economics, by next year a majority of Internet users will be non-native English speakers, and by 2005 that figure will have risen to nearly 60 per cent. Of course, English will still remain by far the most common language spoken by Internet users: 128 million, compared with the 19.7 million who speak Japanese, at present the second most common language.

Moreover this figure is growing almost exponentially. The same source estimates that there will be 345 million users by the year 2005.1 Already, therefore, the Internet has made a dramatic impact upon societies around the world. But still well over three quarters of Internet users live in democracies.

So what impact has the Internet made upon political life, especially in furthering democratisation? What might it do?

**Strong Democracy?**

Already for a while visionaries have used the Internet as a source of inspiration for a possible transformation of democratic politics. Some for instance have highlighted ‘teledemocracy’ as the ideal vehicle for democratic participation in the 21st century.2

Barber has gone further. Already in the 1980s he put the something like the Internet at the heart of his plan for ‘strong democracy’, i.e. a political system akin to the democratic ideal of ancient Athens (without the defects) that would become a 21st century form of rule. What attracted him in particular was the opportunity that an electronic mode of communication offered for direct deliberation of public policy by all citizens. What he also believed, however, was that this new opportunity would give back to people their ‘natural’ interest in politics and their desire to participate in decision-making. So for him the Internet offers the potential to create (or revive) a democratic community that is the foundation of successful democracy.3

However, if this potential is to be realised, he has come to believe, there is a need to provide a public space for debates, free from the commercialism of the sponsors of ISPs, who can, at least in theory, either prevent access for their subscribers to commercial rivals or make it much more difficult.4

**The End of the Nation State – and Democracy?**

Another and potentially much bleaker view is that the Internet will be one of the most potent threats to the survival of the nation state in the 21st century. Some have predicted that this will happen, because of the ability of individuals and organisations to operate more freely across frontiers than ever before. If the state becomes powerless, then the challenge for democracy would be so much greater because it is at present organised on the basis of nation states. If international forces dominate economies and voters in individual countries are left powerless to affect them, then democracy will have to be reconceptualised if it is to have a meaningful future.
The potential impact of the Internet upon democracy therefore will be somewhere along a spectrum that runs from a new golden age of Athenian-style democracy at one end to the emptying of all meaning from politics at the level of the nation state.

In fact, of course, so far the impact of the Internet upon democracy and democratisation has been significant but not apocalyptic. In established democracies, it has made it much easier for new entrants to the political system to make their mark. In the state of Wisconsin in the US, for instance, Jesse Ventura was elected Governor in 1998 as a third party candidate primarily because of his success in using the Internet to mobilise support to overcome the two established parties. He ran his campaign on a shoe-string and yet he succeeded, despite the received wisdom about the need for lots of costly TV and radio advertisements. There is no doubt then that the Internet can both dramatically reduce the costs of campaigning and also enable candidates to target their appeals to specific groups of voters, or even individual voters, more effectively than ever before.

On the other hand, anyone who looked at the Web sites of the two main political parties in the US presidential election last year will have been struck by how glitzy they have become and how they can package new position statements by candidates as news breaks on any kind of issue with a speed that was previously unimaginable. And whatever hopes Barber may entertain about the possible emergence of a new kind of democratic community committed to make ‘strong democracy’ work, is there any sign of that emerging in established democracies? Even if there is still a significant digital divide even in the US, so that it is unreasonable to expect the transformation that the Internet might bring once the overwhelming majority of the population are on-line and comfortable with using the Internet, is there any sign of more people being attracted to political participation?

Of course, it may be that the chief effect of the Internet will be to speed up processes that were already taking place and so the chief impact is upon the pace of events. Bimber, for instance, has written about the ‘accelerated pluralism’ that the Internet can bring. Groups in society that previously struggled to get a hearing in the established media can now set out their stall and win supporters much more freely than ever before. The result will be a much more fluid pattern of interest group politics.

But in any case the chief lesson so far from the impact of the Internet upon democracy is that it is a technology for communication. In itself it is not capable of having any political effect. Its impact depends upon what people choose to do with it. And as they try to do, they assimilate it to their other political experiences and ideas.

However, the chief focus of this paper is not established democracies but new ones and authoritarian regimes. Here too dramatic prophecies have been made about the potential impact of the Internet.

‘The Internet is the censor’s biggest challenge and the tyrant’s worst nightmare... Unbeknown to their governments, people in China, Iraq and Iran, among other countries, are freely communicating with people all over the world (Rolling Stone)...
The Internet is clearly a significant long term strategic threat to authoritarian regimes, one that they will be unable to counter effectively. News from the outside world brought by the Internet into nations subjugated by such regimes will clash with the distorted versions provided by their governments, eroding the credibility of their positions and encouraging unrest. “Personal” contact between people living under such governments and people living in the free world, conducted by e-mail, will also help to achieve a more accurate understanding on both ends and further undermine authoritarian controls. Information about violations of human rights and other forms of oppression will be increasingly conveyed to the outside world by the Internet, helping mobilize external political forces on behalf of the oppressed.6

But what is the actual evidence of the impact?

**Impact on Authoritarian Regimes: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back for the ‘Sinatra’ Approach?**

The first three examples focus on cases where the Internet or new communications technology has provided citizens of individual countries with new means of linking up and organising protests on their own, without much input from the outside world.

**a) Indonesia**

Proponents of the view that the Internet will undermine authoritarian governments can point most persuasively to the events in Indonesia in 1998. The authoritarian regime of General Soeharto had stayed in power for over thirty years by relying upon a combination of brutality, corruption and economic progress. Potential opponents could also remember the bloodbath of 1965-6 when anywhere between 300,000 and 1 million people were killed as alleged supporters of the Indonesian Communist Party. So individuals were discouraged from organising political opposition because of a combination of carrots and sticks.

In the 1990s the Internet had arrived in Indonesia and the government had welcomed it for its business advantages. And although the government censored the press and books (though nowhere like to the same extent as in communist regimes), they had no policy in place to censor the Internet. So they were unprepared for what engulfed them after the Asian financial crisis.

Even before the crisis a number of Web sites had been set up abroad by Indonesians and by foreigners with an interest in the country. These publicised the country, but they also began to run chat rooms where Indonesians could discuss politics in relative anonymity. This remained a fairly minority activity until the financial crisis, not least because of the relatively small number of Indonesians who had access to the Internet. But the Indonesian post office had set up a large number of small Internet connection points and Internet cafes, and people were able to use their Internet connections at work. Those who did have access to the Internet then spread information by word of mouth amongst their acquaintances, thus multiplying the effect. Equally importantly, the Internet provided Indonesians abroad with much more immediate access to what was going on in the country and, when the crisis came, allowed them to make a contribution to debates that was previously denied to them. In practice it was e-mail that was the dominant Internet application.
When the financial crisis struck the region in autumn 1998 Indonesia was initially relatively unscathed, but there was no doubt that the regime would have fundamentally to reform its business sector if it was to restore international credibility. It became apparent that President Soeharto was trying to protect his enormous family interests, whilst passing on the pain of the restructuring to others. By the spring of 1999 public anger over this inequity began to boil over. Although the regime was still willing to use troops and police to intimidate protesters, the Internet became a focus for, first, rumblings of discontent, and then plans of active resistance. The crucial contribution that it made was that it allowed previously scattered individuals, whether at home or abroad, to know that their discontent was shared with others, without them having to go on to the streets to find this out and risk retaliation from the authorities. It provided the focus for better planned and coordinated actions. And later, as the crisis reached its peak, people inside the parliament were using the Internet to communicate directly with the crowds outside over the heads of the soldiers who stood between them.

As the crisis broke, the Indonesian authorities had no pre-prepared plans for censoring the Internet. They had encouraged its use for the benefits that it could bring to business, but they had not thought about how to restrict access to politically critical sites. This was quite different from the measures that the regime had put in place to censor more traditional forms of communication. In a country where infringing the dignity of the President was a criminal offence, expressing strong criticisms on the Web with impunity was a liberating and intoxicating experience.

But insofar as the regime did try to get its act together, it found many of its attempts to silence critics stymied by the use of mirror sites and chat-rooms on servers abroad. None of this was planned or manipulated by foreign governments. However it turned out that Web sites like Apakabar, that was run by John MacDougall, an academic with a professional interest in Indonesia, from Maryland in the US, became important nodes of political debates, because they couldn’t be turned off. And even though the site itself was in the US, almost all of the contributions were in Indonesian, which suggested that few Americans were taking part.

Later, when the crisis peaked, the relative importance of the Internet declined as more direct forms of action and debate became crucial. Now Indonesia has a democracy, at least for the moment. And in that democracy, again for the moment, the fact of Internet-users being relatively few means that its impact fell back as more traditional forms of democratic activity have taken over. Nevertheless there is no doubt that without the Internet the regime of President Soeharto would have been much better able to continue suppressing dissent, as it had been doing successfully for over thirty years prior to that in good years and bad.

b) Philippines
In January 2001 President Estrada of the Philippines was overthrown after a momentous week of mounting popular protest. Technically it was not so much the Internet that contributed to this (although as we shall see it did), but rather another new form of communication – the mobile phone. Nevertheless the methods and implications are rather similar to what happened in Indonesia.
In the week running up to the crisis, President Estrada had been threatened by impeachment by the Senate but he seemed to escape by underhand methods (as it seemed to his opponents). This provoked them into action. Interest swelled. Partly this stimulated Internet interest. On 16 January the on-line *Philippine Inquirer* registered over 5 million hits, as people became exhilarated by the crisis. But rather than use the Internet for communication and organisation, they relied primarily upon their mobile phones and text messages. As of the beginning of this year there were roughly 2.5 million mobile phone users and normally they send up to 50 million text messages per day. In the week of Estrada’s resignation, however, this rose to 80 million. A large proportion of these were just jokes at Estrada’s expense – something that had already become a habit for weeks before. But they also served to organise mass public demonstrations at short notice, so that the authorities could not respond in time, even if they had wanted to.

Here what was crucial was the ability of the protesters to organise at short notice and in overwhelming numbers. It was not even really a triumph of the Internet per se. Rather it was the mobile phone technology that got the better of the authorities, although it is true that the latter were not really prepared for this kind of agitation at all. Compared to the Indonesian experience, there was even less involvement by people outside the country. Since the authorities could not keep track of all the messages, let alone use them to target individual opponents or respond to the challenges, their only option would have been to close down the mobile phone networks. But that would have alienated all the people who needed to use mobile phones for other purposes and it would have intensified the sense of crisis, further undermining the president’s legitimacy.

c) Malaysia

If the two previous examples show the potential of the Internet and/or new communications technologies to challenge authoritarian or illegitimate rulers, their capabilities are not unlimited. The recent experiences of protesters in Malaysia show this.

In 1998 Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed suddenly sacked his deputy and heir apparent, Anwar Ibrahim, making extraordinary accusations of sexual misconduct. Since only months previously he had entrusted the running of the country to Anwar whilst he went on an extended foreign tour, Mahathir’s accusations caused shock and a furore. They provoked a storm of protests, especially when it transpired that Anwar was then beaten up in prison by the head of the police.

Since this story broke at roughly the same time as the crisis in Indonesia, protesters picked up the same slogan ‘*reformasi*’ to demand changes in Malaysia. Until then oppositionists in the country had had little success in winning support. Though the government did not use the same strong-arm tactics as the Indonesian, the Malaysian media had been shy of open criticism of the government, and Prime Minister Mahathir had been tireless in slating opponents.

So Anwar’s supporters took to the Internet, setting up various Web sites to provide a focus for opposition. Again it was the e-mail function that was vital. It allowed critics to reveal their views, sometimes anonymously, and discover how many other people felt like them, without risking police brutality on the streets. They also used
mirror sites abroad to guard against government attempts to shut them down – as it turned out, a valuable precaution. For a while, the tide seemed as irresistible as in Indonesia. Criticisms ranged far and wide. It was not just the Prime Minister who was assailed. There were also demands for more wide-ranging reforms – an end to the corruption that pervaded business and politics. Foreign correspondents speculated on Mahathir’s imminent demise.

Yet the government rode out the storm. It is true that Mahathir is now more isolated. He has also announced that he will stand down before the next elections in 2004 – though no-one is sure that he will actually do this. Nevertheless the ruling UMNO coalition still has a large majority. Anwar’s wife stood for parliament and was elected, but it was a different opposition - the Islamic party PAS - that made most of the gains. However, this only amounted to gaining control of the government of two states out of thirteen in the Malaysian Federation. Equally importantly the oppositionist Web states can still be visited, but they have gone cold from lack of use. They still display material posted in 1989 and 1999, but nothing new has been added.

So the causes of the protests have not gone away. The media and the courts in Malaysia have not become any less subservient. Opposition parties have made gains, but relatively minor ones. The political system is slightly less stable, but not on the verge of collapse.

More work could certainly be done examining how the Malaysian authorities were able to stabilise the situation, but the general conclusion is clear. The Internet in general, and e-mails in particular, can provide powerful alternative channels for lateral communication between citizens. So too can existing mobile phones. People can use them to mobilise protests, even successful ones, take the authorities by surprise. In fast-moving crises the impact can be overwhelming. To use Bimber’s phrase, the ‘pluralism’ can be really ‘accelerated’ in a crisis. It is a modern-day equivalent of the role of rumour in revolutions in earlier ages. Indeed it is more powerful because it allows individuals across a country to act together in real time, whereas previously the effect of rumours was limited to whispering distance. WAP phones will intensify the effect, allowing people to integrate voice and text messages and disseminate messages to mailing lists from the street. But the simple availability of the technology does not guarantee success. And if the regime can withstand the initial onslaught, it may be able to find ways of neutralising the threat – which is why the Malaysian experience is worthy of further analysis.

‘I Get By With a Little Help from my Friends’: China/Tibet, Mexico, Serbia
This section will focus on three examples where the outside world has been far more directly involved in pushing for democratic change within individual countries using the Internet.

a) China and Tibet
Tibetan human rights organisations have been using the Internet for years to try to put pressure on the Chinese authorities to change their policies. This has both coincided with and helped to stimulate an enormous increase in international interest in Tibet in general. According to the Alta Vista data-base there were 39,060 Web pages devoted to Tibet and things Tibetan in February 1997. Now there are 399,777.
Of course Internet access in Tibet itself is extremely limited. The costs are high and there remains a serious problem with illiteracy, though, as in Indonesia, information found on the Web can be spread by word of mouth afterwards. It does provide some additional channels of communication for Tibetans outside the country to contact those inside.

What is most important in this case, however, is the role of the pro-Tibet organisations abroad to use the Internet, such as the World Tibet Network News, the Tibet Information Network, the Voice of Tibet, the Tibet online Resource Gathering group, the International Campaign for Tibet, the International Committee of Lawyers for Tibet, the Committee of 100 For Tibet, the Tibet Fund, not to mention general international human rights organisations such as Amnesty International that have a special interest in Tibetan developments – all of them have their own Web pages and links to others. Partly they also use the Web for contacting people inside Tibet. But more importantly they use it to campaign internationally. This means trying to win more supporters or members. It means trying to put pressure on the authorities in Beijing to change their policies towards Tibet – though so far the chief response from Beijing has been to set up their own Web site putting the positive side. But most important of all it means trying to influence foreign governments and international organisations to give concerns over Tibet, its people and its ecology a prominent place in their policies towards the PRC.

The most striking success came when they orchestrated a campaign to persuade the World Bank not to finance a PRC project to resettle tens of thousands of poor people (most Han Chinese farmers) on land that had been traditionally occupied by Tibetans in Qinghai province. Although the apparent objective of the policy was to reduce rural poverty in a very poor part of China – a natural objective for the World Bank to support – it would also have the effect of squeezing the land of the Tibetans. Without the international campaign, it seems extremely likely that the project would have gone through. As it was, the World Bank halted it pending further investigations, that as of one year ago had not concluded. In the end it may still be approved, so this was only a partial victory, but without the international campaign it would already be in force.

\[9\] b) Mexico

According to Ronfeldt at the Rand Corporation, the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas province of Mexico means that ‘Mexico, the nation that generated the prototype of social revolution of the 20th century, is now the scene of a prototype transnational social netwar of the 21st century.’ Castells called them ‘The First Informational Guerrilla Movement’.

The original uprising, however, was purely an internal affair. A group of mainly Indian peasants became exasperated firstly over being forced into two relocations from traditional lands by the Mexican government, and secondly over falling prices for the coffee beans they grew as the Mexican economy was aligned with international markets. They were angered by the failure of their peaceful protests and simply decided they had had enough. Their protests led to military skirmishes with government forces that led to deaths on both sides. But this uprising would no doubt have been fairly quickly and brutally crushed if the Zapatistas had not managed to publicise their case abroad using the Internet.
No-one, including the Zapatistas themselves, had planned this. They themselves were not computer-literate. Indeed none of the leaders was or is on-line. However, supporters inside Mexico were able to use computers, that had initially been supplied to women’s groups by the Catholic church and the Ford Foundation, so as to spread their message abroad. Once this alternative source of news had been created, it became impossible for the government simply to use whatever force was needed to crush the uprising.

Equally, importantly, however, were the activities of supporters abroad who played an active part in publicising and disseminating the Zapatistas’ message. The best known is the indefatigable Harry Cleaver, a Marxist economist at the University of Texas, Austin, who used his contacts with other left-wing groups around the world to good effect. Not only did he disseminate the views from the Zapatistas but he also collected and disseminated opinions on the movement from wherever he found them. And he linked them to left-wing groups around the world who were challenging the neo-liberal agenda of globalisation. So his own Web site became a vital starting point for anyone who wanted to know more about the Zapatistas. And he made them into a symbol of a global struggle too. He became a one-man news agency in his own right. The significance of this can be seen if we contrast the experience with the Malaysian example earlier, where certainly foreigners were involved in providing mirror sites to allow Malaysian dissidents to keep posting their views, but no-one there played the additional role of disseminating all kinds of information about the protests. As a more recent analysis from the RAND Corporation has concluded, it was the mobilisation of these NGO activities around the issue of the Zapatistas that made them so influential.

Having said all that, what has the movement achieved? Not as much as its leaders would have wished. The uprising is still not over. However, since the end of last year Mexico has its first non-PRI president in Vicente Fox. Although many factors contributed to his victory and defeat for the PRI candidate, the Zapatista rebellion was an important element in the restructuring of Mexican politics and economics that has begun. And one of Fox’s first actions as president was to invite the Zapatista leadership to Mexico City to negotiate an end to the fighting. Though they came and were allowed to address the Mexican parliament, there has as yet been no breakthrough. Nevertheless Mexican politics will never be the same again.

c) Serbia

The third example of the use of the Internet to promote democracy is Serbia, and in particular the experience of B92, the youth radio station that became a crucial element in reporting on developments in Serbia to the outside world and also to Serbs after the collapse of the Former Yugoslavia. We will also look briefly at the way that the Serbian Democratic Party used the Internet to try to get its message across during the conflict in Kosovo.

The significance of B92 is that it continued to report the actions of the Serbian army in Kosovo through using the Internet after the Milosevic regime attempted to close it. This meant that even though very few people in Serbia had access to the Internet themselves, B92 could continue broadcasting even when the government tried to close its transmitters and their message could then be passed on by word of mouth. This
was not a strategy that was planned in advance, any more than the Zapatistas’ was. It evolved as a series of ad hoc responses to crises. And at key moments it involved collaboration with the BBC and Voice of America.

The channel began life as a youth music station in the late 1980s with very little interest in politics. It became more politicised in the 1990s as Yugoslavia itself became polarised and as its listeners became politicised. But an important element in sustaining its listeners was the fact that it continued to play western pop music when others can. The listeners did not begin by listening primarily for political messages, except insofar as they represented the normal protest of a younger generation against its elders in power. However, for the ideologically strait-laced Milosevic regime, these musical tastes were themselves a challenge. So the station was always aware that it might be closed down.

To try to avert this, in the early 1990s they began to think about using the Internet to broadcast music, as in the US. However, at that time there were no ISPs in the country. So they set one up and thereby became useful to companies that wanted cheap and quick communications with the outside world at a time when international trade with Serbia was embargoed. This helped to restrain government measures against them. But the station did try to present accurate news about the fighting that was taking place across the Former Yugoslavia, when the bias of the official media was obvious. They tried to use correspondents from the other side of the lines. And They began to provide useful material for foreign journalists who were having increasing difficulties in seeing things for themselves.

When the conflict began to move to Kosovo, the regime became more sensitive over reports of the slaughter of Albanians and so finally they attempted to close the station transmitters. But now that B92 was on-line, it agreed with the BBC and VOA that it would send its broadcasts abroad to the BBC and VOA, so that they could then be rebroadcast back to Serbia like ordinary material from the BBC and VOA. In fact, the cachet of being associated with these stations now enhanced the reputation of B92. So far from the regime having closed down its opponents, it had ended up by giving them greater credibility. They tried to insist on the station only broadcasting music, but the presenters consistently picked pop records that to a younger generation had a political message but to the army censors meant nothing.

For a few days in April 1999 the regime did actually close the offices of the station, but in the end were forced by silent protests to give way.

So in the end the station was able to survive, albeit it under the ‘new’ name of Free B92.  

As for the Serbian Democratic Party, during the conflict in Kosovo they established a rather sophisticated-looking Web site with material in both English and Serbian. It was not the most important opposition party, but it did try to spread a set of more liberal ideals. This included trying to sustain a more liberal attitude towards the conflict between the Serbs and the Albanians. So they linked up with a Serbian news agency to disseminate within Serbia alternative news to that of the official media on what was happening in Kosovo as a way of establishing its own credibility and
appeal. They also reproduced NATO’s statements on Kosovo in their entirety, again so as to cast doubt on the Serbian official statements.

The key element in this strategy then was the attempt to combine relatively impartial news messages along with the party’s own appeals as a way of trying to transfer credibility from the one to the other.

Now the Serbian Democratic Party seems to have much more limited means. Although its Web site does contain links to a number of news organisations and a number of other political organisations, it no longer feels the need to post messages of simple news as it used to.

**Issues for Possible Discussion**

It is worth at this point stepping back to distinguish between two types of impact of the Internet upon processes of democratisation in authoritarian regimes. On the one hand there are the long-term benefits that may come from being confronted with alternative points of view. These are the sorts of things that the earlier quote from the *Rolling Stone* had in mind: people in closed societies evading censorship, communicating with and learning from others in open ones. In the long term this could encourage tolerance, mutual understanding and democracy, though the Internet is still too recent a phenomenon for evidence to be really available. Cairncross has suggested that the Internet might enable citizens to explore other points of view and therefore make them less susceptible to propaganda from politicians. It might even lead to the emergence of more democratically-minded communities within states – though the evidence from established democracies is not yet especially encouraging in this respect.

In general the aspect of the Internet that most worries some authoritarian regimes seems to be Web sites beyond their control. Singapore, for instance, has deliberately formulated its policy towards the Internet and the licensing of servers so as to control access to the Web in general and prevent it to certain Web sites, chiefly those that are deemed pornographic or politically provocative. This is a strategy that has supposedly influenced mainland China’s policy too, since both Singapore and China want to maximise the commercial benefits of the Internet and so cannot simply ban it, as the government of Myanmar largely does.

On the other hand there are the more immediate effects of the Internet. Primarily these stem from the lower-profile end of the Internet and new communications technologies: e-mail and mobile phones. They involve no foreign Web site designers or owners bent on subversion – as is the suspicion of some governments about the Internet in general. They simply allow people new means of communicating with each other horizontally, without involving government institutions. These forms of communication seemingly get less attention from authorities, except insofar as the hosts of chat rooms may be required to take responsibility so that the views expressed on message boards do not break the law. Reputedly both Singapore and China have already given up serious attempts to control e-mails, although for China at least the enormous growth in e-mail usage is still to come as more and more people get access. Yet as we have seen in the cases of Indonesia and the Philippines, they can actually become very potent facilitators of change in times of crisis, when mobilising and decision-making time is speeded up.
1. **Would distributing mobile phones simply be the best way of spreading democracy?**

Given the ease with which people in Indonesia and the Philippines took to e-mails and mobile phones to spread or strengthen democracy, would mobile phones be the most beneficial assistance that outsiders could give? As the case of the Philippines shows, it is really the numbers of users that are crucial. The Philippines government was not set up to deal with this at all, but probably no government would find it easy to monitor, let alone control, the thoughts of their people when the number of messages runs into tens of millions daily. And not only can this new technology enable citizens to organise themselves for politics, bypassing government if necessary, it also brings a strong sense of individual freedom. Why are trivial text messages so popular among children? People can use them for all sorts of private purposes as well as public ones. In the process they would learn to value the all the benefits of this horizontal communication.

Maybe too it would be a good time to think about this now, given that mobile phone makers now seem to have a lot of spare capacity.

2. **Is there a danger of new technologies enabling mob rule to undermine democracy by bypassing institutions?**

The flip side of the Philippine events is that President Estrada, however unpopular, was pushed aside by constitutionally questionable means. The protesters used mobile phones to build up a momentum of protests that quickly proved unstoppable, so that the armed forces acquiesced in the outcome. To cite Bimber’s phrase again, is the pluralism that it encourages being ‘accelerated’ to a speed that makes institutionalised democratic decision-making more fragile?

In Indonesia, now, a somewhat similar process may be under way. President Wahid has lost most of his popularity in the nearly two years since taking office. The parliament is threatening to impeach him again in August, though the constitutional grounds for doing so are also ambiguous. Some allege that the armed forces high command are not offering him any support because they would like to see Wahid go, thus ending the investigations into corruption under President Soeharto. Once again the political web sites and chat rooms in Indonesia are humming with debate and groups are regularly taking to the streets.

3. **We’re all journalists now – so whom can we believe, especially in a crisis?**

Now anyone with access to the Internet can become a journalist, even a small news agency – viz the achievements of Harry Cleaver over Chiapas. Enthusiasts for the role of the Internet in politics have emphasised in the past the low entry cost for Internet campaigns. What has attracted less attention is the fact that the same applies to journalism. This has enabled Tehelka.com to be set up as an Internet-based news agency in India because, according to them, every up till then every senior Indian journalist and every publication could be identified with a political party or a business house. But any individual with an idea or even a suspicion that they want to share with lots of people can now do so.
This new openness can bring benefits. The recent Tehelka affair in India, which revealed widespread political corruption over defence contracts, shows what can be achieved. It led to the resignation of the Defence Minister.

Use of the Web to expose corruption, whether in business or in politics, is spreading rapidly. Tehelka have set up a special section on their Web site devoted to investigative stories. In the Philippines a new Web site – tag.org.ph - has been created by a group of organisations committed to transparent accountable government (TAG). In Japan a citizens’ group has set up a site to focus on politicians’ corruption and this has now been imitated in S.Korea.

Few, however, have had the normal journalists’ training in checking sources and requiring at least two independent ones before going ‘public’. The threat of libel proceedings is nowhere as great for individuals posting information on the Internet as it is for journalists working for newspapers or broadcasting stations with assets that can be fined if stories are found to be deliberately and wilfully damaging. Does the Internet give a spurious credibility to the malicious gossip-monger? Can this be resisted?

How can readers have confidence in the veracity of the information presented? How reliable are the sources? What do we know about the people and/or organisations behind these Web sites? Already people have used ‘exposure’ via the Internet as a way of settling old scores. Sometimes this has been written for no other reason than that the writer felt like it. Yet it has led to serious commercial or political damage to their targets.

Under normal circumstances this problem is not very different from those confronting traditional journalistic exposés. If there is inaccurate information, time should bring out corrections.

But in political crises, such as the recent ones in Indonesia and the Philippines, the new technology has enabled mobile phone users to mobilise and bring down governments quickly. Partly this was done by ‘exposing’ the corruption of rulers in power. But how could anyone know whether these allegations were true?

More worryingly, the Internet provides opportunities for fringe groups who want to undermine democracy to organise and propagandise with relative freedom and sometimes in relative secrecy, using sites to which only the initiated with passwords have access. Neo-Nazi groups for instance took to the Internet early to mobilise support.16 So too have the right-wing militias in the US.

4. Is there a need to increase the public space on the Internet for verifying news, enabling democratic debate and defending liberal values?
Can anything be done about this? Do we simply rely upon competition in the hunt for news here too to bring out the ‘truth’ later as a corrective?

Or should we try to build up the image of established news agencies or public broadcasting corporations as authoritative sources of information to whom people should instinctively turn in a crisis to check stories for confirmation? Under those conditions, a reputation for objectivity and fairness can be crucial and powerful,
because it saves so much time. It is vital that such organisations report and respond to
breaking stories 24 hours per day. For some, this already means: check CNN/the
BBC to see what they say. Is this enough? If not, is this just a marketing ploy that
news agencies themselves should make - to brand their objectivity more strongly and
market it more widely - or should something else be done?

And is the multiplication of commercial sites drowning out the possibilities for
democratic debate and deliberation, even in established democracies such as the
US?17

5. To whom can news organisations or democratic parties in authoritarian
regimes turn if their Web sites are threatened with closure?
The story of B92 in Serbia shows the importance of the Internet in helping the station
to withstand attempts of the authorities to shut them down. This was done on an ad
hoc basis, requiring the collaboration in particular of the BBC World Service and
VOA. It did help to keep alternative views of politics and democratic ideals alive
even at the height of the conflict with NATO.

But the success depended upon the world services of the BBC and VOA being
available to collaborate in reporting on developments in Serbia. For them the
connection with B92 offered the opportunity for reporting from within the country,
which would otherwise have been almost impossible. But it also depended upon the
services having spare capacity that could respond at short notice. The experience of
the opposition in Malaysia is that it needs active collaboration if it is to be effective.
Merely offering a mirror site is not enough.

6. Democratic ‘Net Wars’: Are We Ready?
In the past few years there have been a number of instances of ‘Net Wars’ between
Internet users and hackers in two or more countries. The Rand Corporation has been
devoting attention to this phenomenon since they see it as a growing threat for the
future.18 So far the ‘wars’ have been largely over foreign affairs, e.g. the aftermath of
the American spy plane incident in China, disputes between the PRC and Taiwan,
NATO intervention in Kosovo.

It is possible, however, to imagine future disputes between democratic groups and
authoritarian regimes turning into net wars, with authoritarian governments trying to
wipe out or immobilise the sites of democratic oppositions, those who support them
abroad and news organisations that report it. What if the Chinese authorities became
exasperated with the Web activities of the pro-Tibet groups? Should precautions be
taken against this? Can they? Are there things that democratic organisations should
refrain from doing in such ‘wars’?

NOTES

1 Figures can be found at http://cyberatlas.internet.com/big_picture/
2 Ted Becker and Chrysta Daryl Slaton, The Future of Teledemocracy (Westport, Ct:
Praeger, 2000)
5 Bruce Bimber, ‘The Internet and Political Transformation: Populism, Community and Accelerated Pluralism’ (*Polity* XXXI, no.1, pp.133-160), also at www.polsci.ucsb.edu/faculty/bimber/research/transformation.html
6 From a 1995 Pentagon report on the impact of the Internet, reproduced at www.fas.org/cp/swett.html
8 See for instance (i) http://memers.tripod.com/Anwar-Online/main.htm (ii) www.geocities.com/Tokyo/Flats/3797/berita.htm (iii) http://members.xoom.com/Gerakan A fairly full index of such sites can be found at http://members.tripod.com/-REFORMASI_MALAYSIA/resources.htm
11 See, for example, his recent 37-page account of the significance of the movement whilst polemicising with a journalist who he regarded as having misrepresented it at: www.eco.utexas.edu/homepages/faculty/Cleaver/anti-hellman.html
13 For a history of the radio station, see Matthew Collin, *This Is Serbia Calling* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2001); for the struggle to overcome censorship and control, see the fascinating account by the station editor, Veran Matic, at www.nyu.edu/globalbeat/balkan/Matic0299.html
17 This is the argument in Noveck, ‘Paradoxical Partners’, op.cit.
18 See, for example, Ronfeldt et al, *The Zapatista ‘Social Netwar’ in Mexico*, op.cit.