

INTERNATIONAL IDEA

Are the New Media Good for Democracy?

MEDIA ROUND TABLE REPORT

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Introduction

THIS REPORT IS THE OUTCOME OF A MEDIA ROUND TABLE convened in conjunction with International IDEA's Democracy Forum 2001, 'Democracy and the Information Revolution: Values, Opportunities and Threats' held in Stockholm on 27-29 June 2001. The Round Table, which brought together a small group of senior international journalists and media representatives, was intended as an opportunity to reflect on the challenges of the ICT revolution to the media, both traditional and more recently established. This in turn was intended to be a contribution, from a professional media point of view, to the broader discussion of the Information Revolution's impact on democratic practice in focus at this year's Democracy Forum.

PARTICULAR THANKS ARE DUE TO THE FOLLOWING: *Dagens Nyheter* and its Political Editor Niklas Ekdal, for graciously co-sponsoring and hosting the Round Table event at the paper's Stockholm headquarters; and the *Financial Times* for co-hosting the meeting, in particular its Foreign Editor William Dawkins for advice on the design of the programme, as well as finding the time to come and moderate the actual discussions.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'KLS' with a stylized flourish at the end.

KARIN-LIS SVARRE
DIRECTOR OF INFORMATION, INTERNATIONAL IDEA
NOVEMBER 2001

The Impact of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) on the Media

Danny Schechter

(*Mediachannel.org*)

KEYNOTE SPEAKER



A transformation of the media is underway, driven in part by globalization, in part by the application of ICTs such as the Internet. The result is an unprecedented level of media consolidation and concentration, in which power over media investments and decisions are increasingly in the hands of fewer and fewer companies. For example, whereas 10 years ago 50 companies were said to dominate the US media, today 6 companies occupy a leading, and global, media position – one, moreover, in which they are interlocked, through strategic alliances and relationships, in a web of influence where reporting news is no longer always the first priority: making news and selling media-related products has become more important.

The result is an overall undermining of the media's role as an independent 'watchdog' force, with sections of the media increasingly integrated into a system of business that influences what does and does not get reported on. In addition, in many instances entertainment values are increasingly steering actual news content, and market-driven values, not journalistic needs, assuming a dominant role.

New technologies now widely available – for example, low cost cameras, audio and video editing equipment, computer-based publishing systems – have created new media openings and opportunities. In countries where governments try to manage or control the media, independent websites have become the voice of honest, uncensored, news and information. Recent or current cases in point include Malaysia-kini.com in Malaysia, the B-92 station in Serbia and Falun Gong websites both inside and outside China.

Simultaneously with this technology-driven democratization of the means of media production, media distribution is increasingly controlled by narrower forces. For example, a recent study showed that four dominant Internet Service Providers (ISPs) have become the choke points of distribution in terms of Internet content. This is potentially very threatening, particularly as AOL and other major ISPs become a world unto themselves in which while access to the wider net is possible, in practice many people stay within their own very commercialized playgrounds. While overall Internet use is increasing there is a real danger of homogenization on the web and its domination by entertainment values and a lack of diversity of expression.

It is becoming increasingly difficult for independent producers to finance and dis-

tribute more challenging or critical programming. Among US broadcasters, the NFU – ‘Not For Us’ – approach to, for example, films about human rights and issues of democracy is widespread, and it is increasingly difficult to get a work on air that raises critical issues.

In tandem with globalization’s unifying effects, moreover, there is a threat posed by the diminishing availability of global news and information. In the USA in recent years there has been 50 per cent or more cutback in news from the rest of the world – and the same phenomenon is in evidence in Europe, albeit to a lesser extent. What is important is thus often missing from our media outlets, which are still consumed by trivialization of the world. Thus the challenge – and opportunity – we face today as journalists with values and concerns about human rights and democracy, lies in recognizing that ICTs provide us with new ways of connecting with and through each other.

In particular, there is a critical need for us to provide stories with diverse, bottom-up perspectives from the rest of the world, and informed by independent analysis – in other words, the ones that otherwise get left out. Unpacking and countering stereotyped images of protestors is a good case in point. Why do protestors and critics who are actually speaking for large groups of constituencies of concerned people – for example at the recent EU summit in Gothenburg – tend to be marginalized, stereotyped and demonized in the media? Even when there are credible reports about who these people actually are and what they think, these tend not to find their way into our newspapers and magazines.

William Dawkins
(*Financial Times*)



How do individuals use the Internet to limit the diversity of news that they receive, by virtue of the fact that when you’re on the web you choose what you look at?

Danny Schechter

There is a general tendency for people to seek out news sources that confirm their own opinions or their own views of the world, and this is also true on the Internet to some degree. There is increasing availability of news, but people often confuse the presence of choice with the presence of voice – we can have a lot of channels, but very few voices in reality.

James Ledbetter
(*Industry Standard Europe*)



A background paper to this meeting asks: ‘Is the multiplication of commercial [Web] sites drowning out the possibilities for democratic debate and deliberation, even in established democracies such as the USA?’ This echoes the dominant view of the Internet circa 1994–95. The vision was that the World Wide Web would let a thousand voices bloom, that it would make a publisher out of any individual who wanted to be one. The proliferation of these new information sources would, it was argued, threaten the established media order, which has been dominated by television, radio and

“Internet media is, by and large, an adjunct of traditional media, not an alternative to it”

print. Six years on, precisely the opposite has occurred. Internet media is, by and large, an adjunct of traditional media, not an alternative to it. In the USA, for example, Internet-only publications that are independent of larger media organizations, such as Salon and TheStreet.com, are foundering. When people go to the Internet for news and information, what they are looking at primarily are the websites of already existing media organizations.

The Internet has experienced one of the most rapid corporate takeovers in the history of modern media. There are many ways of illustrating this fact. For example, according to the web measurement firm Media Metrix, in March 2001 Americans spent a total of 107 billion minutes online: 50 per cent of those minutes – 50 billion of them – were spent on websites controlled by just four companies.

Who are those companies? AOL/Time Warner, the world's largest media company; Microsoft, hardly a tiny individual publisher; Yahoo, which is independently owned (although for how much longer is questionable); and Napster, now partly owned by Bertelsmann, the large German-based media conglomerate.

So quite contrary to expectation, what we see on the web is increasingly an extension of an already existing media order, not a threat to it. Why has this corporate takeover happened? I would focus on three related reasons:

- *Running a website is expensive.* The notion of low cost entry to the Web has been vastly overstated: on the contrary,

anyone involved in running a website will attest that it is a very complicated and expensive ongoing venture. It is expensive to maintain servers and email lists, expensive to design and change web pages.

- *Outside of pornography, there is no self-sustaining business model for publishing on the Internet.* Everyone (except the *Wall Street Journal*) who has tried to get readers to pay for web content has failed, and abandoned that model. The only other way to make money is through advertising, which raises two problems: first, it recreates all the pressures and limitations of traditional, commercially-supported media; second, in order to attract advertisers you have got to build a large audience, which is very expensive.

- *The web is like a television with an infinite number of channels.* Its audience is intrinsically fragmented, and its content intrinsically expandable. That means that in order to attract and retain a significant number of readers, a tremendous amount has to be spent on advertising, marketing and integration with the offline world. And in the long run, the only people with deep enough pockets to afford that are the traditional media companies.

We are thus confronted with a fundamental paradox. The very strengths of the Internet – the fact that it can be accessed for free, that it is ungoverned, and has no limitation on the amount that can be published – also make it extremely vulnerable to domination by commercial media. And I submit that commercial media has only a passing, and usually tangential interest in democracy.

Democratization: the Role and Impact of the ICT

Peter Ferdinand

(Warwick University, UK)



I am interested in ICTs primarily for their potential impact upon political institutions. The most important thing about democracies are the institutions that are in place to ensure some continuity and predictability in decision-making in public life. And I emphasize that because I want to look at problems which the new communications technologies might be said to pose for political democratic institutions.

In my paper¹ I make a simple distinction between what one might describe as the long- and short-term effects of new technologies upon institutions. Most of the literature that deals with the impact of the Internet on democracy has tended to focus upon what might be described as the long-term consequences: the ways in which the Internet might facilitate greater political participation by reducing the costs of entry, making it easier for new political parties to be created and enter onto the political scene. We've already seen this happen in the USA and in other parts of the world. And as some of its enthusiastic advocates have pointed out, in the longer term the Internet might lead to a more informed political debate generally, as it opens up access to information from sources around

the world. Particularly in authoritarian regimes, people may find that they are able to challenge decisions, corrupt practices and undemocratic attitudes more easily. The Internet may give them both the ammunition to attack these practices and the means to mobilize against them.

In these senses it is quite possible to think of the Internet being a positive force for democratization, and some of the examples cited in the paper show how at least some authoritarian regimes have found it difficult to cope with these kinds of challenges. Indonesia, above all, and to some extent Mexico, which found itself confronted by the challenge of the Chiapas movement. And there is no doubt that the Indian political system has been changed by the major recent corruption scandal that only came out because of an Internet-based news agency.

In China, too, when Prime Minister Zhu Rongji actually apologizes for the government having initially misled people about the causes of an accident in a school in Southern China, that, in domestic political terms, is a big change. It doesn't mean to say that China is immediately made much more democratic, and certainly not that the administration is made more transparent, but things will never be quite the same again.

¹ Full text of the paper at: http://www.idea.int/2001_forum/media/mrt_papers/peter_ferdinand.htm

So one can view the Internet as providing opportunities for long-term changes in political behaviour and attitudes, and in one sense I think that is probably irreversible. The process and speed of change may of course vary from one country to another, and it will be affected by all the sorts of issues about, for example, access to the Internet. But it is going to make a big change to the way in which politics everywhere is conceived in future, not least because it is the younger generations who are most adept at using the new technology, and they are the ones who are going to bring about the changes.

So one of the things we need to think about, and that International IDEA should encourage, is reflection on the way in which one can help to build trust in the Internet – in the information that is found there, in the public spaces that exist there – because that is going to be the language and discourse of politics in the future. At the moment there is a certain amount of unrealistic belief in the accuracy of everything that can be found there, yet we know that it is actually quite easy for hackers to change or corrupt information on a website.

We have to find ways to encourage the use of the Internet for the kind of open-minded liberal debates about political issues that

“We have to encourage the use of the Internet for the kind of open-minded liberal debates that are important for democracies”

we think are important for democracies in the future. This is because people can use the new communications technologies to mobilize opinion against authorities, whether democratic or undemocratic, very quickly, and quite conceivably to allow or to create waves of opposition to grow up in ways that any government would find extremely difficult to control, let alone prevent. An example is what happened earlier this year in the Philippines, where suddenly – not the Internet as such, actually text messaging (SMS) – proved to be an irresistible tide for overthrowing President Estrada.

Now I don't want to defend Estrada. But if that can happen to him it can happen to others as well – new technologies being used to effectively ambush institutions. So I hope that organizations like International IDEA will encourage the use of the new technologies to try to support democratic change in authoritarian regimes, and at the same time, promote wariness about at least some of the damaging ways in which these technologies can be used. In other words I am appealing for, on the one hand, a willing acceptance of the use of new technologies in trying to bring about democratic change; and on the other, for us to bear in mind that the long-term goal is not just to enable people to use technologies more openly, but to create democracies where institutions are the basis of political systems. Institutions, moreover, that are not simply swept away in tides of public protest mobilized by minority sectors of the population, however large or small.

Hermann Tertsch

(El Pais, Spain)

How can we create confidence in the Internet: real confidence, not the kind of unrealistic belief that takes no account of the enormous potential for content manipulation or the real possibilities for governments to select and censor content, as in for example China?



Peter Ferdinand

Clearly, simply trying to ban certain content is not going to work, because although there may be an increasing concentration of website ownership, in practice people can always say things on the Internet and to some extent get away with it. What you can try to do is to create institutions – possibly websites backed by institutions – which have a reputation for objectivity.

Serbia, for example, when the Milosevic era government banned the B92 radio station, it was able to survive because it associated itself with international news organizations that already had a kind of credibility, such as the BBC and Voice of America. And the paradoxical effect of that was to make B92's coverage – which was then beamed back into Serbia from the outside – more credible than it had been before.

One could think of trying to build up some websites as having a reputation for objectivity, for being public spaces that were not dominated by commercial considerations or the small number of existing news organizations. In a way, the sort of thing that Danny Schechter is trying to do as well, to enable widespread access with a reputation for credibility attached to the information available.

Per Egil Hegge

(Aftenposten, Norway)

Content is also fairly important. It is important to remember a bit of history, because overturning authoritarian regimes did not start with the Internet and Indonesia: it started possibly with Lenin smuggling Iskra into Russia a century ago. It continued with Ayatollah Khomeini's supporters smuggling audiocassettes into mosques in Iran, thereby laying the ground for the revolution of 1978. The point about the Internet is possibly that you reach critical mass much faster. And the overflow may be difficult to cope with.



Jonathan Steele

(The Guardian, UK)

There is a danger to seeing the Internet as changing more things than is really the case. The demonstrations in Iran, or 10 years later the whole people's power movement in Eastern Europe – these were large groups of demonstrators, most of us applauded their presence, and they didn't need the Internet to get out onto the street. The point is surely that people only come out onto the street when the level of grievance in a society reaches a point that rouses them to do so. The fact that then they use a particular technology to communicate with others is a subsidiary issue, and I don't think we should confuse the technology that allows people to demonstrate with the big issues.



“Every state has to be responsive to its citizens, and that is the reason the Internet is becoming so important”

Second, I think there was a sort of fear of the mob implicit in Peter Ferdinand's presentation, which could be a very antidemocratic attitude. People don't come out in the streets every afternoon: they only come out for particular reasons. And that should be a signal, a kind of wake-up call to the authorities in any society, whether they are established democracies or authoritarian. Where the Internet is becoming subversive is over the question of responsiveness. Every state has to be responsive to its citizens, and that is the reason the Internet is now so important. It gives people a voice in a much more organized and rapidly assemblable way. The issue is to deal with that voice and listen to it, interact and have dialogue with it, rather than getting excited about why people are demonstrating in any particular way.

James Ledbetter

Technology has been a part of every major political movement and it would be a mistake to think the technology is the cause of the political movement. However, it is important to isolate what makes the Internet different from some earlier communication methods. One is that it is intrinsically global. That was not true of a cassette tape in Iran: as soon as a website is up in Ghana it can be read in China and vice versa. Second, it is a many-to-many communication medium. If run properly, people from all over the place can communicate with people from all over the place, which is not true of telephones, radio or television. These are fundamental differences that I think we would be wrong to ignore.

Debate: Is the Internet Good for Democracy?

David Manasian

(*The Economist*)²



I've agreed to play the pessimist, take a look into the future and make some wild guesses about some of the problems that wider access to the Internet and information technologies in general might throw up. And I am going to paint a rather dark vision. I hope doing that will be useful in terms of stimulating some thought.

We know from the history of new medias

that they have been enormously disruptive, both for good and for ill. This goes all the way back to the printing press, which launched the Renaissance in Europe – as well as the Reformation and centuries of religious warfare. The same could be said about radio, cinema and television: all these media brought great benefits and pleasures to millions of people. But they were also quickly seized upon by propagandists for vile regimes who used them to promote racist, imperialist and utopian fantasies that led to two world wars and countless other conflicts.

² Based on a written presentation titled 'ICTs and Democracy: Good Grounds For Pessimism?' available at http://www.idea.int/2001_forum/media/mrt_papers/david_manasian.htm

The telegraph was really the 19th century Victorian version of the Internet: there are very strong parallels. Tom Standage, a colleague of mine at *The Economist* has written a very interesting book called *The Victorian Internet*. Just like today's Internet the electric telegraph was first introduced by the military; it resulted in a huge number of new companies, an investment boom, and then an investment crash; it brought up a lot of the same concerns about privacy; and a lot of the same utopian excitement that we've seen with the Internet. And there was great belief at the time that the telegraph was introduced – as there was initially with the Internet – that it was going to bring about greater understanding and world peace. As we know, however, it did not bring about world peace.

I would like to assume that the Internet is going to be everywhere in some form or other – as eventually are information gathering technologies and the tools for analysing this information, transmitting much bigger amounts of it and monitoring people. When this will happen, its pace and spread are of course unknowns and as such wide open for debate. But we know a lot of these technologies are already available and simply haven't yet been commercialized or applied, and that a lot of others are just beyond the horizon. So here is a series of pretty wild predictions: see what you make of them.

“Once the Internet becomes ubiquitous it will quickly begin to undermine many of the assumptions behind representative democracy”

The Internet is going to have a profound effect on democracies, starting with established ones. At a basic level, once the Internet becomes ubiquitous I believe that it will quickly begin to undermine many of the assumptions behind representative democracy. There have been many rationales for representative rather than direct democracy. Two practical considerations, however, have mattered most. First, ordinary citizens simply do not have the time to analyse all the complex issues that need to be legislated in modern societies. Second, the sheer physical obstacles to large numbers of people voting frequently or participating in debates made their direct involvement in policy-making impossible.

Both obstacles will be drastically reduced by the Internet, particularly when it becomes universally accessible, as it will in rich countries, perhaps within 5–10 years. 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, and the growth in the number of single-issue pressure groups, has already laid the groundwork for this. The steady decline in voter turnouts at elections, especially in rich countries, 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, often behind closed doors, between politicians and professional lobbyists of one sort or another.

Nevertheless, any moves in the direction of direct democracy are likely to be highly contentious and a threat to the political elites who currently run things. Huge debates will occur as government structures are challenged and then overhauled, and as professional journalists become threatened by the fact that a lot more people are going to be able to express their views directly to others. Many, of course, will not become involved in this widening debate. But those who do become involved – usually on particular issues – will want to be more involved than ever, and they will want not just to express their opinions, but to have a say in decisions as well.

Established democracies should be able to weather these disruptions and disagreements. But what about new democracies? 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. More direct forms of democracy will be more fractious, more volatile, rowdier. Wealthy countries can afford to embrace them, nevertheless, and I believe in the long-term they will benefit 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, there has been a genuine cyber component to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. All sides have been able to express their views to an audience that is, at least potentially, global. But it is hard to believe that this has really done much to promote peace in the region, or to build a consensus on either side of the conflict, except one for yet more conflict. 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.

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 started on this front. On one side are technologies that allow ever more accurate tracking of what individuals do over the Internet, or, for that matter, in real time and space. Video technology is going to become incredibly cheap: anyone in rich countries, but even a lot of developing countries, will be able to afford to buy and place cameras around, record what's going on, analyse what they're recording. On the other hand there are new technologies to evade what many are already describing as the 'surveillance society'.

“The battle between privacy and surveillance is very lop-sided: it seems certain that one side – that of surveillance – will win”

But this battle between privacy and surveillance is very lop-sided and it seems to me certain that one side – that of surveillance –

will win. That is 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 indifferent – or only intermittently attentive – public. Arrayed against them are almost all commercial interests in the world and the police of every single nation.

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. All of this is just beginning. The technology already exists to track mobile-phone users. As for the police, they have legitimate law-enforcement concerns, and the benefits that they can actually plausibly offer by employing this technology are enormous in terms of genuine crime prevention. When these arguments come to the fore they are going to weigh very heavily with the public: and the public is often going to say, “Yes, I do want that. We want a safer society”. And because this battle will be so lopsided, I think, eventually, surveillance will prevail against privacy worries. If the citizens of rich countries will regret the loss of privacy, for people in poor and

“The same technology that will provide a cornucopia of new services in rich democracies will also be a godsend to authoritarians determined to repress or control their populations”

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, it will 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. 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 purposes of social control.

Cyber-terrorism is something that does seem a real threat. 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. These more lurid worries, however, are not the real danger. I am presenting an even more pessimistic view. The very benefits that the Internet will bring, in terms of fairer and more democratic governance, 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

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.

Jonathan Steele

David talked about how direct democracy will be a threat to politicians, because of demands being put to referenda, forum groups becoming more powerful, and so on. I think this will be a threat to authoritarian politicians, not to all politicians. Some are willing to be more open and attentive to the electorate, more willing to

“Direct democracy will be a threat to authoritarian politicians, not to all politicians”

hear their views and not just speak from platforms, and the Internet will make this interactive democracy much more possible.

Through websites you will be able to know exactly what politicians think on different issues. When election time comes, at the moment we get an election address from the candidate but almost no feedback because public meetings have stopped: there is no chance to actually talk.

But if it eventually becomes the norm that you can demand answers to candidates on very specific issues, you can really tabulate some idea of what kind of person they will be before they get into the parliamentary party lobbies. This will make it much more useful and maybe revive some of the interest in democracy that you correctly pointed out is waning. The issue is not a stark choice between representative democracy as we have

now and some kind of direct democracy where everything is put out to referenda. It is a way of making representative democracy more representative by giving voters more

“If the Internet can make politics more issue- than ideology-oriented it will be a great step forward”

access to the decision-makers, by really asking them some questions and doing a little bit of ‘naming and shaming’ on websites for politicians who vote in peculiar ways.

This will be even more important in the transition countries – Russia, Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans and so on – because over the last ten years you have had a kind of motherhood and apple pie politics where every politician says “I’m for pluralism, the market economy, integration into Europe”, and that is about the end of their platform. Do they want more money to go on joining NATO or into schools? These kind of questions are never really asked in Central and Eastern European politics. So if the Internet can make politics more issue- than ideology-oriented it will be a great step forward.

One of the threats in all our countries is the personalization of politics, with elections becoming a beauty contest between candidates. If we can get away from this trend by asking candidates about issues in much more detail through the Internet that would be very useful, particularly in Balkan countries, for example, where ‘strong man’ politics is still very dominant.

David argues that established democracies should be able to weather a much more fractious volatile, rowdy politics than the newer democracies. I think that is a misreading of history. History is about a constant political business cycle, if you like, between turbulence and stability.

In the established democracies we have had civil war, land occupations, riots, general strikes, mass street protest and so on, and now we are in a period of stability. So it is quite false to assume that established democracies have always been stable. It is only through politics becoming more rowdy, fractious and volatile that we reach the healthy stability of public debate, compromise and forming temporary coalitions about new issues that moves questions forward. It is completely false to say that it is a danger if politics becomes more fractious and volatile.

Another major flaw is to blame the Internet for things it is unrealistic to expect it to do. Why should the Internet be expected to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? No one has managed to solve it so far. Of course people are putting up hate messages, of course Israelis look at Israeli websites, Palestinians and other Arabs look at Palestinian websites: but that is not the fault of the Internet.

I get constant emails from people complaining about my coverage of the Balkans: Macedonians saying “Why are you so pro-Albanian?”, Albanians saying “Why are you so pro-Macedonian?”, and I find I have two ways of dealing with them. One is to try and go over the points raised on their own merits and give an alternative perspective

on their complaints. Or I find I turn into a kind of ‘agony aunt’. I say: “Don’t trust your own website, or this Albanian website. Are you sure they’re right? Journalism is about judgement. Be sceptical. Don’t always take things at face value. You don’t take what I’m saying at face value: why do you do so with that particular website?”

You have to involve people not just on the facts that they bring up, but on the whole methodology. What is journalism about? What is news about? What are the sources? How do you check it out? Think of it in a more sceptical way. Basically the Internet is a neutral technology – you use it for good or for ill, like any other technology.

David did touch on the role of business briefly. But the main thrust of his paper took it for granted that political power rests in the hands of governments. I think this assumption is much more open to question now than at any time since the formation of modern nation-states. One of the major problems today is the growing power of business, particularly transnational corporations, and the Internet has terrific potential for challenging and mobilizing people against their might.

Internet is a fantastic mobilizing tool because of its ability to network horizontally rather than in the vertical way that we are normally told to look at authority. North-South links, for example, have been made much stronger as a result of the Internet, and things like the Seattle protests have got going. This is also very important in authoritarian states – Russia after communism or indeed most Central European states – where the old idea was that they

were collectives, unlike Western societies that were collections of individuals.

I think we see now that they were not collective societies: they were totally atomized societies where each individual person was a tiny atom – Stalin called them a cog in the vast machine. And if this kind of atomization can be broken down because people start making horizontal links through the Internet, it is only to the good.

We talk about the international community, but what actually is it? A series of elite organizations, mostly western, who are in a sense setting the agenda for the rest of the world. The real international community will come about through this horizontal networking, and the Internet is the best tool that's emerged to get that going.

David Manasian

I work at a commercial website, and I hear from experts about the technology they are just getting their hands on and that will become available soon after refining. Essentially, the Internet exploded and governments and companies were caught completely off guard, so the technologies for monitoring behaviour on the Internet and collecting data about what people were doing was way behind. It is starting to catch up now, so a lot of these technologies are just becoming available. They are probably more widely disseminated than you realize – just not being used for any kind of evil purposes, so they haven't alarmed anybody yet.

Location technology is already available. We have had a very celebrated case with a French court banning a Yahoo site because

they had Nazi memorabilia on it, which was against French law. It wasn't against US law though, which is where Yahoo is based. The court asked a panel of experts to take a look at whether Yahoo could block French surfers from access to their website in the USA. And the panel of experts, some of whom were people who had founded the Internet, said that you can do that now with about 70 per cent certainty (and soon it will be 100 per cent). You will be able to tell where people are. And what the commercial organizations really want is to be able to tell who you are, exactly who it is visiting each page.

So there is big interest in developing this technology, and now that it has started to develop it is going to develop very rapidly, because in terms of commerce and law enforcement, all the benefits are on that side. Just having millions of anonymous people hit your website isn't a business model: companies have got to figure out other ways to figure out who is doing what.

Q: How is the Internet affecting traditional media outlets?

David Manasian

It has already affected traditional media in lots of ways. Some traditional media – US news magazines, for example – have virtually abandoned hard news, because of the dominance of television. The future is a big question mark. All the people running mainstream news organizations, especially the commercial ones that have to make a living, are struggling. They invested so heavily in the first few years of the Internet because they were afraid it was going to cannibalize print and broadcast, change

people's behaviour dramatically. It hasn't, so far. But there is still a lot yet to come, no one knows the answer, and a lot of people have lost enormous amounts of money trying to anticipate what the next effect is going to be.

Jonathan Steele

I want to give two examples of how the Internet affects me personally. I use websites as a tremendous reference source that you never had before – government sources from different countries, NGOs and so on. Where it affects me potentially negatively is that because the web is a 24-hour operation – which as a newspaper we're not – I now find that if I go to Macedonia I'm asked to

do an audio piece for the website. The next stage is that they'll give me a little digital camera and I'll hold it there, filming myself.

In other words I am becoming multimedia. That is good in one sense but it's taking up a lot of time. We already see how 24-hour news broadcasters very often spend the whole time doing their stand-up. They never have the time in the 55 minutes between that and the next stand-up to actually do any reporting. If we are all going to become like that because of the pressure of the web and management wanting to keep costs down, when are we actually going to do any reporting?

New Media – New Networks

Nik Gowing

(BBC World Service TV)



Democracy has never been perfect, but there is a danger of assuming that there is an over-perfection in democracy. I think we are facing something that one could loosely define as a gradual decline in the integrity of democracy, accompanied by a niching of politics and democracy generally. What do I mean by this?

In the UK we've just had the most extensive reporting of a general election where everyone knew who was going to win: fatter newspapers, and 24-hour news channels that became essentially election channels. But as those who produce newspapers and make television programs will tell you,

the ratings by and large became softer, which is code for lower. The crunch problem we're all facing is that you cannot force people to read and to watch, and that is where we have got a real contradiction. Essentially there is a greater and growing disinterest in politics, because politicians are not delivering. Turnout in the UK election just a month ago was down from 71 per cent four years ago to barely 57 per cent.

“Internet exchanges are now facilitating a degree of scepticism about politics”

I would suggest that Internet exchanges are now facilitating a degree of scepticism about politics. They will gradually fracture

and reduce the integrity of democracy – not next year, or the year after, but over the coming decades. What we're seeing is less faith in politicians as a whole: they are becoming 'NFU' – 'not for us', to use Danny Schechter's phrase. That is increasingly the view of a large number of people, however much we report what is going on among the political elite.

Part of the problem is that there is a middle ground that is virtually getting unreported – witness the alternative social summit held in Brazil at the same time as the Davos meetings in January 2001. The big issue happens to be globalization, but there are more people out there who are feeling disenfranchised, and that means disenfranchised from the political system. I think our responsibility is to try much harder to highlight this middle ground, which even when it's reported on is not being picked up.

What we're seeing in the anti-globalization movement is emblematic of new networks being created and facilitated by the Internet, but also by mobile telephones and the SMS text message system. This is the next stage of the Internet – the mobile Internet, and it means now, in your pocket, being able to organize, arrange and create new networks, and to do it massively fast. That is what the Prague, Seattle and Melbourne protests have been about. These networks are organized, often well in advance, using the mobile phone system to outsmart those in power very quickly on the ground.

I am not surprised that CBS has lost 2 million viewers: we are all facing the problem

“We are seeing a fragmenting of the ways that people get information: this has become an opportunity for creating new, loose networks”

of reduction of market share, the BBC included. What we are seeing with the reduction of share is a fragmenting of the ways that people get information, from the Internet, from more unorthodox sources or mainstream media. And this has become an opportunity for those who are creating these new, loose networks.

Jonathan Steele talked about open access allowing people to challenge government: that is the key to where we're going, and that is in a way undermining us in both the normal brand newspapers and TV stations. And importantly, he also pointed out that political power of governments is less now than we assume, which gets back to issue of the fragmentation of democracy: we're getting both a horizontal and vertical fragmentation.

As Peter Ferdinand points out³, what happened in the Philippines in January, and how President Estrada was deposed is an object lesson to many. In a matter of hours there were 18 million SMS text messages sent, and they removed a democratically elected president. As former president Fidel Ramos said to me, “Much as we wanted to get rid of Estrada, in the end this is not the right way to do it”. The fact is, however, that the power of the mobile phone

³ See Ferdinand's paper at http://www.idea.int/2001_forum/media/mrt_papers/peter_ferdinand.htm

allowed organization on the streets and a real challenge to the democratic process.

That's what we've seen in Davos, Melbourne, Seattle, Quebec, Gothenburg: the power to organize, to create new networks in a fragmenting information system. And the fact is that neither the NSA in America or GCHQ and MI5 in Britain have the power to actually analyse what is being discussed and suggested on these mobile text messages. They cannot work out intent fast enough to act politically in order to stop the organization of something that is challenging governments.

And with government portals, despite the assumption of, for example, ukonline that it will get more information out to more people so they are better informed, what you are actually seeing is people going to these websites, seeing the information and saying "I don't like that information. I'm therefore going to take a very different view." It's empowering them, but in a very different way – to do something different. In summary, we are seeing the potential for new ICTs to actually circumvent and very quickly challenge the traditional lines of communications and levers of power. And this is creating a resonance right across the whole spectrum of politics, not least because of time pressure: people are preferring email, chat lines and niche websites to the traditional systems, including government ones. So we're seeing a new power in the fragmented information environment we work in as journalists: a greater power to dissect, to reject, to disagree, and therefore to defy. And if you begin to take this further, power to overturn, ignore and establish alternative pillars of credible

power and influence through the creation of new networks, however large, small or ephemeral they may be: and thus ultimately the power to seize the political high ground through a combination of inaccuracies, polemics, emotion and rumour.

That, for example, is the challenge we at the BBC are feeling from websites in the Middle East. People say "well, the website says this, therefore you must be wrong", which is challenging our credibility. And we can be right, but our credibility can still be challenged.

Overall, we are in danger of looking at this problem through a prism which is simply to set in the old way of doing things, rather than the new reality, which is catching up faster with media organizations and politicians than either we, or they, fully realize.

New Media and Democracy: Case Studies

CHINA

Caroline Straathof
(Sohu.com)



The Internet started much later in China than many countries. It actually only took off in 1998 when Chinese language content first became available for people to view. That immediately started a venture capital-funded boom in Internet companies, which was cut short by the world-wide downturn last year. Even if the Internet industry as such is going through a bit of a hard time in China today, overall there continues to be an explosion in Internet use. We now have an estimated 30 million people online in China, and as Internet content is moving away from PCs into mobile content, we're also looking at an addressable market of 110 million mobile phone users.

The Internet has made China a more pluralistic society and is therefore forming a much better foundation for fostering democracy. For example, thanks to the Internet young people, businessmen and academics are much better plugged in and informed about the rest of the world than they were before.

Domestically the Internet is fundamentally changing Chinese society and putting a lot more pressure on the government to enhance transparency and accountability.

To give a recent example: there was a fireworks explosion in a school and initially the local government tried to explain it away as the work of a madman with a bag of explosives. The Internet chat rooms started buzzing, as local people knew that children were making fireworks to earn money for the school. The issue went all the way up to the Chinese Prime Minister, who first supported the initial local government line but later had to retract it and announce there would be a fresh investigation of the incident by the central authorities. This would have been unthinkable only a couple of years ago.

“A lot of young people in China don't read newspapers anymore: they go to Internet portals for their news”

The Internet's impact as a new medium is really one of the biggest areas where things are changing, because in only three years websites have established themselves as very influential mainstream media, and the Chinese government are now also treating them as such. A lot of young people don't read newspapers anymore: they go to Internet portals like Sohu.com for their news, and our news channel is definitely one of our most popular.

Sohu.com doesn't produce its own news it only aggregates it, adding editorial content

on the biggest story of the day. The sources are only officially-approved newspapers. And these papers actually produce a lot of very interesting news: basically everything that happens in China gets reported somewhere in a local newspaper and thanks to the Internet, finds its way to the public nationally. In fact, nowadays most foreign correspondents based in China get a lot of their story ideas and information either from local media or Internet news sites that picked up their stories.

There are two very specific Internet-related news impacts. The first, as I already mentioned, is that local stories now become national stories and debates. The other is that the Internet becomes a magnifying glass for bad journalism. In China as everywhere a story that is wrong or very badly represents the event actually gets a much bigger audience nowadays thanks to the Internet. Just last month, for example, websites were all reporting that there was going to be a big earthquake in Yunnan province in southern China. This wasn't true of course, and the seismological bureau had to come out and make statements announcing that an earthquake was definitely not going to happen.

The Internet's other major media-related impact is as a source of non-news information. China is an 'under-communicated' society, and therefore the Internet's impact is bigger than in a country that already has 57 news channels in killing taboos and taking up issues that were not discussed previously. In the last five years I've seen tremendous change in China in that respect: homosexuality, consumer rights, the environment, corruption, harassment

in the workplace – these were issues that were not discussed before and which are now open for debate in the chat rooms. Sohu's news site carries a lot of information about these issues, and that is part of making a civil society work, and therefore laying the foundation for democracy. In that respect Chinese people now have really much wider horizons, a much more international outlook, and a lot of material available that stimulates independent thinking.

At first, official attitudes were very fearful: when I first opened an email account in 1996 I actually had to sign a contract saying that I wasn't going to download any subversive or pornographic material. Since then the government has decided that it is impossible to limit things in this way, so they have come up with this broad package of regulations marking the limits of what they find acceptable use of the Internet.

I see this more as setting the parameters for all parties involved, because in fact we are encountering a very pragmatic attitude from the government with respect to applying these regulations. But of course there are some well-targeted attacks on individuals or small websites because the government wants and needs to show what they find acceptable in terms of content.

The next official step will be to set some guidelines for quality control, and I think that is important. I wouldn't really see this as censorship per se, though technically it could fall within the definition. It is, however, very important for the Internet to remain a trustworthy source of information.

How can independent websites like Sohu.com flourish in this kind of environment? If you want to call it a suppressive environment you just look at the text of official Internet regulations and say “see?”. But the fact that a company like Sohu that is mostly foreign-funded, partly foreign-managed and NASDAQ-listed can be a dominant player in what the government sees as mainstream media: this sums up to the extent to which there is a new kind of situation in China, and is proof of the flexible, pragmatic attitude the government is actually showing behind its sometimes stern, official face.

It is true that websites have to be what you might call politically correct, but that only concerns the most sensitive political news. Political chat rooms are, of course, closely monitored, and therefore people tend to stay away from them, but this covers only a very limited number of topics. A personal attack on President Jiang Zemin will not be accepted, but there is a lot that actually does get through in the political arena. And you have to remember that only a generation ago the country was so closed that if Mao Tse Tung said “turn left” 600 million people did exactly that.

I have two issues of practical concern that tie into the wider debate here. First, while the Chinese government is paying close attention to political content on the Internet, it may be neglecting other important Internet-related problems such as fighting organized crime, terrorism, fraud and pornography. Given that privacy is not really an issue of debate in China and that most Internet access is found among young or new users, it makes them very vulnera-

ble to, for example, fraud. Second, there is a need to apply more journalistic standards for quality control, so that the Internet is protected as a valuable – and valued – source of information.

Q. Aren't Sohu and other chat rooms playing quite a political role, as we saw during China's 'spy plane' standoff with the USA earlier this year?

Caroline Straathof

If you went to the chat rooms around that time you would find extremely nationalist viewpoints with writers saying things like “If I could only turn myself into a missile, I would launch myself at San Francisco”. And journalists picked up on this and argued that it showed that public opinion in China is extremely nationalistic, and that this was pressuring the government into taking a very harsh and uncompromising stance towards the USA.

There are two points to make here. First, Sohu had to remove quite a few messages that actually would have reflected a more critical view of the government, at least showing that people wanted the issue handled differently. So as a pure reflection of public opinion I would have to say that you can't do it with the chat rooms, as they are being monitored. Second, there are more subtle things at play here: Chinese people are very adept at criticizing in between the lines. They know that if they say “I think Jiang Zemin is too weak”, the message is not going to make it up into a chat room. But if they push from the other extreme they know the message will get in, because that is the patriotic, politically acceptable attitude. And by going over-

board so much, a lot of Chinese will read into the message a subtle criticism of the authorities that outsiders wouldn't necessarily detect.

Shanthi Kalathil

(Carnegie Endowment for Peace)

COMMENT



Your presentation seemed to me to be very indicative of the situation in China. You talked about the Internet's impact on Chinese society and the way in which it is gradually making the country more pluralistic and providing a foundation for civil society. There is indeed a diversity of viewpoints now that you wouldn't have got in the past, and this is partially due to Internet penetration – more young people, academics and business people using the Internet, including using chat rooms and other places to exchange information. But this also brought to mind some questions about who is getting access to the Internet. Your mention of young people, business people and academics actually underscores the fact that there is still what you might call a 'digital divide' within China. A lot of Chinese do not have access to the Internet and thus are not able to benefit from, for example, the chat rooms.

“Chinese state media is still an organ of the state, and as such a propaganda tool”

You mentioned a lot of cases where the state media is liberalizing and providing more local points of view, and I certainly think that is true: visiting China recently I could read about all sorts of things that I

“If neither the domestic or international companies are willing to be a media watchdog, where is that pressure going to come from?”

would never have found before. But we have to keep in mind the fact that the state media is still an organ of the state, and as such a propaganda tool. Even though you may get a diversity of media viewpoints and local stories on the Internet, the media's general function is still viewed as being a propaganda tool. It simply does not operate in the way that media in less authoritarian countries would. With the chat rooms, too, you can see a general tendency towards self-censorship, because as you mention people know what is and is not acceptable.

My concern here is that with the proliferation of new media you are not getting what might be regarded as a natural pressure to reform standards of journalism in the state media. In particular, you are not really getting pressure on the government from Internet service or content providers trying to challenge the official line on things. And in the absence of regulatory pressure on the government from either foreign or domestic media organizations, the worry is that there will be no real pressure to reform state media regulations.

I understand that domestic media companies usually need to have ties to the government; they need to keep their government partners happy, and that is one big reason why they are unwilling to pressure for change over the strict content regulations.

But foreign media companies have also not taken up the task of pressuring the Chinese government for more liberal content regulations. And if neither the domestic or international companies are willing to take up the challenge of being a media watchdog, where is that pressure going to come from?

You talked about the government's pragmatic attitude to enforcing regulations and that is true in a lot of sectors, including the media. But as you mentioned there are times when the authorities are very willing to uphold the law strongly to make an example. Just recently, for example, you had the shutting down of two small websites that had democracy and human rights forums. This is part of a larger crackdown: for example, some reports are stating that the authorities have shut down about 8,000 Internet cafés in the last month or so. What you are seeing is a small backlash against what the government views as a very real danger of losing control of public opinion on the Internet.

So the government may be pragmatic and willing to bend on certain things because they realize the importance of the development of new media and internet companies, but you can see exactly where they draw the line, are not willing to bend. And this is why companies are unwilling to mess with them on these issues.

You mentioned that you were not sure whether the Internet would create a foundation for democracy in China, that it could go one way or the other, and I agree. Many people tend to emphasize the Internet's benefits for China – its role in

“The Internet has the potential to enhance both authoritarianism and democratization in China: it all depends on how it is used”

creating a public sphere, a civil society. But the Chinese state is also really interested in using the Internet not only as a new propaganda tool, but to harness the full potential of e-government. The Internet has the potential to enhance both authoritarianism and democratization in China: it all depends on how it is used.

Caroline Straathof

The point on access to the Internet – yes, in a population of 1.3 billion, 30 million users is still peanuts. But first, the interesting thing is that a lot of the material that gets posted on the Internet is put back into their newspapers by journalists, which means it then gets published and read all over China. So there is kind of two-way street for information back into the real mass media. Second, Chinese people value education very highly. Whenever a family has a bit of money the first purchase today is a computer, and hooking up the children on-line. So there is a financial limit on how many people are able to access the Internet but there is also definitely a widespread wish to do so: and the moment that people are actually able to gain access they will do so.

In terms of seeing state media as a propaganda tool, on paper that is of course still true. The point I was making is that the media is now given more leeway in a lot of areas – apart from the very sensitive ones –

to challenge and be a kind of check and balance on what is happening in the country. I do see willingness on the part of the government to let the media take a more flexible position, a more critical role in social and economic issues. And again they want to control it step by step, so for now political issues are a 'no-go' zone. But that may change in the future.

Concerning self-censorship by foreign media companies, it seems to me that that doesn't have that much to do with China itself. It relates to how companies make their business a media interest and keep it strictly separate. Companies are already limiting themselves in the area of media coverage because they think it is going to hurt their business interest. For example, Reuters and Wall Street Journal have both

been very critical of China in the past: but they do pretty good business in China today. In reality it is in the company board-rooms that the lines are being drawn, and not because the Chinese government demanding it.

With bulletin boards, Sohu.com is required by Chinese law to have monitors who go through all their content: and we regularly take material out and talk to the relevant government departments if they want something removed. Generally, however, we find that this is not a very big problem. We have to have the monitors, because otherwise our license would be revoked. But in practice 99 per cent of the material we think is useful for Chinese users does get on. So we have to compromise in this area.

THE BALKANS

Gordana Igric
(*Institute for War and
Peace Reporting*)



The Balkans are constantly in the headlines, so there is no need to explain exactly what has happened there the last 8–10 years and is still happening in Macedonia today. IWPR produces three online editions covering the Balkans – of which I am editor – Central Asia, and the Caucasus. I have long experience of what the Internet can do in societies under 'open dictatorship', in a state of war, or simply with corrupt governments. I don't have any novel thesis about whether new media are

good for democracy or not: in the case of authoritarian states, war and dictatorships, the answer is yes, they help enormously.

A few examples of how they have helped in the Balkans. First, from the NATO bombing campaign in Serbia and Kosovo. When the NATO strikes began the Milosevic regime expelled all foreign journalists from Kosovo. In Serbia, it put all possible media, broadcast or print, under its control. As a result, all that Serbian people could see or read was state news media reporting how many millions of NATO airplanes had been destroyed that day – pure propaganda, in other words.

At the same time, however, IWPR had a young journalist in Pristina, Kosovo who

still had electricity and a computer, and she was filing stories about what was really happening in Kosovo to London. They were grim reports of how many people were being killed, neighbourhoods being ethnically cleansed, confirmation that people were being pushed onto trains and expelled from Kosovo by Serbian police forces. In London these reports were being translated into English and posted on the IWPR site, and at one point they were almost the only local media source for foreign media trying to find out what was really happening in Kosovo.

During that period I myself saw how this was one important way that information flowed in and out of the region. I was filing stories from Belgrade and at the same time didn't know what was happening anywhere else, because the information blockade was complete, so I would go onto the Internet to try and check the newswires. Most of my neighbours were Milosevic supporters – officially, at least – so they regarded me as an enemy of the state. But during the night they would come and knock on my door and ask, “Did you check what is happening tonight? Where are the planes? Will they bomb us one more day – or ten?”. When people reached the point that their lives were in danger they became very thirsty for information. And the Internet was the only way to find out what was happening.

I followed most of Milosevic's last year in power from London, particularly his struggle to defeat the new media – as an old-fashioned but very efficient dictator he already had the old media under control. At one point in 2000 Milosevic established a new information law. Not only were all

“Every morning they were carefully reading our material and trying to figure out how to defeat the new media”

state media placed under his control, but the independent media also no longer dared publish anything really critical or sensitive, due to the threat of being fined in court, which being as poor as they were – and are – made things extremely difficult. As a result journalists in Serbia would send their stories to me at IWPR, and so we suddenly became important for the region itself. Information was coming from the region to IWPR, being posted on our website and then returning through people at the Media Centre in Belgrade printing editions off our site and distributing them. This led to the rather surreal situation of the regime's media attacking local journalists for stories that effectively hadn't even been published in Serbia.

From sources inside the government I learnt that every morning they were carefully reading our material and trying to figure out how to defeat the new media. They started by inviting journalists for 'informative discussions' at police stations and telling them that they shouldn't work for an anti-Serbian spy organization like IWPR. Then our journalists began to write under pseudonyms, which didn't help because the authorities already knew who they were. In the end they arrested one of our correspondents and sentenced him to seven years in prison for spying – the last resort in trying to control or forbid the Internet. Comparing with the Chinese

case, IWPR was outside the region, which meant that we didn't have monitors checking and censoring content. Nothing could really stop us except the well-being of our journalists inside the region, who were fully prepared to take the risks involved.

After Milosevic was overturned IWPR received a lot of messages saying things like "we have democracy in Serbia now, thanks a lot", which was very nice of course. But the Balkans is never a finished story, and now we have the crisis in Macedonia and new challenges – including new methods of propaganda used by both the government and representatives of the Albanian viewpoint. Everyone in Macedonia seems to have learned something from the old regime in Serbia, and now they are all trying to fill our email inboxes with their own propaganda.

Christian Palme

(Dagens Nyheter, Sweden)

COMMENT

The Balkans wars of dissolution have been the first real Internet war. Not just the final days of the Milosevic regime but the entire war in Bosnia and Croatia before that and the Kosovo war in 1999 were intensively covered by and on the Internet in various ways. What has the asset been for journalists in particular? First, the Internet has been and remains a rapid source of information for anything that takes place in the region, both for standpoints of the different parties and in-depth information from sources such as IWPR, which is a daily source of information for someone like me who remains interested in the Balkans. But the Internet has itself also been a bat-



"The Internet has itself also been a battlefield in the Balkans"

tlefield where different opinions have fought each other and lobby groups have presented their positions, using the Internet as a way of pushing their propaganda, often with the help of sympathetic outside groups. I often read that the Internet was vital in bringing down Milosevic, that it made it possible to supply information to a wider audience that had no access to objective sources. This is a somewhat overstated view. Internet access was relevant for a relatively small number of people in Serbia last year, and the regime would probably have been toppled anyway by the huge impact that a mass movement like Otpor had on the streets: the Internet didn't really contribute very much to that. To foreign journalists who were trying to follow and cover events from the outside, however, the Internet was absolutely vital, because background news that seldom made it into the reports of news agencies or even major newspapers was instantly published on the web. The Internet has certainly had some political impact, and

"I often read that the Internet was vital in bringing down Milosevic: this is a somewhat overstated view"

maybe the revolution in Serbia in 2000 would have taken slightly longer without it, but it would have come anyway. On the other hand, as a news source and a tool for journalists covering an authoritarian regime in a partially closed area such as

Serbia under Milosevic, the Internet became an extremely vital tool.

Gordana Igric

I don't believe that the Internet alone could have defeated Milosevic, of course: it was a complex of different forces within society. But let me give you a few numbers. A few months before the fall of Milosevic IWPR had around 6000 subscribers. Then suddenly we were getting around 1 million hits per month on our website, which is incredible for an organization with a staff

of ten people. It means that the information didn't just go to foreign journalists covering the region, it also went back into the region. These new subscribers were from the region. When they couldn't find something in newspapers they would go and print stories from our website and share them around. Another important factor was Montenegro, where the media was not all under the control of Milosevic. They would publish our stories, and this helped a lot.

SOUTHERN AFRICA

Jeannette Minnie

*(Freedom of Expression
Consultant, South Africa)*



The Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) is an indigenous African association of journalists and media practitioners that work to promote freedom of expression and the free flow of information. One of its activities has been to establish a news exchange between 30 newspapers – the majority of them weeklies, as is the case with much of the privately owned or independent press in Africa – in 10 different countries of the Southern African subcontinent.

Stories are exchanged every day. Every newspaper sends in a quota of stories per edition – 10 or 15 stories, whatever has been negotiated – covering the main stories of its particular country. The other 29 papers are free to republish those stories,

provided acknowledgement is made both of the newspaper of origin and MISANET as the news service provider.

This was one of the earliest examples in Africa of this kind of voluntary news exchange, and it has been used quite effectively: if you read the independent press it is highly visible throughout the 10 countries covered. And it has been a highly effective form not only of news exchange: the whole point was to overcome the problem of countries in Southern Africa only knowing what is going on in their neighbours through Reuters and the other big international news agencies. The aim was to provide the systematic news developments you need to be aware of if you want to have a society engaged with policy development and issues in neighboring countries on an informed basis. And it has been very successful in those terms.

There are something like 400–600 stories a week going through the MISANET news exchange. MISA itself has attempted to

commercialize the service but that has failed, so for the time being it has decided to refocus on making MISANET a more powerful news exchange and free flow of information exercise. The financial objective is still there, however, because like everybody else MISANET has to become sustainable.

MISA currently plans to redevelop its website making use of the new 'bells and whistles', but designed in such a way that low as well as high-end users can access the site: if you can only receive text or work with text, it will still give you a very good service. It will also give you capabilities to protest against media freedom infringements. You will have all the presidents' addresses and contact details for this purpose – a very effective form of making protest.

Internet connectivity in Africa is incredibly low as the statistics reveal, but where it exists, it is normally within institutions. Those institutions range from the governmental, to fairly modest civil society organizations, to powerful local and indigenous NGOs such as MISA. They use the Internet, and some of them make very effective use of the technology. For example, email is the standard form of communication within MISA. All MISA offices are connected, as are all its radio stations and newspaper members: it is MISA policy to ensure everybody is connected. (In the early 1990s it was virtually a service provider in many of the countries that MISA works in.)

So there is more technological capacity than people are aware of. Penetration is not very large, but it is in a sector that musters re-

“The influence of the Internet in Africa is much stronger than the abysmal connectivity statistics might lead you to believe”

sources and does have influence. When you look at the driving forces for democratic change in the southern African subcontinent, generally speaking it is not the rural poor. It is the intelligentsia of those societies, who are in the cities and towns. And most of them are connected one way or the other, through the institutions or in their offices. This is where the debate, the organization and push takes place – a very influential area for democratic change. So not everything is as abysmal as the connectivity statistics for Africa suggest: the influence of the Internet is actually much stronger than the statistics might lead you to believe.

Roland Stanbridge

(Stockholm University)

COMMENT

On the statistics for Africa: someone mentioned that cyber-café's are much used in different parts of the world, and that is certainly true in Africa. If you go to almost any capital city around the continent you will find a proliferation of cyber-café's, and they are much used by students and journalists.

The average journalist in Africa could not afford to buy a computer even with a whole year of salary. But cyber-café's have provided many of them with the opportunities to communicate with journalists in neighbouring countries, to track down experts,



do research on the Internet, find background information for their articles. And there are many other examples like MISA, both in East and in West Africa, of media houses and radio organizations working together using the Internet. There are other cases as well: for example, in Sierra Leone the *Expo Times* newspaper was forced to close down, the news editor died in detention and the journalists had to flee. In March 2000, however, the paper came into being again on the Internet, with help of the London *Guardian*. And many expatriates and exiles are able to take part in political and other discussions in their home

countries, again, thanks to email. So there is a lot happening in Africa. There is, in fact, connectivity in one form or another in every of the 54 states on that continent. I see myself and many people who work in this field as cyber-realists. We don't believe there is going to be universal access, but using what availability there is there is lots to be done. It is important to empower journalists because if they have access to any medium at all, for most African people living in rural areas it is probably radio, and possibly some print publications. By empowering journalists you also enrich their audiences.

GHANA

Niyi Alabi

(Polyvox Media, Ghana)



I am Director of News of the only FM station that specializes in talk in Ghana – we don't play music, as we think it trivializes serious issues. There are about 40 local FM stations all over the country, 14 of them in Accra alone.

The role of FM stations and mobile phones in the last elections in Ghana⁴ has become something of a celebrity phenomenon, but it was not our own original idea. We must have borrowed it from Senegal, which had

“The role of FM stations and mobile phones in Ghana's elections was not our own original idea”

had its elections earlier in the same year. But you cannot talk about this issue without first providing a clear picture of the West African sub-region, which can be described as a hotbed of the worst imaginable kind of dictators. As we are sit here Conakry, Guinea does not have a single FM station. We know that the leader there, Lansana Conte, metamorphosed from a military into a civilian dictator: and the long list of dictators in the region should give you an idea of the difficulty we have in West Africa in dealing with these tyrants. Which brings us to Jerry Rawlings, the man who made it possible for the recent peaceful transition in Ghana. Undoubtedly, there was a master plan to rig an election victory for the government. All the reports we received pointed to the fact that the Bureau of National Investigation (BNI) had told Rawlings that he was going to lose the election, so the only alternative was to find ways of rigging the result. This could only be done by first intimidating the

⁴ Held in December 2000.

media – Rawlings often referred to the tabloids and FM stations – and there was indeed a deliberate government attempt to intimidate us in the runup to the election.

What happened was simple. We felt it was necessary for us to play an active role, so we trained some reporters – in our case about 40 – who went out to all the polling stations on election day with the task of sending us provisional reports of the results. Then we had a small team in the newsroom tabulating the provisional results. The idea was that even if the final result approved by the electoral commission was declared, the difference that might exist between that and what had been already declared – that is, the provisional result – would simply be too much to stand up. And it really worked.

Before the election, however, serious debate had to be engaged in: good governance, human rights, the record of a government seeking another mandate. And that was something the Rawlings government didn't want. About three months before the election almost all FM stations became engaged in this kind of debate. It was a kind of revolution that those in power did not understand, and privately they were coming to us to say no, this could create chaos. On election day reporters went round to take a look at what was happening – cases of intimidation by security officials, the BNI, even uniformed soldiers. They relayed the information to the newsroom and we went on the air to advise voters not to be intimidated.

And it worked excellently, especially in the election runoff, because the government's idea was to make it impossible for people

“In all the regions with private FM stations voting patterns showed a rejection of the Rawlings government”

to go out and vote. On the morning of the runoff opposition party members were attacked, journalists beaten up, cameras destroyed, mobile phones seized by security operatives. But when the information kept on being repeated on the FM stations, I think then the government panicked. All the so-called ‘foreign electoral observers’ had to be allowed into specific areas, and it became obvious that plans to rig the election would have to be put on hold. And that, of course, was important.

The use of mobile phones is and was not by choice. Land-based telephone lines are very ineffective in Ghana. Our national telecom has been sold to a Malaysian company that has proved to be spectacularly incompetent, and the government has now been asked to think about reopening the tender, because at the moment you can hardly ever get a decent land line connection. So everybody has mobile phones: I carry two, which is quite a burden, but if you want to be able to communicate you have to have them.

Finally, on the election. On polling day journalists would call us to report when something was happening at a particular location, we broadcast the news, and electoral observers ran there immediately to intervene, making it really impossible for whatever rigging plan there may have been in place to materialize. Generally speaking – and Rawlings himself admitted this – the

election was won by the FM stations, which didn't exist at the time of the last election in 1996. In all the regions of the country with private FM stations voting patterns showed a rejection of the Rawlings government. It was only in those regions – three of them – that didn't have private FM

stations that people really voted for the government. To conclude: everything points to the conclusion that FM stations and mobile phones played a very remarkable role in an election that brought about a peaceful transition in Ghana.

Conclusion

Mark Salter
(*International IDEA*)



We have focused on the challenges to traditional media from new ICTs, both from the production side and, just as importantly, consumption. And this is something we could usefully take forward within International IDEA.

We also had a heated debate on whether the new media are good or bad for democracy. I came out of the discussion with a sense of 'mostly', or on balance, 'possibly' good: but it doesn't seem as if the argument was resolved clearly in one direction. One important thing is to beware the danger of investing any technology, including ICTs, with moral attributes. This is a danger we may fall into in discussion of the Internet, and it is certainly a common analytical mistake with a long history.

One thing that came up very strongly, that goes to the heart of the business of journalism, was the question of inclusivity in our reporting. The street protests at the EU Gothenburg Summit provided a very recent graphic example of how that challenge hits

home: the challenge eloquently outlined by Danny Schechter of showing a greater awareness of and openness to the untold stories, the ones that don't make it into the 'keep them entertained' world view, and telling them from the inside.

Watching media coverage of the Gothenburg Summit I was strongly reminded of my own experience as an activist in the UK peace movement 20 years ago, in particular the sense of being part of a movement where your image is ubiquitous, but your message is conspicuous largely by its absence. The thing I would care about as a journalist covering Gothenburg is not the 150 or so stone-throwers – and it was literally that many people – who dominated the media headlines: they certainly had their anarchist counterparts in the non-violent UK peace movement of the 1980s and they aren't the main people to think about. Rather, it is the 20 thousand plus other demonstrators on the streets of Gothenburg peacefully raising issues of globalization, who are part of the growing international movement we've seen on the streets of Seattle, Prague and other cities of late. These people, and their message, is the real challenge for the media to cover.

Are the New Media Good for Democracy? Media Round Table

27–28 JUNE, STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN

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Transcription and Editorial: Béla Selendy, Monika Ericson, Mark Salter

Graphic Design: Johan von Friedrichs/Slow Fox produktion AB

Cover Photos: © Mira Bildarkiv

Printed and bound by: Elanders Gotab, Stockholm 2001