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Eli Noam: The web is bad for democracy  
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People may disagree on the impact of the internet on culture and the economy, but they seem to be pretty unanimous when it comes to its positive effects on democracy. But maybe this balloon, too, needs to be pricked.

My scepticism about the internet as a democratic force is not based on its uneven distribution. It is more systemic. Observers tend to commit the error of composition, confusing the qualities of the parts with the qualities of the whole. They think that if something is helpful to an individual or group, it will also be helpful to society at large when everybody uses it. The alleged time-saving properties of the automobile are an example of this fallacy: does it really take less time today to get to work than it used to?

### The internet will make politics more expensive and raise entry barriers

Easy entry does indeed exist for the traditional narrowband internet, which is largely text-based. But the new-generation broadband internet will first permit and soon require sophisticated video and multimedia messages. Also, the increasing information glut requires ever more elaborate strategies to draw attention. And in contrast to the broad stroke of broadcast-TV messages, "netcasted" politics will have to be customised to be most effective. This requires extensive databases on individuals' interests and preferences. All of this will price out low-budget political efforts.

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Of course, the internet makes some political activity cheaper. But it does so for everyone. Thus, any gains made by early adopters will soon be matched by their rivals and will simply lead to an expensive and mutually stalemating political arms race of investment in customisation techniques and new media marketing technologies.

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The early users of the internet experienced an increase in their effectiveness, and messianically extrapolate this to society at large. The gain was trumpeted as the empowerment of the individual over Big Government and Big Business, but much of it has simply been an temporary strengthening of individuals and groups with computer and online skills (who usually have significantly above-average income and education) and a relative weakening of those without such resources. Government did not become more responsive due to the online users; it just became more responsive to *them*.

### The internet will lower the quality of political discourse

An increase in the quantity of information does not mean that its average quality rises. On the contrary, as the internet leads to more information clutter, messages will have to get louder in order to be heard. Mainstream political information, therefore, will inevitably become even more distorted, shrill and simplistic.

One of the effects of the internet is the elimination of the intermediaries that stand between service providers and the consumer. For politics, the decline of traditional news media and their information screening would not necessarily be a good thing at all. True, gatekeeping has negative aspects, too, but screening and organising information also helps audiences. When information comes unfiltered, it overwhelms and leads to the creation of rumour, disinformation and last-minute political ambush.

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## Direct access to public officials will be bogus

Yes, anybody can fire off e-mail messages to public officials and perhaps even get a reply, and this may provide an illusion of access. But one limited resource will be even scarcer: the attention of those officials. By necessity, only a few messages will get through. If anything, the flood of messages will make the power-brokers that can provide access more important than ever. Not to mention the fact that apparent outpourings of public opinion can be mass-produced. Instead of grass roots, technology can end up creating political astroturf.

## The internet facilitates the international manipulation of domestic politics

Cross-border interference in national politics becomes easier with the internet. Why negotiate with the US ambassador if one can target a key Congressional chairman through an e-mail campaign, chat group interventions, misinformation and untraceable donations? People worry about computer attacks by terrorists. They should also worry about state-sponsored interference in other countries' politics through electronics.

But isn't information good for democracy? Free access to information is indeed helpful, which is why the internet undermines totalitarianism. But it undermines pretty much everything else, too, including democracy. And the value of information to peace and harmony tends to get overblown. Civil war situations are not typically based on a lack of information. Yet there is an enduring belief that if people "only knew", for example through going online, they would become more tolerant of each other. That is a nice thought, but is it based on history? Hitler came to power in a republic where political information and communication were plentiful.

It is easy to subscribe to romantic notions of a "golden age" of democracy, of Athenian debates in front of an involved citizenry, and to believe that its return by electronic means is nigh. A quick look in the rear-view mirror, to radio and then TV, is sobering. Here, too, the then new media were heralded as harbingers of a new and improved political dialogue. But the reality of those media has been one of cacophony, fragmentation, increasing cost, and the declining value of "hard" information.

It would be simplistic to deny that the internet can mobilise hard-to-reach groups and help them to express themselves. It has unleashed much energy and creativity. Obviously there will be shining success stories, but we should wary of extrapolating. Large segments of society are disenchanted with a political system that is often unresponsive, frequently affected by campaign contributions and usually slow. Many see the internet as the silver bullet that will change all that. Others cling to the image of the early internet - open and free - that created new forms of community. They will be disappointed.

The internet does not create a Jeffersonian democracy. It is not Athens, nor Appenzell. It is, if anything, less of a democracy than those low-tech places. But, of course, none of these really existed either, except as ideals, goals and inspirations. And in that sense, the expectations vested in the internet are a new link in a chain of hope. Maybe naive, but certainly ennobling.

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