

Why the Internet Will Be Bad for Democracy

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“Digital Citizens appear startlingly close to the Jeffersonian ideal--they are informed, outspoken, participatory, passionate about freedom, proud of their culture, and committed to the free nation in which it has evolved...”

“...Politicians shouldn't even dream of talking to [Digital Citizens] about the past – or the present for that matter. Digital Citizens don't care about today; they want to know about tomorrow...”

(Wired Magazine 1997)

When the media history of the 20th Century will be written, the Internet will be seen as its major contribution. Television, telephone, and computers will be viewed as its early precursors, merging and converging into the new medium just as radio and film did into TV. The Internet's impact on culture, business, and politics will be vast, for sure. Where will it take us? To answer that question is difficult, because the Internet is not simply a set of interconnecting links and protocols connecting packet switched networks, but it is also a construct of imagination, an inkblot test into which everybody projects their desires, fears and phantasies.

Some see enlightenment and education. Others see pornography and gambling. Some see sharing and collaboration; others see e-commerce and profits. Controversies abound on most aspects of the Internet. Yet when it comes to its impact on democracy process, the answer seems unanimous.¹ The Internet is good for democracy. It creates digital citizens (Wired 1997) active in the vibrant teledemocracy (Etzioni, 1997) of the Electronic Republic (Grossman 1995) in the

¹ Exceptions are Bimber (1998) and Blau (1998)

Digital Nation (Katz 1992). Is there no other side to this question? Is the answer so positively positive?

The reasons why the Internet is supposed to strengthen democracy include the following.

1. The Internet lowers the entry barriers to political participation.
2. It strengthens political dialogue.
3. It creates community.
4. It cannot be controlled by government.
5. It increases voting participation.
6. It permits closer communication with officials.
7. It spreads democracy world-wide.

Each of the propositions in this utopian populist, view, which might be called is questionable.

But they are firmly held by the Internet founder generation, by the industry that now operates the medium, by academics from Negroponte (1995) to Dahl (1989), by gushy news media, and by a cross-party set of politicians who wish to claim the future, from Gore to Gingrich, from Bangemann to Blair.

I will argue, in contrast, that the Internet, far from helping democracy, is a threat to it. And I am taking this view as an enthusiast, not a critic. But precisely because the Internet is powerful and revolutionary, it also affects, and even destroys, all traditional institutions--including--democracy. To deny this potential is to invite a backlash when the ignored problems eventually

emerge.²

My perspective is different from the neo-Marxist arguments about big business controlling everything; from neo-Luddite views that low-tech is beautiful; and from reformist fears that a politically disenfranchised digital underclass will emerge. The latter, in particular, has been a frequent perspective. Yet, the good news is that the present income-based gap in Internet usage will decline in developed societies. Processing and transmission becomes cheap, and will be anywhere, affordably. Transmission will be cheap, and connect us to anywhere, affordably. And basic equipment will almost be given away in return for long-term contracts and advertising exposure.

That is why what we now call basic Internet connectivity will not be a problem. Internet connectivity will be near 100% of the households and offices, like electricity, because the Internet will have been liberated from the terror of the PC as its gateway, the most consumer-unfriendly consumer product ever built since the unicycle.

Already, more than half of communications traffic is data rather than voice, which means that it involves fast machines rather than slow people. These machines will be everywhere. Cars will be chatting with highways. Suitcases will complain to airlines. Electronic books will download from publishers. Front doors will check in with police departments. Pacemakers will talk to hospitals. Television sets will connect to video servers.

² This analysis holds mostly for the United States, but there is no major reason why it should not apply, in general terms, to other larger free market, free-speech democracies, within variations of history, constitution, and political

For that reason, my skepticism about the Internet as a pro-democracy force is not based on its uneven distribution. It is more systemic. The problem is that most analysts commit a so-called error of composition. That is, they confuse micro behavior with macro results. They think that if something is helpful to an individual, it is also helpful to society at large, when everybody uses it.

Suppose we would have asked, a century ago, whether the automobile would reduce pollution. The answer would have been easy and positive: no horses, no waste on the roads, no smell, no use of agricultural land to grow oats. But we now recognize that in the aggregate, mass motorization has been bad for the environment. It created emissions, dispersed the population, and put more demand on land.

The second error is that of inference. Just because the Internet is good for democracy in places like North Korea, Iran, or Sudan does not mean that it is better for Germany, Denmark, or the United States. Just because three TV channels offer more diversity of information than one does not mean that 30,000 are better than 300.

So here are several reasons why the Internet will not be good for democracy, corresponding to the pro-democracy arguments described above.

- **The Internet Will Make Politics More Expensive and Raise Entry Barriers**

The hope has been that online public space will be an electronic version of a New England or

culture.

Swiss town meeting, open and ongoing. The Internet would permit easy and cheap political participation and political campaigns. But is that true?

Easy entry exists indeed for an Internet based on narrowband transmission, which is largely text-based. But the emerging broadband Internet will permit fancy video and multimedia messages and information resources. Inevitably, audience expectations will rise. When everyone can speak, who will be listened to? If the history of mass media means anything, it will not be everyone. It cannot be everyone. Nor will the wisest or those with the most compelling case or cause be heard, but the best produced, the slickest, and the best promoted. And that is expensive.

Secondly, because of the increasing glut and clutter of information, those with messages will have to devise strategies to draw attention. Political attention, just like commercial one, will have to be created. Ideology, self-interest, and public spirit are some factors. But in many cases, attention needs to be bought, by providing entertainment, gifts, games, lotteries, coupons, etc. That, too, is expensive. The basic cost of information is rarely the problem in politics; it's the packaging. It is not difficult or expensive to produce and distribute handbills or to make phone calls, or to speak at public events. But it is costly to communicate to vast audiences in an effective way, because that requires large advertising and PR budgets.

Thirdly, effective politics on the Internet will require elaborate and costly data collection. The reason is that Internet media operate differently from traditional mass media. They will not broadcast to all but instead to specifically targeted individuals. Instead of the broad stroke of political TV messages, "netcasted" politics will be customized to be most effective. This

requires extensive information about individuals' interests and preferences. Data banks then become a key to political effectiveness. Who would own and operate them? In some cases the political parties. But they could not maintain control over the data banks where a primary exist that is open to many candidates. There is also a privacy problem, when semi-official political parties store information about the views, fears, and habits of millions of individuals. For both of those reasons the ability of parties to collect such data will be limited.

Other political data banks will be operated by advocacy and interest groups. They would then donate to candidate's data instead of money. The importance of such data banks would further weaken campaign finance laws and further strengthen interest group pluralism over traditional political parties.

But in particular, political data banks will maintained through what is now known as political consultants. They will establish permanent and proprietary permanent data banks and become still bigger players in the political environment and operate increasingly as ideology-free for – profit consultancies.

Even if the use of the Internet makes some political activity cheaper, it does so for everyone, which means that all organization will increase their activities rather than spend less on them.¹ If some aspects of campaigning become cheaper, they would not usually spend less, but instead do more.

Thus, any effectiveness of early adopters will soon be matched by their rivals and will simply

lead to an accelerated, expensive, and mutually canceling political arms-race of investment in action techniques and new--media marketing technologies.

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

- **The Internet will make reasoned and informed political dialog more difficult.**

True, the Internet is a more active and interactive medium than TV. But is its use in politics a promise or a reality?

Just because the quantity of information increase does not mean that its quality rises. To the contrary. As the Internet leads to more information clutter, it will become necessary for any message to get louder. Political information becomes distorted, shrill, and simplistic.

One of the characteristics of the Internet is disintermediation, the Internet is in business as well as in politics. In politics, it leads to the decline of traditional news media and their screening techniques. The acceleration of the news cycle by necessity leads to less careful checking, while

competition leads to more sensationalism. Issues get attention if they are visually arresting and easily understood. This leads to media events, to the 15 min of fame, to the sound bite, to infotainment. The Internet also permits anonymity, which leads to the creation of, and to last minute political ambush. The Internet lends itself to dirty politics more than the more accountable TV.

While the self-image of the tolerant digital citizen persists, an empirical study of the content of several political usenet groups found much intolerant behavior: domineering by a few; rude “flaming”; and reliance on unsupported assertions. (Davis, 1999) Another investigation finds no evidence that computer-mediated communication is necessarily democratic or participatory (Streck, 1998).

- **The Internet disconnects as much as it connects**

Democracy has historically been based on community. Traditionally, such communities were territorial — electoral districts, states, and towns. Community, to communicate — the terms are related: community is shaped by the ability of its members to communicate with each other. If the underlying communications system changes, the communities are affected. As one connects in new ways, one also disconnects the old ways. As the Internet links with new and far-away people, it also reduces relations with neighbors and neighborhoods.

The long-term impact of cheap and convenient communications is a further geographic dispersal of the population, and thus greater physical isolation. At the same time, the enormous increase

in the number of information channels leads to an individualization of mass media, and to fragmentation. Suddenly, critics of the “lowest common denominator” programming, of TV now get nostalgic for the “electronic hearth” around which society huddled. They discovered the integrative role of mass media.

On the other hand, the Internet also creates electronically linked new types of community. But these are different from traditional communities. They have less of the averaging that characterizes physical communities—throwing together the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker. Instead, these new communities are more stratified along some common dimension, such as business, politics, or hobbies. These groups will therefore tend to be issue - driven, more narrow, more narrow-minded, and sometimes more extreme, as like-minded people reinforce each other’s views.

Furthermore, many of these communities will be owned by someone. They are like a shopping mall, a gated community, with private rights to expel, to promote, and to censor. The creation of community has been perhaps the main assets of Internet portals such as AOL. It is unlikely that they will dilute the value of these assets by relinquishing control.

If it is easy to join such virtual communities, it also becomes easy to leave, in a civic sense, one’s physical community. Community becomes a browsing experience.

- **Information does not necessarily weaken the state.**

Can Internet reduce totalitarianism? Of course. Tyranny and mind control becomes harder. But

Internet romantics tend to underestimate the ability of governments to control the Internet, to restrict it, and to indeed use it as an instrument of surveillance. How quickly we forget. Only a few years ago, the image of information technology was Big Brother and mind control. That was extreme, of course, but the surveillance potential clearly exists. Cookies can monitor usage. Wireless applications create locational fixes. Identification requirements permit the creation of composites of peoples' public and private activities and interests. Newsgroups can (and are) monitored by those with stakes in an issue.

A free access to information is helpful to democracy. But the value of information to democracy tends to get overblown. It may be a necessary condition, but not a sufficient one.

Civil war situations are not typically based on a lack of information. Yet there is an undying belief that if people "only knew", eg. by logging online, they would become more tolerant of each other. That is wishful and optimistic hope, but is it based on history? Hitler came to power in a republic where political information and communication were plentiful.

Democracy requires stability, and stability requires a bit of inertia. The most stable democracies are characterized by a certain slowness of change. Examples are Switzerland and England. The US operates on the basis of a 210-year old Constitution. Hence the acceleration of politics made the Internet is a two-edged sword.

The Internet and its tools accelerate information flows, no question about it. But same tools are also available to any other group, party, and coalition. Their equilibrium does not change, except temporarily in favor of early adopters. All it may accomplish in the aggregate is a more hectic

rather than a more thoughtful process.

- **Electronic voting does not strengthen democracy**

The Internet enables electronic voting and hence may increase voter turnout. But it also changes democracy from a representative model to one of direct democracy.

Direct democracy puts a premium on resources of mobilization, favoring money and organization. It disintermediates elected representatives. It favors sensationalized issues over “boring” ones. Almost by definition, it limits the ability to make unpopular decisions. It makes harder the building of political coalition (Noam, 1980, 1981). The arguments against direct democracy were made perhaps most eloquently in the classic arguments for the adoption of the US Constitution, by James Madison in the *Federalist Papers #10*.

Electronic voting is not simply the same as traditional voting without the inconvenience of waiting in line. When voting becomes like channel clicking on remote, it is left with little of the civic engagement of voting. When voting becomes indistinguishable from a poll, polling and voting merge. With the greater ease and anonymity of voting, a market for votes is unavoidable. Participation declines if people know the expected result too early, or where the legitimacy of the entire election is in question.

- **Direct access to public officials will be phony**

In 1997, Wired magazine and Merrill Lynch commissioned a study of the political attitudes of the “digital connected”. The results showed them more participatory, more patriotic, more pro-diversity, and more voting-active. They were religious (56% say they pray daily); pro-death penalty (3/4); pro-Marijuana legalization (71%); pro-market (%) and pro-democracy (57%). But are they outliers or the pioneers of a new model? At the time of the survey (1997) the digitally connected counted for 9% of the population; they were better educated, richer (82% owned securities); whites; younger; and more Republican than the population as a whole. In the Wired/Merrill Lynch survey, none of the demographic variables were corrected for. Other studies do so, and reach far less enthusiastic results.

One study of the political engagement of Internet users finds that they are only slightly less likely to vote, and are more likely to contact elected officials. The Internet is thus a substitute for such contacts, not their generator. Furthermore, only weak causality is found. (Bimber 1998)

Another survey finds that Internet users access political information roughly in the same proportions as users of other media, about 5% of their overall information usage (Pew, 1998).

Another study finds that users of the Internet for political purposes tend to already involved. Thus, the Internet reinforces political activity rather than mobilizes new one (Norris, Pippa, 1999)

Yes, anybody can fire off email messages to public officials and perhaps even get a reply, and this provides an illusion of access. But the limited resource will still be scarce: the attention of those officials. By necessity, only a few messages will get through. Replies are canned, like answering machines. If anything, the greater flood of messages will make gatekeepers more

important than ever: power brokers that can provide access to the official. As demand increases while the supply is static, the price of access goes up, as does the commission to the middle-man. This does not help the democratic process.

Indeed, public opinion can be manufactured. Email campaigns can substitute technology and organization for people. Instead of grass roots one can create what has been described as “Astroturf”, i.e. manufactured expression of public opinion.

Ironically, the most effective means of communication (outside of a bank check) becomes the lowest in tech: the handwritten letter (Blau, 1988)

If, in the words of a famous cartoon, on the Internet nobody knows that you are a dog, then everyone is likely to be treated as one.

- **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 by an e-mail campaign, chat group interventions, and misinformation, and intraceable donations. People have started to worry about computer attacks by terrorists. They should worry more about state-sponsored interferences into other countries’ electronic politics.

Indeed, it is increasingly difficult to conduct national politics and policies in a globalized world, where distance and borders are less important than in the past, even if one does not share the

hyperbole of the “evaporation” of the Nation State (Negroponte 1995). The difficulty of societies to control their own affairs leads, inevitably, to backlash and regulatory intervention.

Conclusion:

It is easy to romanticize the past of democracy as Athenian debates in front of an involved citizenry, and to believe that its return by electronic means is neigh. A quick look to 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 is one of cacophony, fragmentation, increasing cost, and declining value of “hard” information.

The Internet makes it easier to gather and assemble information, to deliberate and to express oneself, and to organize and coordinate action. (Blau, 1998).

It would be simplistic to deny that the Internet can mobilize hard-to-reach groups, and that it has unleashed much energy and creativity. Obviously there will be some shining success stories. But it would be equally naïve to cling to the image of the early Internet - - nonprofit, cooperative, and free - - and ignore that it is becoming a commercial medium, like commercial broadcasting that replaced amateur ham radio. Large segments of society are disenchanted with a political system is that often unresponsive, frequently affected by campaign contributions, and always slow. To remedy such flaws, various solutions have been offered and embraced. To some it is to return to spirituality. For others it is to reduce the role of government and hence the scope of the democratic process. And to others, it is the hope for technical solution like the Internet. Yet, it would only lead to disappointment if the Internet would be sold as the snake oil cure for all

kinds of social problems. It simply cannot simply sustain such an expectation. Indeed if anything, the Internet will lead to less stability, more fragmentation, less ability to fashion consensus, more interest group pluralism. High capacity computers connected to high-speed networks are no remedies for flaws in a political system. There is no quick fix. There is no silver bullet. There is no free lunch.

The Internet is a thrilling tool. Its possibilities are enchanting, intoxicating, enriching. But liberating? We cannot see problems clearly if we keep on those rosy virtual glasses and think that by expressing everything in 1 and 0 and bundling them in packets we are even an analog inch closer to a better political system.

The Internet does not create a Jeffersonian democracy. It will not revive Tocqueville's Jacksonian America. It is not Lincoln-Douglas. It is not Athens,² nor Appenzell. It is less of a democracy than those low-tech places. But, of course, none of these places really existed either, except as a goal, a concept, an inspiration. And in that sense, the hopes vested in the Internet are a new link in a chain of hope. Maybe naïve, but certainly ennobling.

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¹ They would expand to the point where marginal benefit is equal to the value of marginal impact
² for those lucky to have had the vote.