2007

The Internet: Simulacrum of Democracy?

Eric Loo
University of Wollongong, eloo@uow.edu.au

•••

•••

•••

•••

•••The Internet:

Simulacrum of Democracy?

By Eric Loo

Abstract:

This chapter argues that depending on what criteria is used to evaluate the Internet's democratizing potential, one can easily arrive at disparate assessments of the medium's impact on society. If the Internet is assumed to be a tool that inherently enhances freedom of communication and social mobilization, then the medium will likely be evaluated positively. Essentially, technology per se does not foster nor hamper participatory democratic culture. Instead, users of the technology determine if the civic and democratizing potential of interactive communication technology can be realized. Therefore, the Internet is only a tool that enables users to disseminate their ideas and opinions, ideally 'without fear or favour', and to freely seek and receive information from global sources. The 'democratising' influence of the Internet is only as effective as allowed for by the country's communication, political, legal and institutional structures, the public discursive culture and the people's readiness to actively engage in the political process by using the Internet as the medium for this engagement.

The many faces of democracy

Deliberations on the ideal form of democracy often allude to the days of old in Athens where informed citizens could gather in a public space to muse, mull, debate and decide issues of public policy. Democratic governance is essentially judged by whether government decision making is underpinned by the majority-rule principle. Direct engagements between governments and their constituents through their elected representatives to resolve problems, create policies and implement action plans are deemed to be the truest form of government because they, theoretically, provide the best assurance of protection of one's civil liberties. Antithetical to democratic governance is a system where power resides exclusively with the elite, where the people have no effective or representative means of expressing their aspirations to those who rule; where the elite decide on public policy without any open forum via the mass media or the people's elected representatives.

Perceptions of "democracy" throughout history have varied from the Athenian notion to the 'soft-authoritarian' view that individual freedom and discourse without responsibility or discipline runs the risk of fomenting chaos and anarchy in societies that are plagued by economic, racial and cultural disparities. For instance, one can argue that elections are meaningless if nations lack a rule of law, economic freedom or a constitution that guarantees civil liberties. 'Soft-authoritarian' governance has even been argued to have performed better in its economic indicators than dictatorships or uncontrolled democratic states. The latter view is often expounded by former Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, and current 'Minister Mentor' of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew.

Mahathir (2003) has often alluded to the concept of a "benevolent despot" who acts in the broader interests of society, especially in societies plagued by simmering racial tensions. Liberal democracy, according to Mahathir's conception, tends to render governments powerless where, sometimes, the outspoken, articulate and majority rule principle is used to deprive the silent minority of its rights. Likewise, Lee Kuan Yew

(2003) notes that "you can have democracy and growth provided you have democracy and discipline in society".

Conversely, Western leaders argue that there are essential democratic principles common to every successful society. George W. Bush (2003) in expounding on these 'universal' values of progressive democracy, ironically at the height of the US invasion of Iraq, notes the direct relationship between "successful societies" and democratic values, such as (a) the limitation by the people of the power of the state and the military; (b) government accountability to the "will of the people, and not the will of an elite". (c) impartial rule of the law to protect freedom rather than to punish political opponents; (d) healthy civic institutions, labor unions and independent newspapers and broadcast media; (e) religious liberty; and (f) laws that "prohibit and punish official corruption, and invest in the health and education of their people." [1]

The world of democracy according to Mahathir, Lee and Bush reflects the implicit conflict between individual freedom, equality and individual rights with collective responsibility, majority rule, the notion of a greater good and respect for authority. But more than just differentiating between individual freedom and liberty with the collective good, their perceptions underscore the relativity of 'democratic values' across cultures and political systems.

This chapter does not intend to delve into the philosophical debate about democracy as a practice or an institution. Instead, it simply refers to democracy as a process of active open engagement between citizens and their elected representatives, who in turn are obliged to represent their constituents' interests, aspirations and concerns to the inner circles of government. An active open engagement is defined by the regular exchange of opinions on issues of public policies in a public forum, which is

---

[1] The references to George W. Bush, Mahathir Mohamad and Lee Kuan Yew are meant to show the perceptual differentiation of democratic values. Their political ideologies are well-known and have been widely published. For an insight into Mahathir's political legacy, refer to: Hwang, In-Won, (2003), *Personalised politics: the Malaysian state under Mahathir,* Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore. For a picture of how George W. Bush had sheltered his foreign policies and actions behind his conceptualization of democracy, refer to Chomsky, Noam (2003), *Hegemony Or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance,* Allen & Unwin, Sydney; and Goodman, Amy (2004), *The exception to the rulers – exposing America's war profiteers, the media that love them, and the crackdown on our rights,* Allen & Unwin, NSW, Australia. It is also well known how George W. Bush had sheltered his policies and actions behind the 'democracy' concept. For an alternative account of the Bush administration's political agenda and double standards, read Moore, Michael (2003), *Dude, where's my country?.* Time Warner Books, NY.

facilitated and expressed either through the public, commercial and alternative media or, in the context of this chapter, the Internet. [2] An informed citizenry, which is possible only if they enjoy equitable access to diverse sources of opinion, is therefore essential to this form of participative democracy [3] (Keane, 1991). The next section provides an overview of how the Internet in parts of Asia has played a role in facilitating the process of 'democratization'[4]

The tests of democracy

Examining the Internet's capacity to 'democratise' can be problematic in countries where the media are controlled by the state, where the Internet's architecture is primarily designed for efficient commercial transactions in a consumerist culture -- besides pornography, sport news and gambling -- rather than to foster a political culture of reasoned language, informed debates, or expressions of public discontent and consensus.[5] This problem is not new. One of the earliest studies of how political problems could be solved by new communication technology was conducted by the Roosevelt Center for American Policy Studies (Arterton, 1987). Then termed "teledemocracy" before the Internet became a public medium, Arterton cited the use of "participation technologies" to facilitate the transmission of political information and opinion between citizens and their public leaders. These technologies took the following formats: televised call-ins; mail-back ballots (for instance, ballots printed in local newspapers, often as a special supplement) to stimulate citizens into returning

---

[2] For an example of how journalists have initiated a mechanism for generating community debates of public issues, look at the Webdiary started in 2000 by author and journalist, Margo Kingston sited in the Sydney Morning Herald web page at: http://webdiary.smh.com.au/index.html

[3] Keane, John (1991) in *The media and democracy,* Polity Press, Cambridge, UK, notes that "democracy is best understood as a system of procedural rules with normative implications. These rules specify who is authorized to make collective decisions and through which procedures such decisions are to be made, regardless of the areas of life in which democracy is practiced" (p.168). He goes on to explain the rationale for a "representative mechanism as a necessary condition of democratic procedure because in large-scale complex societies, regular assemblies 'of the people' as a whole are technically impossible" (p.169), thus alluding to the relevance of the Internet as one of the medium to facilitate the people's participation in the democratic political process. Read pp.168-193 for details.

[4] Without getting bogged down by definitional arguments, this chapter reads 'democratisation' as any activities that contribute to enhancing the democratic political process as explained in the introduction.

[5] For an overview of conceptual frameworks adopted by previous scholars in speculating on the 'democratising' influence of the Internet, particularly that of the work by Howard Rheingold, refer to

the ballots or to solicit citizen views and preferences in one policy area; interactive cable television; teleconferencing and videoconferencing; computer conferencing; electronic mail and videotext (ibid, pp.38-43).

The question then was not whether, but how, the new media would influence the political process. Optimism that teledemocracy would evolve as a consequence of "participation technologies" was based on the assumption that the political process exercised by political institutions are primarily influenced by the structure of communications available to a particular society at a certain point in time. [6] Thus, the advent of participation technologies, it was theorized, would lead to the birth of 'participatory democracy' which, as futurologist Naisbitt (1982) noted, would enhance the people's "ability to make decisions about how institutions, including governments and corporations should operate" (p.160).

Naisbitt's contemporary, Toffler (1980) likewise noted that the 'communications (technology) revolution' would transform national politics - from electronic voting to providing a public space for citizens to debate on community issues and contribute to policy making decision. Both postulated that public opinion mobilized through these participation technologies would drive the nation's politics. Their main argument, which was technologically deterministic to an extent, alluded to the inherent capacity of new technology to positively transform how citizens communicate, and through this dialogic process, modify the way governments govern.

Others argued at that time that the "communications revolution will generate a new social class that will restructure political institutions to its liking … (that) our current political institutions -- parties, representative legislatures, bureaucratic agencies -- will prove increasingly incapable of dealing with the demands of a large and ever more complex society" which would in turn generate a class of information (*knowledge)* producers and transmitters" (*italics added*, Arterton, 1987, p.19*).* To what extent the pre-Internet optimistic speculations during the early 80s have eventuated today is still open to interpretation.

Thornton, Alinta (2002), *Does Internet create democracy?* MA Thesis, University of Technology Sydney, http://www.zip.com.au/~athornto//intro.htm

[6] Which means if one controls the voting software, one controls the election outcomes. This is implied in the US presidential election in Florida in the week of Oct. 17, 2004 where votes were registered via a laptop in the polling booth.

Direct citizen participation via the telephonic applications in the political process was seen as unworkable because it was too time consuming, costly and would complicate the policy-making process. A critical factor, which dampened the anticipation of a majoritarian solution to political issues offered by direct teledemocracy, was the prevalence of lukewarm citizens, many of whom were apathetic towards political matters. And even if they were interested, the average citizen seemed indifferent to reading or researching the details of complex policy issues. Low rates of citizen involvement, vast inequalities in participation across different social classes, rigid bureaucracies that hindered the free flow of information, and the unspoken fear of persecution for voicing dissent, also exacerbated political apathy among citizens, for instance in Malaysia and Singapore.

In summary, there were two schools of thought in Arterton's study of 'teledemocracy': (a) those who believe in the majoritarian concept of direct "electronically induced democracy" (p.23), who accept without question "the normative proposition that individuals and groups should decide for themselves .. that (technology) may overcome the (discursive) problems created by large numbers of citizens"; and (b) those who considered the teledemocracy concept on a theoretical and institutional level rather than as a normative assertion. They argued that instead of the direct electronically induced democracy, for all practical purposes, a representative machinery was necessary to "ameliorate the divisive conflicts over political interest, to contain political ambition, to balance inequalities of participation and knowledge, and to safeguard minority rights" (ibid, p.23)

However, both proponents and critics agreed that high levels of cynicism and distrust by the citizens of the state would threaten any democratic political process, whether they are directly "electronically induced" or exercised through the representative system. The question for both was whether communications technology could effectively address entrenched public apathy and cynicism, either by transforming the political institutions or facilitating greater citizen participation in the political process, or both. The next section revisits this question and examines the work of previous scholars who have investigated into how the Internet has or has not helped to facilitate

direct citizen participation in the political process, and thus, strengthen the representative political institutions.

Whither democracy on the Internet?

Currently, the Internet's architecture is primarily driven by electronic commercial imperatives. The Internet essentially embodies a laissez-faire marketplace of consumer products, entertainment and information, which range from political ideologies and agendas to fiction, facts and opinions. It has become so much a part of daily commercial transactions, lobby group activities and private lives that the medium, and its subliminal influence on human communication, is taken for granted. The Internet has given birth to concepts such as e-democracy, e-government, e-learning, e-business, e-commerce. Each concept is premised on the Internet's capacity to 'revolutionise' the way we live, transact, communicate and govern. For civil society groups in emerging democracies in Malaysia, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Indonesia, the Internet has been embraced with great expectations that the medium will emancipate the disenfranchised and give a global voice to the local silent majority. To the governments, however, the Internet is seen as a double edged sword -- as it opens up the marketplace of ideas, it also ushers in 'undesirable' ideologies, thus justifying the need for governments to cast wider the net of state censorship, firewalls and data filters.

Advocates of the Internet's empowering attributes do profess uncritical faith in the technology to solve the world's problems by opening up new pathways for greater democracy in previously closed societies. Current pathways are provided by weblogs [7] and *Wikipedia* that allow users to contribute to and edit each other's opinionated

---

[7] The multiplier effect of self-published political commentaries, especially since 11 September 2001, has seen ideas and opinions flooding the myriad of weblog sites. As users are free to edit each other's posting, the process works like a stockmarket where, as one commentator puts it, "ideas and opinions correct themselves with the rapid turnover of discursive articles written by unidentifiable myriad of users on the Internet". Bad ideas kill themselves off in the process, thus tipping the balance towards productive and cooperative members of the 'Wiki' community (which means 'quick' in Hawaiian where the first 'Wiki' media began). Webloggers generally believe that through the dialectical process of weblogging, quality content ultimately emerges. This genre of 'participatory journalism' has been greeted with enthusiasm, despite the initial apprehension of its intellectual quality. Wikipedia sites are also appearing in China (http://zh.wikipedia.org). Many major media outlets have already established weblogs, maintained by journalists, columnists and editors. Weblogs in China were closely monitored by the government. Recent incidents of government interference are on March 11, 2004 when the government shut down BlogBus.com for posting a letter critical of the government. This was followed, three days later on March 14, when Blogcn.com was shut down.

articles. Free weblogging software has so simplified the process of weblogging that a computer novice can literally become a weblogger overnight.

Techno-realists, however, downplay the Internet hype, including weblogging, because there is as yet no conclusive evidence that the Internet has indeed changed the way that governments govern nor fostered informed discourse among users.[8] In the absence of any feedback mechanism embedded in government web sites, currently perceived as one of the products of an e-democracy, the Internet is in fact been reduced to a high-tech polling machine by the power elites to gauge changing public attitudes. This means that governments are to an extent using the Internet as a market research and public relations tool to disseminate bureaucratic information and state political ideologies. This is apparent in the Australian experience (see chapter by Morris Jones).

Research on Internet usage pattern in the Philippines (Santos, 2003) and Malaysia (Loo, 2003; Hashim & Yusof, 2001) show that the contents of online discussion do not completely reflect the attributes of a democratic culture as explained earlier. *Listserv* groups and bulletin boards are mainly driven by mutual interests and shared ideologies. Online discourse is thus akin to preaching to the converted, and in some cases, self-indulging diatribes by elites who profess a stake in the subject matter. To what extent the diatribes and dialogues in listserv groups can impact on the political process is unclear from the scattered literature. Benson's (1996) research on Usenet groups found that at one level, the anonymous, confrontational, ideological debate does not meet the ideals of democratic discussion offered by theorists, for its "name-calling, the flaming, and the ideological demonization common to both sides" (p. 34).

Stromer-Gallye (2000) likens the kind of horizontal talk on the Internet to casual conversation in "lifestyle enclaves," in which there "is the simulacrum of democracy" and a culture that "isolates individuals while seducing them with mere appearances of communication and collectivity". And in the process, users are unwittingly providing information via cookies back to governments and big business with every keystroke. In online conversational situations where there are no clear rules, where no one has a

---

[8] Refer to Ferdinand (2000) for a compilation of case studies which show that the modest impact of the Internet on the political process.

stake in the discussion or its outcomes, or when the conversation is not politically oriented, genuine deliberation does not occur. When the conversation is personal and political, online chatters often degenerate into ideological slanders.

Research on online political campaign and vertical communication is likewise ambivalent. Davis (1999) conducted a detailed study of American political candidate Web sites in 1996, examining who were online, and what were their contents. He found that the major political parties and their candidates had sophisticated sites distinguishable in content and quality from lesser-known party and candidate sites. Out of the 100 political campaign sites, 75% of the candidates used interactive features, such as e-mail addresses, on their sites. But none of the candidates used the Internet to engage with their constituents on policy issues. Instead, as Jones notes in his chapter in this book, political websites are one method for politicians to survey the public sentiment without any obligation to reply.

In Banerjee's (2003) country reports of e-democracy in Asia, the common impediments to the democratizing influence of the Internet were attributed to limited access to telecommunication infrastructure, a culture of self-censorship, state control, media ownership and the lack of a democratic discursive culture. However, the country researchers acknowledged that the Internet had provided an alternative for the people to voice their political views. "In a context where the mass media has often been strictly controlled by the state, the Internet offers a new channel of communication, a new voice, a new hope for those who have been marginalized and prevented from participating in the political process" (ibid:22).

Shuli Hu (2003), editor of *Caijing Magazine*, a biweekly in People's Republic of China (2003) notes the Internet's positive impact on China's media as: (a) the loosening of regulations on information dissemination, which has sped up the delivery of the news; (b) the Internet has become the main channel to gauge public opinion; and (c) the government has become more tolerant of the news media. However, Kluver and Qiu (2003:54) note that the Internet's democratising influence in China is limited by the medium's accessibility to only the affluent and well-educated social strata. State regulations, likened by cyber activists to the 'Great Firewall of China', also limit access to only approved sites approved by the government. Sites on the

blacklist include New York Times, CNN, Times, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Playboy.

As in Singapore, Chinese language sites such as the People's Daily bulletin board, *Sohu.com* and *Sina.com* are routinely monitored and filtered for any references to democracy, human rights, Tibet and lately, references to Falun Gong. Proxy servers that circumvent these regulations are only available to techno-savvy users who are mainly in the minority living in the urban areas. The backdrop to this culture of self-censorship was in October 2000 when the Chinese Government legislated that ISPs are responsible for users accessing any banned content. That effectively introduced another roadblock to the flow of information, and thus the fostering of a democratic culture. The greatest obstacle is the state-owned telecommunication infrastructure,[9] which allows for the persecution of users caught accessing the blacklisted sites.

Kluver and Qiu (2003) note that "current trends of technological diffusion alone will not play a significant role in creating a more democratic nation, so it is vital that Chinese policy-makers, academics and netizens attempt to create a cyberspace with Chinese characteristics that will adequately realize not only the goals of economic development, but also social stability and political maturity" (p. 55). What these "Chinese characteristics" are is open to conjecture.

Perhaps, the "Chinese characteristics" can be understood through how the Chinese government reacts to a crisis situation via its control of the Internet, such as during the SARS epidemic in 2003 when websites and bulletin boards were monitored (Xiao 2003). During the entire "cover-up" period no on-line information and discussions

---

[9] The Ministry of Information Industry (MII) is the apex regulatory body for information technology in China that governs the physical networks of China Telecom, Unicom and private VSATs. The Interconnecting ISPs are ChinaNET, China Golden Bridge Network (GBN), CERnet and CSTnet. ChinaNET is the largest commercial ISP in China; GBN is part of the Government's Golden Projects to provide the latest technology in different sectors; CERnet is the education network; CSTnet is administered by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. (Hu, 2003) According to Xiao (2003), "the multi-layered strategy to control Internet content and monitor online activities … is built on a mixture of legal regulations and blocking, filtering and surveillance technology. Since 1995, more than 60 laws have been enacted to govern Internet activities in China. The latest regulations, enacted in August 2002, require Internet publishers to censor their own sites or risk being shut down. More than 30,000 state security employees are currently conducting surveillance of web pages, chat rooms, and private email messages."

were allowed to contradict the official line. However, the use of SMS "did challenge the official monopoly of information" (ibid).

Duggal (2003) notes a different set of structural impediments in India where more than 70% of the population live in rural areas with the Internet being practically non-existent. He notes: "People need to be educated about the usage and role of the Internet. Political leadership needs to advocate the benefits of using the Internet for political purposes and processes. There is a need to change people's mindset (where most) view IT in isolation to democracy" (p. 85).

In Indonesia, Gumilar (2003) notes that the Internet has helped to break the government monopoly on the mass media, but cautions that "it is too early to conclude that the technology has had a major role in enhancing the democratization process, since the usage of the technology is unevenly spread and represents a digital divide among the people" (p.117). Likewise, Hill and Sen (2000) in their study of the Internet's role in the downfall of Suharto in 1998, note that "the state of the (Internet) technology in Indonesia offers possibilities of enormous discursive openness, but technology alone will not secure such a public space". What is needed, they add, is "a continued and conscious commitment from the participants to maintain an autonomy from the state, and capital".[10]

In examining the concept of e-democracy in Malaysia I noted that optimism for an e-democracy to fully evolve is currently tempered by physical barriers such as the high cost of computers and the urban-rural divide in Internet accessibility; secondly, conceptual barriers created by the dominance of the English language on the Internet conflict with the theoretically inclusive nature of the medium; and thirdly, the state's ambivalence towards direct engagement with its citizenry on the Internet (Loo, 2003). The prospects for e-democracy are relatively dim as the conceptual and cultural barriers remain unchallenged by the bureaucracy, academic ethos and discursive environment, which together are heavily shrouded by an information secrecy syndrome as far as research, information sharing and knowledge generation is concerned. Research information continues to be seen more as a tool for self-

---

[10] Refer to Hill, David T & Sen, Krishna (2000), *The Internet in Indonesia's new democracy,* in Ferdinand, Peter (2000) ibid, pp.119-136.

empowerment of the elites than as a resource to be shared, debated, generated and transferred to the grassroots.

In the Philippines, Santos (2003) sees the Internet as further polluting the public sphere by "dispensing information indiscriminately" (p.254) which already is being provided for by television and the cellular phone "which together account for most of the bombardment of information and gossip the nation gets today" (p.255). Santos adds: "And lately, television networks and mobile phone companies have been marrying their strengths, particularly where a television program calls for public participation, an arrangement in which text-messaging fits perfectly. In the marriage of the joke box and the idiot box in a movie-going, happy-going, short-attention-span market, what chance does the more serious Internet really have? For that matter, what chance does serious democracy have?" (ibid: 256).[11]

In Singapore, Banerjee and Yeo (2003) note that the "political apathy (and fearful convictions towards political discourse) of Singaporean citizens has been a major obstacle to the establishment of a democratic process and environment" (p.285). Rananand (2003) in her study of Thailand's Internet system says that while the technology has created significant changes in the communication between government departments and the people, democratization remains limited by the digital divide.

Simulacrum of democracy?

The brief survey shows a mixed evaluation of the Internet's potential to enhance the democratic process. The common thread of argument is that the Internet's influence is limited by inadequate human capital, technological maturity, governance and communication infrastructure to fully exploit the medium's enabling capacity to generate ideas and debates in the public domain; and secondly, despite the proliferation of online news sites, for instance in Malaysia, there is as yet little indication that the structure of established media institutions have changed to the extent that they are able to scrutinise the activities of the state and corporations (which

---

[11] However, for an insight into how 'People Power II", as exercised via the Internet has contributed to the downfall of Joseph Estrada from his Presidency in 2000, refer to Robles, Alan C *Internet and democracy,* Panorama, 3/2001, pp.5-21. http://www.kas-asia.org/Publication.htm#pano32001

tend to be mostly in cahoots). This is to the level that they were unable to do so before the Internet became central to the public communications system. A deliberative democratic culture will therefore not evolve, as one would hope for, if differentiated ideas and petitions by individuals are not likewise transformed into a collective intent to dialogue openly on the Internet that will in turn lead to some form of collective civil action.

In *Freedom and Culture* (1939) philosopher John Dewey suggests that democracy must begin and end in a culture of equity and freedom; that the political realities of a democratic society will manifest themselves only if democracy is cultivated and nurtured at the grassroots, that is, established from the ground up in schools, families and the wider communities. Without a viable culture of freedom, the constitution (or the Internet for that matter) can do very little to salvage the political reality of democracy. However, the reality in parts of Asia is closer to a plutocracy of wealth and class, instead of a political culture "where, as the Indian pacifist, Mohandas Gandhi said, "the weakest should have the same opportunity as the strongest".

The socio-economic reality in countries such as the Philippines, India, Indonesia, and to an extent, Malaysia, show a minority possesses the major portion of the nation's power and wealth while the masses live in abject poverty. The Internet in this context looks more like an irrelevant high-powered tool handed to a poor handyman who has no access to the resources to build nor create. Like a handyman living with an illusion of creative capacity, Internet penetration rates have provided governments with an illusion of progress devoid of the attributes of a democratic public culture.

Discussions about how the Internet has enhanced democracy, if at all, in Southeast Asia, including China, echo the period when VCRs, and DBS were first introduced in the 60s as a tool of modernization (Schramm, 1964). It is thus easy to be overly sanguine with the Internet's capacity to foster greater 'people power' following the flood of alternative citizen-centred activist web sites in the late-90s in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. However, the Internet's enabling force to democratise and hold governments accountable in this case has only remained theoretical. In reality, the average citizen's priorities, and the state's agenda are still being defined

more by tangible economic outcomes than abstract democratic discourse or the propagation of public interest values on the Internet.

The actualization of public interest values in newly developed nations such as Malaysia is conspicuous by its absence. The Malaysian government has instead used the Internet primarily as a tool to foster "insiderism" and consumer interest among its citizens (Tong, 2002). Tong notes that users have been socialised to feel that they are the privileged group to have been given a rare opportunity and in return should use the technologies in line with good Malaysian principles, which often means that "any problems should not be made known to those outside the established power structure -- that a solution must not be made without consulting the authorities who supposedly know the national interests better." In other words, it would be considered unpatriotic to wash national dirty linen in the public space, notably on the Internet. "It is therefore unsurprising that under the MSC (multimedia super corridor) flagship, e-government was not established to promote participatory politics among the people by encouraging them to talk or to organise themselves concerning policies and other related matters" (ibid).

The Internet has evidently been used to foster a consumerist lifestyle, which reflects the government's tendencies to gauge any dissension along with modernity in terms of technological advancement, as represented by the Malaysian MSC project's commercial goals. Thus, the often cited records by the Malaysian government of incremental growth in the number of commercial web sites, online transactions, e-commerce projects, and foreign investments in the MSC, the progress of which, according to McKinsey in February 2001, had been curtailed by excessive bureaucracy. The InfoSoc 2002 conference at Kota Kinabalu in June, organised by the National IT Council of Malaysia likewise cited the administrative, political, bureaucratic and societal mindsets as preventing Malaysians from taking full advantage of an open forum peculiar to a 'democratic state'.[12]

---

[12] For details refer to Loo, E (2003) "E-democracy in Malaysia: Chasing the winds of change", in Banerjee, Indrajit (ed) (2003). *Rhetoric and reality: The Internet challenge for democracy in Asia,* Times Media Academic Publishing, Singapore, pp.179-234. For an example of a pilot project in e-governance in Malaysia, visit the Subang Jaya e-community portal, which started in 1999, at http://www.usj.com.my/aboutus.php3

In the case of Singapore, the government is seen to be using the Internet to propagandise, regulate, shape and nurture the nation's 'shared values' ideology - that is, nation above community and society above self; family as the basic unit of society; regard and community support for the individual; consensus instead of contention; and racial and religious harmony. Regulating the Internet and new media in Singapore is mostly about ensuring "an automatic functioning power for political expedience and longevity" (Lee, 2002, p.6).

Gomez notes in his observation of Internet politics in Singapore that even though the government has provided the infrastructure for widespread Internet use, the public remains nervous about using it for political ends because of prevailing restrictive laws, systems of surveillance and punitive actions. "The apparatus of control and intimidation does not match the language of transparency and access inherent in the IT revolution" (ibid, 2002, p.18).

That the Internet has provided citizens with greater access to more alternative sources of information is undisputed. If the hardware and software are affordable and the technological know-how attained, the once-voiceless have been evidently empowered to interact within a network of local and global sources in real-time. Its democratic outcomes, however, are empirically vague.

Questions unasked

Akin to radio, telephone and television, the Internet has today become for most a medium of ordinariness. Like passive viewers surfing aimlessly on the multi-channels of cable television in search of entertainment and ill-defined news, Internet users are likewise becoming jaded. This raises a question of whether the information overload has in fact de-motivated rather than democratise human interaction.

As it is, today's politics are clearly outside most of the daily experiences of the average person who are caught up in the daily stress of trying to make ends meet. The people's potential involvement in the various levels of government, for instance, with the experience of Malaysia and Singapore which boast of a high Internet penetration rate, is impeded by bureaucratic hurdles whenever one attempts to request for

information which should be on the public record – for instance, migrant labour statistics, pecuniary records of government officials, salary levels of politicians. [13] These hurdles are raised even higher by the artificial distance created to separate elected representatives from their constituents. In cultures where politicians regard themselves as elites, rather than as servants of the people, the communication pattern is highly vertical. This is reflected in the lack of interactive mechanisms in government websites.[14] Email enquiries are seldom acknowledged nor replied. These political websites end up being more of a public relations channel than an open medium for the community to access their elected representatives.[15]

To speculate on the Internet's transformative influence on the political process is problematic because technologies alone do not determine their political participation. Technologies exist as part of a complicated relationship of social needs, cultural patterns, discursive culture, civic consciousness, and economic constraints. Ferdinand (2000: p.174) notes that "even in the United States, where Internet penetration is still very much greater than in any other country, commentators are still awaiting the first signs of real (political) transformation."

New technology must be supplemented by parallel transformation in the human capital base. Ferdinand notes: "the scale of transformation that will be needed for current post-industrial societies to become genuinely 'information societies', where all, or almost all, citizens are roughly equal in their access to all new channels of information, as well as all the old ones, and where they also have the sophistication to make the best use of them is just too big to expect real transformation to take place" (p.175). The impact of the Internet in giving the people a voice is most obvious in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian states such as in Indonesia, China, Cambodia,

---

[13] For an overview of public access to information in the Asean region, refer to a 2001 study by the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, "Democrats and dictators: Southeast Asia's uneven information landscape" by Yvonne T. Chua, *Development Dialogue* 2002:1, pp. 22-36.

[14] For background reading of government websites in Malaysia refer to Loo, E (2003) "E-democracy in Malaysia: Chasing the winds of change", in Banerjee, Indrajit (ed) (2003). *Rhetoric and reality: The Internet challenge for democracy in Asia,* Times Media Academic Publishing, Singapore, pp.179-234.

[15] As in footnote 9.

Laos, Malaysia, Singapore. The parallel transformation in the political institutions, however, remains relatively modest if not elusive.[16 & 17]

Concluding remarks:

'Democratisation' in the context of this chapter primarily refers to the process of political decision making through a two-way engagement between the government and the people. This means putting in place the necessary mechanisms to facilitate the people's direct participation in public affairs. This is done by sanctioning an Athenian-type public space – via, for instance, the Internet, conventional mass media, public forum in city halls and public libraries, for instance -- where rational discourse among well-informed participating citizens can take place independent of state or power interference and corporate influence. The Internet, theoretically, does provide this public space and pathway through which these democratic goals can be attained. However, the reality in parts of Asia is quite different, primarily because the Internet is being applied as a tool for commercial transactions, entertainment and vacuous chat at the neglect of exploiting the dialectical strengths of the medium in mobilising the force of public opinion to foster positive changes where local, state and national governments carry out their responsibilities.

The attributes of the Internet -- volume, speed, affordability, infinite channels, diverse and special interest audience groupings, quick transaction time and real-time interactivity -- differentiate the medium from the mass media that we knew of a decade ago. But whether these attributes will transform political institutions and

---

[16] Refer to Ferdinand, 2000, pp.174-182 for a picture of the modest impact of the Internet in transforming politics and changing political institutions based on case studies of states in Europe, US and Asia.

[17] For an overview of Asian countries readiness to exploit the liberating opportunities offered by the Internet, go to: http://www.cid.harvard.edu/cr/gitrr_30202.html. The NRI developed by the Center for International Development at Harvard University (2002) looked at a country's network connectivity, and the relationship between network use and enabling factors such as network access (information infrastructure, hardware/software support), network policy (ICT policy, business/economic environment), networked society (networked learning, ICT opportunities, social capital), and networked economy (e-commerce, e-government, general infrastructure). Out of 75 countries surveyed, Malaysia ranks at 36 in its readiness for the networked world compared to Singapore (8), Hong Kong (13), Korea (20) and Japan (21). Thailand ranks at 43, Philippines (58), and Indonesia (59). The top five are USA, Iceland, Finland, Sweden and Norway. In the networked society component index, Malaysia ranked 44th (for networked learning); 39th (for ICT opportunities); and 52nd (for its social capital) -- an average 45th ranking.

practice will essentially depend on how citizens and the state choose to use the medium.

This chapter has also highlighted the fact that the Internet is full of paradoxes. While it has facilitated the global exchange of information and, thus, challenged the state's dominant grip on public discourse, it has also reinforced governments' and big businesses' hands in monitoring and filtering public opinion. Secondly, while the Internet has certainly fostered greater information exchange among citizens, their different capacities in accessing the Internet has also widened the information literacy gap. Thirdly, while much information is generated on the Internet, there is no guarantee of informed meaningful discourse, thus knowledge transfer.

Depending on what criteria is used to evaluate the Internet's democratizing potential, one arrives at disparate assessments of the medium's impact on society. If the Internet is assumed to be a tool that inherently enhances freedom of communication and social mobilization, then the medium will likely be evaluated positively. However, the Internet can likewise be controlled by governments that own the communication infrastructure and the type of applications being promoted on the Internet. Essentially, technology per se does not foster nor hamper participatory democratic culture. It is the users of the technology who determine if the civic and democratizing potential inherent in the technology of interactive communication can be realized.

Therefore, the Internet is only a tool that potentially enables users to disseminate their ideas and opinions, ideally 'without fear or favour', and to freely seek and receive information from global sources. The 'democratising' influence of the Internet is only as effective as allowed for by the country's communication, legal and institutional structures, the public discursive culture and the people's readiness to actively engage in the political process using the Internet as the medium for this engagement.

With prevalent cynicism and civic distrust of the political systems, the pressing question remains: to what extent can the Internet reconnect the governed with those who govern, thus transforming and restructuring political institutions along the way? One can be easily persuaded to resign to the mindset that the Internet cannot offer

much of an improvement given the current political apathy – this, not for the lack of civic commitment among the people but more of a despondency borne from a long history of being governed by 'soft authoritarianism', as alluded to by Mahathir Mohamad and Lee Kuan Yew.

However, since 1986 when I registered my first email account, the communication network I have established with sources from both Western democracies and 'soft authoritarian' countries have shown the medium's enabling power to generate ideas, organise movements and mobilise political actions. This knowledge-generating and mobilising capacity is obvious from the many independent media alliances, alternative news sites, and special interest listserv groups set up with colleagues from Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, China, Singapore and Malaysia. However, whether the online dialogues have led to real changes in the political process in the respective countries is yet unclear. It may take a generational change. But one remains optimistic that the hold on the media by corporate elites and the silencing of the public voice by the state will gradually weaken with the critical usage of the Internet by an emerging net-generation to spread the democratic values of open dialogue.

Bibliography:

ABC Online, *China targets weblogs in censorship bid*. 18/03/2004. [http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/s1068965.htm] [Accessed May 18, 2004]

Arterton, F. Christopher (1987), *Teledemocracy: Can technology protect democracy?* Sage Publications, CA.

Banerjee, Indrajit (ed) (2003). *Rhetoric and reality: The Internet challenge for democracy in Asia,* Times Media Academic Publishing, Singapore.

Benchmarking E-Government: A Global Perspective, UN Division for Public Economics and Public Administration & American Society for Public Administration, 2001 p.14). (http://www.unpan.org/egovernment2.asp) (Accessed June 25, 2002).

Benson, T. W. (1996). Rhetoric, civility, and community: Political debate on computer bulletin boards. *Communication Quarterly,* 44, 359-368.

Bertelson, D. A. (1992). Media form and government: Democracy as an archetypal image in the electronic age. *Communication Quarterly,* 40, 325-337.

Bush, George W, (2003), President Bush Discusses Freedom in Iraq and Middle East at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy United States Chamber of Commerce Washington, D.C., November. [http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-2.html] [Accessed May 26, 2004]

Chomsky, Noam (2003), *Hegemony Or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance,* Allen & Unwin, Sydney;

Chua, Yvonne T (2002). Democrats and dictators: Southeast Asia's uneven information landscape, *Development Dialogue* 2002:1, PCIJ and SEAPA, pp. 22-36.

CID - Center for International Development, (2002). *The Global Information Technology Report 2001-2002: Readiness for the Networked World. Oxford University Press,* UK (http://www.cid.harvard.edu/cr/gitrr_30202.html), (Accessed on June 20, 2002).

Davis, R. (1999). *The web of politics: The Internet's impact on the American political system*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Dewey, John (1939), *Freedom and culture,* Putnam Books, NY.

Duggal, Pavan (2003). Internet and democracy in India: a report, in Banerjee, Indrajit (ed) *Rhetoric and reality: The Internet challenge for democracy in Asia,* Times Media Academic Publishing, Singapore, pp.61-98.

Ferdinand, Peter (2000) (ed), *The Internet, democracy and democratisation,* Frank Cass: London.

Gomez, James (2002), *Internet politics: Surveillance and intimidation in Singapore,* Bangkok & Singapore: Think Centre.

Goodman, Amy (2004), *The exception to the rulers – exposing America's war profiteers, the media that love them, and the crackdown on our rights,* Allen & Unwin, NSW, Australia.

Gumilar, Somantri (2003), Towards democracy beyond societies: a study of Internet practices in Indonesian Politics, in Banerjee, Indrajit (ed) *Rhetoric and reality: The Internet challenge for democracy in Asia,* Times Media Academic Publishing, Singapore, pp. 97-121.

Hashim, Rahmah & Yusof, Arfah (2001), Malaysia in *Internet in Asia,* Ramanathan, S & Becker, Jorg (eds), Asian Media Information and Communication Centre, Singapore, pp. 102-109.

Hill, David T., & Sen, Krishna (2000), The Internet in Indonesia's new democracy, in Ferdinand, Peter (2000) (ed), *The Internet, democracy and democratisation,* Frank Cass: London, pp. 119-136.

Hu, Shuli (2003), IT and the digital divide: Creating an Internet audience in China, in *Journalism Asia,* Issue 3, Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility, Manila, Philippines.

Hwang, In-Won, (2003), *Personalised politics: the Malaysian state under Mahathir,* Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.

Keane, John (1991), *The media and democracy,* Politi Press, Cambridge, UK.

Kluver, Randy & Qiu, Linchuan (2003). China, the Internet and democracy, in Banerjee, Indrajit (ed) *Rhetoric and reality: The Internet challenge for democracy in Asia,* Times Media Academic Publishing, Singapore, pp. 26-60.

Lee Kuan Yew (2003), A Conversation with Senior Minister Lee Kuan-Yew, *World Economic Forum,* Singapore, October 13.

Lee Kuan Yew (2001) Textbook western-style democracy not for S'pore, says SM Lee. *The Straits Times,* Nov.12.

 Lee, Terence (2002). The politics of new communication technologies in Singapore, *Asia Pacific Media Educator,* No:12/13, December, Wollongong, Australia, pp. 4-25.

Loo, Eric (2003). E-democracy in Malaysia; chasing the winds of change, in Banerjee, Indrajit (ed) *Rhetoric and reality: The Internet challenge for democracy in Asia,* Times Media Academic Publishing, Singapore, pp.179-234.

Mahathir Mohamed, *Diplomacy Need of Hour ,* Interviewed by Amir Taheri, Arab News, May 23, 2003.
[http://www.cse.unsw.edu.au/~norman/CurrentAffairs/TaheriMahathir.html]
[Accessed May 26, 2004]

Moore, Michael (2003), *Dude, where's my country?.* Time Warner Books, NY.

Naisbitt, J. (1982). *Megatrends: Ten new directions transforming our lives.* New York: Warner Brothers.

Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. (1998). *The Internet audience goes ordinary.* Washington, D.C.

Rananand, Pirongrong R. (2003). Internet and democracy in Thailand, in Banerjee, Indrajit (ed) *Rhetoric and reality: The Internet challenge for democracy in Asia,* Times Media Academic Publishing, Singapore, pp. 259-287.

Santos, Vergel (2003). The Internet and Philippine democracy: a frail connection, in Banerjee, Indrajit (ed) *Rhetoric and reality: The Internet challenge for democracy in Asia,* Times Media Academic Publishing, Singapore, pp. 235-258.

Schramm, Wilbur (1964), *Mass media and national development; the role of information in the developing countries,* Stanford, Calif., Stanford University Press,

Schudson, M (1997), Why conversation is not the soul of democracy. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 14, 297-309.

Stromer-Galley , Jennifer (2000), *Online Interaction and Why Candidates Avoid It, Journal of Communication*, International Communication Association. [http://www.asc.upenn.edu/usr/jstromer/interact.html] [Accessed, June 1, 2004).

Toffler, Alvin (1980). *The third wave.* New York: Bantam.

Tong, Yee Siong (2002), *Malaysia: New technologies and old issues,* unpublished paper presented at symposium on *"New communication technology and democracy in Asia – A symposium & editorial workshop,"* Friedrich Naumann Foundation & Journalism Media Studies Center, Hong Kong University, Nov.22-24.

White, C. S. (1997). Citizen participation and the Internet: Prospects for civic deliberation in the information age. *The Social Studies*, 88, 23-28.

Xiao Qiang (2003), *SARS' impact on media control and governance,* Testimony before the U.S. —China Economic and Security Review Commission, June 5, CA. [http://www.uscc.gov/researchreports/2000_2003/reports/qiates.htm] [Accessed 1 October 2004]