

Why the Internet Is Bad for Democracy

By ELI M. NOAM

T

he Internet is not simply a set of interconnected links and protocols—it is also a construct of the imagination, an inkblot test into which everyone projects their desires, fears, and fantasies. Some see enlightenment and education. Others see pornography and gambling. Some see sharing and collaboration. Others see spam and viruses. Yet when it comes to the impact on the democratic process, the answer seems unanimous. The Internet is good for democracy. It creates digital citizens active in the teledemocracy [1] of the Electronic Republic [2] in the e-nation [3]. But this bubble, too, needs to be pricked.

Skepticism about the Internet as a pro-democracy force is not based on its uneven distribution. It is more systemic. When it comes to the Internet, observers often commit a so-called error of composition. They observe a “micro” behavior and jump to a “macro” conclusion. They think that if something is helpful to an individual or group, it similarly affects society at large, when everyone uses it. To draw an analogy: it might be faster for an individual to drive to work in the morning. But if everybody does the same, they all may well be late for

work, and the environment is worse off than before due to mass motorization.

A second error is that of inference. Just because the Internet is good for democracy in places like North Korea, Iran, or Libya does not mean that it is better for Germany, Denmark, or the U.S. Just because 10 TV channels are better than three does not mean that 3,000 are better still.

So let us consider the principal claims for the Internet’s strengthening of democracy.

“The Internet will facilitate political participatory action.” Of course, the

Internet makes some political activity easier and cheaper. But it does so for everyone. And if everybody speaks, who will be listened to? Thus, any effectiveness of early users will soon be matched by their rivals and simply lead to an expensive and mutually stalemating political arms-race of investment in customization techniques and new-media marketing technologies.

The early users of the Internet experienced a gain in their effectiveness, and messianically extrapolated 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 initial strengthening of individuals and groups with computer and online skills (who usually had above-average income and education) and a relative weakening of those without such resources.

On top of that, the low cost exists primarily for the traditional narrowband Internet, which is largely text-based. But the broadband Internet will first permit and soon require fancy video and multimedia messages. "Netcasted" politics will be customized to be most effective. Extensive databases will be needed. None of this will be cheap.

"The Internet will raise the level of the political dialogue." Just because the quantity of information increases does not mean its average quality rises. On the contrary, as the Internet leads to more information clutter, it will become necessary for any message to get louder. Much of the political information, therefore, will inevitably become distorted, shrill, and simplistic.

One of the characteristics of the Internet is "disintermediation." For politics, disintermediation of information is a mixed bag. True, gatekeeping power is bad news, but so is disinformation. Screening and branding of information helps audiences. When information comes unfiltered, it will create community-based media but also lead to rumor and last-minute political ambush.

"Direct access to public officials becomes possible." Yes, anyone can send email messages to public officials and perhaps even get an automated reply, and this may provide 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. If anything, the greater flood of messages will make power brokers that can provide access more important than ever. Not to mention the fact that an ostensible outpouring of public opinion can be mass-produced. Ironically, the most effective means of communications to an elected official—other than a campaign contribution check—becomes the handwritten letter.

"The Internet provides more information, which is good for democracy." Access to information is indeed helpful, which is why the Internet undermines totalitarianism. But it undermines pretty much everything else, too, including political parties and stability. It also creates new tools for electronic Big Brother surveillance. More fundamentally, perhaps, the value of information to peace and harmony is overrated. Civil war situations are not typically based on a lack of information. Democracy requires stability, and stability requires a bit of inertia. The most stable democracies are characterized by a certain slowness of change. Examples are Britain and Switzerland.

It is easy to romanticize democracy's past as Athenian debates in front of an involved citizenry, and to believe in its return by electronic means. A quick look in the rearview mirror—to radio and television—is sobering. Here, too, the then-new media were heralded as harbingers of a new and improved political dialogue. But the reality has been one of cacophony, fragmentation, increasing cost, and declining value of "hard" information.

Of course, the Internet can mobilize hard-to-reach groups, and help individuals and groups to express themselves. It has unleashed much energy and creativity. Large segments of society are disenchanted with a political system that is often unresponsive, frequently affected by campaign contributions, and usually slow; and many look to the Internet as the silver bullet that will change it all. 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, nor Lincoln-Douglas. It is, if anything, less of a democracy than those low-tech places. But, of course, none of these places really existed either, except as an ideal, a goal, or an inspiration. And in that sense, the expectations vested in the Internet are a new link in a chain of hope. Maybe naïve, but certainly ennobling. **C**

REFERENCES

1. Etzioni, A. Communities: Virtual vs. real. *Science* 277 (July 18, 1997).
2. Grossman, K.L. *The Electronic Republic: Reshaping Democracy in the Information Age*. Viking, NY, 1995.
3. Katz, J. The digital citizen. *Wired* (Dec. 1997).

ELI M. NOAM (noam@columbia.edu) is a professor of finance and economics, and the director of the Columbia Institute for Tele-Information at Columbia University in New York.