

Information and communication technologies are transforming democracies worldwide. In fact, we are only beginning to tap their true potential.

RATING THE IMPACT OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES ON DEMOCRACY

Whether one thinks that more democracy is really better rests as much on values as it does on scientific theory and data. My own view is that stronger, more open, and more inclusive democracies provide the greater good for the greater number. There may come a time in its evolution when a point of too much democracy is reached. However, nowhere on Earth is this true in humanity's and civilization's evolutionary trail.

In my opinion, we are nowhere near a strong democracy, or a participatory representative system, or teledemocracy anywhere on this planet, with the single exception perhaps of Switzerland where citizen initiatives and referenda are available to the citizenry at all levels of government and used widely. The Swiss are constantly involving themselves in legislation to augment and sometimes undo the work done by their representatives and/or government officials. However, even in Switzerland, there has not been much improvement in their system by the new information and communication tech-

nologies (ICTs). In fact, the country's voter turnouts are in a steady decline.

I think that modern ICT is absolutely essential for helping democracies transform themselves toward a strong democracy or a more participatory stage of democratic evolution. The use of such technologies, particularly computers, permits much higher levels of democracy at greater distances and includes much greater numbers of citizens than ever before possible. Because of these new ICTs, we can improve and expand direct democracy—well-informed citizens deliberating complex issues for long periods of

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time at vast distances from one another—in big cities, in states, nationally and transnationally. As Francis Cairncross so eloquently stated, the new ICTs have tolled “the death of distance,” while simultaneously heralding a new era for democracy.

Thanks to the development of one of the most important ICTs—the Internet—I have been able to launch a Web site into cyberspace dedicated to the transformation of democracies into stronger states whether it be from thin to strong or from dictatorship to limited-rep states. The site, called Teledemocracy Action News + Network (TAN+N), can be found at www.auburn.edu/tann and is characterized by a light-

modern and responsive to the demands of the information age. Other purposes are to help cut costs of daily government business by automating services and being more convenient by being online. Another goal is to make the government look more responsive by allowing feedback via email. This latter ploy, however, is not much more than the old circular file or complaint department—Internet style. If you get an answer, it will most likely be of the form variety.

Governments are not the only users of the Net to keep modern representative systems as thin as they can. One can find a host of Web sites belonging to political candidates for office, political parties, the



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ning bolt rating system that runs from one bolt to six bolts with each successive bolt indicating a greater level of citizen empowerment and greater level of democracy.

Cyberpolitics-as-Usual (Zero bolts)

To believe that those who ardently want to keep things as they are would not use the Internet to protect the status quo would be the pinnacle of naivete. In present-day dictatorships, this means that central governments control or monitor all the Web servers (China, Singapore, Saudi Arabia) and surveil flows of information and communication on a routine basis. Even if this does not catch all those evildoers and culprits engaged in free discussion and organization (like the Falun Gong in China), it certainly makes it risky to try. So, despite satellite TV, the Internet, wireless phones and all modern electronic information and communications gadgetry, these one-party states maintain their strong grip on civil authority.

In representative democracies, a cursory glance at the Internet in any country, state, city, or town will reveal a myriad of Web sites belonging to governmental and establishmentarian political interests addicted to that system. The main purpose of these Web sites is to make the government look as though it is cyber-hip and thus helps legitimize itself as being

established mass media (TV, radio, and newspapers) and heavily financed special interest groups that have long monopolized political power. They provide information, rooms for chats, and try to raise money and/or volunteers to keep them in business or keep their costs down. If I had to venture a guess, I'd say that well over 95% of all the gigabytes used for political purposes on the Internet are cyberpolitics-as-usual. As such, they do not rate a cloud, summer shower, or even one lightning bolt for actually empowering the people.

Strengthening the Present System (1–2 bolts)

Web sites that truly enrich citizens within the present system are ones used to inform about the wealth of alternative ways to look at issues involving the present political economy (globalization). They can also be used to alert citizens to problems with the environment and social justice as well as provide a lateral system of communications among citizens and non-established political groups. They do this by presenting a massive pool of facts and opinions quickly and cheaply accessed that broaden the debate provided by the cyberpolitics-as-usual sites along with the general run of propaganda and establishment opinion in the mass media. These off-beat Web sites give citizens greater and deeper insight

into alternative ways of looking at political issues and solutions and, ipso facto, make the representative system more like it should be, that is, the free marketplace of ideas and debate. These kinds of informational sites rate one lightning bolt.

However, the email capabilities of the Web are even more significant since they add something lacking in all representative systems: a cheap and rapid way to organize resistance to established power centers and interests. Thus, we have seen many examples of ordinary workers and citizens organizing via the Net to challenge the hierarchies in which they play and live. This has been witnessed at local, state, regional, national, and even transnational levels.

Examples abound: The WTO protest in Seattle; the IMF protest in Washington, DC; The Million Mothers March in DC in favor of gun control; and worker organization to pressure both their unions and employers prior to and during strikes, to name a few. The major characteristic of these cyberorganizations is to inform and coordinate citizens and workers beyond the capacity of the mass media and the telephone—once the sole tools at hand that put them at a decided disadvantage. A new kind of political organization is thus emerging, one that is networked and nonhierarchical. Some mass media outlets are confused as to how to cover these cybermovements, since they have no usual pyramidal structure and no self-annointed leaders. Yet, they are precisely coordinated and are capable of turning out numbers way beyond what authorities expect. These four events are excellent two-bolt examples.

Another two-bolter is Citizens Solidarity in Korea. Established online in January 2000, it is a cybercoalition of approximately 500 civic and nongovernmental organizations. Its main goal is to rid the national parliament of corrupt and inept politicians. It does this by publishing online reports on shady deals, low attendance at legislative meetings, and their votes for programs unpopular with the general citizenry. This new movement has also created a new type of political protest they call the "Internet Rally." This combines the information on the politicians with email debates, discussions, and strategies, email campaigns, and fund-raising. Due to their efforts, many of the candidates they disfavored lost their elections and the election code itself was revised. They presently have a staff of 50 people who are paid through cybercontributions.

All of these examples, however, are well within the parameters of the present representative process and illustrate how a moderately democratic system is supposed to work, that is, with informed active citizens making their views heard and their votes count.

Changing the Representative System to Give Citizens More Power: Toward a Stronger System (3–4 bolts)

So, how have new ICTs, particularly computers, been used to actually change the representative democratic system itself? Do they give people even more input and power to change who runs the system and what comes out of it? A few examples must suffice.

In the early 1990s, the out-of-power Liberal Party of Nova Scotia decided to cooperate with Maritime Telephone and Telegraph (MT&T) in Canada to broaden the party's political convention in Halifax by allowing any registered member in the province to vote on who should be the party's leader for the next election. They accomplished this by televising the convention and set up a computer system that would let the party members vote by phone from wherever they lived or worked. When people registered to be a party member, they were given a personal identification number (PIN) to use when voting electronically. Despite one major computer crash, the new tele-democratic system worked like a charm.

The number of party members participating in the convention process grew exponentially. In addition, many party members who could not possibly participate in person were able to vote from their homes and other remote sites (like by mobile phone from fishing boats). This empowered entirely new groups of citizens (older people, people living far from Halifax, the working class) and selected a new kind of leader who led the party to victory in the next election. This system was soon replicated successfully by the Conservative party of Saskatchewan and the Liberal party of British Columbia. Is there some reason this could not be done by the Democratic and Republican parties in the U.S.? Clearly, there is no technical barrier. The only deficiency is in the undemocratic inclinations of those who run those parties. We give these kinds of systems, including the new Oregon system of voting-by-mail, three lightning bolts because ICT altered the system to increase the power of the ordinary citizen.

In the mid-1990s, Canada's Reform Party ran an experimental Electronic Town Meeting (ETM) in Calgary, Alberta. The five Reform Party Members of Parliament (MPs) from that area decided to hold a face-to-face meeting at a university on the issue of physician-assisted suicide. This meeting was to be televised on the local cable company channel. In addition, each of the MPs solicited a random sample of about 400 citizens in their districts and asked them to watch the televised debate and then telephone in their opinions during the meeting on several related issues.

These votes were tallied by computer and flashed on the screen.

What's so empowering about that? Isn't it just the same-old, same-old? The big difference was these five MPs made a public vow that should a super majority of random sample televoters from their district vote for physician-assisted suicide, then they would do the same in Parliament—despite the fact that all five were already on public record as opposing such action. (Actually, the results of the televote were to be compared with a number of other polls the MPs conducted with their constituents as well).

In other words, combining new ICTs with face-to-face deliberation and a promise of representatives to bow to the will of their constituencies produces a much stronger linkage between the citizenry and their government and gives much more power to the citizenry in the representative system. The system stays the same, but it matures into a much more participatory form of representative democracy. It moves toward becoming a teledemocracy since the citizens are determining the law. That's why I think this kind of ETM rates four bolts.

These are two methods using current ICTs, particularly computers, to empower citizens in deliberative processes and divining what the public wants.

Transforming Representative Democracy into a Participatory Democratic State (5–6 bolts)

The real key to a transformed system of participatory democracy into a teledemocracy using ICTs is to afford citizens the right to be lawmakers directly. This necessitates an increase in the use of more pure democratic forms, like New England Town Meetings and citizens initiatives and referenda at all levels of governance. This gives the citizens the right to be legislators in their own right on major issues concerning the agendas, priorities, planning and policies of their polity. It worked in ancient Athens, it works in New England towns, it works in Switzerland, and it works in 24 states in the U.S. It needs to be expanded throughout all representative systems in order to increase their effectiveness and the use of modern ICT is indispensable to make this happen in the future. There are some good examples of how this is occurring today and how this viewpoint is becoming a global movement.

Unlike Switzerland, the U.S. (which likes to be thought of as the leader of Western democracies) has no citizens initiatives at the national level. The reason for this is the founding fathers deeply distrusted the citizens and gave as little power to them as they could in order to get their new form of government ratified.

Also, unlike almost every modern industrialized nation in the Western world, the U.S. has no national referenda. (A referendum is where the national legislature decides to let citizens vote on a major issue of national concern). In recent years, citizens of Italy, Austria, and Sweden have voted to ban nuclear power in their countries. The people of Ireland voted to permit abortion in certain instances. The people of Norway voted to not belong to the European Union. The Australian people voted to maintain their connection to the British monarchy. The people of France voted to cut the term of office of their president to five years. And in the near future, the people of Great Britain will vote on whether to replace the pound with the Euro. Big issues decided directly by the people. But in the U.S., we maintain a hostility to direct democracy at the national level based on the knowledge and values of 55 men in 1787 who feared and distrusted the will of the people.

However, thanks to the struggle of other men and women at the turn of the 20th century, almost half the states in the U.S. do permit citizens initiatives at the state level. And in the past several years, thanks to the Internet, a system of a decentralized, multistate citizen's initiative process is evolving. Since the mid-1990s, organizers of similar citizens initiatives in several states have been coordinating their efforts via the Internet to come up with strategies, tactics, wording, fund-raising, and so on in order to get laws passed on certain issues that are the same or nearly so.

Thus, we find a large number of states in 1994 passed very like-minded laws that limited the terms of office for members of Congress and state legislatures. In 1998, five states passed almost duplicate laws that permitted the use of marijuana (and other controlled substances) to ease the pain of people suffering from terminal and/or very painful diseases. There have also been Internet-coordinated state initiatives on limiting taxes. This list will grow and the number of states involved will grow as well. It is my prediction that within the next 10–20 years, we will be having the exact same initiative passed in 20 or so states. Moreover, this will probably persuade other states to change their constitutions to institute this process so they can join the movement.

The move toward more and better citizen lawmaking is hardly confined to the U.S. In Germany, for example, there is a movement called "Mehr Demokratie" (More Democracy) that has grown tremendously over the past few years. This is a national organization that has been successful in changing the constitution of Bavaria to facilitate citizen initiatives and the charter of Hamburg, Germany to allow for it as well. Their aim is to amend the con-

stitution of the federal government to permit national citizen initiatives.

Mehr Demokratie uses the Web to distribute information, to expedite organizational activities, and for fund-raising. It also uses the Web to help develop a trans-European movement for more direct democracy in other European nations and to help amass support for changing the constitution of the European Union to allow the citizens of the nations of the EU to vote on EU laws directly. All this is in an early stage.

Concluding Thoughts

I've tried to show in this brief article that new and future ICTs are good friends, allies, and supporters of democracy, no matter what its stage of evolution or wherever it is practiced. Many more examples of two-six bolt empowerments exist, but space here is limited. Readers interested in reviewing more examples should visit the TAN-N Web site. Furthermore, there is every reason to believe that present and future ICTs will be put to more use—beyond the limits of our imaginations—and will synergize this movement as never before.

We realize these very same technologies can be and are being deployed defensively by hostile political powers to crimp and/or cripple these very same movements. However, whenever the powers-that-be are thrust into a reactive or retroactive mode of operations, they create at least the appearance, if not the reality, of suppression, repression, and oppression. This does not always work well in democracies and, in fact, often leads to big scandals and even stronger movements and broader coalitions to overcome the tyranny of that state.

Am I optimistic about seeing the positive and supportive role of ICT for future democracy prevailing over the negative and destructive uses of ICT against democracy? Indeed, I am. I also think my view is supported by a long history that demonstrates over time that democracy, not dictatorship, has been, remains, and will always be the political wave that drives real human social and economic progress. ■

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