Are new media democratic?

Vineet Kaul

vineetkaul2404@gmail.com

Abstract

From Wiki leaks revelations to claims of "Twitter revolutions," the role of new media in shaping global political action is one of the most discussed but least understood phenomena confronting scholars, policymakers, advocates, and the private sector.This article describes and evaluates democracy in the milieu of new media technology, particularly the internet, to improve participation in local democratic processes. Various aspects of democratic communication are examined, including information access, preference measurement, deliberation and group mobilization. This paper gives an overview and critique of some of the rhetoric surrounding digital media at this time. Specifically, I wish to question claims being made about the democratic properties inherent to such media, and that are being naturalized in discussions about their own use and understanding of digital media in terms of democracy, and to think again about the language that may have been naturalized around their use. I will attempt to focus on how this new model and these new media help to promote a more democratic form of mass communication where the receivers are able to become the senders and vice versa. Should we fear this evolution, or embrace its potential? Will digital media fulfill the ideal of direct democracy, or will it generate a "cesspool" of erroneous information? Is the free and equal communication of citizens through the new media a feasible ideal at the end of the twentieth century? In turn this creates a large social based "discussion" rather than small-localized group "discussion" and can lead to make social and political changes. I also want to examine how these new media technologies have helped blur the lines between the public and private spheres. These are a few of the sources I am going to be pulling concepts from:

Keywords: *new media, democracy, media history, empowerment, new technology*

Introduction

Media cannot be described simply with adjectives like "honest, "; "exploitative"; "public"; or "commercial". New forms of media operate in a very murky area between liberation and subjugation. Most discussions about the intersection of the new media technologies and global democracy have been inconclusive if only because those who understand the technology know little about democracy, and those who understand democracy are woefully ignorant about technology. Nevertheless, there is no discussion more fateful for the future of democracy than the one that poses the question 'will the new technologies that have sustained globalization reinforce or undermine democracy?' Media is fetish zed as inherently democratic, inclusionary, and participatory. In the age of new media the relentless flow of content and reiteration of ideas creates a semblance of participation that, in reality, causes the individual user and consumer to disengage with real world political practices. It's hard to imagine a more pressing issue than the next generations' involvement in our democracy. The findings run counter to some popular misconceptions about teenagers and new media: that by socializing with their friends online, they are not meeting others with diverse viewpoints and that the internet promotes a shallow kind of activism where teenagers are more interested in virtual than real world change. The big claim being made for the digital media with regards to democracy is that they 'amplify the political voice of ordinary citizens' in a multitude of ways (Hindman 2008: 6). For example, in increasing access to information, inspiring participation, foregrounding transparency in political and other

processes, rendering censorship useless, and galvanizing support around the issues of the day. The advent of the new media have been seen as a way of widening the discourse about what is possible and even what is desirable within our cultures and communities. New media pacifies the public with an abundance of information, denying any practical and agentive political action. No one ought to feel immune to the authority that intersects and transcends institutional technologies. We must always examine how our own biases and political positions are molded by new media. A brave new wave of activists such as Brad Friedman, John Stauber and Joan Blades are using new media to restore the democratic lifeblood of a people's media, they're giving voice to the voiceless, checking and balancing corruption, and providing liberty and access for all.

The crucial point is of course that there is no such thing as "democracy," pure and simple; there are only democracies -- different varieties of democracy, competing theories of direct democracy and indirect democracy, representative democracy and populist democracy, plebiscitary democracy and strong democracy. To which kind of democracy do we refer when we worry about technology's impact on it? It may be that innovations that serve one kind are nefarious to another. The relationship between new media and democracy is complicated, because it is difficult for researchers to draw causal connections between adopting new social computing technologies and promoting what professor *Joseph Kahne,* Mills College, USA has characterized as behaviors and values consistent with an "effective, just, and humane democratic society." Kahne asserts that there is "no doubt" that multimedia literacy can promote civic participation, because "looking up information," "having access to networked communities," and "communicating and sharing perspectives" depends on having developed those literacy, but having basic literacy with computational media and content on distributed networks does not necessarily translate into more meaningful and robust democratic participation. Democracy in the Digital Age may look fascinating philosophical exploration of how the emerging information and communication technologies are impacting political participation. Rather than being the antidote to democratic ills, the political conversations occurring online are neither inclusive nor deliberative, suggesting that new technologies, as currently designed and used, are as much threats to progress as they are vehicles of progress.

Figuring out what is new and not new when it comes to the roles of the media in democracy is not easy. Reading the literature, however, it seems to be easy to exaggerate transformations and revolutionary changes in contemporary society. The discussion about the opportunities of the new media for direct or representative democracy has lingered for about twenty years. In these decades two things appeared. First, the conceptions of democracy are much more complicated than a simple dualism between direct and representative democracy. Second, discussions have become less theoretical; the media of ICT are maturing and entering into the daily practice of the political system. One can observe stages of experimentation and beyond. The new media has relatively emerged as a formidable constituent as it vie for legitimacy in representing the broad masses. This contestation provides the framework for critical examination on how the media impacts on the democratic process.

New media, such as blogs, Twitter, Face book, and YouTube, have played a major role in episodes of contentious political action. They are often described as important tools for activists seeking to replace authoritarian regimes and to promote freedom and democracy, and they have been lauded for their democratizing potential. New media, and particularly computer-mediated communication, it is hoped, will undo the damage done to politics by the old media. Far from the telescreen dystopias, new media technology hails a rebirth of democratic life. It is

envisaged that new public spheres will open up and that technologies will permit social actors to find or forge common political interests. People will actively access information from an infinite, free virtual library rather than receiving half-digested 'programming', and interactive media will institutionalise a right to reply. Despite the prominence of "Twitter revolutions," "color revolutions," and the like in public debate, policymakers and scholars know very little about whether and how new media affect contentious politics. Journalistic accounts are inevitably based on anecdotes rather than rigorously designed research. Although data on new media have been sketchy, new tools are emerging that measure linkage patterns and content as well as track memes across media outlets and thus might offer fresh insights into new media. The impact of new media can be better understood through a framework that considers five levels of analysis: individual transformation, intergroup relations, collective action, regime policies, and external attention. New media have the potential to change how citizens think or act, mitigate or exacerbate group conflict, facilitate collective action, spur a backlash among regimes, and garner international attention toward a given country.

Media is an integral and imperative component of democratic polity and is rightly called fourth limb of democracy. It is not merely what the media does in a democracy, but what it is, that defines the latter. Its practice, its maturity, and the level of ethics it professes and practices in its working are as definitive of the quality of a democracy as are the functions of the other limbs. With tremendous growth and expansion, prospects of mass media are today viewed as more powerful than ever before. However some feel that the media has gone too far ahead of itself, and today media has become more show rather than the medium. Media has created its own world of glamour, gossip, sex and sensation that has played a major role in distracting attention from the real issues of our times. Media have to play a vital role in our democracy. We depend on unbiased news from reliable and independent sources to learn what's happening in our communities, to participate in public affairs and to hold our government accountable. It's media that keep the public informed. But the consolidation of our media by corporate giants means fewer sources of news, opinion and information. Consolidation creates a more homogenous media that don't reflect our country's diversity. It means a junk diet of celebrity gossip instead of the substantive and critical journalism we need to keep an eye on those in power. And it means less exposure to the varied and competing voices that sustain our democracy.

The rise of the new media and the conditions that have produced it do not sound the death knell of democracy as some have argued, but demand that we "begin to rethink democracy from within these conditions .We must understand the emergence of new technologies, and in particular new communications systems, as a result of complex interactions among technological, social, cultural, political, legal, and economic forces. Different cultures and different political regimes will exploit nascent technologies in radically different ways, as a comparison of the early history of television in Britain, the United States, and Nazi Germany dramatically illustrates. Moreover, not only are notions of technological determinism historically mistaken, they are politically and morally dangerous, because they assume we are powerless to shape new media in socially beneficial ways and powerless to resist their pernicious effects. When a new medium strikes an 'old regime,' the political effects depend on both the technology and the regime and on the decisions, both technical and political, that shape the new medium and the institutions that grow up around it. The introduction of a new medium will engender debate about political culture but cannot by itself significantly alter the society in which it appears.

Instead, the new medium generates an extended negotiation or contestation among competing forces-some emergent, some well-established; some encouraging change, others resisting it; some publicly visible, others operating covertly. The impact of new media is evolutionary, not revolutionary.

Media institutions have come under close scrutiny with some critics questioning whether the media deserve special status particularly in light of allegations of bias and the proliferation of new media options. An increasingly loud call for limitations on media autonomy and freedoms has arisen based on heightened concerns about national security and skepticism whether incumbent media outlets enhance democratic governance and civic participation. World Wide Web sites, blogs, webcasts and other outlets vie for attention and impact in a marketplace of ideas that consolidates or diversifies depending on your perspective.

The meaning of the term 'new media' is still elusive. However, it can be said that new media is associated with information technology or the internet, and is an interactive form of communication. The new media as we experience them are a mixed bag. ICT can be used to communicate about politics, but it can also be used for the exchange of gossip and jokes. It can be used to inform people, but also to entertain them and steer their emotions. Cyberspace can be used as a political arena in which everyone engages in serious debate with everyone else, thus bringing closer the ideal of participative democracy. It can also be used as a virtual shopping mall and parts of it can itself be commoditized.

In terms of New Media let us adopt the Wikipedia definition, that "What distinguishes new media from traditional media is not the digitizing of media content into bits, but the dynamic life of the 'new media' content and its interactive relationship with the media consumer. Another important promise of New Media is the 'democratization' of the creation, publishing, distribution and consumption of media content." We know from the history of new media that they have been enormously disruptive, both for good and for ill. This goes all the way back to the printing press, which launched the Renaissance in Europe – as well as the Reformation and centuries of religious warfare. The same could be said about radio, cinema and television: all these media brought great benefits and pleasures to millions of people. But they were also quickly seized upon by propagandists for vile regimes who used them to promote racist, imperialist and utopian fantasies that led to two world wars and countless other conflicts. The question on which our debate should focus now becomes how new media can be used to really achieve democracy, how it can be instrumental in the process of empowering people. New media and a globalizing world are inevitably linked to each other. The ultimate aim however, has to be quality of life and the global sovereignty of the people.

The past decade has witnessed fundamental changes in the mass media environment. Contemporary media technologies and format innovations have created new ways of communicating and reaching audiences. A number of scholars have been debating the web as a means to increased democratic participation and strengthened political community. (Berber, 1984; Arterton, 1987; Boncheck 1995; Grossman, 1995; Bimber 1996; Ward 1996). The discussion, especially among academics, of the political impact of the new digital communication technologies has emphasized its potential to offer opportunities for renewing democracy, fostering innovation, economic development, and providing populations in both the

advanced industrial nations and the developing world with resources and opportunities previously out of their reach. For starters we might consider if mass media engender, as Marshall McLuhan once envisioned, a "global village" where democracy is encouraged along with universal understanding and the cultivation cosmic consciousness. Or is media transformation within new democracies nothing more than a tool of global economic power to colonise previously "untapped" social domains via information, entertainment and new technology? While perhaps seeming to be artificially oppositional in the face of today's complex political and cultural landscapes across the globe, these questions are nevertheless useful points of departure in that they suggest how media might serve to alter, enable or disrupt the cultural sovereignty of nations and political potency of communities. Indeed, variations of these themes have been at the heart of controversies regarding the scope and legitimacy of regional trade agreements (Galperian, 1999a, 1999b) and within them resides the core issue of in whose interest and benefit are media and communication technologies are being used to reshape nations and "democratize" the flow of information and capital. In short, what "kind" of democratic reforms is taking place, and how are media involved? It is clear that the transformation of media system has important implications for democratic citizenship, especially as audiences' relationships to mass communication have been influenced significantly. However, perspectives on the prospects for democratic political systems in the "new media" era vary widely.

Pundits and politicians recognize that "democracy" itself is a disputed term. Is democracy a particular structure of governance or a culture of citizenship or some complex hybrid of the two? How much power must shift to the voters to justify the argument that society is becoming more democratic? How much of our current understanding of democracy is bound up with the concept of the "informed citizen"? In an era of networked computing, we are starting to see changes not only in how politics is conducted, but in what counts as politics. Consequently, it may take some time to discern the full influence of the Internet on civic life. The consolidation of democracy in the past few decades has strengthened freedom of the press, but threats continue to come from both state and non state actors.

Democracy is about the power of the people. The relationship between government and governed depends hugely upon the efficiency of information transmission. This is one reason for the rise of what has been called" media democracy."An informed citizenry is one who can consent more knowingly , scrutinize the political process more simply and obtain access to government services more readily. The classical idea of democracy as a model in which the people can send home their government is too minimal. Its successor, the trias politica, in which a chosen Parliament is also instrumental in legislation and checks on governmental action, was an important improvement. Unfortunately this model has gotten some worn spots. In fact democracy has never been perfect, but there is a danger of assuming that there is an over-perfection in democracy. I think we are facing something that one could loosely define as a gradual decline in the integrity of democracy, accompanied by a niching of politics and democracy generally. A Media transformation in emerging democracies is an attempt to register and make sense of these questions by looking specifically at the relationship between media and democracy within the broader phenomena of globalization. We have to take as our focus, the place of mass media in the political and cultural life of nations negotiating democratization while simultaneously contending with economic liberalization and privatization, the changing role of state, and the reformation of civil society. In doing so, the collection addresses issues that have

defined the challenges and consequences of media transformation faced by new and emerging democracies. These issues include the dismantling of national broadcasting systems, the promotion of private independent and pluralistic media, the clash between liberal democratic and authoritarian political traditions, the proliferation of commercial media channels and programming, the development of new opportunities for civic engagements, the socioeconomic impact of transnational broadcast partnerships and linkages, negotiations about the appropriate broadcast language, the potential for a free press and for freedom of speech, new role for entertainment media, the development of new legal and administrative frameworks for broadcasting. While partial, this list nevertheless identifies challenges and tensions that have become consistent enough in a diversity of nascent democracies to suggest core area for investigation and analysis. Moreover, these points are important because of their intimate connection to the evolving political profile of a given nation- state.

In spite of the ubiquity of these new platforms, digital innovations in communications offer only a partial snapshot of news environments, the rest of the picture reveals that the old hierarchies and power systems persist. The mix of web architecture, economic prowess and search engine design give the advantage to established news brands and leading Internet companies. Now more than ever, public debate over the use of new technologies is of utmost importance to the future of democracy. Who will control the media and technologies of the future, and debates over the public's access to media, media accountability and responsibility, media funding and regulation, and what kinds of culture are best for cultivating individual freedom, democracy, and human happiness and well-being will become increasingly important in the future. The proliferation of media culture and computer technologies focuses attention on the importance of new technologies and the need for public intervention in debates over the future of media culture and communications in the information highways and entertainment by-ways of the future. (Kellner 1990, 1995a, 1997, and 1999.) The technological revolution of our time thus involves the creation of new public spheres and the need for democratic strategies to promote the project of democratization and to provide access to more people to get involved in more political issues and struggles so that democracy might have a chance in the new millennium

When we talk about democracy, (itself of course a contested term, we are mindful of a number of themes, structures and processes, not least popular power, electoral systems and mandates, open argument, equality, and representation. Even though these things are rarely in stasis – they are fluid, sometimes oppositional to one another, manipulated and contested – they remain a useful start point in this discussion. The "new media" environment is still the bastion of society's more privileged members, and has done little to encourage participation among the traditionally unengaged. The newer communication formats, such as talk radio and the Internet, attract audiences from higher socio-economic and educational groups who tend to be politically active in other ways (Graber, 1997; Davis and Owen, 1998). Even as the Internet user base increases [1] and becomes more "ordinary" (Pew Research Center, 1999), it still is not available to millions of citizens without the resources and skills to take part. In some ways, the Internet has widened the political information and participation gap between societal 'have's' and 'have-not's'.

One of the key facets and facilitators of democracy is of course free and open discussion between citizens, something championed in ideas of the public sphere (Birkerts, S.

(1995) yet which has remained allusive over time; no doubt due in part to a monopoly of elites who have prioritized and legitimized certain debates over others, and sought to manage the flow of information. This is nowhere more apparent than in the continuing concentration of ownership of the means of production of our news media (Chester, J., 2008). What follows is an articulation and exploration of digital democracy presented as two narratives. One argues *for* the new media as a tool for democracy, the other argues *against* such media as a radical or useful way of understanding and enacting democracy in practice. These narratives may seem poles apart, but are both 'true' to the information and evidence about the new media that we have at the current time. They are purposefully provocative in voice with neither comprehensively representing the views of the author.

The narratives explore a number of themes: How (indeed whether) the technology underpinning the media opens them up in terms of access to the media and participation through the media. Do they represent an opening up of decision making processes? Or even a platform for increased activism?

In summary, each narrative will expose the persistent rhetoric and language which are used subtly (or otherwise) to configure and articulate the very use of the media. It is then for the reader to decide how, if and where they position their own use and experience of the media within those narratives, and to anticipate – indeed enact – a future for this debate.

My argument is that although the technology of the Internet provides us with some new form of public space, the reality of Internet political use in most developing countries presents a rather gloomy scenario. The considerations are twofold. First, there is an enormous economic barrier to Internet access. Second, the democratic systems are not fully developed and, therefore, a democratic culture is not yet consolidated, which might reflect on the attempts at online democratic exercises.

In *Technologies of Freedom,* the freedom is fostered when the means of communication are dispersed, decentralized, and easily available, as are printing presses or microcomputers. Central control is more likely when the means of communication are concentrated, monopolized, and scarce, as are great networks.

Democracy and the Internet

The emergence of new media, particularly the Internet, has profoundly changed the way people communicate and share and receive information. Digital terrestrial broadcasting and new media also have changed the traditional conception of "information boundaries". New media have not just helped develop a globalized world, but they also provide us with "globalized" news, accessible often in real time and any time by one-third of the world's population. In this regard, the Internet and new media bring people closer to each other, while at the same time increasing transparency and generating a new understanding of what is the public sphere. New media also present challenges to national jurisdiction over media outlets and content. With a server located in one country, content being produced in a second and read or downloaded in a third, the questions of the origins of news or other media content and their target audience arise. This can have an impact on media pluralism domestically and in the trans-national context.

Numerous commitments are aimed at ensuring freedom of expression, of information and of the media. It is rightfully recognized that independent media and freedom of expression are cornerstones for stable and peaceful societies. Freedom of the media is the collective embodiment of freedom of expression. Pluralism in the media is, therefore, a prerequisite for the expression of different opinions and a guarantee of individuals' abilities to express their opinions without interference. With media in the hands of society, and not the custody of the state, pluralism is a safeguard for the marketplace of ideas.

Opponents argue that while information is now at everyone's fingertips, so is misinformation, which can appear and circulate virally across the Internet. The rise of the Internet as a source of information has undercut the economic model upon which professional journalism is based. Consequently, there is less support for high quality, disinterested information produced by journalists—the type of information upon which democracy depends. Newsrooms full of professional reporters are diminishing as bloggers and online commentators gain larger followings. The resultant new environment is one which enables citizens to choose the ideological slant of virtually all the information they receive. This means they encounter fewer facts upon which their opinions are based and are less frequently confronted with perspectives that challenge their beliefs. Despite the dramatic increase in the availability of diverse sources of information and the possibility of checking the veracity of information, the ability to attend only to information and online communities with which one agrees results in alarming percentages of Americans believing assertions which have been proven to be false.

Our culture of news and information has never been richer or more democratic—anyone with an Internet connection can contribute to the public conversation and dig deeply into complex topics.The internet and digital technologies are daily changing power structures across the world. These technologies are blurring the old distinctions between media and public, seeming to offer a newly-minted democratized media. Is this a paradigm shift? Will it live up to its promise? Electronic Democracy has become a magic word in the debate on the modernization and democratization of the political system in an emerging information society. It is remarkable that most debates are technology-centered and that the still unsolved problem of the social embeddedness of the new technologies in political and cultural structures is not sufficiently considered. We frequently do not know how the citizens themselves, being directly involved, think about political participation via internet. Internet and democracy is a topic research on politics and media is increasingly dealing with. Computer networks as a technological infrastructure and media innovation as well as Electronic Democracy (E-Democracy) are a challenge for political and social sciences, frequently stimulating the imagination of researchers. Until now we know little about how the citizens, being directly involved, think about political participation via internet. How do they assess the opportunities and where do they see limits? What are their doubts and fears? Where do they see fields of application for E-Democracy? Do they think regulations are necessary? Do they at all accept the internet as a media for political participation?

The 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 prodemocracy 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. Internet was described as something that could be promising for the development of democracy and citizen participation, and something that could be an important part of politics. In a recently published article, Douglas Kellner (2007) instead describes the Internet as a "normalized aspect of politics, just as the broadcast media were some decades ago". What was described 10 or 20 years ago as new media, including a number of potentialities, is today an ordinary and diversified communicative infrastructure with significant democratic implications. The young students that we now meet at the universities are the first generation to have grown up from the very beginning in a media landscape in which computer-based communication technologies are the most natural and most evident infrastructure and modality for a number of different activities in everyday life. This is also an infrastructure for various forms of public communication, which forces us to rethink the conditions and practices of democracy.

In an age where participatory democracy is seen to be in decline, the emergence of the internet as a tool for communication seems variously to be an agency for that breakdown of democracy, yet also a vehicle for mass communication and political participation on a scale exceeding anything our governments have yet been able to achieve. 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 fantasies. 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. 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 Digital Nation (Katz 1992).Is there no other side to this question? Is the answer so positively positive?

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. First, most Internet content, in terms of bandwidth and hard drive space, is not dedicated

to politics but to porn and illegally shared movies. Most online transactions involve shopping or entertainment, not interactions with candidates for political office. Digital media are rarely used for political content (though we have not been able to measure how this might be changing).

Second, digital media can also be key tools for regime propaganda, political surveillance, counterinsurgency and corporate espionage. These uses are on the rise, and only a few people (such as Ron Deibert at the University of Toronto) track their political consequences in systematic ways. Activists are not as safe as they might think, and may even weaken their movement by being too dependent on information technology. "The problem with most technological fixes," Morozov writes, "is that they come with costs unknown even to their fiercest advocates" (p. 303). Peer-to-peer file-sharing systems, mobile phones, and cloud computing all have technical limits and security vulnerabilities.

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.

It is easy to romanticize the past of democracy as many debate 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,[4] 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.

Zealots of the new technology are apt to respond to charges of hyper individualism by citing the novel possibilities of cyber-community. Communities that cut across nations and peoples can be fashioned on the net that are otherwise impossible. Cyberspace is unavoidable, and yet cyberspace is unregulatable. No nation can live without it, yet no nation can control behavior within it. Cyberspace is that space where individuals are, inherently, free from control by real space sovereigns. Cyberspace does not lie within your borders. Do not think that you can build it, as though it were a public construction project. You cannot. It is an act of nature and it grows itself through our collective actions. The relationship between cyberspace and democracy is very complex. I shall highlight two specific aspects of that relationship. First, there is a clear contradiction between the discourse of a utopian realm, where everybody accesses the Internet, and its privatised access ethos. On the one hand, the Internet culture has enabled a revival of open public discussion, creating a new social space through a decentralized communication system that institutes costless reproduction, and instantaneous dissemination. On the other, access to cyberspace is effectively expensive and a privilege of a relatively small minority of the world's population, as it remains unknown and irrelevant to daily life in the world-at-large. Even when considering that there has been an explosion in the growth of Internet use and an increase in the number of people who access it on regular basis, it is still limited to a social, educational and economic elite. In addition, we should mention that the increased commercialization of the Internet might intensify the pressure on its social and political use. The more pessimistic conclusion will be that the world we are entering…is not a world where freedom is ensured. Forms of control and regulation, are already embedded in the operational codes that govern our interactions in cyberspace; we already accept without thought a series of invisible constraints on digital associations and transactions that have never been publicly debated. Unless we understand this antidemocratic potential of cyberspace, we are likely to sleep through the transition from freedom into control. Ironically, almost all conference addressing the potential of the new cyber-technology meet in real time and space – their modus operandi standing as a living reproof to the cyber-communitarian theories they celebrate.

The second aspect relates to citizen participation in the political system. Such participation has been discouraged by three main factors: inadequate civic education, citizen apathy, and disconnection between citizens and their representatives, which might also interfere with the way people, use and respond to the Internet as a political space. It is important to highlight that the Internet cannot provide an instantaneous technological fix to the crisis of democracy but it has a significant role in the new political dynamics of the 'network society'.

For individuals, the Internet changes expectations. Think about e-mailing a bank; we *expect* mails answered in hours, rather than letters answered in weeks. The same will become true in civic life. The Internet lends itself to this type of direct connection, and hence is likely to create demands for more direct forms of democracy. Wired citizens will seek a less interrupted, more efficient, link to political power. Yet traditional democracy just doesn't work this way. Instead, pluralist politics functions by slowly filtering individual preference through groups. Yet, the Netizens still want their answers, in hours not weeks. If they don't get them, because representative democracy doesn't work that way, democratic frustration will surely follow.

Citizen Apathy

Many countries have become riddled with political parties interested only in party power, politicians who care only for their party and their public legacy, politicians who misunderstand the role of government, record government debt, excessive taxes, corporate welfare, political correctness, influential interest groups, people who expect "free" government handouts, injustices to The Constitution, the expanding nanny-state of the government, the list can go on at infinitum.

What is the cause of these issues? It could be assumed that taxes are high because we have debt. We have debt because politicians think government spending money is the answer to our economic woes. There are corrupt politicians because they are power hungry and want leadership in their parties. They want power in order to enjoy the spoils of government control. In such scenarios, it may seem obvious which the cause is and which is the effect. In reality, they are *all* effects. Many correlate, some compound each other, but there is one underlying cause, or root, to all of our country's problems -- citizen apathy. The level of attention of politics is so low in mass public that events must be "starkly visible "to have an impact on opinions. There appear to be a distinct threshold of public awareness. As a result, political parties derive impression that that cannot breakthrough the apathy barrier of most citizens and stimulate new thinking. This basic fact of mass politics has taken on the character of a given, an assumed premises of mass political trends. Citizen apathy is reflected by the low rates of voter turnout. One study emphasizing the factor of cognitive limitations concluded that many people find politics "downright confusing" and simply lack the conceptual tools to make sense out of day-to-day politics. Many other people write politics off as incomprehensible. A number of scholars argue that to address political apathy, one must build effective local political communities based on civic organizations to bring about democratic revitalization (Barber, 1985; Coleman 1988; Putnam, 1994; and Newton, 1996).

So what should we do to overcome apathy? There are several online possibilities to overcome apathy, such as the creation of a 'virtual public space' to enable citizens to get information about issues of their interest and to scrutinize the workings of parliament and government. In addition, the development of an effective political community at the local level might be fostered through chat rooms, electronic bulletin boards and online conferences enabling wider groups of citizen to participate in policy deliberation.

Links between citizens and their representatives

Building stronger links between legislatures and citizens may be particularly important in transitional democracies in which civil society is not well established. Effective

communication between legislators and constituents and between the institution and the general public can help to build democratic traditions. In these societies, legislators may not yet play a significant role in policy-making due to traditions of strong executive authority or tight party control, but they can still contribute to democracy by voicing the concerns of constituents and assisting them in dealing with the government bureaucracy. However, the very recent visions of 'digital democracy' poses questions (Hague & Loader, 1999): how do we use communication technologies to have more informed citizens? To what extent can new technologies stimulate and improve political participation and citizen involvement in political decision-making?

Over time, placing emphasis on this linkage function educates both citizens and legislators about their role in a representative democracy. It may contribute to the legitimacy of democratic government and, eventually, lead to a more significant policy role for elected representatives.. In a direct democracy, this would take the form of delegates being mandated, accountable and recallable. The literature registers several reasons for this disconnection; increased size and power of bureaucracy, the information asymmetry between the government and general public; and the high costs of communication and organization mean that the policy process is more responsive to small, well-organized interests than to large, poorly organized groups (Niskanen, 1971; Campbell et al, 1960; Becker, 1983; Mitchell and Munger, 1991). Many of the suggestions to bring government and people closer call for a transfer of power from representatives and the business elite to ordinary citizens. However, most of the existing attempts are nothing more than symbolic gestures by politicians to engender public confidence in their own ability to effect change (Hale, 2000). In the end, improving the connections between citizens and their representatives requires more than improving communication, it needs the development of a public debate that is deliberative in nature. It is not enough for citizens and government to talk, democratic renewal requires 'dialogical' communication: cross-communication between citizens and citizens, and between citizens and public officials.

Internet users generally regard the democratic potential of the Internet with extreme optimism. They make particularly positive judgments about the possibilities of getting to know the opinions of others, of finding people with similar interests and of expressing their own opinions. The most complicated aspect for them is, surprisingly, coming in contact with politicians, receiving information from political institutions and organizing a protest. Political action in the form of protest is perhaps difficult to imagine online, at least from the perspective of an average Internet user. But the other two - making contacts with politicians and receiving information from political institutions - judging from several practical experiences (Coleman, Taylor, & van de Donk, 1999) - should not be so difficult to achieve, at least from the technological point of view. Nevertheless, Internet users perceive them to be less accessible and more difficult. Their own experiences with interactions with political actors within cyberspace apparently have achieved little success. As Richard argues, "without ensuring that administrations are adapted to this new environment of links and nodes, governments cannot expect to take an active role in a structure increasingly described as the model for a healthy civil society" (Richard, 1999, p. 85). The readiness to accept and respond to the rapid expansion of computer-mediated communication within the political sphere should be optimal in order to achieve and realize the potential of computer technologies.

However, through computer-mediated communication, whether in the form of e-mail or discussion fora, *the distance between the governing elite and the citizenry is shrinking*. The

13

emergence of the World Wide Web established a new picture of political actors within the net, representing their own political programs, proposals and concrete decisions, thus enabling better information and more direct access to their work. Additionally, the interactive nature of computer-mediated communication enables the creation of new discussion fora, where individuals can exchange their opinions and listen to the views of others. The Internet could therefore reduce the cost of communication between two political spheres, between the state, on the one hand, and civil society and citizens, on the other. Access to many decision-makers is more open and potentially more direct. Questioning the extent of users' willingness to act politically through the Internet in these new political platforms should take into account the diversity of several possible activities which new communication technologies enable. Moreover, what is important to explore is what meaning users attach to different processes in which they participate; how do they perceive the probable effects? This is especially important if we suppose that attitudes towards new, concrete possibilities in cyberspace can consequently also determine decisions about how often one should act, communicate or discuss using this new political platform. The Internet provides, in principal, a horizontal, non-controlled, relatively cheap, channel of communication, therefore it might be an option to reduce the distance between citizen and government or non-governmental organizations since it creates the opportunity to improve communication and reconnect citizens with their representatives, other citizens and democracy. It offers high levels of interaction, openness, visibility and support for group-based communication. Whether and how government applications of the technology capabilities will affect democratic processes will nonetheless depend on how they are designed and used - the social shaping of the technology (Hale at all, 2000:107). The question is what kind of political online channel the social movement is creating in order to overcome the political crisis and foster public empowerment.

Inadequate civic education

Whilst many adult strongly feel that an understanding of government, rights and responsibilities and other aspects of citizenship are important but mostly people are poorly informed and limited in their understanding or experience of democratic life. In developing countries, this factor has been fundamental in perpetuating old and unjust structures of economic and political power and keeping people distant from the political process of policy-making. Access to information is indispensable both to forming political judgments and to effective political participation.

The Internet has been argued to enhance the opportunity for citizens and the governing elite to communicate. While these capabilities might advance the process of democracy, it is less clear whether the Internet will foster the development of more thoughtful and civic oriented communication. According to Blumer & Gurevitch, the civic potential of the Internet is related to several aspects: the issue of active users; the possibility of involving large numbers of users in a civic dialogue; the provision of large stores of retrievable data that may be tapped into by users; the interactive exchange, enabling a symmetry of communicative power by making it easier for individuals to find and follow information of their interest, and by reducing the costs of acquiring information (Blumer & Gurevitch, 2000) . The diversity available in today's media – facilitated greatly by the internet – means it is hard to evaluate someone's civic mindedness because they may be deeply knowledgeable and engaged in a set of issues you are completely unfamiliar with. Diversity of content and access to it, made possible by the internet, has strengthened our civic engagement.

However, the question is not whether interactive communication technologies (ICTs) have the potential to connect citizens to political institutions, but 'what kind of political channels need to be created to enable ICTs to become sources of public empowerment' (Coleman, 2000:200). Thus, for example, Coleman suggests the implementation of a number of political mechanisms ranging from 'virtual public spaces', to online policy proposals and consultations utilizing reliable online information. Nevertheless, so far, the Internet's civic potential has been greater than its reality. Although a number of innovative initiatives have been developed, the Internet has not yet become an ordinary tool for public participation in the political sphere. Despite this, the Internet would seem to be a useful tool for providing citizens with civic and political information. The Internet could be used for the provision of information about parliament, political parties, non-governmental organizations, including a deliberative forum for citizens to exchange views with one another. Moreover, civic education through the Internet should not only provide basic information but also should enhance democratic culture by stressing the importance of ideals of commonwealth, and the need for a sense of common good and civic responsibility.

Challenge of the New Media:

The charm of emerging new media and its impact on democracy must also be examined. In particular the focus should be on the new challenges posed by technologies such as email, Usenet, and the Internet as they are unequally distributed, misused, and designed to reify asymmetrical power relations. Specifically, four challenges to democracy in the digital age should be explored. First, the barriers to entry into a digitally mediated public sphere are high, since participation requires a demanding set of resources and skills including the cost of accessing and / or purchasing capital-intensive hardware, the universal literacy needed to manipulate and navigate new media environments, and the higher order learning- communicative skills and critical thinking- required to participate effectively in public-sphere discussion and debate. The second threat is corollary to the first and relates to the ability of persons to share universally in a virtual public sphere. As innovations in the telecommunications, broadcast, and computer industries supply powerful and multifaceted goods and services to households, we must be careful not to increase unwittingly the ranks of the information and communications-poor. Without concomitant safety nets in place to ensure that essential services are available to all residents of a democratic society, those persons on the margins of society may fall farther behind the most affluent. The third challenge" rise of the network society" is the potential underwing of the methodical pace of democratic decision making due to rhythms and speeds unparalleled in human history. The question remains: Will quality discussion, debate and deliberation in new civic spaces be swept away in the current of "scream" television and talk radio, or will these activities survive, albeit transfigured, to serve democratic ends? The final peril is the phenomenon of the disappearance of the public sphere under the pressure of market forces that distort, compress and even eliminate public right-of-way. Some in the private sector want to abolish the public interest standard in which broadcasters act as trustees on behalf of the audience lacking excess to this scarce spectrum, erecting instead pay-per-use, privately owned media environments in which the public has no legal right to expect free entry.

The new communications technology and the diverse social networking sites associated with it are generally represented in the dominant media in terms that are utterly depoliticizing and privatizing, and reduced to personal tools and entertainment devices that allegedly enamour young people all over the world. Little is said about either the prevalent technological and market driven rationalities that guides the dominant uses of the electronically based media or how the diverse screen cultures that enable it—such as Facebook, Twitter, and other social networking platforms—either enhance or limit matters of agency, ethics, knowledge, and social responsibility. Scholars are concerned about how instrumental rationality has undermined technology's emancipatory possibilities, reducing it to a tool for domination are too often ignored, except by a few critical scholars whose work is generally missing from larger public debates about the new media. For instance many pundits warn about how screen culture and its virtual networking sites undermine democratic notions of the social while promoting a culture of privatization, a culture more akin to the dictates of neoliberalism than democracy.We talk compulsively about networks and try obsessively to conjure them (or at least their phantoms) our 'speed dating', personal ads and magic incantations of 'messaging' because we painfully miss the safety nets which the true networks of kinship, friends and brothers-in-fate used to provide matter-of-factly, with or without our efforts. Mobile-telephone directories stand for the missing community and are hoped to deputize for the missing intimacy; they are expected to carry a load of expectations they lack the strength to lift, let alone to hold

The brave youth are providing the world with a lesson in how the rest of us might construct a cultural politics based on social relations that enable individuals and social groups to rethink the crucial nature of what it means to make power visible, exhibit civic courage, and assume a measure of social responsibility in a media-saturated global sphere. They are working out in real time what it means to address how these new media technologies might foster a democratic cultural politics that challenges religious fundamentalism, state censorship, militarism, and the cult of certainty. Such a collective project requires a politics that is in the process of being invented, one that has to be attentive to the new realities of power, global social movements, and the promise of a planetary democracy. Both the old and new media processes and the technologies of screen culture are inextricably implicated in not simply the crisis of information and communication, but the crisis of democracy itself. Whatever the outcome, the magnificent and brave uprising by the young people of Iran illustrates that they have legitimated once again a new register of both opposition and politics. What is at stake, in part, is a mode of resistance and educational practice that is redefining in the heat of the battle the ideologies and skills needed to critically understand the new visual and visualizing technologies not simply as new modes of communication, but as weapons in the struggle for expanding and deepening the ideals and possibilities of democratic public life and the supportive cultures vital to democracy's survival.

As these students and young people have demonstrated, it would be a mistake to simply align the new media exclusively with the forces of domination and commercialism as many critics do in the United Sates–with what Allen Feldman calls "total spectrum violence. The Iranian uprising with its recognition of the image as a key force of social power makes clear that cultural politics is now constituted by a plurality of sites of resistance and social struggle, offering up new ways for young people to conceptualize how the media might be used to create alternative public spheres that enable them to claim their own voices and challenge the dominant

forces of oppression. Theorists such as Thomas Keenan, Mark Poster, Douglas Kellner, and Jacques Derrida are right in suggesting that the new electronic technologies and media publics "remove restrictions on the horizon of possible communications and, in doing so, suggest new possibilities for engaging the new media as a democratic force both for critique and for positive intervention and change . The democracy implies an experience in which power is shared, dialogue is connected to involvement in the public sphere, hope means imagining the unimaginable, and collective action portending the outlines of a new understanding of power, freedom, and democracy

The new media may be highly novel in its ability to bring mass numbers of people into the streets, but long term organizing is not synonymous with mobilizing demonstrations. It is difficult to encourage people to think about protracted struggles, protracted movements that require very careful organizing interventions that don't always depend on our capacity to mobilize demonstrations. It seems to be that mobilization had displaced organization, so that in the contemporary moment, when we think about organizing movements, we think about bringing masses of people into the streets. We need to rethink not only how the new media technologies of screen culture and electronically mediated social networks can refigure existing modes of communication, but also rewrite a democratic politics in which social movements can emerge that challenge those anti-democratic tendencies around the world. The new technologies with their instant modes of communication have a purpose as we have seen in Iran, China, Moldova, and Egypt. But what is crucial now is the fostering of relationships to technology that are predicated not only on instant, widely circulated, and uncensored modes of communication but also on creating the conditions for the development of critical literacies, modes of agency, critical thinking, and other aspects of civic engagement and education that are the precondition for any lasting form of democratic governance and social relations.

Conclusion

New media technological change is both driving globalization unambiguously and impacting democratization in deeply ambiguous ways. They have the potential to strengthen as well as to weaken democracy in certain of their chief characteristics, though differentially for representative and strong democracy. Globalization itself does more to impede than facilitate democracy, and new media technology is too often a tool of that obstruction. If it is to serve democracy, the technology will have to be effectively programmed to do so, and that program will have to be sensitive to the distinctive political theories and paradigms of democracy that inform political regimes. Market forces will not put the technology to creative and democratic uses but only to commercial uses. Deregulation in this domain has been and will be disastrous.

Certainly there are novel features of new media technology that can serve a more participatory, deliberative form of strong democracy and can help redress the asymmetry of a global society in which anarchic markets are powerful and organized civic and political forces weak. Technology can be an ally of citizens as well as of banks and corporations, of global civil

society as well as special interests groups. But this will happen only if it is consciously subordinated to our democratic wishes, and if we are fully sensitive to the technology's ambiguous impact on the forms of democracy.

It is certainly not the zealots of new media technology alone who are to blame for the fact that the democratic potentials of technology have not yet been exploited. Cyber-enthusiasts riding the electronic frontier understand technology well enough but misunderstand democracy completely; democrats tend either to ignorant enthusiasm or Luddite fearfulness. But in the end, the real challenge is political not technological, and if democracy is to benefit from technology we will have to start not with technology but with politics. Having a voice, demanding a voice and the making of science and technology policy is the first step that citizens can take in assuring a genuinely, democratic, technology. The new technology is only an instrument of communication. It cannot determine what we will say and to whom we will say it.

Can our communicative blockages, our local incivilities and neighborhood conflicts be overcome by the miracles of long distance computer communications? Will virtual community heal the ruptures of real community? Does the Net offer a solution to Kosovo or Palestine? Why should we think we can cure on our little keyboards and pixilated screens in nanoseconds all the intractable human problems we have created with one another face to face over centuries? If in this new, remarkable, millennium we are about enter, a millennium in which these new technologies will dominate our lives as never before, we want democracy to be served, and globalization's anarchic tendencies to be checked, then the bitter-sweet fruits of science will have to be subordinated to our democratic ends and made to serve as a facilitator, rather than a corrupter of our precious democracy. Whether this happens or not will depend not on the quality and the character of our technology, but on the quality of our political institutions and on the character of our citizens.

About Authors

Vineet Kaul is a free lance journalist and a visiting faculty teacher in different Indian Universities.

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