Chapter 12

Conclusions: Promoting e-Democracy

Previous technological breakthroughs have commonly generated exaggerated hopes that machines can transform society and democracy. Luddites fear for the worse, but technophiles hope for the better. In its more utopian manifestations, this view has been dubbed 'technoromanticism', expressed in earlier eras in response to Samuel Morse's electric telegraph, Alexander Graham Bell's telephone, and Guglielmo Marconi's wireless radio. The more utopian visions of the Internet suggest a future society in which virtually unlimited qualities of information become available, civic society flourishes, government decision-making becomes more open and transparent, and nation-state borders are eroded as people build virtual communities for work, learning and leisure spanning traditional boundaries of time and place. Although still in its adolescence, the core transformative capacities of the Internet include its potential for radically shrinking communications and information costs, maximizing speed, broadening reach, and eradicating distance. Compared with radio, television and newspapers, controlled by editors and broadcasters, the World Wide Web facilitates a virtually unlimited choice of information and communication one-to-one (e.g. via email), one-to-many (e.g. via a personal home page or electronic conference), many-to-one (e.g. via an electronic poll) and, perhaps most importantly, many-to-many (e.g. an online chat room), with a minimal role for gatekeepers or government censors. Internet messages have the capacity to flow further, faster and with fewer intermediaries.

Cyberoptimists are common in the United States where the Internet reflects certain deeply-held values in American culture; for libertarians the Web symbolizes the rewards of entrepreneurial risk-taking individualism and the benefits of the unfettered market-place, while for communitarians the digital world mirrors the values of egalitarian forms of direct democracy and grassroots networking. America's love affair with the latest, the smallest, the fastest electronic gizmos and gadgets is often expressed with an irrational gee-whiz exuberance similar to faith in the Nasdaq. Yet there are many reasons to temper the rosy scenarios with a more cautious vision stressing the substantial inequalities that may arise from technological development. Deep down many want to believe that the Internet represents the best of scientific progress, with a devil on our right shoulder whispering promises of technological quick fixes for civic engagement in democracy, akin to one-week wonder diets or surgical tummy tucks to save us from slothful selves without the need for painful exercise. Yet it remains difficult to silence the voice of the skeptical devil on our left, muttering warnings to mistrust glib promises of easy shortcuts for solving intractable social
inequalities and civic ills. People marvel at the magical powers of new-fangled mechanical inventions, yet simultaneously mistrust dependence on technology. So how do we strike an appropriate balance between these alternative visions and determine the most perspicacious assessment of future scenarios?

The global divide in Internet access

The issue of widening technological disparities around the world has generated considerable concern by international agencies and national governments. The evidence considered in this book confirms that the global divide in access to digital technologies is substantial and that it has been growing during the first decade of the Internet Age. While some post-industrial societies have experienced a remarkably fast transformation to All Internet, All-the-Time, at present about one in twenty of the world’s population is connected. Vast swathes of the population are excluded in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and South East Asia. There are grounds to hope that computer software and manufacturing will prove an important source of revenue in high tech areas of development in Taiwan, Malaysia, India and Brazil, but at present for most of the poorest nations the Internet represents one more area where they lag behind the industrialized world.

The analysis demonstrates that the root cause of unequal global diffusion of digital technologies is lack of economic development, the same as the reasons for the uneven spread of old mass media like radio and television. Within about a decade of its launch, professionals and managers in America, Sweden and Britain have come to take for granted access to Internet resources, surrounded by desktop microcomputers wired to high speed LAN networks and technical advisers at work, with the paraphernalia of mobile phones, digital pagers, personal digital assistants, and laptop computers for road warriors when traveling, and electronic shopping catalogues, library databases, electronic banking, and email easily available from home. In contrast multiple barriers face many developing societies where access to household telephones and television remains uncommon, as well as a reliable supply of electricity, let alone computers. Cyber-cafes, wired village schools and mobile cellular phone schemes may eventually help to connect more peripheral areas in poorer regions in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America or South East Asia, but such initiatives are only starting to be introduced. As international agencies like the UNDP, World Bank and G-8 have emphasized, wiring the world matters, not just in itself, but also because access to digital technologies is likely to reinforce the economic growth and productivity of richer nations while stranding the poorest ones further behind.
The social divide within nations

In postindustrial societies, as the Internet becomes increasingly commonplace for the home, school and workplace, it becomes even more important if certain groups are excluded from this resource, whether poorer neighborhoods and peripheral rural areas, of the older generation, girls and women, ethnic minorities, and those lacking college education. Many countries have recognized this issue and developed initiatives designed to tackle social access, often involving a combination of state, non-profit and market initiatives. Many assume that the digital divide is caused by certain characteristics associated with proximate access to this technology, such as the need for computing skills and affordable ISP connections. The policy solutions designed to ameliorate the digital divide commonly focus on specific fixes, such as wiring schools and classrooms, training teachers, and providing community access in poorer neighborhoods.

But will these initiatives work in terms of diversifying the online population? What the analysis in this book demonstrates is that the heart of the problem of the social divide in Internet access lies in broader patterns of socioeconomic stratification that influence the distribution of household consumer durables and participation in other common forms of information and communication technologies, as well as in the digital world. Moreover it is not necessarily the case that all dimensions of the social divide will automatically close as Internet access becomes more ubiquitous - the evidence from nations where use of new technologies have become widespread like Sweden and the Netherlands is that the gaps by education, income and occupation remain substantial and show no signs of closure during the first decade. It remains to be seen how this pattern changes in subsequent years. The process of generational turnover can be expected to gradually close some of these divisions, given the investments in school access and training. A combination of further technological developments, falling costs, and the appeal of mass entertainment delivered over the Internet all promise to widen access. But the continuing social inequalities in the distribution of older technologies like cable and satellite TV, and even household telephones, suggests that some residual inequalities are unlikely to disappear completely in access to personal home computers and Internet connections.

The democratic divide

Many have expressed hopes that cyberdemocracy can revitalize public interest and participation. Political institutions have adapted to the new opportunities: chapters have demonstrated that thousands of sites have been established by political parties, interest groups and new social movements, government departments, and parliaments. Cyber-
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optimists have faith that these innovations will revitalize social networks and civic engagement. Digital technologies promise to provide new forms of horizontal and vertical communication that can facilitate social engagement and enrich deliberative democracy. Cyberoptimists hope that the Internet provides a distinctive structure of opportunities for political mobilization that differs, in several important ways, from conventional activities like joining political parties, organizing grassroots community movements, or lobbying elected officials. Many believe that the Internet will diminish inequalities in public life by sharply reducing (although not wholly eliminating) certain barriers to civic engagement, leveling some of the financial hurdles, and widening the opportunities for political debate, the dissemination of information, and networks of new social movements. Given the lower information and communication costs via the Internet, it is hoped that new technology will allow people to be far more knowledgeable about public policy issues, articulate in expressing their opinions, and active in casting their votes. Enthusiasts often see information technology as a way to by-pass the limitations of representative democracy, allowing fuller participation in direct democracy and public deliberation through electronic town hall meetings, online discussion lists, bulletin boards, newsgroups, and community networks, as well as protest activities, direct action campaigns and civil disobedience coordinated via the Internet.

As we have seen, numerous web sites have sprung up to encouraging participation and deliberation, particularly in the United States, as well as multiple non-profit sites linking transnational advocacy networks concerned about issues such as the environment, human rights and international development\(^5\). In the early to mid 1990s, enthusiasts expressed hopes that many features of digital technologies had the capacity to transform politics as we know it, stressing the interactive many-to-many and one-to-many features of Internet communications, its networking and organizational role, its global reach across national boundaries, and the almost unlimited supply of information available on the Internet. Many hoped that the combination of the World Wide Web, online discussion-groups, email and bulletin boards had the Midas capacity to transform worthy but dull civic dross into democratic gold – generating a more participatory, egalitarian and deliberative form of public affairs.

Yet in contrast cyber-pessimists suggest that the new opportunities on the Internet will serve to reinforce the grip of established political actors and interests, such as the traditional news media, incumbent office-holders, and inside-the-beltway lobbyists. After just a few years the conventional mood among commentators became cautious and skeptical, stressing that despite the potential of new technologies, in practice the virtual world tended
to reflect ‘politics as usual’, with much the same dominant players, activities, and routines. In this view, far from generating new opportunities for deliberative and participatory politics, established interests predominate. Parties and candidates use the Web to hawk their electoral wares, boost their support and raise their dollars. Parliaments and government departments put official documents online, saving ink and postage, but they rarely facilitate public discussions or develop interactive ‘bottom-up’ formats. Newspapers and magazines give away electronic versions, usually hemorrhaging money in the process, but rather than widening the plurality of the news media, as in life, people tend to surf those sources they trust in the non-virtual world - the New York Times, the BBC and CNN, and so on. Most people participating in online politics - contributing electronically towards campaigns, surfing for news, or emailing their representatives - are those most likely to participate in traditional forms of face-to-face civic engagement.

One reason why the Internet arouses such fiercely contested visions of the future is that plausibly the new technology may both act as a ‘great leveler’ restructuring communication and information resources among intermediary institutions, and empowering the class of wired political activists, while also simultaneously reinforcing inequality for those nations, groups and individuals lacking the resources and motivation to take advantage of the new structure of opportunities. Like the blind men of Indostan, by describing different parts of the elephant, depending upon where we focus, as partial truths, ‘each was partly in the right ~ And all were in the wrong’ 6. Government web pages may both serve as a new channel for transparency and accountability, and also as a form of state propaganda. Established interested parties can use the Internet to boost their fund-raising, strengthen their organization and communicate their message, but so can minor opposition parties and grassroots groups of human rights or environmental activists.

Rejecting both the utopian revolutionary visions that everything will change (with technology driving politics), and the equally misplaced skeptical claims that nothing has changed in the virtual political world (with technology subordinate to its social uses), this study draws three main conclusions.

First, it is true, as many cyberpessimists argue, that so far established political institutions usually remain relatively conservative in how far they have adapted to the potential of digital technologies. Many official agencies have established an online web site and, as with firms in the commercial sector, within just a few years it will be surprising to find any major political institution that has not ventured online. Nevertheless, at least during the first decade, political uses of digital technologies have often proved relatively staid and unimaginative. Most mainstream political organizations have sought to communicate via
digital channels much as they would through the conventional mass media, changing the channel but not the nature of communications, rather than radically rethinking their strategic information and communications functions in the light of the interactive capacities in digital technologies. Government departments, for example, often publish official documents and downloadable forms online, saving paper, postage and ink, but they rarely launch deliberative consultation exercises through unmoderated chat rooms. Major party websites commonly publicize leadership speeches, press releases and official policy statements, but they less often facilitate feedback mechanisms for public comments from supporters or critics. Interest groups often use the web as a form of corporate wallpaper, publicizing their messages, but not utilizing the two-way capacities of digital media.

Moreover it is also true, as pessimists emphasize, that at mass level the Internet has difficulty in mobilizing the disengaged. In this regard, the Internet will largely serve to reinforce the activism of the activists, facilitating participation for those who are already interested in politics by reducing some of the opportunity costs of communicating, mobilizing and organizing. The choice of where to go and what to do online means that a growing gap can be expected to develop between the politically engaged and disengaged. Yet this conclusion needs one important modification: although the Internet is not necessarily reaching new groups of citizens, the analysis suggests that the culture of the Internet in Europe and the United States is distinctive in certain important regards, and may therefore contribute towards a diffuse process of changing values in society and politics. The evidence suggests that the online community in America is more tolerant of alternative lifestyles, more sympathetic towards new social movements, more secular towards moral values, more liberal in general on the social issues although also more pro-business on the economic agenda. This analysis needs to be extended further, but at present the available evidence points towards an Internet culture that will accelerate the process of value change associated with societal modernization.

Lastly, and most importantly, despite these grounds for caution, the study suggests that 'politics as usual' may be altered by digital technologies primarily by altering the balance of resources among the political institutions, reducing the costs of gathering information and communicating messages, with consequences that will mainly serve to benefit minor parties, smaller groups and fringe movement activists. There are parallel developments in the knowledge economy, where information technology has shifted the balance of resources away from the investment in land and capital, and towards skills, expertise and know-how. The process has mainly benefited small businesses in the service sector, with the organizational flexibility and aggressive entrepreneurship to adapt innovative ways of
connecting directly with customers. The capacity of the Internet in the economic sphere lies in reducing the transaction costs for companies, thereby downsizing the optimal size of firms, and supplementing the importance of the traditional resources of land and capital by those of know-how and technical expertise. In less than a decade, innovative companies with the flexibility and imagination to take advantage of digital technologies, like Amazon.com and E-Bay, have challenged the market-share held by established companies. Utilizing niche markets, small businesses with the necessary skills and flexibility in manufacturing, sales or services can supply customers directly, challenging large multinational corporations. Thousands of dot.coms have failed, but some succeed.

In the same way, digital politics has shifted the balance of resources away from large-scale professional bureaucracies, mass-branch membership organizations, and financial resources, and towards technical knowledge and skills. This process should not be exaggerated; digital politics does not level the playing field for political actors – traditional resources remain important, and indeed they may be translated into off-the-peg know-how. Nevertheless the Internet provides an arena that facilitates more open and egalitarian competition in civic society. Digital politics therefore has the potential to amplify the voice of smaller and less well-resourced insurgents and challengers, whether parties, groups or agencies, who have difficulty being heard through the conventional channels of the traditional mass media but who have the flexibility, skills and innovative capacity to produce new coalitions capable of sudden ‘flash’ protests around specific events. In the public sphere, the most dramatic exemplification of digital politics has come from transnational advocacy networks and alternative social movements that have adapted the resources of new technologies to communicate, organize, and mobilize global coalitions around issues, such as those of world trade, globalization and human rights, to challenge the legitimacy of established international organizations and national governments. As shown by the systematic comparison of fringe, minor and major parties, the wired world cannot eliminate the power of traditional organizational, financial, or authoritative resources, but it provides a more egalitarian environment where technical expertise counts in gathering information and communicating messages. As the Internet spreads worldwide, the capacity for digital politics has particularly important implications for consolidating and transitional democracies struggling to institutionalize their political systems. Many countries are characterized by free and fair elections yet they continue to lack stable party organizations and strong opposition movements, effective parliamentary checks on the abuse of power, a flourishing civil society and respect for the rule of law. Where the Internet spreads among civic society in these countries, it can be expected to contribute towards the democratization process through
strengthening the mechanisms for information and communication, and the influence for middle-level actors of representative governance.

More than a century ago the French sociologist Gabriel Tarde described the diffusion process as analogous to a stone dropping into a pond triggering rippling waves that spread in concentric circles, advancing slowly among core elites in the beginning, followed by rapid acceleration spreading through advanced urban societies, with progress gradually slackening until it finally stops. This surge remains in process and the limitations of our ability to peer into the future of the Internet is self evident: few can predict with much confidence which of the multiple dot.coms stocks will rise or fall tomorrow so it is hazardous to provide more than, at best, an educated guess about the long-term consequences of new technology for democracy. Historical analogies are commonly drawn with previous technologies like the electronic telegraph, telephone, or television but, like generals fighting the last war, there are many plausible reasons why, despite these lessons, digital technology may prove distinctive. Projections of future developments remain uncertain and hazardous, surrounded by health warnings, yet at the same time it remains even more important that we seek to understand the underlying reasons for patterns of Internet access and use at this stage in the diffusion process, even imperfectly, before the initial inequalities rigidify into a virtual Berlin Wall dividing the information rich and poor, within and between societies.


3 See, for example, Andrew L Shapiro. 1999. The Control Revolution: How the Internet is Putting Individuals in Charge and Changing the World we Know. New York: Public Affairs. See also Christopher Weare. 2000. ‘Technology and politics: Linking the Internet to changes in democratic governance.’ Paper presented at the International Political Science Association World Congress, Quebec August.


6 The reference is to the Hindu fable described in John Godfrey Saxe’s poem ‘The Blind Man and the Elephant.’