

Democracy and the Information Revolution*

Conference Background Paper

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How is the information revolution affecting the practice and prospects of democracy around the world? Is it growing the global public's opportunities for free political expression and participation from the grassroots up, or rather is it simply reinforcing existing patterns of inequality and hierarchical power relationships? Is it strengthening the social foundations of electoral politics, such as political parties and a shared civic culture, or is it weakening them? Will it expand the ability of authoritarian regimes to utilize propaganda and to monitor their citizens' behavior, or will it help pro-democracy activists to progressively chip away at their grip on power? These and similar questions have been addressed to varying extents on an individualized basis, particularly with respect to the experiences of the industrialized countries. But there has not been enough effort to explore them together as interrelated elements of a unified field, or to do so on a truly global basis that takes into account the wide disparities between rich and poor countries's abilities to employ information and communications technologies (ICTs) in the political sphere.

The convening of Democracy Forum 2001 is an important step toward beginning to fill that gap. In keeping with the views expressed at the April 2001 Policy Seminar in Helsinki, Finland, the Democracy Forum will explore in detail both the risks and opportunities that the information revolution raises for democracy. In addition, it will consider some of the key choices that the international community will have to confront in attempting to steer the revolution in directions congenial to the spread, consolidation, and progressive enrichment of democracy.

It would be well beyond the scope of this brief paper to explore these matters in any detail. Instead, our mandate is far more modest: to pull together in one place concise introductions to the debates surrounding the key issues to be taken up in the course of the Democracy Forum. Our survey begins with the global digital divide, which will be a central theme of the initial plenary sessions. Obviously, when significant segments of society cannot access or use the Internet and other ICTs, the prospects for their participation in e-democracy are greatly reduced. Promoting the digital development of societies generally is hence critical to the prospects for robust information age democracies.

We then introduce the issue-areas to be explored in the Democracy Forum Workshops. The next sections address the impact of the information revolution on three key pillars of democracy---local social capital, political parties, and an open public sphere of political ideas and information. From there we turn to the challenges of using ICTs to improve the conduct of elections; the potential contributions of electronic governments and parliaments to the development of e-democracy; and finally to the complex matter of the information revolution's implications for authoritarian regimes and the prospects for transition to democracy. In each case, we briefly outline some of the contending claims about the risks and benefits of the information revolution, and then suggest a few broadly framed normative and practical questions with respect to possible action items. It is hoped that these questions are of some use in stimulating thought and discussion, including in the break-out sessions. Either way, it is hoped that by the end of the day, each group will have agreed on some recommendations to the international community that can be presented in the subsequent plenary meetings.

I. Narrowing the Global Digital Divide

The past few years have witnessed a vibrant international debate about the nature, causes, and consequences of the global digital divide. Some participants in the debate have advanced a rather pessimistic view, arguing that the information revolution and globalization inevitably will deepen social inequalities and leave much of the world behind. In contrast, while acknowledging the challenge of growing inequality, other participants emphasize that today's ICTs provide unparalleled opportunities to significantly increase wealth creation and social empowerment around the world. The technology's speed, power, and flexibility are increasing rapidly while its costs are falling in tandem. As such, the Internet, personal computers, mobile telecommunications, and so on can be productively applied to tackle an infinite number of economic and social challenges, including in the poorest areas of the world. Hence, they maintain that through concerted action the international community can help the developing and post-communist countries to not only narrow the digital divide, but even to reap a significant digital dividend.

Governments, multilateral institutions, businesses and industry associations, and civil society organizations have all joined the debate, resulting in a slew of meetings and proposals on the way forward. Collectively, these proposals point to an emerging consensus on a number of key principles and action items, including the importance of establishing coherent national plans for ICT-based development; building national and regional Internet backbones and community access points; adopting enabling policies for telecommunications and electronic commerce; encouraging the creation and dissemination of locally relevant content and applications that preserve cultural heritage and linguistic diversity; significantly expanding education and training programs, both in general and with regard to ICTs in particular; and creating a facilitative environment in which both civil society uses of technology and business entrepreneurship can thrive. But despite this consensus, political divisions, economic difficulties, and organizational turf dynamics have arisen to make the near-term prospects for the adoption and implementation of major new initiatives mixed at best. For example, absent a change of direction on the part of leading participants, the recently released recommendations of the Group of Eight's Dot Force committee are unlikely to result in the emergence of a really significant action plan at the G-8's July 2001 summit in Genoa. Given these developments, among the key questions that will need to be addressed going forward are:

1. How can the developing and post-communist countries best move forward with the sort of initiatives and policies suggested by the Dot Force if substantial new commitments from the international community are not forthcoming?
2. How can the industrialized countries, the international business community, and multilateral organizations be encouraged to strengthen their commitment to digital development and to establish a higher level of coordination among their efforts?
3. What will be the consequences for democracy promotion if progress in narrowing global digital divide remains slow and highly uneven? What tactical adjustments will be necessary, for example by more effectively leveraging the traditional media technologies already in place?

II. Building Social Capital for Local Democracy

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the importance to democracy of social capital--the social networks and norms of reciprocity and trust that link individuals into societies. But some scholars and practitioners worry that the information revolution may be contributing to the erosion of this positive sort of social capital (as opposed to, say, the bonds between hate groups). They variously argue that the explosive growth of video rentals, portable computer game and audio equipment, cable and satellite television channels, World Wide Web surfing and so on encourages people to substitute individualized electronic pastimes for real-life interactions in social settings. Coupled with broader trends like generational change, suburban sprawl, and the pressures of modern life, this atomistic absorption in technology is said to result in a collective withdrawal from citizen engagement and the decay of the community bonds needed for vibrant democracy. However, other observers counter that the degree of erosion is overstated, and that the information revolution is simply facilitating a transformation in the character of social capital. In their view, it may be that many people are spending less time in local community associations, bowling leagues and the like, but they are forging new forms of community in cyberspace, some of which involve strong bonds and normative commitments. Moreover, these observers add, the technology has greatly empowered and catalyzed the growth of civil society organizations and new social movements that advocate democratic governance and social responsibility.

These issues have national and international implications, but of particular interest in this conference is whether the information revolution can contribute to building social capital and democracy at the local level. Over the years, many communities have used technologies like computer networks and bulletin boards, videotex systems, public access cable television channels and, of course, broadcast radio and television to foster local identity and social bonds. Today, many are developing Internet web sites and portals offering access to government services, local businesses, community events and so on. Some communities are using public telecenters and kiosks to broaden that access, or are taking advantage of the Internet's interactive capabilities to facilitate dialogues among their members and with local officials, as well as to deliver more personalized services. Particularly in light of these experiences, the extent to which ICTs can contribute to building local social capital and countering any larger trends toward social fragmentation merits consideration. A few of the relevant questions may include:

1. Which technologies, services and applications have proven to be more or less effective in building strong bonds within local communities and between civil society and local governments?
2. What steps can be taken in such efforts to engage in particular social segments that have been marginalized from participation in community life?
3. Should local governments and businesses pursue ICT partnerships with civil societal organizations engaged in buttressing democracy from the bottom up, and if so how?

III. Strengthening Political Parties

Political parties are another essential foundation of vibrant democracies. But unfortunately, the state of parties around the world is rather mixed. In many developing and former communist countries, political parties are weakly institutionalized, highly fragmented, and inadequately prepared to govern. In many industrialized countries, party identification and membership is on the decline. It is possible that the information revolution may be contributing to some of the problems parties face. For example, the Internet and other ICTs may encourage a substitution effect in which certain segments of society redirect their energies into more narrowly defined political groups that are seemingly more responsive and less encumbered by the need to strike compromises between disparate objectives. The spread of direct democracy techniques, such as online plebiscites, would bypass parties even further. Alternatively, the technology provides ample opportunities for people to simply “tune out” public life and pursue more individualistic forms of fulfillment. And in addition to facilitating the erosion of public participation in parties, the information revolution may provide party members with incentives to pursue strategies that weaken their organizations from within. Most prominently in United States but also elsewhere, many politicians and political factions have used ICTs to cultivate their own bases of support separate from or even in partial opposition to their parties.

On the other hand, the information revolution also presents political parties with some significant new opportunities. Properly managed, ICTs can be used to reach out to politically disaffected or unmotivated citizens, including youth and historically marginalized groups; to publicize party positions, and to solicit feedback, new ideas, and new members; to energize party activists and build leadership cadres, both nationally and at the grass-roots level; and to strengthen intra-party communications and create more flexible, less bureaucratic organizations. Moreover, ICTs lower some types of entry barriers and help new or smaller parties to be heard and compete on a more level playing field. This increases the representation of diverse views and can have an energizing effect on both the public and the traditionally dominant parties (although it also can result in a fragmented polity, minority governments, and unstable governing coalitions). In sum then, as societies becoming increasingly networked and information intensive, traditional parties may have to work harder to maintain their external support and internal coherence, while new ones will have to build their ability to use ICTs as a force multiplier. In this context, some of the questions that may merit consideration include:

1. To what extent have differences among parties in their ability to utilize technology had a demonstrable effect on their relative strengths and on electoral outcomes?
2. What are the most effective ways to use ICTs to strengthen party organization, including the links between the national and local levels and with sister parties abroad?
3. How can political parties best use ICTs to publicize and build support for their policy positions and to get out the vote?
4. How can parties use the technology to engage the public in interactive dialogues and active participation in shaping their agendas?

IV. Promoting a Vital Public Sphere in the New Media Environment

A vital public sphere of ideas and information is a third foundation of democracy. The information revolution is having an undeniable impact on the ability of individual citizens and organizations to acquire, create, and publicly disseminate information of all kinds. Traditional media organizations are undergoing rapid change in the technologies of news and entertainment production. At the same time, the organization and governance of their industries is being transformed by trends such as globalization, deregulation, competition, privatization, convergence, and consolidation. The result has been an explosion in the volume, variety, and technical quality of the product delivered to consumers, although critics contend that substantive quality and intellectual diversity have not necessarily grown in tandem. In parallel with these changes in the “old” media, the Internet and related new media technologies have essentially given many millions of people unprecedented access to the world’s information, as well as a multi-media printing press and a global distribution channel for their views. As the technology advances, many home pages will become home stations disseminating audio-visual as well as graphical and textual information, and many users will be able to send and receive it anywhere, anytime.

There is, of course, a good deal of debate about the risks and opportunities presented by the emerging media environment. Pessimists variously fear that the instantaneous global spread of unreliable, falsified, criminal or inappropriate information will become the norm; standards of ethics and truthfulness will erode; societies will fragment, with shared experience and civic discourse giving way to a digital tower of Babel; governments will attempt to impose new forms of censorship, including beyond their borders; big corporations will assert their control and render the infosphere a vast wasteland of vapid consumerism; and so on. In contrast, optimists maintain that new social norms will emerge to counter the digital “dark side,” and that the technology will remain overwhelmingly empowering and subversive of top-down controls. Either way, the road we are on undoubtedly will have profound consequences for public discourse and knowledge and, by extension, the character of democracy. Hence, a few of the questions that may merit consideration include:

1. What sort of public policy frameworks are needed to facilitate diverse political expression in the “old” mass media, whether commercial or noncommercial in nature? Will the transition to digital radio and television require different approaches?
2. How can governments protect societies against allegedly harmful political expression or disinformation on the Internet without unduly curtailing speech or imposing their laws beyond their national borders?
3. How can we preserve some measure of shared civic culture in the infosphere and guard against the excessive fragmentation of political expression into narrow communities of interest?
4. How can governments ensure that all citizens have the opportunity to access and use ICTs for the purposes of political speech and participation irrespective of gender, ethnicity, income, education, locality, or other considerations?

V. Improving the Conduct of Elections

As last year's events in Florida made abundantly clear, computerization is not a panacea for the technical challenges of running elections. Indeed, the inappropriately purged voter rolls, confusing ballots, outdated punch card system, miscounted and prematurely reported tallies and so on comprise a fairly good checklist of things not to do when selecting and managing election technology. Moreover, it is entirely likely that similar problems have arisen to varying degrees elsewhere in the United States and around the world without attracting much attention. Presumably, such missteps would be even more problematic in situations where democracy is not yet deeply institutionalized. Hence, as countries go forward with technological upgrades in the years ahead, it is important that the lessons of Florida be carefully analyzed in order to avoid these or similar mistakes.

If properly managed and subject to appropriate oversight, ICTs can contribute a great deal to the conduct of free and fair elections. Computerized and networked systems can significantly increase the speed and accuracy with which registrations are checked and votes are cast and counted. Broadcast networks and the Internet can be used to quickly disseminate results from the precinct level on up, increasing much needed transparency in the process. These and other improvements build citizens' trust and desire to participate in elections, as well as their willingness to accept what they consider to be unfavorable outcomes---all essential societal bases for the development of democratic cultures and institutions. Going further, recent experiments with on-line voting may be the harbinger of a more convenient model that could greatly increase voters' propensity to "turn-out" and, in particularly conflictual environments, their sense of personal security in doing so. On the other hand, e-voting does raise issues of fairness in socially stratified conditions, and may be seen by some as eroding important rituals of citizenship. All this points to a number of managerial and political questions, including the following:

1. What commitments can governments reasonably be expected to undertake with respect to funding the procurement of appropriate voting technologies and ensuring their consistent deployment on a nation-wide basis?
2. How can electoral management bodies best ensure that voting technologies are customer friendly and configurable to meet the needs of citizens with disabilities, limited education, or little experience in using such technologies?
3. How can electoral management bodies make sure that computerized voter identification and registration records and vote counts are handled in a politically neutral, professional manner by both public bodies and any private sector entities involved?
4. What policy and security steps should governments take to maintain their national information infrastructures and electrical power grids at levels of readiness necessary for the reliable aggregation and dissemination of results?
5. Should remote electronic voting be promoted in order to encourage wider participation, and if so, how can governments ensure that such opportunities are not limited to particular social groups?

VI. Fostering E-Democracy Through Governments and Parliaments

Governments and legislatures around the world are beginning the transition to digital, networked organization. Predictably, a number of concerns have been raised about the potential risks of such efforts. Some observers worry that bureaucrats and politicians may not be adept at designing optimal and sustainable plans; that powerful private vendors will take advantage of their bargaining power to become the leading beneficiaries; and that states will not be able to compete for and retain the requisite skilled personnel. Moreover, critics suggest that governments are too rigid and dependent on informal procedures and influence dynamics for e-government to make a real difference in their operations. Additional concerns are that most of the e-government initiatives adopted thus far give limited attention to interactivity with and participation by the general public in government affairs, and that the digital divide could limit the direct benefits to comparatively wealthy and educated social strata.

But to proponents of e-government, these and other potential problems are tractable. They argue that as relative latecomers, states can adopt the best procedures and technologies from the outset; that ICTs increase governments' efficiency, transparency, and accountability while limiting the scope for arbitrary decisions and abuses of power; and that organizational management, inter-organizational coordination, procurement practices, and the delivery of services to citizens and businesses all will be greatly enhanced. Further, on the question of interactivity, some proponents argue that what citizens want most is a professionalized state capable of effectively providing services, not an opportunity to remotely participate in the minutia of policy making. Conversely, others envision a fundamental transformation in the relationship between states and citizens, in which agencies and parliaments will provide the public with opportunities to track and electronically weigh in on a wide range of decisions and administrative procedures. In short, whether they champion direct democracy or just more effective and modern representative democracy, the proponents of e-government insist that the benefits far outweigh the risks. This is a reasonable (and perhaps obvious) conclusion, but many questions remain as to how to make e-government serve the cause of e-democracy. A few of the relevant questions may include:

1. How can governments best use ICTs to make documents and legislative deliberations progressively more accessible to the general public?
2. As they develop the necessary resources and expertise, how can governments move beyond the one-way provision of services to creating interactive and participatory opportunities for citizen? In what cases would this be a useful objective, or not?
3. To avoid abuses and ensure that citizens will have full confidence in using e-government services, should governments adopt strong policies on privacy protection, digital signatures, freedom of information, and related issues?
4. Should the international community develop "readiness assessment" tools that can be used---on a demand-driven basis---to evaluate national e-government/e-democracy initiatives and to help identify and publicize best practices?

VII. Encouraging Change in Authoritarian Regimes

Since the early days of international radio broadcasting, many have argued that technology-enabled flows of information can play a critical role in opening up authoritarian regimes. Although the historical record on this score actually is rather mixed, the proposition has received renewed attention and widening popularity in the context of today's information revolution. Proponents of this view argue that the international diffusion of everything from photocopying machines, camcorders, personal computers, and cell phones to global television services and, above all, the Internet will make it progressively more difficult for authoritarian regimes to control the political, thought, expression, and behavior of their citizens. The consequence, they maintain, will be the erosion of authoritarianism and transitions to democratic rule. However, other observers take a more cautious view. They point out that some authoritarian regimes have proven adept at restricting access to ICTs, or at monitoring and suppressing undesired speech where such access is allowed. This is true even of the Internet, cyber-libertarians' proclamations about its uncontrollability notwithstanding. Moreover, some despotic regimes have been quite effective at using the technology to spread pro-government propaganda or to whip up nationalist, religious, or ethnic sentiments to the same ends. And, these observers add, even if information is more freely circulated, it is by no means certain that this will result in effective challenges to dictatorships that are dead set on retaining power.

The information revolution probably can make a difference in countries transitioning to democracy, and even in semi-authoritarian systems that allow some opposition. But in the case of rougher authoritarian regimes, under precisely what circumstances which types of ICT usage can help promote (or retard) change remains an open question. Moreover, recalling the long-standing debates about international broadcasting and national sovereignty, it may also raise controversial issues with respect to the appropriate response of the international community. Hence, some of the questions that could be considered in this context include:

1. Should the international community cooperate with civil society organizations and exile groups that are using ICTs to work for change in authoritarian countries?
2. Should the international community promote the global diffusion of ICTs, particularly encryption and other technologies that increase the privacy of electronic behavior?
3. Should ICT companies doing business with authoritarian regimes refrain from providing them with the technological means to track and suppress the electronic behavior of their citizens?
4. How can the international community raise the profile of information and communication rights on the global human rights agenda and in its interactions with authoritarian governments?
5. Should democracy assistance programs for countries transitioning from authoritarian rule give significant consideration to the potential benefits of ICTs, and should broader development assistance programs similarly support democracy-enhancing technology applications?

Conclusion

As the discussions at the Democracy Forum undoubtedly will demonstrate, the information revolution is beginning to have a significant impact on the social foundations and organizational practices of democracy. And yet, we must bear in mind that in a very real sense we are still in the early stages of the Internet-based phase of the information revolution. In the decades ahead, the technology's power and world-wide accessibility will far outstrip where we are today, and in all likelihood its effects on the conduct of democracy will grow in parallel. With this in mind, it probably makes sense to establish an ongoing global dialogue about the challenges of building e-democracy, and to track its progress and pitfalls in a manner that facilitates collective learning and successful adaptations to changing circumstances. Governments, international organizations, civil society organizations and the global business community all can make central contributions to the success of such an effort. Hopefully, this Democracy Forum will be just the beginning.