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Electronic Democracy: Between The Vision & The Reality
- Whose Vision, Whose Reality?

By

Peter Thompson
ELECTRONIC DEMOCRACY:
BETWEEN THE VISION & THE REALITY

WHOSE VISION, WHOSE REALITY?

by Peter Thompson, Bangkok University

I recently had to mark a pile of assignments completed by a group of 18-20 year old students, on the topic of how communication technology affected their lives, and what implications it might hold for the future. With the exception of a couple of imaginative optimists who predicted that teleportation & time-travel would be available to us all by next Tuesday, there was a general consensus that the technologies which we have come to recognise as comprising the 'Information Super-Highway' (ISH) were:

a) desirable & beneficial,
b) inevitable & unavoidable,
c) accessible & affordable,
d) essential for 'development'.

Few students made any explicit comments about why they regarded the new forms of communication technology as inherently progressive, and nobody mentioned the implications for democracy.

It struck me that the majority of us rarely consider the potential impact that such new forms of media might have on society as a whole. We often consider a new technology simply in terms of personal advantage/cost, and neglect to wonder how other people (whether as individuals or masses) might regard its potential uses or shortcomings.

Technology can mean different things to different people & different societies. The same is true also for the notion of 'Democracy'. In this paper I will attempt to provide a brief overview of some of the potential areas of conflict in respect to the Electronic Democracy issue and to draw some conclusions according to the visions & realities which seem most likely to be manifested in the future.

There would appear to be little disagreement with the argument that the world is undergoing an enormous change with the emergence of digital, computerised communication networks that are being established in virtually every nation around the globe. Asia in particular is rapidly developing its communication infrastructures along with its economies.

Yet questions remain over whether the information revolution represented by the 'Information Super-Highway' also represents a democratic revolution.

It is important to recognise that there are competing and conflicting perceptions of the sort of society that could emerge from the shifts in the way we create, process & distribute information across the world.
Whether we expect a democratic Utopia or a totalitarian nightmare depends on a multitude of variables which might influence our relationship to the new infrastructure.

From an individual perspective, we must consider criteria such as age, sex, race, nationality, religion, education, occupation, income, political preference, & primary-group relationships. A young, Japanese computer scientist will no doubt have a rather different outlook than an elderly Indian bus-driver, for example.

From a national perspective, relevant variables will include geographical location, natural resources, population level, extent of existing technological infrastructure, cultural/religious/political identity, GNP, international standing & internal stability. For example, Rwanda will have a very different national agenda from France.

From a global perspective, important variables such as organisational status, legal/economic power, extent of corporate and/or state recognition, & general public respect will affect how the ISH is conceived. UNESCO, AT&T, and Amnesty International will all operate according to their respective international concerns.

The variables mentioned above are not exhaustive, and the three main perspectives are by no means discrete. It is obvious that many concerns will be shared among them, and, indeed, that they will directly influence each other.

The point here is simply to draw attention to some of the possible sources of dispute over the desirability of certain technological implementations and their democratic potential. To illustrate the point, consider the following examples:

A Trans-National Corporation (TNC) might perceive the huge business potential of the ISH and encourage developing nations to accept investments to develop its access.

The TNC might also suggest that communication systems be developed as a way of encouraging 'freedom of speech' (which has, in the past, been interpreted as the right to advertise in the host nation...).

An NGO working to develop educational opportunities in a particular country might regard the ISH as a valuable source of academic material which might otherwise be unaffordable, and therefore a progressive tool for advancing their cause.

An urban teenager might regard the ISH as an exciting new dimension of electronic entertainment, and pester her/his parents to pay for interactive TV services.

A poor rural peasant might simply shake his/her head in confusion at the arrival of yet another technological wonder beyond comprehension, and wonder whether it will make the crops grow better this year...

If the technological vision varies, so too will the perception of democratic potential. For some nation-states, 'democracy' is just an ideal which only the advanced industrial nations can afford. As Ratnatunga (1995) and Datta-Ray (1995) suggest, political standards vary between nations and cultures. The right to free association and speech, and the perception of the legitimacy of dissent also vary. It is difficult to criticise such variations in democratic standards without

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Such a conspiratorial analysis may seem unrealistic, but perhaps that is precisely the point that Enzenberger is making: We have implicitly accepted the inevitability of technological ‘progress’ without being sufficiently critical about the nature of that progress. We perceive the possibilities, but fail to take account of the fact that the forces which will determine which possibilities become realities are not ours to control.

In regard to telecommunication development, it must be noted that the infrastructure has been established predominantly by the private sector (ie-TNCs). Their aim is to make profitable investments. This is not necessarily incompatible with democratic developments, but it is certainly a quite separate issue. Schiller (1976) & Hamelink (1977) have argued that while new technologies will often find alternative forms of use, appropriate to the society adopting them, such alternatives are generally peripheral: The primary intentions of the technology’s producers will always be established as the main function. As Hamelink contends: ‘Exactly the origin of the technology defines its principal application, which will inevitably outweigh any alternate use in terms of volume and impact. The technology was designed such that it will function optimally in the principal application. Computer technology illustrates this. This technology is designed for use within centralised infrastructures and formalised hierarchial organisation structures. It can evidently be applied within decentralised environments, but it has an inherent preference for centralisation, being primarily an instrument of control, measurement, and ordering.’ (1977, p.19)

Since the ISH is being developed primarily as a business interest to facilitate international market liberalism, it follows that this feature will be central, not peripheral to the societies which adopt it. Alternative uses will certainly be found, albeit on a marginal basis. There is great potential for imaginative and culturally-appropriate modes of technological utilisation to be discovered & implemented. But these will be in addition to, not instead of ‘the main commercial function.

For example, if we accept that the international trade in stocks & shares and money-markets is an important element in motivating TNCs to develop the global communication infrastructure, then we must also accept that this investment would not be forthcoming were there any doubt that the ISH would not permit such activity.

Thus the continuation of free-market ideology and operation is ensured, since its legitimacy is implicitly established along with the technology. Since such fundamental philosophies encompass a wide range of social/political/economic assumptions, we have to ask just how much democratic room-for-manoeuvre will remain...

The increases in international and cross-cultural communication & trade certainly pose many policy problems for politicians. Communication, being fundamental to human social/cultural existence, cuts across all aspects of human political & economic concern.

As Davey (1994, p.5) argues, ‘The rapid evolution of the Information age will, however, place major stresses on our legal and social institutions which are at present unable to adapt as quickly as technological development.’
Melody (1995) suggests that the ISH may represent a significant increase of TNC influence over national domestic politics. This may suggest that future political-economic agendas may be established according to external international pressures, and that nation-states will face a further dilution of their autonomy.

For the individual, the democratic prospects are complex and uncertain. Questions of access are clearly very important. Fortner (1995) points out that in addition to possible economic exclusion and alienated disinterest, 'excommunication' from the ISH may occur through social fragmentation induced by huge overloads of available information. He sees the information society as the manifestation of 'Gesellschaft'- the cellular society where individual/interest-group concerns isolate and insulate themselves from one another. (This is what Williams calls 'privatisation' of the individual.)

Citing Gergen (1991), Fortner argues that 'social saturation' may occur, where people are simply stretched to the limits of their capacity for social discourse, and are unable to handle any further communicative interaction.

Melody (1995) also points out the potential problems of selectivity & reception, and suggests that the increase in the quantity of accessible information in no way guarantees any commensurate increase in quality. Gerdes (1994) points out that access to information does not imply the creation of better understanding.

It could well be the case that the information society will consist of people, who, on the whole, are worse-informed. Social fragmentation and individual isolation could easily reduce the social base of common knowledge and shared values.

While radical plurality may be a democratically acceptable development, its value is lost if common awareness and mutual respect & tolerance is not present. In a fragmented society, where it is easier to ignore other human beings, there will be a qualitative reduction in social dissonance: The social mechanisms by which conformity to certain principles of behaviour and attitude are normally encouraged will be eroded. This may sound emancipatory, but it could also be dangerous. If the social order is threatened, then states may seek non-democratic measures to maintain order. Perhaps the emergence of political extremists such as Vladimir Zhirinovsky in Russia and Louis Farrakhan in the USA is only a beginning. Fortner (1995, p.150) makes the following comment: 'The United States, which has long prided itself on its melting-pot characteristic... may likely find itself fragmenting into fractious congeries of prejudice, sustained by an information system that took its moral responsibility lightly under the assumptions of inherent good in free market capitalism.'

The fragmented society prophecies are important because they illustrate an alternative critical approach to the usual concerns of mass homogenisation & cultural uniformity. It is important to recognise that diversity is not the same thing as democracy. There is diversity in a supermarket trolley, but the underlying consumerist ideology is the same, regardless of variety of contents. As Melody (1995) contends, greater diversity is entirely compatible with a restriction of real choice.
being caught in the cross-fire from the debate over issues such as cultural relativism and national autonomy.

Nevertheless, it is important to try and appreciate the different forms of government & public decision-making which claim to be democratic. The recent Iraqi referendum which resulted in apparently overwhelming support for the continuing rule of Saddam Hussein is one example. Other nations, such as Cambodia or South Africa, might claim democratic successes when they develop forms of decision-making which do not dissolve into violent confrontations. Indeed, it would be uncharitable and unintelligent to dismiss such signs of political hope because of electoral imperfections.

In some nations, participative democratic values are regarded as a secondary concern behind essential drives for basic developments necessary for survival. However, as Yushkiavitshus (1995) argues, this is often a reflection of the more dubious tendency to equate ‘development’ with GDP/GNP statistics. Such figures prove nothing about the distribution & utilisation of the nation’s wealth, and cannot be substituted for human rights.

Aung San Su Kyi made the following remark on this issue: ‘The true development of human beings involves much more than mere economic growth. At its heart there must be sense of empowerment and inner fulfilment.’ (Quoted in Yushkiavitshus, 1995, p.12)

Despite variations of cultural context and perceived priority, it is at least possible to outline what sort of principles represent the Democratic Ideal.

Claiming universality for a democratic standard is not tantamount to attempting to impose uniform social/cultural values across the whole world. On the contrary, the ideals of democracy must surely allow for diversity and variation according to informed public consent & preference.

Precisely what this means in a particular national/cultural context is not a matter for academic critics to determine. But this does not mean that it is right or proper for military/political elites to take advantage of respect for cultural relativism and impose their own arbitrary rule over a society. Such rhetoric has too often been a thin veil over oppressive methods used to maintain their positions of privilege & power. So too have been the audacious claims that such measures are necessary to save the nation from external imperialist domination (which might carry some validity were the leaders not themselves enjoying the consumerist excesses of the imperialists).

As Mahub-ul-Haq, of the UN Development Programme comments, 'The South has often found external alibis for all its internal problems. It has sought international justice while denying justice to its own people at home.' (Bangkok Post, Outlook, p.29, 29.6.94)

Democracy involves the empowerment of the individual and community. It is the right to be informed and to dissent; the right to demand (& expect) political change. Above all, the right to participate in social, political & economic decisions which affect one’s own life.

This describes a process, rather than an end-result. It is clear that no society has ever developed a form of democracy in which the above criteria are clearly satisfied. It is only expediency that makes Western political leaders suppose otherwise. In fact it is interesting to note that the original ancient Greek
interpretation of ‘democracy’ (public rule) is not far removed from most Western styles of government: Mob-rule, where the largest & most influential interest-group seizes the right to make decisions on everyone else’s behalf is still the essence of majority-government.

At least most developing nations will admit that their own societies are democratically imperfect. As Pinit Charusombat, an ex-student leader and former Thai Deputy Minister of Transport & Communication comments:

‘I agree with the idea of political reform, but I believe that the Thai people are politically backward and therefore not ready for it.’ (Bangkok Post, Outlook p.29, 14.10.95)

An informed society is clearly a prerequisite of real democratic progress, but even if we are heading in the right direction in establishing the ISH, the types of issues that require resolution are becoming more complicated as a result. For a start, national-level politics no longer represents the totality of human concern in any particular society.

Globalisation and the intensification of human activities which transcend geo-political boundaries calls for increasingly broader perspectives to be taken into account. For example, nation states no longer contain discrete cultural publics. Socio-economic migration has increased enormously in the past fifty years. Nowadays, a degree of cultural & religious pluralism is an accepted norm in most societies. This in itself may pose some obstacles to democracy.

For instance, the maintenance of certain male/female divisions of labour may contradict certain standards (eg- sexual equality) while maintaining others (eg- cultural tolerance & non-interference).

Another possible dilemma might be presented by the need for universal education; diverse cultural groups may have different views about what ‘education’ means (eg- Sex education in schools is perceived by some to be immoral. Others, who are familiar with the effect ignorance has had on the spread of HIV & AIDS, may see this as vital.)

Resolving such conflicts is not a simple matter, and some residue of intractable disagreement seems inevitable, regardless of the length of debate. The point here is to recognise the likelihood of some potentially irreconcilable conflicts within the same democratic society.

It is also important to consider the influence that wider, non-domestic concerns may have on democratic processes within a society. For example, many developing nations have welcomed huge capital investments by foreign TNCs. The economic & political influence of institutions capable of investing ( & dis-investing) billions of dollars in a nation cannot be ignored.

Such factors may define the effective parameters of democratic possibility. The fact that most TNCs are based in & operated from the advanced industrial economies of the ‘North’ implies a commitment to industrial-consumerist ideology and a free-market interpretation of ‘democracy’. Nevertheless, it should be noted that TNCs may represent an effective dilution of national political-economic sovereignty for all nations, the G-7 nations included.

Particularly in the supra-national context, which is becoming increasingly significant as an arena where vital political-economic agreements must be formed, it is very difficult to establish a mutually-recognised forum for debate.
and that if that meant adoptive societies developed like America, then so much the better.

Most theorists now cringe at the cultural insensitivity of such approaches. It is evident that a remote rural village does not require information technology to establish & maintain its fundamental social relationships. It would be naive to assume that such a community would benefit from the ISH in the same way as an urban business community might. This does not mean that the technology would be of no benefit to a rural village. Satellite education and on-line medical advice could be useful and welcome. However, this sort of technology needs to be implemented with informed consent of the local community, not imposed from above like some 'gift from the gods'...

Many people are welcoming access to new communication forms, convinced that whatever the shortcomings, the advantages will outweigh them. The international business community in particular seems to regard any misgivings about the ISH as a symptom of technophobia, or a quaint desire to return to the stone-age. There is still evidence that many technocrats, while paying lip-service to the need for local determination of how new technologies are implemented, still subscribe to the myth that technology = progress.

As Shariffadeen (of the Malaysian Institute of Micro-electric Systems) comments: 'There is no doubt that every nation which aspires to progress must develop applications of I.T. according to its own needs.' (1995, p.78)

Davey, (of the ITU) also appears to regard the advent of the ISH as an inherently positive process. Asked about the have/have-not divide, he states: 'I believe that more information will close the gap, not widen it.' (The Nation, p. c2, 29.6.94)

In a similar vein, Kakabadse (of the WTO) (1995) suggests that the huge increases in channel capacity and delivery systems is 'technological progress', a response to increases in global demand for entertainment.

It would appear that there is widespread faith that whatever changes are wrought by the ISH, it will ultimately all turn out for the best. There also seems to be an undue confidence that the new technologies will be readily adapted to suit local needs. Others are more sceptical.

Enzenberger (1974) regards communication developments as a response to the needs of global elites to educate people in order to perform complex tasks in the economy. However, he also perceives a more insidious motive: The need to utilise increasingly sophisticated techniques of maintaining general consent & hegemony.

The potential for emancipation as a result of technology is an important perception; but as Enzenberger contends, it is a possibility which the ruling elites cannot allow to materialise, since it would threaten the existing order: 'It is just the margin between fiction and reality which provides the mind industry with Its theatre of operations.' (1974, p.5) Enzenberger continues: 'The Mind industry's main business and concern is not to sell its product; it is to 'sell' the existing order to perpetuate the prevailing pattern of man's domination by man, no matter who runs the society and by what means. Its main task is to expand and train our consciousness- in order to exploit it.' (1974, p.10)
Many international organisations exist in order to facilitate representative debate. (E.g. the UN, WTO, OECD, ITU, etc.) However, immense problems of universal inclusivity arise: The UN (& its derivative organisations) is comprised of nation-states. As suggested earlier, this excludes TNCs and may also fail to represent cultural interests which are not synonymous with the state. (The emergence of increasing numbers of break-away states and demands for autonomy from various annexed regions further complicate this issue.)

It is unlikely that any international forum will emerge as a fully inclusive & representative body for supra-national policy formation. Diversification is more likely as the ISH allows easier access to multi-channel international networks and services such as tele-conferencing. As Mahoney (1989) observes, the politicisation of the development debate in UNESCO in the late 1970’s led to the resignation of the USA and UK.

Similarly, the IBI (Inter-Governmental Bureau for Informatics), which enjoyed some prominence in the early 1980’s eventually found some of its more progressive development issues (especially those concerning trans-border information-flow regulation) thwarted by non-co-operation from the advanced industrial nations (which were themselves under TNC pressure to avoid any agreements restricting the free-flow of commercial information).

If the notion of ‘electronic democracy’ is to be seriously discussed, it would be wise to recognise that macroscopic political-economic affairs are always the backdrop to microscopic grass-roots developments.

We may well wonder whether genuine democratic progress is really likely to result from the adoption of new communication technologies when so many fundamental political-economic conditions have already been imposed, quite undemocratically, from the supra-national level.

There are both optimistic and pessimistic analyses of the democratic potential of the ISH. Everyone agrees that new media technologies are going to make changes in the way many people live their lives. Whether these changes are regarded as progressive or not often depends on the individual’s particular needs & interests.

However, it is misleading to suppose that the new technologies are simply ‘neutral’ tools which human society can use for good or for ill. As Williams (1974) and Hamelink (1977) have argued, the development of a new technology is not an accidental occurrence, but a reflection of the prevailing social concerns of the producer.

Technology bears the ideological hallmark of the society which developed it, and it is no simple matter to distill the ‘raw technology’ from the implicit cultural/political/economic/scientific ideas which led to its creation.

Schiller (1976) argues that the development of any new form of technology requires the approval of economic decision-makers. As such, it must be recognised that the ISH is a development that implicitly reflects the perceived needs and concerns of the advanced industrial nations.

This may not be a problem if we were to accept the prescriptive Modernisation theories of Lerner (1958) or Schramm (1964). The original Modernisation approach simply took for granted that technology meant progress,
Bearing this in mind, it is also important to note that the ISH does have much potential to inform, empower, & enrich the lives of many people. It will, in many respects, be progressive. However, as mentioned earlier in the paper, democracy is a process, not an end-result. Wider political-economic forces may allow progress to take place while simultaneously structuring the International political-economic context in such a way that the full extent of democratic progress will never be realised in all probability.

The ISH will no doubt bring different types of change to different societies. Stevenson (1994) suggests that the possibilities of social fragmentation and homogenisation both exist, and, indeed, may both be realised even within the same society. In what he terms the ‘bizarre bazaar’, he predicts a complex mish-mash of many different forms of human interaction, where benefits and problems co-exist. Whether this scenario leaves hope for democracy is unclear. The possibilities may be there, but they will be realised in a non-uniform pattern, with some people self-actualising with help from the ISH, and others becoming alienated.

There have been some interesting uses of new communication technology for democratic ends. For instance, the Pro-democracy protests in Bangkok in May 1992 saw popular activism circumnavigate censorship & news black-outs by using mobile phones & pagers to co-ordinate action and keep informed about the changing situation. The recent e-mail anti-nuclear test chain-letter was another noteworthy example. Although it did not succeed in preventing French nuclear tests on Mururoa Atoll, it did manage to generate such much on-line correspondence that there were several communication break-downs on the Internet. Although the organisers at Tokyo University apologised profusely, perhaps their antics could provide us with a lesson. Varilla (1994) points out that there is still the potential for the ISH to be subject to ‘malicious’ disruption.

Despite his pessimism, Enzenberger (1974) does argue that there is some hope for true democracy if the people of the world can become active communicators, rather than passive receivers. The ISH would certainly seem to present some opportunity for that (and, indeed, the Internet has already been used as a channel for political dissidents in SE Asia to air their grievances.)

Eco (1986) argues that massive increases in the quantity of information being transmitted around the world might provide scope for what he terms ‘semiological guerilla warfare’, a form of protest where information overload could be deliberately manufactured and directed to create social confusion and political instability.

Perhaps such fanciful ideas are unrealistic, but it does suggest that we may yet be surprised at how human creativity may be applied to new communication possibilities.

What we must be careful to remember, though, is that microscopic-level successes in promoting democratic processes in society may not be a reflection of the global political-economic trends at work on the macroscopic-level.

We ought not to allow ourselves to be carried away on a wave of techno-democratic optimism if the tide is really going out.