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Paper No. 16
INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY: ENHANCING OR LIMITING DEMOCRACY IN ASIA?

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Asia: Information Poor to Information Rich
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Communication is an essential component inherent in the concept of democracy. Indeed, judging at its role in democratic societies, one can say that democracy is defined to a great extent by communication. How communication is exercised characterizes the state of democracy in a society. The rise and decline of democracy, like all other systems of governance, depend a great deal on the structure and character of its communication system. A country, organization or institution is called democratic if it facilitates unhampered communications, marked by public discourse, open exchange of thought, ideas and differences, unrestricted flow of information (e.g., a free press), and suffrage. Governance is based on the expressed support and consensus by the majority, the right to implement power by vote and by representation; thus, by the communication of preferences through agreed communication channels. Any change in the variables of communication influence the conduct of democracy.

Democracy, however, is understood differently by different societies and cultures. A state may impede, limit or restrict communication, but no single one would disclaim democracy. Democracy is universally cherished; hence a democratic image is cultivated by all out communication effort. During the Cold War, even authoritarian societies call themselves democracies; some even have 'democracy' asserted as their names, e.g., peoples democratic republic. Afterwards, some of these states change their names and stop calling themselves 'democratic' while at the same time actually become more democratic by Western standards.
The technology for democracy

- Communication for democracy: more demanding than most coms. Larger, more diverse & critical audiences; far reach but high speed, competitive, continuous, complex series of process. Yet must be fair, transparent, develop well informed citizenry.

- Technology: extends human ability to ease and make practical difficult tasks. C-IT extends natural ability to transmit, receive, & process information.

- Rapid advances in C-IT capabilities should be able to facilitate communication needs in coping with the increasing demand & complexities of democracy.

Communication in the conduct of democracy or for democracy is complex. It must reach a much larger number of audience, at times the whole nation, not just its segments. Communication should be speedy, to reach every citizen any where on time. Democracy requires a well informed citizenry, one who have the means to follow current development, understand the issues, compare the main arguments, evaluate available alternatives of action or candidate, make up their mind, and express their preferences. In order to do that, they should have access to the channels of information – not only as audiences but also as communicators to make their views known. They should also have the means to cope with growing complexities of political communication in a democracy.

In a general election, millions of individuals -- living in a wide expanse of territory, difficult topography and access, different time zones and long distances – exercise their democratic rights simultaneously on the same day. Each vote is a message containing the political preferences of a particular person; yet at the end of the day, it becomes a part of an aggregate of single voters transformed into big power blocs of impersonal communications.

With so many obstacles in building democracy, the demand for communication is also complex. True democracy requires open discourse on various issues, at least theoretically between all citizens, before they can act. The high volume of communication required is impossible to carry by traditional means. Democracy in the increasingly complex world of today can only be carried out with the benefit of rapidly advancing technology of communication and information (C-IT).
Traditional uses for new technology...

Some tech has always been used for democratic political com; are they effective? How about new tech? Some applications are still common & traditional:

Mass media: new tech for traditional application, efficiency (speed, volume) & trends (infotainment)

Ditto traditional social channels (village meetings, mosque PA system, etc): new tech to extend reach, begin to open for new (incl. political) content

Personal channels: new tech for daily life, quality & status. New but limited use: breaking news service (pager, voicemail), election returns (HP mailbox)

The people of Asia seems to be very innovative in adopting the products of new technology immediately as they come to the market. Their may look at technology for the purpose of enlightenment, information, the desire for better life, or most likely, simply to gain social status. Whatever may be the case, communication channels are also motivated to adopt new technologies when they could. Leading print media, for instance, have opened websites and online editions, many without clear direction.

Nevertheless, new technology has been used by mass media more for technical improvements, for instance to gain speed in reaching the market or to follow industrial and market trends -- not especially for the promotion of democracy.

Surprisingly, the creative use of technology to enhance democracy starts to appear in the sector of personal media. In several Indonesian cities, breaking news on latest political actions (e.g., demonstrations) are offered by some paging services; early election returns are available through cellular telephone mailbox using SMS program, etc.
... common tech for uncommon use ...

But new tech can be applied for democratic reforms:

- Breaking communications constraints, e.g., use of field communications by mothers to influence troop (Phil. People's Power, 1986); HP & HT for evasion and mobility (Thailand Middle Class Revolution, 1992); pagers, transceivers and radio broadcast for action coordination (Indonesia's Reformasi, 1998)

- Creating climate conducive for popular support and pressure (online mailing lists, fax, photocopies, e-mail & chain letters, TV & radio breaking news)
Hi tech: highest democratic potentials?

Hi tech, advanced I-CT may seem to have strongest potentials for political com to enhance democracy:
- I & C convergence + infrastructure is capable to handle complex democratic processes, e.g. election
- Capabilities will keep increasing to facilitate new requirements imposed by Asia’s diverse plurality; but cost will continue decreasing to fit most of Asia’s economies (Moore’s & Metcalf laws)

Democratic nature of IC media (Internet): open structure, and control, all-to-all (not 1-to-1 or 1-to-
many); connectivity, equitability, etc.

Notes

"Moore’s Law is formulated in 1965 by Gordon Moore, one of the founders of Intel. Really a prediction, it states that the power, speed, and capacity of microprocessors - the ‘brains’ of computers - would double every 18 months, and the cost would be halved in the same period. For 30 years that’s held true, although how long it can continue is a source of debate." A chart (Moore’s Law 1997-2000) which plots actual increase in the number of transistor per microchip since 1970 shows that the brains of computers double every six months while the cost is halved. (John Green, The New Age of Communications, 1997, 9-10)

According to George Gilder, “Moore’s Law, which has accurately predicted the doubling of computer power every 18 months for the past 30 years, is actually too conservative.” Because of the synergy of having greater processing power the effect is more like a quadrupling of performance. (Green, 72-73)

Metcalfe’s Law (named after Ethernet’s inventor Robert Metcalfe): When a computer is interconnected in a network - local area network or Internet - each computer increases its performance exponentially, as a function of the synergy of connection and the number of networked computers.

“The practical effect of [Moore’s Law] is to put computing power - real power - in the hands of just about everyone. [Cheap electronics] will do a great deal to equalize talents.” (Jerry Pournelle, “Pro & Con: Narrowing the Margin”. IntellectualCapital.com, 20 May 1999)
Global technology and democratization

ICT facilitates global pressure toward democratization by providing global interconnectivity between media (mass media and e-media) and between nations:

- Equalization of social-cultural values through global content providers and global network (CNN, MTV etc)
- Global acculturation of Western political/democratic values, paradigms, systems, and priorities
- Foster global media convergence in agenda and analysis setting through technological primacy & dominance of global information provider
Electronic democracy?

ICT progress inspires new mode for future democracy -- direct democracy via electronic mediated com:

Continuous democracy: asynchronous discussions and voting on all civic issues & decisions

Empowerment of voter: can aggregate themselves in relevant ways, pick candidates representing society not parties

- Eliminate deficiencies of representative democracy: bureaucratic, unresponsive reps; money driven system; low public participation, democracy only for election, unfair reapportionment of districts, etc.

At the same time as ICT drives Asia toward representative democracy, the new technology is inspiring the West to move away to direct democracy through electronic means. The trend in the progress of IC technology, opens the possibility to remedy the flaws of representative democracy, and develops for the 21st Century a ‘perfect’ democracy -- something close to the classic democracy during the era of Plato, Aristotle et. al.

The E-democracy create opportunities for all individual citizens to participate in all civic matters through a cyber gathering place, which provide the opportunities for discourse through various means, e.g. e-mail, chat, etc.

The potentials of technology

ICT can enhance democracy at various levels:

- Inherently democratic information infrastructure (accessible to all, wide spread, interconnectivity)
- Better C & I tools for concrete democratic participation at micro level
- Improve mass media capability to develop better, informed, empowered citizenry
- Mechanism for direct democracy; improving, even replacing representative democracy
The limits of technology

Tech application are limited by constraints that drive a wedge between technorich & technopoor:

- Structural gap: info infrastructure development based on econ feasibility, not equality for the poor
- Cost of technology is beyond the reach of most Asians despite Moore's Law
- Requirements and culture of technology. (For example, Internet requires English proficiency.)

Tech provide opportunity for the technorich to define the field at the disadvantage of technopoor.

The technopoor is at a disadvantage due to structural constraints. In order to make use of advanced CI technology (e.g., Internet), he must have telephone access and computer, but his area has no telephone line. 50% of world population have never made a telephone call; 50% live more than 5 kms from a telephone. 65% of the world household have no phone service.

In the meantime, technorich people and technorich country becomes richer and faster in terms of information, technology and infrastructure.

In the US, Internet traffic doubling time is 100 days. To reach 50 million radio owners, the US took 38 years; to reach the same number for PC the time needed is only 16 years, for TV 13 years, but for Internet only 4 years. (Spal-ter, J.A. & Moran, K. Toward a New digital Diplomacy, in iMP-the Information Impacts magazine, May 1999. http://www.cisp.org/imp/may_99/05_99_contents.htm.)

The total number of people online in the world today is estimated at 163.25 million, <3% of total world population. The US share is 90.63 million or 55.5% of all people online in the whole world. Asia-Pacific has only 20.97 million people online or 16.5% of global total. (Daly, J.A. Measuring Impact of Internet in the Developing World, iMP-the Information Impacts magazine, May 1999)
Abstract. Communication is pivotal to democracy: The whole democratic process is carried out by communication. Information and communication technology are designed to extend the reach, speed and efficiency of human communication, and as such, has the potentials to enhance as well as limits democracy.

Rapid technological advance has brought about information globality, which in its turn creates intense pressure for reform toward Western democracy on other societies. New technology is increasingly applied in the process of democracy in Asia — although not always with favorable results, sometimes bringing unintended effects detrimental to the growth of democracy.

Globalization of technology increases the power gap between information-rich and information-poor, not only within a nation but also between nations. While being utilized to strengthen good governance and the empowerment of a country’s constituency, the same technology provide channels for outside interference from non-constituents — thus countering democracy.

At the same time as it drives Asia toward representative democracy, IC technology is inspiring the West to move away to direct democracy through electronic mediated communication. This would further increase the gaps between technorich and technopoor, or inforich and infopoor.
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Communication, pivotal to democracy

Communication: essential component, inherent in the concept of democracy

- Democracy is evaluated by communication criteria, e.g., information flow, freedom of the press and expression, access to communication/information channels, suffrage

  Democracy is practiced through communication in all stages: political education, public opinion, law making, campaign, election, impeachment, etc.

- Democracy is highly cherished; communication efforts build up democratic image where none exist.
The technology for democracy

- Communication for democracy: more demanding than most coms. Larger, more diverse & critical audiences; far reach but high speed, competitive, continuous, complex series of process. Yet must be fair, transparent, develop well informed citizenry

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- Tech provide opportunity for the technorich to define the field at the disadvantage of technopoor,
Enhances, but also limits democracy

Communication is pivotal to democracy. I&C tech is designed to extend the reach, access, speed and efficiency of comm, thus enhancing democracy. It also limits by cost, skill & structural requirements.

Globalization increase domination of technorich over technopoor. As technopower, global media dominates global information and define reality in democratizing countries.

ICT drives Asia toward representative democracy while the West move away to direct democracy.