

NEW POWER: CHOICE INSTEAD OF DEMOCRACY

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Today we see the unprecedented availability of information. This ensures that more people than ever can publicly express themselves and make demands of those who govern them. This is true in both developed and developing states and within both democracies and non-democracies. **These demands are not necessarily for greater liberalism or political pluralism. The content of the messages in question reflects an enormous diversity of ideas, motivations, wants and needs.** In this case, the proliferation of information technologies is empowering for people across socio-economic groups in nearly every country of the world.

At the same time, the much wider range of choices that people have in terms of the sources of ideas and information means that elites and ordinary people are not listening to and looking at the same things.

People tend to gravitate toward others who they believe share their interests and values. **As a result, various groups become more polarised and less able to understand one another.**

This situation will lead to a further fragmentation of power of the state only in the case that it continues to be a decentralising force. However, that is not necessarily how information and communications technologies will develop. **Today we see the construction of intranets, closed networks designed to allow the State to guard against cyber-attacks and industrial espionage, while also monitoring and controlling communication among citizens.** If states work to become the dominant players in these sectors, essentially by declaring sovereignty over certain segments of cyberspace for example, we will eventually greater conflict between individuals and governments over a new form of property rights and an intensification of authoritarianism in some places. **There is nothing inherently pro-democracy about the internet. It is merely a tool that people and institutions can use** to express ideas and pursue their interests, whatever those ideas and interests may be.

The expansion of the internet and numerous social networks, as many say, is a crucially new factor only in places where there is broad public demand for democracy. If students in Iran, for example, want a government that better reflects their view of the future, then the use of communications tools there can help them make progress toward their goal. But if students in China want their government to be more assertive in diplomatic conflicts with Japan, then the internet there will become a forum for their nationalist passions. Social networks can also spark ethnic, religious or vigilante violence if some of the people who use it can profit by creating demand for these things.

Some people believe that the democratisation of information will inevitably generate pressure for the democratisation of politics. This is not necessarily true because, when forced to choose between prosperity and the right to vote, many people will choose prosperity. In any society where people believe that the state offers the best defence against anarchy and violence, many citizens will support the state, either actively or passively. Giving these people access to the Internet will not change their preferences. It will only change how they express their preferences. In short, **the masses can be ‘mobilised’ to do all sorts of things.** It is also true that states still have tremendous influence over what sorts of political information citizens have access to. China’s so-called Great Firewall isn’t impregnable. There are ways around it for resourceful internet users. But we shouldn’t assume that citizens have broad access to the kinds of information that will compel them to change their minds about who they are and what they want.

In terms of whether the internet is capable of bringing about the emergence of a ‘global civil society’, I would say probably not. I believe that society is moving strongly in the other direction -with the creation of the G20, for example. The G20 better reflects today’s true international balance of power than the G8 did. But this new organisation represents a much, much broader range of political values and a real divergence of ideas about the proper role of government in the lives of its citizens. In other words, over time, we will discover that this and other international institutions generate greater awareness of international differences rather than similarities. The internet is just as likely to reflect that reality and to amplify the voices of those who disagree than to prove itself to be a force for international unity. ■

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