



*The discussion that we began in one of the Yaroslavl Forum's newsletters about the 'forthcoming netocracy' continues on. Following are the opinions of Manuel Castells, sociologist and leading expert on the information society, and a professor of city and regional planning at the University of Berkeley.*

## GLOBAL DEMOCRACY OF INTERNET

Manuel Castells

There is a profound crisis of political legitimacy all around the world. Over two-thirds of citizens, according to various global surveys, do not feel represented by their governments, and the lowest ranked occupation in terms of reputation in every society is politician. Trust has already vanished in relation to the economic elites, as bankers and financial traders are considered to be responsible for the economic crisis, perceived by many to be running the system for themselves. As a result, overall, there is a growing gap between individuals and the citizenry. Restoring the level of trust will not be easy, but one way to do so is to make all information that citizens have the right to know available online with a friendly, easy to use, interactive system. If chosen by governments, the **internet can serve a fundamental tool for participatory democracy**, but more often than not governments use the internet as a one-way information system and tend to be fearful of the autonomy that citizens could gain through its use.

I know, on the basis of scientific evidence, that **our brains, and consequently ourselves, evolve in terms of connecting neural networks with social networks and environmental networks, and this activity depends on communication**. Since the technology of communication has fundamentally changed with the digital age, there has also undoubtedly



been a process of transformation in our minds. We do not know exactly the extent of this transformation and there is currently cutting edge research on this subject. As for a change in the quality of democracy, what is clear is that **citizens can set up their own networks of horizontal communication and search globally for sources of information**. Therefore, if governments open up channels of participation, this will enrich and strengthen democracy. If governments continue to hold an air of secrecy and a monopoly over power, then the new technologies will be used by citizens to fight their governments and by governments to monitor their citizens. By the way, all these topics are treated, with abundant empirical evidence, in my latest book *Communication Power* (Oxford University Press, 2009), which has not yet been translated in Russian.

There are many good systems of electronic democracy available, but none of them really work in practice because there is an a priori concern, not technical in nature but political, over **the willingness of governments to accept the input of citizens into the decision making process**. The internet can help if the political will of the actors is towards democracy. Moreover, it can help the struggle of citizens to defend their rights. However, the internet is not going to solve the problems surrounding oligarchic appropriation of power. What is clear is that the internet is a major tool for mobilization and self-organized participation, and in this sense, it is a tool for the re-politicization of society. This was the case in the US with the Obama presidential election campaign and is again the case with the Tea Party movement that has now mobilized against him. The internet is powerful when used to foster grassroots movement and this has been demonstrated through the over 40,000 international NGOs who coordinate their members, programs, and activities over the internet. All kinds of movements and campaigns are created online and this, in combination with traditional face-to-face interaction, can form a new type of civil society. ■

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