
Madison and the Smart Mob: The Promise and Limitations of the Internet for Democracy

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In the lead-up to the Ukrainian elections in 2004, President Leonid Kuchma selected Viktor Yanukovych to succeed him, hoping to extend his party's position of power. In the run-off election, the official results indicated that Yanukovych had defeated the opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko, but there was evidence that elections were marred by widespread voter intimidation and electoral fraud. Then something extraordinary happened. Hundreds of thousands of people gathered in Independence Square in Kyiv, braving intense cold for 11 days, to protest the election results. The protests, later to be named the Orange Revolution, were buttressed by online organizing through tools that included cell phone text messaging (SMS) and website discussion boards where activists shared best practices and initially detailed election fraud. The movement paved the way for new elections that eventually brought Yushchenko to power. For many, this was the moment that defined the Internet as a formidable political tool and a force for democratic change.¹

Three years later in Burma, protesters, many of whom were monks, took to the streets to protest a spike in fuel prices. The focus quickly shifted

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to protests against the country's authoritarian rulers, adding the Saffron Revolution to the palette of color revolutions. Unlike the Burmese uprisings in 1988, digital images and video of the 2007 protests, and the subsequent violent crackdown against the protesters, found their way to blogs, television, and print media outlets around the world, contributing to the international condemnation of the Burmese government's brutal tactics. The political power of the Internet in Burma was strong enough that the military government resorted to shutting down the entire Internet for a two-week period with intermittent periods of access. However, unlike the Ukraine protests, the uprisings in Burma did not result in substantial reforms, though they did motivate authorities to pay closer attention to the Internet and to increase surveillance.²

These two examples demonstrate some of the power and the limitations of digital technologies in promoting political reform. In this paper, we take preliminary steps toward building a framework that explains the potential impact of digital networks on democratic processes and demonstrate why they may be ineffective or even detrimental. When most people talk about the impact of the Internet on democracy, they cite the use of digital tools during political revolutions, protests, and other "flashpoints" that often make headlines briefly and then fall from the public eye. We argue that to understand the real potential impact of the Internet, it is

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necessary to look at how the Internet will strengthen the quality of democracy in individual states over the long term. To better explain how this may happen, we draw on the work of previous authors who have described the key differences between the horizontal processes within governments and the vertical processes between citizens and governments. We contend that the Internet is transforming peer-to-peer relationships—the way citizens interact with one another—as well as the vertical relationships between citizens and government. However, the Internet and

digitally networked technologies are not as good at improving the relationships and processes among government institutions, in other words, the horizontal processes. We believe this may explain the potential and limits of using networked technologies to strengthen democracy. This also leaves

a number of open questions about the lasting impact of the Internet on democracy and its ability to affect the consolidation of democracy globally.

THE DEMOCRATIZING POTENTIAL OF DIGITAL NETWORKS

The examples above are part of a growing set of stories that describe the impact of the information technology on democracy. One of the earliest is described by Howard Rheingold in *Smart Mobs*, where Filipino cell phone users organized themselves via SMS to help bring down the Estrada government of the Philippines in 2001.³ Serbia provides another example, where an Internet-based radio station, Radio B-92, continued to report unfolding stories from the street, often contributed by listeners, after the broadcast station was shut down by the government in 1999.⁴ In 2007, television stations in both Pakistan and Venezuela shifted to streaming their programs online after their broadcast programs were shut down by their respective governments.

Each of these stories suggests a devolution of power from the government to citizens. These examples also draw on the fact that cost is no longer an obstacle for wide-scale publishing and distribution of information via the Internet and cell phones—at least for those connected to the network. Anyone can be a pundit, a reporter, or a political organizer using tools such as text messages, e-mails, wikis, blogs, video, and websites. In the United States, the “Yes We Can” video supporting the campaign of Barack Obama was filmed in two days at the end of January 2008. A month later, it had been viewed 20 million times. In the parlance of the Internet, it had gone viral. Although professionally produced, it was put together quickly and at relatively low cost. The key point is that the distribution cost for producers is effectively zero, which allows both professional and amateur producers to post videos to YouTube and other video-sharing sites, creating the absurd mix of inanity and schlock alongside serious political commentary.

As Jonathan Zittrain describes in *The Future of the Internet*, the declining costs and increasing quality of digital sensors, particularly digital cameras and digital video recorders, means that more and more of our lives and political events are being captured, uploaded, and archived online.⁵ This ensuing loss of personal privacy corresponds with an unprecedented ability to record, monitor, and publicize the public and personal activities of governmental leaders. This growing transparency has begun to influence electoral politics. A commonly cited example comes from the 2006 campaign of United States Senator George Allen, from Virginia, who was caught on tape uttering a racial epithet, recorded fittingly by the recipient

of the slur. Allen went on to narrowly lose his election, with many observers suggesting that this event was a decisive factor. In Iran, activists use cell phone images to document government executions and share them with the world, and from Iraq we were able to hear Saddam Hussein being heckled by the guards present at his execution. In each of these cases, individuals are seen wielding the considerable power of information previously held only by governments and large media companies.

In addition to low-cost information aggregation and distribution, the Internet has produced a searchable archive of information available to anyone who can log on. This helps citizens to become effective reporters and political commentators. The canonical example of this is the remarkable citizen media site OhmyNews in South Korea, which draws on the contributions of more than 40,000 citizen reporters. OhmyNews is notable not only for the way that news is collected and reported but also because of the important influence it had on the 2002 presidential election in South Korea, arguably helping the opposition candidate defeat the incumbent.⁶

The impact of this expanded access to information is not limited to those who are online. In Cuba, where Internet connections are politically rationed, digital information collected online passes from person to person using memory sticks, extending the impact of one connection. In Kenya, where only about 7 percent of the population is online, bloggers including KenyanPundit.com and other digital activists were able to document and routinely update news of post-election violence through Ushahidi.com and other websites. Even in countries with low Internet penetration rates, bloggers and online media serve as the major source of information to radio and other mainstream media, which then reach a wider audience.

The potential for tracking the actions of leaders once they are in office is not as well-developed, though a number of organizations have created remarkable digital tools for this purpose. The Sunlight Foundation, an organization dedicated to the use of interactive technologies to fight corruption and increase transparency and accountability, has created a number of online tools that allow users to track congressional spending and earmarks. This includes projects such as “Earmark Watch” and “Where Are They Now?,” which uses distributed collaboration to track former congressional staffers as

they travel through Washington's revolving door between Congress and lobbying firms. Tunisian digital activist Sami Ben Gharbia has created a number of video mash-ups that use Google Maps and cell phone photographs to track the Tunisian president's plane as it travels to vacation hotspots instead of official state visits. In Bahrain, a clever anonymous political commentator used freely available maps from Google Earth to create a simple but compelling visual tour of inequality there, highlighting the extensive land holdings of the ruling families. Although it is difficult to gauge the potential influence of this increased scrutiny and transparency on democratic processes, it is also tempting to join the throng that is exuberant about the prospects. A crucial missing piece to the puzzle is the extent to which this scrutiny will translate into heightened accountability and actual improvements in governance and democracy.

DIGITAL ORGANIZATION

Beyond the sharing of information, an important shift in our political lives is the ability to organize online and via cell phones. In Colombia, the Facebook group "A Million Voices Against FARC" organized what some called the largest protest in Colombian history when an estimated 4.8 million Columbians participated in 365 marches across the country.⁷ Clay Shirky writes convincingly about the increasing ease of organizing people with digital tools. He describes groups of airline passengers, church goers, and television show fans that have come together online and changed public policy and private decisions—groups that are too disparate to have been constituted without the Internet.⁸ At a more abstract level, one of the fundamental problems with collective action, and hence democracy, is that smaller, well-organized groups are often able to shape public decisions to the detriment of a far greater number of citizens, for whom the costs of organizing are too high. If we believe the thesis that these organizational costs are an impediment to improving democratic action, then we might reasonably expect digital technologies to have an important positive impact on democracy.

Yochai Benkler, one of the more influential writers in this field, discusses the impact of "networked public spheres," pointing out the fundamental shift enabled by the organizing and information-sharing aspects of digital networks. Benkler's theories expand upon the work of Jurgen Habermas, who has stressed the importance of open public debate in the functioning of democracies. The Internet provides a compelling platform for political discussion and provides a useful venue for the debate and deliberation that

are thought to contribute to democracy.⁹ Many have expressed hope that this will lead to an increase in political participation as well, strengthening both individual involvement in political discussions but also fostering the formation of social capital. The idea that participation and social capital formation are crucial for successful democracy is featured prominently in the work of Robert Putnam.¹⁰

Iqbal Quadir makes the case for engendering better governance by devolving power from the state to individuals aided by the use of information and communication technologies. Quadir describes the uses of these technologies not only in helping citizens organize and increasing scrutiny of government actions but also in allowing smaller enterprises to prosper outside of the influence of government control.¹¹

The potential impact of the Internet on political reform has not gone unnoticed by governments. Free speech and democratic action are limited by governments online as well as off. As documented by the OpenNet Initiative, there has been a sharp increase in filtering and surveillance by governments, as well as harassment, arrest, and imprisonment of individuals for online speech.¹² Activists and technologists are engaged in a never-ending game of cat and mouse with government filters and censors, and they are not always successful. While some governments say they are preventing illegal speech and political action, this claim is often simply a cover for harassment of regime critics. Terrorists and others who want to spread hate and propagate violence are generally just as likely to use networked technologies as democracy activists and at times they are more effective.

Additional practical problems associated with the rapid distribution of information over digital networks have been put forth. As more information is put online by individual users, and as the cost and technological impediments to storing vast amounts of data shrink, privacy protection and control over who sees personal information has become a major challenge. Whether it is bank account information or photographs of underage drinking, that information is harder for users to control and more difficult to erase permanently. Others have argued that a Babel effect will occur from too much information and that the flood of information will prevent us from finding the most valuable information. Critics such as legal scholar Cass Sunstein also argue that the ability to personalize the news one sees through this type of media allows readers to filter out the news that they do not care about, at the expense of broader viewpoints that contribute to a better understanding of one's entire community and current events. According to this theory, the Internet allows users to create echo chambers that will contribute to group polarization.¹³

If we are to believe the observers that describe the transformational aspects of the Internet—and there is plenty of evidence to suggest that it is changing the way we interact with the world and form communities—why have we not seen more political change as a result? Indeed, democracy has not fared particularly well over the past several years, even as the number of Internet and cell phone users has risen sharply. Although we do not suggest drawing any strong conclusions from such a limited time horizon, there has been no Internet democracy dividend. Instead, there are a number of important examples, including Pakistan, Armenia, Kenya, Russia, and Venezuela, where democracy has retreated in recent years.

We posit that an explanation for this can be found in the literature that focuses on the formation and characteristics of democracy. In this paper, we take some modest steps toward unifying these two distinct literatures. We find surprisingly little in the democracy literature to explain the changes that might occur because of the Internet. Internet scholars also seem to have largely ignored the vast and deep democracy literature but perhaps understandably since so little of that democracy literature persuasively explains the changes we see today thanks to the Internet. In the next section, we take a brief look at the democracy literature.

THE GLOBAL ADVANCE OF DEMOCRACY AND ITS BENEFITS

Much has been written about the rapid advance of democracy across the globe since 1974, famously described as the “third wave” of democratization by Samuel Huntington.¹⁴ Larry Diamond has written recently that even with recent backsliding in countries such as Russia and other post-Soviet states, the majority of the world’s countries have chosen democracy over dictatorship. The benefits of democracy for citizens within those countries and for the international system are significant. From Immanuel Kant to Bruce Russett, democratic peace theory has proven empirically that democracies are less likely to fight one another than other regime types.¹⁵ Internally, democracies are better than other forms of government at protecting civil and human rights, battling corruption, and restraining officials from abuse of power. Large-scale corruption has a major impact on the ability of governments to provide health, education, and other basic services, and petty corruption reduces the ability of citizens to pay for those services and other basic needs. Given democracy’s many benefits, it is not surprising, as democracy scholar Tony Smith first wrote, that the United States has consistently supported democracy around the globe throughout its history, no matter what party is in power (albeit by different means).¹⁶

There is also a strong correlation between thriving market economies and democracy. Seymour Martin Lipset argued that wealth was a precondition to democracy, and Huntington observed that poverty was probably the principal obstacle to democratic development in the third wave of democratization, while those in the middle income “political transition zone” were most likely to successfully transition to democracy.¹⁷ There is a mutually reinforcing effect of a strong middle class on democracies. Morton Halperin, Joseph Siegle, and Michael Weinstein have even shown that in developing countries, democracies beat out autocracies on a number of social and economic fronts, challenging the conventional wisdom that economic development should precede democratic reforms.¹⁸ In *Development as Freedom*, Amartya Sen responds to those who are skeptical of the role of democracy in economic development, asserting that democracy is both an impetus for development and an end in itself.¹⁹ He noted that a famine has never occurred in an independent country with a democratic form of government and a relatively free press.

The impact of digital networks in promoting political change unquestionably depends on the context. It has been suggested that the Internet will have an impact on authoritarian regimes and political revolutions such as with the blossoming of bloggers in Iran, who serve as a source of ideas, discussion, and commentary not found in the traditional media.²⁰ This is very different from the role of the Internet in a well-established democracy or its role in furthering political reform in a struggling democracy. In the following section we look more closely at the factors that contribute to the success of democracies to better understand the potential influence of digital technologies.

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DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AND LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES

Democracies come in many shapes and sizes. Democracy scholars often describe democracies as falling across a gradient. Liberal democracies, also known as “consolidated” or “thick” democracies, occupy one end of the spectrum, with non-democracies on the other end. “Thick” democracies are defined by attributes including strong institutions of representation, the rule of law, elections, universal suffrage, and protection of individual and group rights. “Thin” democracies, on the other hand, have the *sine*

qua non of democracy—elections—but lack many of the other attributes of thick democracies. They hold routine elections but lack the other attributes that for many define what it truly means to live in a democracy—freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and other fundamental political and civil rights.²¹

Many of the promising examples of citizens using digital technologies toward political purposes map well against the factors that contribute to democracy as described by democracy scholars. Freedom of expression and an independent media have been identified as critical elements in a democracy. Despite the efforts of many countries around the world to control Internet speech, the overall net impact of the Internet and cell phones on free speech is unquestionably positive. In most, if not all, countries around the world, the range of speech that can be found on the Internet far exceeds that found in traditional offline sources and the broadcast media. Online anonymity can promote free speech in countries where those who speak out are at risk of government harassment and arrest.

The activities of civic organizations have been widely recognized as providing an important contribution to the strength and stability of democratic societies. The Internet may have an impact on civil society or the ability of groups to form around similar interests independent of the state. The ability of the Internet to bring together individuals with similar interests but that are geographically dispersed is obvious and significant. This includes associations with social and political objectives, like labor unions, as well as less formal groups. Online groups often form organically and are noted for the lack of state involvement, formal hierarchy, or formal group rules found in traditional “brick and mortar” civil society groups. According to Putnam, the trust, or social capital, built between individuals through participation in civil society groups leads to increased civic participation, which is critical to a healthy democracy. Alexis de Tocqueville was the first to note the proclivity of Americans to form into “associations in civil life” and its importance for American democracy.²² In the United States today, we have also seen new forms of civil society groups thanks to the Internet: those that organize wholly online and around a specific issue and then become institutions in and of themselves with broader objectives, such as MoveOn.org. However, as often argued about television, the Internet may hurt civil society and civic participation more than promote it, as individuals find it easier to form shallow online relationships instead of building deep relationships with accountability to each other. Many Americans today may be more likely to donate money to a favorite charity or sign up for a Facebook cause rather than to go the “extra mile” and take

action in the real world. Online groups have many of the traits of mass-membership organizations, or what Putnam called “tertiary associations,” like the Sierra Club or AARP, which can have significant political muscle but do not build social capital because members are unlikely to know of one another’s existence, much less do anything for one another. If online groups are to build social capital better than offline mass-membership organizations, they will need to build ties between members that are deeper than simply having common friends, activities, symbols, leaders, or ideals. Social networking sites and other Web 2.0 technologies seem to offer the promise of deeper ties and increased social capital, but we are still waiting for proof that this is the case.²³

Elections are central to democracies. We are only just beginning to see in Western democracies the influence of the Internet on elections. Liberal democracies hold routine, “free and fair” elections where any citizen can run for office, vote, and join political parties or other political associations. In the United States, the Internet has allowed candidates to raise cash from individual donors, which should lessen the need for candidates to accept large donations from corporations and interest groups, which is thought to lead to corruption. The amount of information available online about candidates, both real and fake, has also increased significantly. As Urs Gasser has observed, the “Stemwijzer” project in the Netherlands marked the emergence of a new type of voter assistance website in western Europe. Switzerland has adopted a similar tool called Smartvote that allows voters to receive personalized voting recommendations based on their political preferences matched with questionnaires completed by both the candidates and the voter.²⁴ In March 2008, Estonia allowed online voting in its national election, for the first time in the world.

VERTICAL AND HORIZONTAL PROCESSES

The use of digital networks to organize and diffuse information presents multiple avenues for democratic reform, such as participatory media, enhanced freedom of speech, greater participation in elections and political processes, and improved accountability. These democratizing modalities all draw upon grassroots action. While quite different in their impact and strategies, they all involve the relationship between government and citizens. They are vertical processes. Demonstrations, revolutions, elections, and other processes that may be substantially influenced by digital networking are also all vertical processes. This is similarly true of the scrutiny and accountability facilitated with digital cameras, bloggers, and e-mail lists.

There is a distinctly different set of factors that have been linked to well-functioning liberal democracies that bear no simple relationship to the processes most often cited in the Internet and political change literature. Constraints on executive power and the existence of an independent judiciary, which stem directly from the separation of powers and checks and balances in governmental systems, are two important factors that have little direct relationship to grassroots or vertical processes. These are horizontal processes—those that take place within government, across leaders and institutions at the highest level.

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Many have written about the importance of effective institutions for decision making and horizontal power sharing within government. Guillermo O'Donnell notably describes the absence of horizontal accountability in many countries as a central weakness in numerous struggling democracies around the world. O'Donnell draws extensively on examples in Latin America, including Costa Rica, Uruguay, Colombia, and Venezuela in the late 1990s.²⁵ The ebb of democracy in Venezuela under Hugo Chavez is an excellent example of the lack of horizontal accountability used by a populist leader to reform the constitution, neuter his opposition, and consolidate power. This is not limited to Latin America. The decline of democracy in Armenia, Pakistan, Russia, and Zimbabwe follows similar trajectories, in which government institutions fail to prevent the concentration of executive power, the power of the judiciary is diminished, and mechanisms for horizontal accountability flounder.

This fundamental building block of democracy—establishing and maintaining governmental structures that limit the concentration of power—is conspicuously absent in the literature that describes the democratizing impact of the Internet. This is not entirely surprising: the most promising aspects of digital networks, such as dispersing power to the periphery and facilitating wider citizen action, do not as easily translate into improvements at the highest level of government. Effective democracy and good governance are built upon both vertical and horizontal processes.

THE LIMITS OF VERTICAL PROCESSES

Fareed Zakaria describes a marked rise in the incidence of illiberal democracies over the last decade of the 20th century. According to Zakaria, by 2003, half of the “democratizing” countries in the world could be classified as illiberal democracies, compared to 22 percent in 1992.²⁶ Many of these countries hold elections regularly but don’t function particularly well as democracies and lack many of the attributes described earlier. Elections are a form of vertical democratic action, and although elections are seen as necessary elements in democracies, they are just one of the many attributes of stable, well-functioning democracies discussed above. Elections, and their associated citizen involvement, are poor substitutes for continual horizontal accountability instruments. Elections occur too infrequently, and they are not effective mechanisms for deciding and implementing complex policy choices. Elections may also mask what is really an authoritarian government that seeks the international legitimacy typically conferred upon democratic states.

Other vertical processes, such as freedom of expression and assembly, play a key role in democracy, but do not provide the horizontal accountability essential for good governance. The disinfectant of sunlight is undoubtedly powerful but works better where strong governance institutions are there to receive and act on information. In 2007, digital media provided viewers around the world with a poignant depiction of the violent repression of popular demonstrations in Burma and the ongoing suppression of democracy there. Sadly, the gains of the courageous pro-reform movement are yet to be seen. Yet, in comparison to the 1988 democracy protests in Burma in which no fewer than 3,000 were killed, the most generous estimate of deaths in 2007 is approximately 100. While still tragic, one has to wonder if the junta were conscious of the fact that the world was watching digital images disseminated around the globe.

If the influence of digital networks has thus far been limited to vertical processes, then we need to look no further to explain this paradox of transformation and stagnation. This also helps explain to cyber-utopians why the Internet has not had the desired democratizing effects. States and institutions still matter, and unless there is a radical transformation of democratic governments toward extreme direct democracy, the Internet’s impact cannot be as great as its proponents would expect. The success of democracy resides in the strength of persistent governance institutions, both governmental and nongovernmental, for which neither popular uprising, demonstrations, or elections is a substitute.

VERTICAL SOLUTIONS TO HORIZONTAL PROBLEMS?

The recent turbulence in Pakistan punctuated by the demonstrations in the fall of 2007 is indicative of a country struggling to hold on to democracy. The government of Pervez Musharraf has pursued the standard route to consolidating power by seeking to concentrate power in government institutions under its control and either sidelining or eliminating the opposition. In 2007, the chief justice of Pakistan's supreme court, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, was dismissed by Musharraf and later placed under house arrest. The story does not end there, however. In an unusual scene reported by the BBC, Chief Justice Chaudhry surreptitiously addressed a gathering of 500 lawyers using a cell phone from his home as part of a protest against the consolidation of power by the Musharraf government.²⁷ Chaudhry's reinstatement as chief justice in March 2008 was a victory for the separation of powers in Pakistan. This scene does not fall neatly into either the horizontal or vertical processes described earlier: it constitutes a more complex hybrid or diagonal process. The balance of power between government agencies is naturally mediated somewhat by the engagement of civil society and nongovernmental organizations. If digital networks can be leveraged to support the independence of judiciaries and constrain executive power, then the case for improving democracy using these tools is stronger.

It may be that an untapped, and perhaps less obvious, potential for the Internet to impact horizontal processes may be what some call "diagonal accountability." This occurs when citizens or grass roots groups amplify a government's own pre-existing accountability mechanisms, such as public disclosure of assets for candidates and government officials. The term "diagonal," however, may be somewhat misleading

because this approach may not constitute a new path for governance and accountability. It is more likely to entail the leveraging of vertical processes to support the horizontal.

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An apt recent example comes from Brazil. Fernando Rodrigues, a journalist for the country's largest newspaper, *Folha de Sao Paulo*, created the website *Politicos do Brasil* to publish online the income and asset disclosure forms that are required of all Brazilian politicians running for office. This site now has the disclosures of more than 25,000 politicians, covering all those who ran for office in the last three national elections. While these forms had long been required under Brazilian election law, it was not until an innovative journalist with a knack for computers and computer-assisted reporting decided to collect the disclosure forms and make them more easily accessible that they effectively became available to the public. The Brazilian public's desire for this kind of information was so great that the site had more than one million unique visitors on its first day. Before the website made these asset disclosures public, they usually just sat in a drawer in the local election commission's office. When governments, which are rarely innovators in the uses of technology, are either unable or unwilling to share information publicly, the public and the media can now pick up that information and make it meaningful in ways governments rarely can. The Internet allows individuals to collect, catalog, and index reams of information in a publicly available and searchable format, as well as to put it into context.

Leading technology and legal scholar Larry Lessig has recently begun a "Change Congress" initiative that serves as another example of the Internet's impact on horizontal processes. Congress's "power of the purse" and its obligation to pass a federal budget every year is arguably its greatest power and one it jealously guards. The framers built in some checks, allowing the President to present his budget first to Congress, which theoretically sets the agenda, and granting him the power to sign or veto each appropriations bill. However, without line-item veto power, the President's ability to truly impact the budget process is limited to signing or vetoing spending bills in their entirety. The inability of the President to stop the runaway earmark process or of other branches to limit the influence of lobbyists on Congress is a problem that Lessig is now trying to change using technology and Internet tools. Candidates, activists, and citizens are linked and able to advocate online in the pursuit of four goals: 1) accept no money from lobbyists or political action committees; 2) vote to end earmarks; 3) support publicly financed campaigns; and 4) support reform to increase Congressional transparency. The movement is aimed at reforming the way the U.S. government functions, and if successful, would be an example of the Internet impacting a horizontal process.²⁸

Vertical accountability may support horizontal accountability and at times act as a substitute. There are many examples of bloggers digging up

information and stories that would have never seen daylight in traditional media outlets without their efforts—from seemingly racist comments by Trent Lott at Strom Thurmond’s birthday party, which led to Lott’s resignation from his leadership position in the Senate, to the promise by the president of the electronic voting machine maker Diebold to “deliver Ohio” for the Bush campaign. Governments may facilitate this interaction by providing presidential papers, background information on policy-making processes, contacts with lobbyists, asset disclosures, and strengthening freedom-of-information laws. Thanks to the Internet, the government often does not even need to catalog or index this information to make it useful; it only needs to ensure it is quickly made public.

While accountability is undoubtedly a critical component in good governance, there are other linkages between vertical grassroots action and horizontal processes. But outside of the accountability role, the place for grassroots action in governance, as mediated via digital tools, is not obvious. The scale, scope, and frequency of intra-governmental interactions are quite different from the rhythm and focus of direct citizen participation, although the Internet might help close this gap.

There are examples of ways in which the Internet may directly impact horizontal accountability; the few that exist, however, are in liberal democracies with strong horizontal institutions already in place. David Lazer and Victor Mayer-Schonberger argue that the goal of information government (i-government) is to facilitate cooperation among and between government agencies as well as between government and citizens.²⁹ An example is e-rulemaking in the United States, where citizens are allowed to electronically submit comments on proposed administrative/executive rules before they go into effect. These rules often determine how much authority an executive department or agency has to carry out its mandate under existing legislation. E-rulemaking makes the existing public comment period on federal rulemaking more open and transparent, accessible to more citizens, and more efficient. However, it seems unlikely that this type of example will expand beyond governments that have strong institutions of horizontal checks and balances already in place. We would also argue that to be most effective, the Internet must also enhance the ability of government agencies to check one another, not just facilitate cooperation.³⁰

We would also argue that to be most effective, the Internet must also enhance the ability of government agencies to check one another, not just facilitate cooperation.

Popular action has at times helped to create governmental power structures that are critical for maintaining democracy. Yet citizen action, however well-organized, is not an effective substitute for robust power-sharing arrangements within government that are necessary for day-to-day governance. It is impossible to imagine a system in which direct citizen action is the only effective check on the concentration of power by power-hungry leaders.

Another issue with using vertical action to correct horizontal weakness is that popular sentiments are not always a good source of prudent public policy. This concern lies at the heart of efforts to create representative government. There are innumerable examples of leaders moving away from democratic ideals but with strong popular support. Recent examples include Russia, Venezuela, and, some would argue, the United States. A version of this concern is often voiced in the context of the Middle East and North Africa, where it is suggested that greater citizen involvement might promote the spread of theocracies and a further retreat from Western democratic ideals. One of the fundamental questions associated with the formation of democracies is how best to transform citizen action into effective and persistent governmental institutions. Vertical and horizontal mechanisms are mutually reinforcing, and both are required for a well-functioning, consolidated democracy.

INFLECTION POINTS

A few key questions remain. The Internet and other digital tools are merely that—tools. They are available to all, including those who seek to expand representative democracy, those who seek to manipulate public institutions and government for their own gain, and those who seek to seize and consolidate power. This prompts the question of who can best utilize these tools. A related question asks whether digital networks are intrinsically conducive to improving democratic processes. There is a reasonable argument that the Internet is inherently democratic in the way that information is structured and disseminated, particularly in comparison to traditional media, which can be more easily controlled by a repressive government. Previously, widespread media required substantial investments, implying a less even playing field than we currently enjoy. This statement is tempered by the fact that a great majority of the world is connected neither to the Internet nor to cell phone networks. Another counterpoint comes from Russia, where pro-Kremlin bloggers have been deployed to engage and debate those who are critical of the Putin-Medvedev government, and where the most popular blogging platform, LiveJournal, was bought by a

Putin ally. Money and power are still useful on the Internet and can be used to offset free expression and to shape public opinion. The use of Internet filtering, legal restrictions on online speech, and the ability to limit access to the Internet also restrain the positive impacts on democracy.

Another key unanswered question relates to the effectiveness of networking tools to create the type of institutions that contribute vitally to democracy. We have seen the rapid and strong coalescence of like-minded individuals on social networking sites. It is still unclear how this may translate into longer-lasting institutions or institutions that will have the capacity to support not only ephemeral, popular issues but also longer-term, less sexy policy questions.

Yet another question concerns how states improve horizontal accountability. It is not obvious how the Internet can impact the process, but it is worth noting generally what is required. First, it seems that constitutional design is what is most critical for ensuring that institutions can restrict the illegitimate accumulation of power in one branch of government, in particular a popular (or populist) executive. Unfortunately, the opportunities for major constitutional change are exceedingly rare, and once a political system has been established, the costs of switching systems already in place are high, which makes reform difficult.³¹ Therefore, it is all the more important that strong horizontal accountability mechanisms be included when drafting new constitutions. When opportunities for system design or redesign do occur, building in strong protections for freedom of information and transparency in government operations will make it more likely that the Internet can have an impact on horizontal processes.

While the U.S. system is in many ways not ideal for others to copy, it may offer the best example of a constitution with extremely strong checks and balances. Of all the founders, James Madison's writings and political thought may be most persuasive. Madison worried about the natural propensity of man to fall into factions and animosity and about the need to prevent the concentration of power in any single branch of government through checks and balances. As he wrote in *Federalist 51*:

If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controuls [*sic*] on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: You must first enable the government to controul the governed; and in the next place, oblige it to controul itself. A dependence on the people is no doubt the primary controul on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions.³²

Zakaria also rightly notes that the fear of accumulated power by the framers of the U.S. Constitution, and its resulting institutional system of checks and balances, is what is lacking in many developing countries and new democracies. As compared to the French and other European models, the framers of the U.S. Constitution assumed that people cannot be trusted with power and that constitutions must have institutional mechanisms to prevent the accumulation of power.³³

A source of concern is that online organizations will not provide the type of support that sustains democracy in the long term. Of even greater concern is the possibility that online organizations will displace existing civic and political institutions without effectively replacing the democracy-promoting roles that these institutions currently play. Will citizens use the Internet only to join a Facebook group and contribute to presidential campaigns, or will they knock on doors for their candidate in the real world as well? Will the nearly half million members of the Facebook group to support Burmese monks push for policy reforms and increased sanctions in their home countries, as offline groups did in the 1980s, or will they simply amplify the noise in their own echo chamber or, worse, move to the next cause without any long-term commitment to democratic change in Burma? This question hinges on the net impact of Internet-based activism—whether it adds to or subtracts from the overall level of participation. If it brings in new participants, this impact is positive, even if the level of participation is low. If it instead detracts from more effective offline activism, this constitutes a negative impact.

Another open question is whether digitally enabled grassroots popular movements around the world will lead to more political revolutions. This is difficult to assess given the number of economic and political factors that lead to revolutions, but it is clear that the availability of these tools and organizers' familiarity with them will continue to increase. This may further the formation of more "thin" democracies with weak horizontal structures. Furthermore, we have asserted that vertical and horizontal processes are highly complementary. This suggests that digital technologies may help to strengthen democracy in those countries that already possess robust horizontal governance mechanisms. It also implies that digital technology may not contribute as much where horizontal processes are lacking, and that the Internet will not be as effective in fostering the political reforms necessary to help build strong governance in weak democracies.

These are some of the questions that remain unanswered, and the answer to them will ultimately determine the true impact of the Internet on the global expansion of democracy and the quality of governance in existing democratic regimes.

CONCLUSIONS

There is a growing number of anecdotes that suggest that the Internet and cell phones are having a significant impact on democracy. These tools seem to be changing public life substantially across social, economic, and political domains. This is a paradox, given that there is little evidence that these tools are having a systematic influence on political structures and processes. In this paper, we draw upon two distinct literatures to describe where the digital network technology is most likely to positively influence the transition to and persistence of democracy, and where the disruptive nature of digital networks is less likely to promote lasting democratic reform.

We argue that the Internet is most effective in supporting political processes that draw upon widespread participation of citizens, such as elections, grassroots movements, and participatory media. This naturally follows from the sharp drop in the costs of disseminating information and online organizing.

However, consolidated democracies are composed of much more than effective involvement of citizens. The Internet does not have an obvious or significant impact on critical attributes such as civilian control of the military, a supreme constitution, protection of minorities, and freedom of religion. These intra-governmental processes—exactly what is most needed in many countries around the world—appear to be immune to the transformative power of digital tools.

There are linkages between vertical and horizontal processes that leave room for a degree of guarded optimism. Vertical accountability mechanisms have been shown to be powerful tools that can be leveraged to enhance governance and democracy. Moreover, digital tools that promote the development of strong civic organizations capable of improving governmental decision making could provide critically needed support for democracies around the world. Although we are witnessing a profusion of new online communities and organizations, it is unclear whether they can fill this crucial role.

Ultimately, vertical and horizontal governance are complementary approaches. As the example of Rodrigues and his *Politicos do Brasil* website demonstrates, the Internet allows citizens low-cost ways to collect, aggregate, index, and disseminate meaningful information due to preexisting horizontal institutional processes. For the Internet to reach its true potential, governments need to redouble their efforts to make information about horizontal processes publicly available. This includes public disclosures on a range of issues, from decisions about government spending to background documents related to the creation of law and policy.

We will continue to see headlines about the Internet's impact on political transitions and future color revolutions. However, if the goal is lasting and meaningful improvements to the quality of democracy around the world—with all its benefits for decreased violence and improved economic, political, and social benefits for citizens—we need to ensure that the Internet can move democracies from “thin” electoral democracies to “thick” consolidated ones. Otherwise, we will continue to be disappointed with the failure of new democracies to grow the roots necessary to prevent backsliding into illiberal democracy and autocracy. ■

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