Can New Media be a better tool for Governance?

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Abstract:

Given the unique characteristics of the New Media, the technology offers real opportunities for democratization and political transformation, especially in societies where the basic rights of freedom of expression and the press are constricted by state control. This paper seeks to challenge this main assumption by examining the impact of the Internet along with the politics surrounding its use in Asia, with specific attention to the cases of China and Singapore. This paper postulates that in the cases of certain authoritarian regimes such as China and Singapore, not only has the presence and use of the Internet failed to spawn strong opposition movements, but authorities in these states have cleverly entered the domain of online expression and have utilized the technology to improve governance and control of these societies.

Introduction:

Throughout the 1990s and onwards, there has been a growing body of literature on the impact and implications of the Internet and New Media on democratization and governance as the Internet has evolved to become a central component in liberal individualist visions of electronic democracy. Many have advanced the case that the Internet, unlike any other mode of communication, is immune to government control; many contend that the World Wide Web will destroy hierarchical orders of authority, stifle any restrictions placed on it and unleash the free exchange of information and ideas worldwide. In short, it will precipitate the demise of the state and democratize regimes heretofore resistant to political change. The Internet is a potentially powerful feature in this debate as it is a prominent part of the convergence and world-wide impact of the "knowledge explosion" wrought by new sciences and technologies. In a time of momentous change and instant communication, the compartmentalization of the world is gradually dissolving, making it increasingly difficult for the political elite to isolate its people from such change. Indeed, many democratic theorists postulate that the information revolution will force open political and social systems as governments will need to develop more tenable concepts, policies, programs and institutions by which they can deal with said change. One of the major deficiencies in past research is that they make generalizations on the political impact of the Internet based on the technical and architectural features of the Internet, thereby abstracting and de-contextualizing the technology from the national and political contexts in which it was introduced. An examination of the experiences of China, Singapore and Iran will show that the technology does not produce uniform and undifferentiated effects across varying countries and contexts. There is a real need to embed research in this area into the national political context; to understand Internet use and its impact on developing nations, we need to adopt an approach that takes into account the numerous socio-political factors and variables that intervene in the political use of the technology. The paper is primarily concerned with and will define 'civil society' as the collection of activities which can be identified as strong opposition movements or an agitation against the state and government actions.

I strongly argue that while the Internet has engendered greater political and social awareness, ultimately, it cannot be said to be a democratizing force. Experiences in the use of the Internet in several Asian countries reveal unforeseen dynamics which have not been captured by a large body of literature and studies which focus primarily on North America and Western Europe, where democratic traditions have been entrenched for centuries. In this paper, I am making two main contributions. First, I advance the argument that in the case of China and other authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states such as Singapore, the development of Internet technology and its use, have failed to engender democratization or more active opposition movements. Contrary to prediction, the very reverse is in fact happening, whereby state authorities are emboldened and enriched by the Internet and have begun to see and use the technology as a vital tool for governance and control. Secondly, I identify a number of conditions which contribute to the strengthening of the authority of the nation-state, making it possible for certain governments to suppress online activism. The first and perhaps most important of these conditions is the ability and foresight of certain states to put into place the necessary legal and regulatory mechanisms to prevent and stop the medium from straying into impermissible territory. Those states which had the foresight to enact strong controls before the proliferation of Internet technology have a clear advantage over those which do not have such mechanisms in place and are merely reacting to any changes and advancements in the technology. Another crucial condition for success is the proper use of e-government. Those states which recognize the political

and administrative benefits of the Internet are now taking and streamlining government operations online, thus putting those with a more sophisticated understanding of the potential of the medium at a distinct advantage.

The New Media as a Democratic Tool:

Since its inception, the Internet carried with it an anti-authoritarian feeling and was envisioned by social scientists, politicians and communication practitioners to be a potentially liberating and democratizing force in the world. As part of a wave of new advances made in information technology, the Internet was regarded as a particularly potent instrument for the spread of pluralism and democracy in countries where constrictions are placed on political debate and participation. The rapid and dramatic expansion of the technology globally has captured the imagination of scholars and led to predictions that the Internet will break down political control and usurp the tight-fisted reign of authoritarian rule.

In current literature, the relationship between the Internet and democracy has been clearly and often cogently delineated. Some of the characteristics that are said to be central to the Internet's ability to corrode totalitarianism include first and foremost, its ability to erode physical and political borders as information bits travel along fiber-optic cables or over satellite bandwidths and mushroom to reach millions around the world. The open-ended, decentralized structure of this medium then allows for the rapid dissemination of information not previously seen with other forms of print and broadcast media. The speed of the Internet's development and diffusion will likely elude central government control or at the very least, render it extremely difficult for states to cope with. With the world's information resources now readily available within reach and with the cost of publishing one's views having rapidly diminished, this new powerful new mode of free expression is predicted to be ground-breaking for many societies. But more than just free expression, the Internet provides the ideal venue for individuals with like views interests to freely associate, share information and jointly advance their agendas – political or otherwise. And it is this particular characteristic of the Internet which is said to pose the greatest challenge to dictatorial regimes as the empowerment of citizens is said to bring about the slow erosion of authority generally. Related to this then, the Internet thereby crucially limits the ability of governments to regulate the activities in which citizens engage online. Lawrence Lessig of Harvard Law School contends: "Borders keep people in and hence governments could regulate. Cyberspace undermines this balance… (and) escape from regulation becomes easier. The shift is away from the power of government to regulate and toward the power of individuals to escape government regulation."More generally, the Internet acts as a powerful enabler of education – a crucial foundation of democracy. It permits access to a vast array of information from global sources, increasing the ability of citizenry to bypass state-controlled media and to think outside the political parameters established by the government. Newspapers, articles and even books are made available for online scrutiny, a haven of knowledge for a growing middle class. The Internet is also believed to have the power to bring about government change, forcing the state apparatus to become more democratic. As those countries which insist on maintaining nineteenth-century methods of conducting business will be doomed to failure, many states will be forced to take their daily business online, thus making government information more readily accessible and transparent to citizens. This opens up a line of communication and information sharing between state officials and the citizenry not previously available.

Is the Authority of Nation at Stake?

The imputation that there is an inherently political character to the Internet is ultimately erroneous as its impact cannot really be separated from human use of the technology or be abstracted from the national and political contexts in which it is introduced. The experiences of Singapore and China testify to the fact that the mere existence of technologies such as the Internet has little or no relevance for democratization, unless other necessary and critical conditions are also in place. The purely technical characteristic of the medium along with its glorious democratic potential cannot be extrapolated from the socio-political factors and variables that drive uses of such technologies in specific ways and contexts. While in theory, anyone may access and share political and controversial news online, this potential is still limited and manipulated by coercive instruments which are at the disposal of the state machinery. In countries with weak or nascent democratic traditions, the inherently global structure of the Internet clearly has not eroded the power and authority of the nation-state to take action against media coverage that is critical of a nation's practices and political establishment. In the cases under study, China and Singapore serve as potent examples of authoritarian regimes which have exercised their power to establish very effective controls over the Internet and which, to the chagrin of many, have managed to utilize the medium to further state goals. Both states had the foresight to establish strong legal and regulatory mechanisms in order to guard and govern online activity. There is a definite sense that while authorities in these countries are actively promoting Internet technology, any such progress is very much

controlled and manipulated by the government in power. These states appear to recognize the benefits of the Internet and have embraced it as a state tool to help streamline and strengthen governmental operations and functions. In the case of China more so than Singapore, authorities have also managed to pacify both domestic and foreign Internet media actors, ensuring that cooperation from this sector is rewarded with government support for continued business in the country. A crucial characteristic that these states share is the ability to stay ahead of the game by utilizing their technological and organizational savvy to mollify both the public and Internet media. As a result, the vast majority of Singaporeans and Chinese appear to have fallen into a state of complacency. Some may remain ignorant of the state's control and manipulation of online content but it would be fair to say that many simply do not care. For the average middle-class individual, the cost of dissent is prohibitively high; with self-censorship being the far the more pragmatic course of action. Iran appears to challenge the claims of the paper by serving as a contrast case which illuminates the reasons behind the failure of some developing countries to control the Internet. The Iranian government has operated under a set of political and social circumstances which contrast greatly from those of China and Singapore. In the initial stages of Internet development in the country, authorities there actively welcomed the unfettered growth of the technology; Iran is then in a much weaker state as controls are more difficult to implement once the technology has blossomed. And not only does Iran's control regime lag behind those of China and Singapore, but the country have not displayed an understanding of the importance of e-government. In short, Iranian authorities have not utilized the Internet with the brand of creativity and imagination that Chinese and Singaporean authorities have displayed. And perhaps more importantly, the citizens of Iran and most especially, its youth, are hungry for political and socio-economic change and they are taking their opinions online. This concoction of forces means that Iran has not managed to successfully utilize and reign in online resources and will continue to find itself more exposed to protest than its Asian counterparts.

Can you regulate the New Media?

Developments in the Asian Internet landscape undoubtedly belie the notion that the Internet eludes all forms of regulation and control. In this context, states have managed to put in place the necessary legal and regulatory mechanisms to stop the medium from straying into impermissible territory. National security and stability, the preservation of moral and ethical standards along with the need to punish violators of the law have constituted some of the stronger arguments in favour of regulatory mechanisms. When the Internet was first introduced into China, it was bound by few rules and regulations; but once the number of users began to climb, authorities realized its vast potential and sought to rein the new medium in. The development of the Internet has been placed under the control of three government agencies: the Ministry of Information Industry (MII), the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) and the State Education Commission (SEC), with the MII holding the majority of the responsibility for regulating its growth. Much of the concern surrounding the use of the Internet is the exposure of citizens to potentially subversive and damaging online content. Given that the state has long had restrictions on the spread of material related to pornography, gambling and anything deemed "counterrevolutionary," the Internet posed a very real threat which the government was ready to combat.

In order to suppress undesirable online content, the government has employed a complex system of surveillance and punitive action as a way of promoting self-censorship among the public. The state has managed to control the actions of Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and Internet Content Providers (ICPs), placing responsibility for infractions of regulations at their door. All ISPs must obtain an operating license from the MII and keep meticulous records of each customer's account number, phone number, IP address, sites visited and time spent online. With the proliferation of Internet cafes across the country, the government has sought to supervise their activities as well, expecting that owners will generally police themselves and comply with regulations. For those websites which have managed to bypass filtering through these various stages, the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) reportedly employs over 30 000 human monitors or "cyber-police" to scrutinize online content. Violations of government regulations have met with strong punitive measures. Websites which did not obtain government authorization before distributing news faced the threat of closure and fines of up to 30 000 Yuan (US\$ 3 700). The country reportedly holds anywhere between 15 and 54 "cyber dissidents" in prison for posting material that is deemed subversive. While cases which have escalated to the point of arrest and imprisonment are rare, stiff fines and prison sentences have scared off the vast majority of Chinese citizens, effectively sending the message that the state will not tolerate opposition. By imposing strict rules guiding Internet use and by enacting unforgiving punishment on violators, the state has stunned the public into silence by making the cost of dissent prohibitively high.

Internet: The Indomitable Governance Tool

The possibility of the Internet becoming another medium dominated by the powerful is a very real possibility in authoritarian regimes. For a Chinese audience that is concerned with current events, the government has sought to satiate its appetite for news by inundating the Internet with state-approved sites – a strategy which has proven to be successful. In order to distract netizens away from subversive material, these attractive, glossy sites drive down the need for users to access foreign sites. By cleverly opening up selective public spaces, the state has been able to mould the public sphere of debate and to channel political discourse in the direction of its choice. True to its title, the 'Strong Nation Forum' is intended for discussions on how China may transform into a stronger nation. So long as postings are not directed against the government and does not challenge state policies, the site provides an officially tolerated outlet for nationalist sentiment. Crucially, by allowing for the growth of controlled nationalism and for forums such as this one and others to generate much needed debate, the government is pre-emptively allowing for the broadening of acceptable discourse in order to stave off a massive blow-out of pent-up public frustration. Many observers enthusiastically argued that the SARS epidemic would like be "China's Chernobyl", a breakout event which would induce fundamental political changes at the institutional level. However, it did not take long for the government to realize the potential of the Internet as a propaganda tool; at the height of the outbreak, in typical Chinese propagandist fashion, officials used the Internet as a mass mobilization tool to capitalize on the patriotism of the Chinese people and called on citizens to organize social groups to join its efforts in defeating the disease. It would appear that citizen confidence in the government was duly restored and China was even internationally praised for its handling of the crisis. Indeed, the dual nature of civil society and its relationship with the state is demonstrated here as citizens may just as easily become a tool of the state as they may oppose state actions. By monitoring and tolerating a degree of healthy discussion in the relatively controlled environment of chat rooms and bulletin boards, the state is realistic about the fact that citizens in a country that is bursting with socioeconomic growth will acquire and deliberate new ideas, and will need to vent and voice their dissatisfaction. So long as discussion does not directly demean the Party-state, the Internet in actuality provides a means by which officials can gather otherwise unattainable information by tapping into the heart of public opinion. Authorities can now enter the domain of problem articulation, gauge exactly where the citizenry stands on any given issue and be notified when the tide of opinion is shifting or changing, making the task of governance arguably easier.

Ameliorate through E-Governance

Because the state has always confronted the problem of decentralized authority, the Internet allows the Centre to consolidate its power and establish a more efficient means of communication with provincial governments. The Chinese state today is also cultivating a more sophisticated understanding of the possibilities of e-government and has actively adopted the medium to advance its own goals. While such a move appears to render the government more vulnerable to critique by allowing citizens to access information previously unavailable, it is a step which in the long run, will likely strengthen the regime. In the eyes of the public, e-government helps to increase the transparency and legitimacy of government agencies and shows that the state is committed to the improvement of civil services. By going online, the state manages to at once enhance efficiency and secure the confidence and trust of the people.

Many believe that the Internet will invite scholars and intellectuals to take their thoughts online, which will result in a flourishing of ideas and a new heretofore unseen activism in this group. To a certain extent, this is true. The expanded space of free expression for intellectuals spells progress as they are signing on to the Internet in large numbers; intellectual websites such as the Formalization of Ideas, which directs serious and scholarly attention to pressing social and political issues are on the rise. Interestingly enough, on this front, the state has adopted new and more subtle strategies and is resorting to a more refined control mechanism than that which is currently employed against the print press or the general public. Rather than shutting down controversial sites outright (though this will always remain an option), authorities extend a greater degree of tolerance towards intellectual website editors, inducing the latter to exercise their own good judgment on the admissibility of submitted articles. Given that there are no strict guidelines as to what constitutes permissible material, and the ever-present fear of being punished by the state looms large, editors, in order to ensure the physical viability of their site will err on the side of caution and publish articles which would not offend the sensibilities of state actors. The state does not directly interfere with editorial decisions because it does not have to. Remarkably, officials manage to achieve their goal by trusting webmasters to conduct self-censorship and as a result, topics such as the cases of corruption, independent labour unions and political pluralism are virtually untouched by mainstream intellectual websites. After

an initial period of free development, many intellectuals discover that there are very real limitations to their capabilities and have found that it is simply easier to give in to the state and offer their cooperation. This way, they can access significant financial and political resources, which they can use to polish their websites to make them more prominent and appealing. This de facto alliance between the state and intellectuals means that a truly free, electronic press for academics will not likely emerge in the near future. A medium which holds so much promise for independent thought formation is submerged under the pressure of more pressing, pragmatic concerns.

Conclusion/Discussion

Forced to choose between jumping on the information superhighway and languishing on the unwired byways of technology, many authoritarian regimes are embracing the Internet; in so doing however, the state has still managed to maintain strict control over media and information channels through regulation and ownership. While the Internet undoubtedly offers more multidirectional flow of information than other media and harbors extraordinary potential for the expression of citizen rights and human values, it would be naïve to suppose that this technical feature actually engenders the breaking down of information hierarchies and monopolies or that it can act as a replacement for social change or political reform. Information alone is simply not strong enough to establish democracy. The sheer availability of information or the existence of information channels cannot in themselves guarantee political involvement and activism; the impetus for political reform must arise from a population that will agitate for change and is loath to negotiate away its freedoms. The Internet may provide a forum for human rights and political activists to conspire and gather force but forecasts of a net-based autonomous group formation of the wider population at large appear bleak. At the moment, there is little indication that Internet forums are contributing to a greater degree of civil society in states which have managed to institute various mechanism of control. Thus far, states like China and Singapore have been successful in nurturing a technology-savvy populace at the same time that the political ramifications of this technology are tempered. This is not meant to discourage those hopeful for change in authoritarian regimes. Any assessment of these states' achievements is premised on the fact that a country like China has not experienced any major disruptions since the inception of the Internet. Should the economy falter dramatically in the future or should some unforeseen incident trigger major political commotion on a scale comparable to Tiananmen Square, the Internet will likely be the avenue through which agitation and dissent will gain momentum. And unlike the case of Tiananmen, this time round, the story will be impossible to contain as the country would learn of the brutality of which Beijing is capable. There is no doubt that civil society will continue to push the boundaries of permissive acts and test and re-negotiate the limits of toleration. For the time being, however, the continued relevance of nation-states even in an age of globalized media systems is a fact which cannot be ignored.

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