WHICH TECHNOLOGY FOR WHICH DEMOCRACY? WHICH DEMOCRACY FOR WHICH TECHNOLOGY? [♦]

by

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Often those who know the most about democracy and are most concerned with democracy know very little about technology. Those who know most about technology usually know very little about democracy. This makes the discussion of the interface between democracy and technology particularly difficult, especially because those who report on both to the world, namely journalists, generally know little about either. That makes the translation of the any discussion about the interplay between technology and democracy and the impact of each upon the other to the general public that much more difficult.

The second caveat we need to make is that the technologies themselves are rapidly changing. Almost anything we say today about technology is likely to have a different meaning by tomorrow. So, in a sense, it is almost impossible in our discussion to catch up with the speed of the pace of change of the technology itself. We need to keep the pace of this change in mind and to keep in mind that sometimes those who have not enjoyed today's technologies might still not be slowed down on the path to tomorrow. So, for example, most of Africa, which has been completely excluded from the wired world, may progress directly to a wireless world, and enjoy whatever advantages that leapfrogging brings with it.

The change in nature of the technology also means that in this period of transition from a print and a hard-wired world to an electronic and soft wired or wireless world, we face the problem of what I would call the "generational contradiction". Those, who created the new technology lived, grew up and were educated in the old world of books, libraries and magazines. They designed a new world in the assumption that its technology will reproduce in some new form that old world. But our children and our grandchildren, who enter that world afresh, without the advantages or disadvantages of a world of radio, books, newspapers, are likely to see in the new technologies both promise and danger that have been invisible to us. For example, my generation comes to the information on the Net with the experience of books and libraries and a certain kind of education. But sixteen year olds and ten year olds, who never experienced that kind of education, and depend for their primary learning on new technology, are likely to be effected

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by the Internet very differently. The assumption, that there is no problem for them simply because they are fluent users conversant with the new tools, is a dangerous one and one that is to be reckoned with.

The third feature of technology, that I think is important to mention, is simply that technology has always been, from the beginning of time, a tool of human interests and human objectives, which, tends to mirror the society, which invents it. We look to network technologies to solve problems that have been created in the "real" world. Though we look (and hope) for new and immanent forms of political organization in the new technology that are not necessarily present in our world that is a mistake. We have seen the new technology very quickly ends up mirroring and reflecting the world in front of us. I'll give you three quick examples of this. One, of course, if the so-called "digital divide." Until now the new technologies have done far more to mirror and reinforce inequality than to overcome it. Whatever its technological potential, the fact is, using technology depends not just on access to hardware and software, but depends on computer literacy and word literacy of a kind that many of the world's people simply do not have. Giving the illiterate computers will not make them computer literate. It normally takes fifteen or twenty years to educate somebody and that time will not be substantially shortened by handing out hardware or software.

Second, we live in a largely commercialized world and in that world, we will find, that the new technology is increasingly commercialized. In the late 1980s and early 1990s there was a lot of great talk about the electronic frontier, the new anarchy, the new freedom, the new direct democracy of the Net. Today 95 % or better of the traffic on the Internet is commercial and 25% of that traffic is, not surprisingly, pornographic. We did with the new technology what we did with the old technology. But those who anticipated that the Net would introduce a new and different political era can only be disappointed. We encounter even today how some governments are looking for ways to turn e-government into e-commerce and to turn citizens into mere consumers of government services. Thereby reflecting the commercial character of our times.

So, though this small group has talked bravely in the last two days about many of the fascinating potential uses of the new technology, the actual uses to date reflect a privatized, commercialized, profit-obsessed world and that is, I think, largely, what we will see continuing in the larger population.

The third characteristic of the new technologies, which again, we haven't talked much about, is, I fear I have to say, their deeply monopolistic character. Now again, we assume that technology itself has the potential for pluralism, for freedom, for many different inputs, for access to all, but, in its current formatting, the underlying telecommunications infrastructure and computer hardware, the overlying software and the front-end interface of the World Wide Web are owned and controlled by the same super corporations which dominate the rest of the economy. In other words, the monopolies that elsewhere dominate the economic structures of our time also dominate this new technology. To think that because the technology is perceived and has some technical promise of pluralism and freedom that it is therefore pluralistic and free is to engage in wishful thinking – and wishful thinking of a dangerous and delusional nature.

So, one has to be well aware of the difference between the theoretical discussion of some of the democratic potential of the Net and the actual use of that technology in a commercialized, monopolistic world, dominated by a few dozen global corporations that control the business of communication, entertainment and information.

Remember that, as we talk here under the kind hospitality of a few German universities and research centers and we have a small group of people, who are lucky to be here and have their airplane tickets paid for, elsewhere there are corporations, that are deploying billions of dollars to assure their control over these media. It's not exactly a fair contest. To think that because we have good ideas what will happen with the technology will be the result of what we think is again, I think, a dangerous mistake.

Now having said that, I want to go back to the technology itself because although technology is almost always a mirror of the society, different technologies imply different political possibilities that depend also on the social context. Think of gun powder. Some historians said that gun powder democratized warfare in the middle ages and made possible the coming of democracy. Indeed, in Europe during the Reformation, it probably did that. But in China gun powder reinforced the hold of elites over the population. Many associate the freedom and individuality of American culture with the automobile and its underlying technology, the internal combustion engine. But that same internal combustion engine was also used to develop diesel engines and public transportation in Europe. The decision between investment in public and private transportations, between train systems and automobile systems, was a political, not a technical, decision and the available technology served both sides of the policy debate.

So, what I would like to do with my time this morning, is to offer you a discussion of some of the technical characteristics of the new technologies and their impact on democracy - keeping in mind that much of what we say is a political, not a technical, choice - the choice, of how we are going to use the technology. But before I do that, I wished all my friends, who were here yesterday and talking about plebiscitary democracy were here today because there is a tendency, when we talk about democracy, first of all to think it is one thing: technology and democracy. But there is no such thing as democracy. There are only a variety of forms of governments, which have a variety of characteristics that can be labeled under different groupings that define (not without controversy) distinctive forms of democracy. I have three in mind but we could easily multiply that to six or seven – if I had a bigger platform. The tendency, when people want to make a distinction, is to make a simplistic distinction between representative democracy and plebiscitary democracy. That is the distinction we often heard yesterday. I at least want to add a third, what I call strong, or deliberative or citizen or participatory democracy, which is in many ways as different from plebiscitary democracy as representative government is different from plebiscitary democracy. If we had more time and more space, we could also distinguish parliamentary from presidential forms of democracy, we could distinguish unitary from federal or *eidgenössische* forms of democracy. England and Switzerland are both democracies, but the one is deeply unitary, the other one is deeply federal. That makes fundamental differences. The implications of the technology in those two countries is going to be very different. You might ask: "Will the new technology serve British democracy or Swiss democracy?" You can't really ask:

"Will it serve democracy?" because that question is meaningless. But let me at least take these three distinctions here and look at some of the characteristics. I want to do is a small exercise. I want to look at some of the potential characteristics of the Net and ask the question: "Do they reinforce or do they injure these various forms of democracy; representative, plebiscitary and strong ?" I will give you my answer, but actually the answers are controversial and we can discuss them. Some people may not agree. But it is a way to ask the questions that I think is a little more nuanced and useful than the broad generalization "technology and democracy."

Let me start with what is the new technology's greatest virtue or greatest vice, depending on how you feel about it: speed. It's literally as fast as the speed of light and we forget that. Now, from a general point of view, one might say, that is good for democracy, because democracy is about communication and the faster the communication, the better it is for democracy. Moreover, it enlarges the compass of democracy. Aristotle said, that the largest possible democracy was one a man could walk across at a day, so he can get to the assembly. At the speed of light we can reach everybody on earth in a second. So you could say, Aristotle's ideal of the republic is global. But the problem with speed from the point of view of democracy is that if we assume, that one of the essential characteristics of democracy is deliberation, thinking, pondering, meeting, talking, democracy in fact is a pre-eminently slow form of government.

Tyranny actually is faster. The tyrant makes up his mind and it's law. But in a democracy we have to argue and think and the change our minds and persuade and that takes time. I would argue, in a plebiscitary democracy, defined by a populist leadership trying to manipulate a population into legitimating its rule, speed is a good thing. In a plebiscitary democracy, you don't want people thinking too much. You want to spin them, manipulate them and get the possible eighty, ninety, ninety-five percent to say yes. The way the Communists or the Nazis did.

Plebiscitary democracy likes speed, I would say, and welcomes it, which was the fear of some of the people yesterday. But they made the mistake of identifying plebiscitary democracy with participatory democracy. Participatory democracy is the other way round. It comes from the bottom up, requires deliberation, public discussion and public engagement. It is slow. Speed is dangerous to deliberative participatory democracy. So from that point of view one of the inherent characteristics of the Net – speed and rapidity – the ability to have quick plebiscites, is a problem for strong democracy or deliberative democracy or participatory democracy.

If I were in the *Bundesrat* in Switzerland, I would not welcome the fact that citizens voting at home could make up their mind just like that without any discussion and without any debate. I would rather think that's not the way our democracy should work.

On the intersection on the matrix between the characteristic of speed and representative democracy, I put a question mark because it depends a little on how you feel about representative democracy. If you think representative democracy is nothing more than people making an instant decision about who the leaders are, then speed is OK. If you think, that representative democracy has to engage citizens in some thought, in some debate, then probably, as with strong democracy, it would be a liability. You have to make up your own mind about it, but what's clear is that depending how you think about how representative democracy works, speed might be a liability or it might be an asset.

Take another feature of communication via the Internet. It is more like the telephone and less like radio and television. It's a point-to-point-medium where everyone can be in touch with everyone else. Now that means that it cuts out hierarchies, that it cuts out authority, that it makes it more difficult for those from the top, who want to control people's opinions through information, and from that point of view I would say, it is a negative feature for representative government because it makes the life of political parties harder. Political parties are traditionally the organizations that hold together people who otherwise can't be in touch with one another. But if we can all be in touch with one another directly, why do we need political parties? Political parties may become superfluous in a world of point-to-point technology. So if I am part of a party democracy or representative democracy, I worry that the Net will undermine the control of political parties over political content. But if I am a strong democrat, if I am a participatory democrat, I am delighted. Because it means that every citizen can become part of the process without being represented by an intermediary party or an interest group. They can participate directly; they can talk to other citizens without the mediation of a party. So the point- to-point-character of the Net is probably an liability for representative democracy but an asset for strong democracy and it's certainly a liability for plebiscitary democracy, because the last thing a populist tyrant wants, is citizens talking to one another. He wants all the relations to be subject to the populist dictator, the populist leader. So, lateral discussion is not desirable.

Now let's go to a third characteristic, the interactive character of the new technology as against the passive character of traditional one-way broadcast technologies. Today's representative democracy has become a television spectator's court. What is required to be a citizen today? Watch television. That's how we are citizens. We watch television – passively! On the whole, we are not particularly active the way citizens of 19th century Switzerland or 5th century Athens would have been. We are no longer citizen soldiers nor do we engage in self-government. Rather, we watch the governors. Indeed we are, in the language of liberalism, watchdogs. Our job is to police the governors and make sure they don't abuse their power. But it's a passive function. So from the point of view of representative government, a technology that engages people is a liability. On the whole, representative government wants citizens to be active once a year – on Election Day. And then it wants them to go home and leave the government to the government. There is nothing more irritating to a bureaucratic politician than an active citizen who, after Election Day, says: "All right, I am still here. I want to do more than vote. I want to help. I want to participate." To this the politician in a model representative democracy responds: "No, thank you, we'll take care of that, that's our job, you voted us for that. And if you don't like how we do it, throw us out next year. But leave us to do the governing."

Plebiscitary democracy, in this case, is like representative democracy. The last thing a populist wants is mobilized citizens who are engaged in political action. It, too, appreciates passive citizens and therefore the interactive potential of the new technology is not very useful. For strong and deliberative democracy, where people are going to play a role in governing themselves, an active and engaged citizenry is a plus. But this assumes a fundamental difference in the nature of government, understood, not as the election of those who govern, but of self-government by the governed.

But the argument that the bottom-up character of the technology is a liability for representative and plebiscitary democracy and an asset for strong deliberative democracy is my own and you may want to contest it. All I am suggesting is that there is a relationship between the characteristics of the technology and the form of democracy. We can argue about exactly what the relationship is. Some active party participants will say: "No, we want active members of the party! We want them from the bottom up, that's good for us, not bad for us." Ok, if the party sincerely wants participation, then the bottom-up character of the Net is useful. But it may be a test case to find out whether the party is serious. Because it is easy for parties to say: „We want participation.." Fine, you want it, then use the Internet and you can get. If they say: „No, thank you," then maybe they are not serious.

Another significant feature – and these are all interrelated, as you can see these are not distinctive features – is the unmediated character of the Internet. Because we talk to one another laterally, the role of editors, of preachers, of politicians and even of teachers and professors is minimized. That has virtues and it has weaknesses. The weakness is that the Net is a hot bed of gossip, lies, false ideology and myths. You can find information about how to get into a spaceship. You can find every conspiracy theory ever invented. On the Net you will find no criteria by which you can decide which of those is useful and which of this is not. The Net is a plethora of information: truth, lies, science, and superstition, all thrown together with no internal standards for making judgments. It is unmediated by the standard makers. Most of us, when we want to get our news, we have no way of knowing, whether the news story from Vietnam or from Cambodia or from Chile is true or not. So we say: „I trust the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*" or the *New York Times* or *Le Monde*. We let the editors make those decisions for us. On the Net there are no authoritative mediators. You have to make it up yourself.

Is the unmediated, anti-hierarchical character of the Net a liability or an asset to these various forms of democracy? Some people may say that it is a liability for strong democracy because it makes the deliberative judgment difficult. How do you reach for deliberative judgment based on all the information on the Net without some help from an editor, from an interpreter, from a professor, from an expert?

We don't have that recourse in the nature of the technology itself. The Internet offers a plethora of information but, I want to add, information is not knowledge. Knowledge consists of theories, paradigms, associated data, data around the hypothesis and around the way of seeing the world. The Net doesn't give us theories, it gives us raw data, which often can overwhelm and confuse us and make it very hard to reach political judgments.

We also talked yesterday about what I called the privatized character of the net and what I meant by that was the fact that we use the net usually in private, in other words, in an office, at home, behind a screen. The Internet, by its nature is isolating. Increasingly, those, who use the computer, are socially isolated. At American colleges and universities, I think at European ones as well, people talk more and more over the Internet. We have cases of students, who room together, who sit in a room side by side and they talk to each other on the Internet; „Hi, how are you, what are you doing?" „I'm doing my homework. What are you doing?" „Oh, I'm all right. I'm trying to finish up some paper." They never even look at each other.

Is that good or bad for democracy? Democracy, if we understand it as the politics of community, the politics of the „res publica", of common things, is not fond of isolation and solitude. People who think in solitude also form their opinions in solitude and vote in solitude – that is a problem for democracy. Particularly, it seems to me, it is a problem for strong democracy. Again, depending on how you look at it – here I put a question mark on representative democracy - it may be, that some parties like people to stay home, do what the party wants and not to be together. Or not. I don't know. We put a question mark around that. Certainly, it is the totalitarian, populist, plebiscitary dictator, who would love nothing more than people, who never communicate with one another, who only communicate over the Net, who are isolated from one another and who each can be taken one at the time and persuaded to be a Nazi or a Communist or a fascist. The sociologists talk about the destruction of mediating institutions, the destruction of sociability, the destruction of our social institutions as the premise for the hold of a populist dictator directly over the individuals, one by one by one by one. Unfortunately, the Net works one by one by one by one, isolating us one from another. That is the sense, in which it is privatized.

If we take again the *Gemeinderäte* (assemblies) where we have this picture of a group of citizens in a field together talking, looking at each other and voting openly, that is one end of democracy. Then the other end is a million people sitting at home alone, forming their opinion privately and expressing it directly by pushing a button, taking no responsibility for it, talking to no one about it, communicating with nobody and voting anonymously. Is that good for democracy? Or another way to ask the question is what kind of democracy is that good for? It may be good for one kind and not so good for another. This is a vital question.

At the end, let me mention that there are a number of characteristics, where you have an actual characteristic and a potential characteristic, that are in conflict with one another. I have already given one. I have said that the actual state of the technology today, because of the character of corporate ownership, means that private monopoly corporations control the infrastructure and the content of today's communications media, including the Internet. In that sense the Net has a monopolistic whole on information and opinion making. That is probably bad for strong democracy, it is probably good for plebiscitary democracy and what is it for representative democracy, you have to tell me.

Finally and perhaps in some ways most important – I have saved this one for last – the Net as we currently know it is word based. Democracy is the politics of the word, the politics of talk, the politics of conversation, the politics of logos. That certainly is good for deliberative democracy and probably good for representative democracy and probably bad for plebiscitary democracy, which doesn't really want to get into a rational use of words to justify and legitimate power. But with broadband we are moving from a word-based to an image-based, sound-based communications medium. That will render some fundamental changes. I started by talking about change. And all of our assumptions here have been about the word-based medium. But broadband will bring a picture-based, sound-based medium, a medium of affect, of feeling, of heart – and not of the brain. And that will change the character of democracy. It will make the Internet much more like television and less like radio and newspapers.

Is that good or bad for democracy and for which kind of democracy is that good or bad? We need to think not just about the actual character, but the potential nature of the changing Net. What I have discussed today are just examples. We can multiply the kinds of democracy, we can multiply these characteristics, but it raises a set of fundamental questions, that have to be answered prior to figuring out what kinds of applications are appropriate for the *Bundesrat* in Switzerland or for the English Parliament or for state government in Arizona. Those questions depend on the answers to these prior questions. Political theory has to come first. Even though it seems abstract and perhaps less interesting than the questions of applications here. But if democracy is going to benefit from technology, then we have to start, not with technology, but with cultural problems and that sometimes means taking a step back.

There is a wonderful story about Marconi, the inventor of the wireless. He was working a long time on the new telegraph connections and he had a studio in New York and his assistant was in another room and another was in Florida. They have been working for weeks and, finally he rushed into him and said: „Marconi, Marconi, we can talk to Florida!" Marconi, who had been working on this technology for years had an epiphany. He turned to him and said: „That's wonderful, but do we have anything to say to Florida?".

Now, the new technology allows us to talk to people all across the world. But as far as I can make out, our problem is, we don't know how to talk to our neighbors. We look to Bosnia, we look to Africa, yet we can't talk to each other. People can't talk to their wives and husbands and children. Yet we are celebrating that we can now talk to strangers across the world. The democracies we have in small nations are not working very well yet wse hope to have a global democracy because of the new technology?

No, what I want to suggest then is whether democracy survives and flourishes is not going to depend on the quality and character of our technology, but on the quality of our political institutions and on the character of our citizens. That means that our first questions remaining today, as they always have been, are not technological but political.