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# **Democracy in the age of modern communications: an outline**

**Leni Wild**

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## Executive Summary

This paper sets out to analyse the implications of modern communications technologies for democratic ideas and practices around the world. It is intended as an outline of current thinking and initiatives: it does not set out comprehensively to review all possible aspects but to highlight some of the most promising, as well as some of the more worrying, developments.

As **Section 1** of this paper sets out, modern communications technologies can impact on liberal, representative models of democracy in a multiplicity of ways. First, they can facilitate the provision of information and in the process improve the transparency of political processes, contributing to a more informed citizenry. Second, modern communications technologies have shaped the form of communication between people and their representatives or governments. Some argue that the intersection of these two changes – increased access to information and changes in forms of communication – may contribute to a shift from passive citizens, receiving information from those in authority, to active citizens, engaged in shaping the information and communications they access (Coleman 2005).

Modern communications technology may also have some rather more practical implications. Democratic opposition groups have increasingly turned to the mobile phone or the internet as organisation tools. Thus women's groups in Africa have used mobile phone text messaging linked to technologies that create online petitions, protestors have organised demonstrations by text in South Korea and national movements for democracy, often known as 'coloured revolutions', have occurred in parts of Central and Eastern Europe assisted by the use of the internet. The processes of democracy themselves are beginning to be affected by these new technologies too, with proposals for e-voting and shifts towards 'e-government' – online public services that, in theory, should be more accountable to the public. At the same time, in the climate of the 'war on terror', democratic governments have increasingly adopted methods of surveillance using these technologies that, for some, infringe on some of the basic tenets of a democratic society.

Furthermore, as addressed in **Section 2**, modern communications technologies and the new networked environment may contribute to the development of new forms of democratic engagement. For example, initiatives that allow pre-legislative scrutiny and deliberation online are increasingly heralded for their potential to reshape relations between people and governments (Coleman 2005).

Kofi Annan (2003) once stated: "While technology shapes the future, it is people who shape technology, and decide to what uses it can and should be put". Undemocratic governments have historically used communications technology, including mass media such as television and radio, to consolidate their control over their societies. In this vein, **Section 3** looks at how new communications technologies are being adopted by authoritarian governments or non-state actors to suppress democratic ideas or opposition. The paper concludes by suggesting some areas for further investigation and areas for potential intervention.

## Introduction

Technology and politics have often been thought to be intertwined. From Marx to Kuhn to Bertrand Russell, technological change or development has been said to alter, or be altered by, its social and political context. For modern communication technologies, this is arguably more so. The social nature of these technologies – facilitating communication and the spread of information – has in turn, according to Dutton, been ‘transformative’ of social and political relations (Dutton 2004).

Thus the birth of the modern printing press might be said to have contributed to the creation of the modern public sphere, in the process challenging central authorities’ control over the written word (Davies 2005). Today’s communications technologies, from the internet to mobile phone technology, can also be seen as contributing to challenges to power in a variety of ways.

This has led commentators to speculate that networked communications may help democratise the public sphere, increasing access to information and participation in political debate. For Naomi Klein, “...the Net is more than an organizing tool – it has become an organizing model, a blueprint for decentralized but cooperative decision-making” (2001: 396). Governments too, particularly in developed countries, have been quick to seize on the democratic potential of these new technologies. Thus a European Commission report states “The delivery of improved public services and support for active democratic engagement can be enhanced through eGovernment”, defined as the use by public administrations of information and communication technologies (eGovernment Unit 2006: 6).

However, as this paper demonstrates, there remains a ‘mixed balance sheet’ regarding the implications of the new communications technologies for relations between people and government. As Castells reminds us, the development of horizontal layers or networks of communication have empowered social movements and those working to deepen democracy. But corporate media and governments have also invested in this communication space. Power is both shifting and consolidating in different contexts (Castells 2007). What is significant is *how* communications technologies are used. Just as cars or television sets or washing machines would not be held to account for an individual’s use of them, so too should communications technologies be seen as conduits or tools. Thus they may have the potential to enhance democracy, but this is by no means guaranteed.

Blumler and Coleman (2001: 6) have argued that new media, such as the internet, may hold a “vulnerable potential” to improve public communications. Similarly, modern communication technologies may have only a vulnerable potential to enhance democracy. For Blumler and Coleman, writing in a UK setting, new policy interventions will be needed in order to ensure that the internet and other new media become a force for democracy. This paper makes a similar argument. It highlights the key challenge that remains: to identify whether and how modern communications technologies can be effectively harnessed to facilitate genuine ‘civic spheres’, characterised by debate, discussion and deliberation; and it suggests possible areas for intervention.

## Definitions

The terms ‘modern communications technology’ and the ‘networked communications environment’ are vague, ambiguous and used in variety of contexts. Brief definitions for both are provided here, to give some clarity for the purposes of this paper but these are not intended to be definitive. As Horner (2007: 9) highlights, the communications sector before the 1980s could be conceived of as “vertical rather than horizontal layers”, in that the telecommunications, mass media and computing industries operated in separation. As others have analysed, these industries were considered as ‘natural’ government monopolies, due to the use of ‘intelligent’ technology and its high cost (Fransman 2001, Mueller 1999). This led to the development of ‘one-to-many’ models of mass media, in which communications flows led from media companies and corporations, or through them from governments, to ‘passive’ citizens or consumers.

Since the 1980s, and increasingly so in the twenty-first century, these sectors have merged into what might be termed horizontal layers. In the telecommunications (telecoms) sector, the UK and the US led the way in privatising telecoms, underpinned by a neo-liberal belief in the power of markets. Other countries followed suit, embracing greater telecom competition, privatisation and liberalisation. As Aronson (2001: 542) highlights “convergence became the watchword as boundaries separating local and long-distance, voice and data, cable and telephone, and wireline and wireless services eroded”. Across the mass media industry too, there has been increased competition and the rise of new technologies such as cable and satellite. Distinctions between these industries are thus breaking down in the shift from vertical silos to horizontal layers. Where previously the media industry was seen as ‘public’ (hence it was regulated) and telecoms were private and unregulated, this separation is now challenged, leading to a diverse debate as to where the ‘privacy’ line now lies (Davies 2005: 52). The way in which these networked communications have developed is set out in Global Partners’ paper *Shaping the Networked World* (Horner 2007).

For the purposes of this paper, the ‘modern communications technologies’ are defined as all those technologies which fall in the horizontal intersections between the telecom, media and computing industries. This includes, but is not limited to, the internet, mobile phone technology, digital television and radio. The ‘networked communications environment’ includes these technologies, along with the actors and industries that they relate to.

Notions of democracy and democratic engagement are also highly contested. This paper discusses a number of different models of democracy, including liberal representative, communitarian and deliberative approaches. The liberal representative model draws on the theories of Rawls, Schumpeter and others, who posit that individuals are rational, autonomous and able to express their best interests, if given enough information to do so. Thus this strand might emphasise modern communications technologies as significant because of the access to information they can provide, potentially enabling citizens to empower themselves. A communitarian approach, in contrast, might point to the potential of new technologies to build communities, emphasising social networking and accompanying social capital as key to revitalising democratic engagement. A more deliberative approach would instead

see citizens becoming active participants in democratic processes, with an emphasis on free and open dialogue, facilitated by modern communications technologies (see Dahlberg 2001 for a fuller discussion of these three strands).

In this paper, these strands are not treated as distinct categories: modern communications technologies may have implications for all three of these strands of democratic theory, and for countless others. Furthermore, this paper does not adopt a normative framework regarding democratic theory; instead it surveys current trends, opportunities and challenges in regard to broad notions of democracy. It does, however, adhere to the premise that freedom of expression is a foundation right that is a necessary condition of functioning democracies and, to varying degrees, a part of all democratic theories.

Finally, this paper does not assess the current state of democracy across the world, nor does it dwell on how democracies are functioning in various countries, as others have looked in detail at this. Instead, this paper focuses explicitly on the democratic implications of new communications technologies.

## **1. Assessing the implications for liberal representative models of democracy**

This paper examines five main aspects of the implications of modern communications technologies for liberal representative models of democracy. These are:

- Government in the information age
- Changing patterns of communication
- Political activism and debate
- E-democracy and e-government
- Surveillance and new technologies.

### ***1.1 Government in the information age***

The initial development stage of the internet might be classified as ‘informational’ in that it was defined by the unprecedented amount of information available online, with a proliferation of documents uploaded onto websites (Tolbert and McNeal 2003). This was reinforced by the spread of new forms of media, such as independent television and radio. Together, it could be argued that citizens around the world could access more information than ever before by the end of the twentieth century (although the level of information available still varied according to national and regional lines). In democracies around the world, people have increasingly been able to access more information about their government, and systems of governance, arguably strengthening transparency but also allowing for greater accountability and more informed political debate.

For example, in India, internet café owners use wireless technology through India's fibre optic network to compensate for a lack of access to telephone lines. This has meant that for a small fee, citizens can access government officials, government records and even receive online medical consultations (Caldow 2004). In countries such as France, Canada, and Australia, legal texts are now freely accessible to anyone via the internet. In Poland, due to its Freedom of Information legislation introduced in 2001, a variety of information is available online, including information on local government spending (Clift 2004). New forms of radio programming have also emerged as important conduits of political information, particularly when linked to or supported by internet technology (Girard 1999). For example, some radio programming uses the internet as a distribution network among independent broadcasters for news and programmes, such as Sri Lanka's Kotmale Community Radio ([www.kirana.lk](http://www.kirana.lk)) which uses the radio as a form of people's gateway, making the internet's resources available to rural and marginalised communities (Ibid.).

Overall, the proliferation of information now available using modern communications technologies allows greater access to political information than ever before. As Benjamin Barber (1998) highlights, democracy as a form of government is dependent upon information and communication. Increased information should allow for greater transparency and potentially increase the potential for citizens to hold their representatives to account. This is not without limits however. First, the 'digital divide' often prevents marginalised groups or those most vulnerable in society from accessing this information, in large part due to the lack of access to technology. Second, the very proliferation of information, and questions as to the amount of 'trust' that can be placed in sources, for example, found online, remain a significant barrier (Horner 2007)<sup>1</sup>.

## *1.2 Changing patterns of communication*

Accompanying this rise in access to information, there have been a number of key changes, both in people's expectations of democratic governments, and in the actions of democratic governments themselves. In particular, governments' mode and level of communication with the people they claim to represent have changed significantly.

In the post-war period, many governments – democratic and non democratic – sought to use mass media tools to communicate their messages. But the rise of 24-hour news cycles and increased access to information have shaped the ways in which governments communicate. For example, most local and national governments in developed countries, and increasingly in developing countries, now have websites. Government websites may provide information about government institutions, processes and those who hold office. Politicians themselves are also developing individual websites in order to promote their campaigns and activities.

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<sup>1</sup> As Horner (2007) highlights, in most countries television and newspapers remain the most trusted sources of information. The Internet, particularly Internet blogs, is often the least trusted (Horner 2007: 11-13).

This has facilitated new forms of government to citizen communication but also citizen to government communication, as individuals can contact their representatives by email, and even text messaging through a mobile phone. At the same time, new types of intermediaries are emerging, built around the distributive and interactive capabilities of new media. For example the UK based WriteToThem.com allows internet users to find out who their representatives are, and then to write to them (a fax is then sent on their behalf). This site is not run by the UK Government and its primary function is to facilitate communication. TheyWorkForYou.com (another UK based site) takes this a step further. It essentially provides a highly usable version of Hansard, the record of what is said in the UK Parliament, which allows users to search by issue or Member of Parliament. It is visited by about 10,000 people per day and highlights the important intermediary role that new technologies can play ([www.mysociety.org](http://www.mysociety.org)). A New Zealand version of this Website also exists (<http://theyworkforyou.co.nz/>). Similar initiatives have been developed in the Netherlands, to allow users to find out their representatives' voting records and political opinions (<http://www.150volksvertegenwoordigers.nl/> and <http://www.politix.nl>). A Wikipedia page also lists a number of other known sites where people can process and re-use information about parliaments and politicians ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parliamentary\\_informatics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parliamentary_informatics)).

Coleman (2005) argues that traditional broadcast technology only allowed citizens access to the political process as spectators. The rise of interactive technologies has thus opened up opportunities for more inclusive public engagement, or more 'active' citizens (Ibid.). It could be argued that this 'interactive' potential has been demonstrated in the American Presidential debate process. The Democratic and Republican presidential debates were traditionally televised nationally but in the 2007 to 2008 debates, questions themselves came in the form of videos sent in by users of YouTube (a video-sharing website), and video content from each event was made available for sharing and distribution online, in a collaboration between YouTube and CNN.

Governments too have sought to respond to citizens' calls for more interactive participation. This has led to the development of a number of online consultative initiatives. For example, the UK Parliament has run a series of online consultations in which groups of citizens with specific expertise or experience in a policy area participate in an online forum for one month – sharing ideas with each other and with MPs (Coleman 2005). Similarly, the Canadian Parliament has also run online policy consultations, including an interactive parliamentary committee website (Coleman and Norris 2005). Estonia has emerged as something of a world leader in this field, demonstrating the significant role that interactive communications technologies can have in transition countries. The Estonian government launched its website 'Tana Otsustan Mina (TOM)' (Today I decide) in 2001 (<http://tom.riik.ee/>). This website allowed citizens to comment on draft laws and submit ideas for new laws, a number of which were subsequently taken forward (Coleman and Götze 2001).

Transnational projects have also begun to appear. For example, the Greek Government led an e-vote campaign for Europe when it held the European presidency in 2003. This involved a website which offered informative content on European issues, and the chance to debate and participate in European policy decisions. According to Coleman and Norris (2005), this website received relatively high traffic

(around 177,000 respondents) and the Greek Foreign Minister regularly reported his findings on this initiative to the Council of the European Union. France also initiated a joint enterprise with the European Union, based around five forums on five different websites to discuss European policy issues (Coleman and Götze 2001).

These initiatives have developed rapidly over the last decade and seem to present an exciting trend towards greater engagement between the governed and government – a key part of a functioning democracy. Internet and mobile phone use has undoubtedly expanded rapidly – according to Castells (2007), there are now over 1 billion internet users and over 2 billion mobile phone users. While levels of uptake for political use are harder to gauge, the observations in this paper suggest that the political use of these technologies is increasing, from the use of mobile phone to organise politically to the use of networking sites to spread information (Castells 2007 also supports this thesis).

But, as Coleman points out, these opportunities for increased dialogue may appear alarming to representatives themselves (Coleman 2005). While citizens may have greater channels of access and communication to their representatives, particularly using the internet, representatives themselves have to date shown reluctance to actively engage with these new technologies, complaining that they can not control the content of much of what is written about them, for example in blogs (Coleman 2005). At the same time, representatives are reported to be slow to respond to enquiries from their websites (Ibid.). A report into the US Congress found that representatives in the House and the Senate reported feeling overloaded by email enquiries (COP 2001). In part, this may be a technological issue – few politicians' offices own software that can automate email message sorting, and the entry of emailers' names, addresses, and other information into an office database (Ibid.). But there are also some cultural barriers at work too – many politicians may be struggling to change their behaviour when faced with a more interconnected society.

Another key issue is that any consultations with citizens need to have a demonstrable impact on policy decisions. A number of initiatives have not displayed clear impacts for users and this has led to widespread scepticism within internet communities. For example the German Bundestag's e-democracy project was supposed to allow citizens to discuss selected legislative initiatives online. This project was subsequently deemed to be a failure due to firstly, a number of technical problems in the software used and secondly, and perhaps more significantly, users lacked clarity as to what – if any – impact they would have on legislative outcomes (Coleman and Norris 2005).

Thus, as Dutton reminds us, it is important to 'avoid the trap' of seeing the internet's enablement of increased information flows, and its facilitation of communicative power, as the same thing as the realisation of deepened democracy (Foreword in Grant 2004: 4). The ability to communicate and exchange information should not be taken as a proxy for real commitments from governments to consult and listen to their citizens, or to allow their participation in the shaping roles and policies of governments (Ibid). And if new forms of communication are used in the familiar top-down fashion by representatives, parties and governments, there remains a real danger that this simply reinforces public disengagement rather than rejuvenates the political or civic sphere.

Putnam has pointed out that “the ability to send a message to [president@whitehouse.gov](mailto:president@whitehouse.gov) can give the illusion of much more access, participation and social proximity than is actually available” (cited in Davies 2005: 62). At present, the novelty value of the initiatives described in this section may compensate for the lack of truly interactive features, but there remains a danger of growing frustration from users if top-down communication persists in the modern communication age. As discussed in this section, an online project in Germany failed in part because internet users quickly realised that their participation had little impact on the outcomes, as “users are quite able to differentiate between real and fake calls for participation” (Coleman and Norris 2005: 15). Therefore, if modern communications technologies are to alter communication between governments and people, open up dialogue and allow greater access, they need to be used in ways which will provide demonstrable effects to their users. Otherwise, these initiatives risk losing legitimacy and being abandoned by those they seek to engage.

### *1.3 Political activism and debate*

Communications technologies are also (re)shaping communications between citizens, with important implications for the relationship between government and people. This section discusses two main themes:

- increased opportunities for political activism and organisation
- increased political debate through citizen journalism, internet forums, and so on.

The internet and mobile phone technology have seemingly contributed to a number of **high-profile political protests**. The so-called Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 was seen as an example of the use of the internet to organise and campaign. According to McFaul it “may have been the first in history to be organised largely online” (cited in Goldstein 2007: 4). For Goldstein (2007), though internet access was limited in Ukraine (in 2004 only one to four per cent of the population were thought to have internet access), those who did have access were politically engaged and well-connected, allowing them to have a political impact. For example, during the election campaign, pro-democracy supporters used the internet and mobile phones to organise protests, distribute information and coordinate election monitoring. Mobile phones were also used for surveillance – for example, students covertly filmed their professors illegally instructing them to vote for the incumbent party, using cameras on their phones (Ibid.). The 2002 South Korean Presidential elections might also be an example of the increasing power of the internet as an organisational tool. South Korea has a relatively high level of internet access (more than half of the population regularly access the internet). During the election campaign in 2002, Presidential candidate Roh had an active online supporters club, which used digital technologies to implore supporters to vote, including messaging by phone and email (Han 2007, Joyce 2007).

Mobile phone communication remains cheaper and more widely available than the internet in many developing countries. Therefore mobile phone technology, particularly text messaging, has increasingly emerged as an important trend in these countries. In the Philippines, mobile phone communication was used to disseminate

information regarding the 2000-2001 impeachment of then President Estrada. When the impeachment process was aborted, text messaging in particular was seen as a key tool in the organisation of protests (Rafael 2003). In Senegal, during Presidential elections in 2000, journalists watched over the electoral processes, feeding back to their editors by mobile phone any signs of vote rigging. Using new technologies, journalists in effect became unofficial election monitors and were able to highlight the incumbent's attempts to manipulate democratic processes (the pro-democracy opponent, Abdou Diouf, went on to win) (Paye 2002). Similarly, in Ethiopia, Oberman (2005) argues that opposing political parties used text messaging to call on supporters to vote.

Manji (2005) highlights the **regional potential** of communications technologies. She points to a campaign in Africa to ratify the Protocol on the Rights of Women at the African Union's Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. A coalition of around 20 women's organisations across the region created an online petition. In recognition of the limitations of internet access, however, technology was also developed so that people could sign up to this petition using text messaging via mobile phones. Those who subscribed to the messaging service could also receive updates on the campaign (Ibid.). More broadly, Obadare (2006) points to protests in Nigeria against mobile phone companies, and government policies that failed to regulate or bring pressure on these companies, as examples of the potential for modern technologies to be used for democratic activism. In 2003, it is alleged that 75 per cent of mobile phone users switched off their mobile phones for one day to protest against high phone charges and poor access (Ibid.). For Obadare, this went much further than a protest against mobile companies, and should be seen as part of a wider campaign of "righting wrongs" regarding corporate control and government negligence (Obadare 2006: 93).

Therefore a number of concrete examples of the use of communications technologies as a tool to challenge dominant political power can be found. However these technologies may also have important broader cultural or social implications. Wheeler (2006) analysed data on users of internet cafés in Jordan and Egypt, reaching some interesting conclusions regarding the possibilities of the internet. There is a prevailing pessimism regarding new technologies in the Arab world, due to many governments' effective filtering of content and access (see Section 3). Yet, for Wheeler, evidence from Jordan and Egypt suggests that even within tightly proscribed boundaries (such as limits on which websites or forums can be accessed) internet use may **widen experiences, interactions and opportunities for citizens** who are otherwise excluded from power channels (Ibid). Internet use in this context occurs within a controlled environment – any use of the internet to openly oppose the government or any attempt to access opposition websites was likely to be discovered. Therefore, those interviewed by Wheeler limited themselves to surfing websites that were permitted, or participated in chat rooms, which were often in Arabic.

Despite these limitations, Wheeler argues that internet use in these countries may still signify the emergence of a more civic culture (Ibid.). For women in particular, often unable to freely express themselves in public in many Middle Eastern societies, the internet might become both a forum in which to talk to members of the opposite sex and a 'training ground' for expression (Ibid.). Rahimi (2003) points to blogging as an alternative form of expression in Iran (a country thought to have at least 20,000 active internet sites and blogs), pointing to the case of a former Iranian prostitute's blog,

detailing the underworld of Iranian society, as an example of a challenge to the separation of the sexes advocated by the Iranian regime.

Citizen journalism has also been heralded for its potential to contribute to the civic sphere. User generated media sites are seen as giving rise to citizen journalism or **participatory media sites**, in which citizens, often unpaid, contribute news stories. The South Korean site [www.ohmynews.com](http://www.ohmynews.com) is a good example of this, as it was one of the first Websites to use citizen journalists, with professional editors. For its proponents, this trend is transformative, giving voice to those otherwise excluded in mainstream media and removing the 'gatekeepers' who currently decide which news is important (Joyce 2007). Certainly, user generated content challenges traditional models of media reporting, in that users can edit stories and add comments. But this model has also been criticised due to the lack of formal training, or ethical code, which should come with professional journalists (Ibid.). Attempts to export this model, to other countries and internationally, have also struggled (Ibid).

But it does mark a shift towards **demands for greater interactivity** within the media. In response, traditional media organisations now include a range of interactive features on their Websites. For example, the BBC has developed an 'Action Network' (previously BBC iCan, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/actionnetwork/>) which allows users to voice their opinions on local issues and find out about local campaigns. And initiatives such as [www.openDemocracy.net](http://www.openDemocracy.net) both post content by 'known' authors or journalists and allow discussion boards for users to comment on stories and analysis. These initiatives, and many others not described here, open up new channels for political debate, and challenge the dominance of major news companies in deciding which news is important.

So it seems that in many ways modern communications technologies may help to strengthen political activism and to deepen and foster political debate. However, the limitations, challenges and risks should also be noted. The limitations are multiple – lack of access and 'digital divides' continue but beyond this, many citizens may be unaware of these technologies, or feel themselves unable to take full advantage of them. For example, Dederich et al (2006) found that many civil society organisations struggle to capitalise on the possibilities of new technology, due to a combination of lack of expertise, lack of time and lack of resources. The citizen journalist model has not taken off around the world, although traditional media sites are now including more interactive features. At the same time, while the internet and mobile phones are increasingly effective tools for democracy activists, they do not alone trigger revolution or opposition to anti-democratic regimes (Joyce 2007, Rafael 2003). As a recent article in the *Economist* points out: "The story so far is that technology intensifies the democratic process, but does not fundamentally change it" (*Economist* 14/02/2008). Put simply, new technologies may allow for more effective organisation or activism but they have not yet supplanted other forms of activism, from political parties to public meetings, nor can technologies alone be said to have changed the outcome of a political contest

Perhaps the most important aspect in the long term might be the subtle cultural shifts that emerge over time from citizens' participation in online forums, chat rooms and discussion boards, which Wheeler argues is occurring in some Middle Eastern countries. Thus the ability to strengthen the 'civic sphere', opening up interaction with

people and views beyond the reach of normal social networks, may potentially help build more democratic cultures and more publicly minded citizens (Wheeler 2006).

#### ***1.4 E-democracy and e-government***

Modern communications technologies have been much heralded for their potential impact on the procedures of democracy and government. In particular, governments have focused on electronic voting (or e-voting) as one way to combat falling voter turn-out and increasing apathy (Withers 2004). E-voting encompasses both electronic means of casting a vote and electronic means of counting votes. Therefore it includes the use of voting machines, which collect and tabulate votes in a single machine, as used in Brazil, India, the Netherlands, Venezuela, and the USA as well as internet voting systems, using the internet to cast votes, which have been used for government or local government elections and referendums in the UK, Estonia and Switzerland as well as municipal elections in Canada and party primary elections in the USA and France. The argument presented is that e-voting could make voting easier, and could help counter falling voter turn-out. Advocates point to the success of reality television shows, in which the public votes for preferred contestants (such as *Big Brother*), and they hope that the successes of this kind of e-voting could thus be replicated in the political sphere.

However, Norris highlights that three factors contribute to the likelihood of voting: electoral costs, electoral choices and electoral decisiveness (cited in Withers 2004). Electoral costs are inconveniences for the electorate such as long, difficult processes for registering to vote. E-voting may increase convenience – allowing voting at a time and place of the voter’s choosing. But the introduction of a simpler mechanism for voting does not in itself allow voters more easily to process information regarding candidates (another electoral ‘cost’) nor does it have any impact on electoral choice or decisiveness (the extent to which votes cast for each party determine the outcome; e.g. whether an election is closely fought) (Ibid.). As Coleman (2005: 12) highlights, making it easier to participate in traditional political activities that many already view as ‘dull’ is unlikely to rejuvenate political participation. Instead it reveals a narrow interpretation of the opportunities these technologies can bring.

There is some confusion between the terms ‘e-government’ and ‘e-democracy’. Definitions of ‘e-democracy’ are contested but it can be taken to refer to both procedural aspects of democracy (e-voting and so on) as well as new notions of democracy arising from the modern networked environment (discussed in Section 2). E-government focuses on removing bureaucratic boundaries, making public services more accessible and efficient. Most developed democracies, and many democracies in developing countries, are now introducing aspects of e-government. For example, public services, varying from access to government forms to transactional services such as filing tax returns, are available online in the UK, Canada, the USA, Australia, as well South Africa and India to name a few.

This service transformation has often been linked to democratic transformation. Thus a European Commission report states that “The delivery of improved public services and support for active democratic engagement can be enhanced through

eGovernment” (eGovernment Unit 2006: 6). The New Zealand government’s e-government strategy explicitly states that its implementation will make it easier for citizens to have a say in government; and one of the UK Government’s performance objectives is for ‘citizens to feel more engaged with the process of democratic government’ (cited in Dutil et al 2007: 84). For Chadwick (2003: 447), the use of modern communications technologies in bureaucracies may create a shift from inward facing computer systems to “outward facing networks in which the division between an organisation’s internal information processing and its external users effectively melts away”.

However, as Dutil et al (2007) highlight, moves to improve service delivery have not necessarily led to the increased engagement of citizens in a democratic dialogue and instead may emphasise a consumer or customer approach to service delivery on the part of government. They point to the reinvention of the Canada Revenue Agency as an example of this. Since the late 1990s, it has become the Canadian government’s flagship performer in terms of online transactional services and it has focused on a customer-orientated approach that benchmarks response times to external inquiries and communicates its results in a corporate style, with annual reports detailing objectives and results (Ibid: 80). Similarly, Livingstone et al (2007) argue that the Office of Communications (OfCom), a sector-wide regulator in the UK, has promoted a ‘citizen consumer’ approach, which in reality reveals an economic agenda of market regulation. They point to civil society concerns that a citizen focused approach thus risks being marginalised as the discourse of ‘consumerism’ is mainstreamed (Ibid.). These government-led initiatives do not yet seem to comprehensively engage the citizen in the design, implementation and oversight of service transformations but instead focus on more superficial aspects of service delivery, from response time to annual reports.

Higher levels of customer service and satisfaction with government services, facilitated by modern communications technologies, have thus been linked by their proponents to increased trust and confidence in government, with possible positive spin offs for democracy and participation (eGovernment Unit 2006). However McDonald points out that to date, e-government has focused on ‘cost-effective, personalised and relevant services’: “In other words, the role of practice borrowed from business could be considered as: those technologies, processes and approaches that make the delivery of a service better (convenient, more channels, easier to use etc.) but which do not, in themselves, promote stronger engagement” (McDonald 2006: 3). Therefore, there is a danger, as argued by Livingstone et al (2007), that service improvements could be confused with deeper democratic involvement. McDonald also highlights that greater efficiency in ‘transactional’ interactions with governments could increase trust and increase citizens’ perception that governments are responsive to their needs, but he suggests that e-government services may need to focus more on issues of choice (and implicit within this, participation), rather than the narrow focus on efficiency seen to date (McDonald 2003).

### *1.5 Surveillance and new technologies*

This paper's discussion has focused in the main on the critical evaluation of the opportunities created by these technologies. But it is also important to reflect on some of the potential threats to democratic practices that may arise. For example, following the tragic events of 11 September 2001, democratic governments have sought to control and limit access to and the use of communications technologies, giving rise to criticisms of perceived encroachments on some important democratic tenets.

A key area has been the strengthening of governments' ability to access communications and retain data. According to Privacy International (2006), in 2000 the UK government proposed a policy to require the retention of communications traffic data for up to seven years by a central government authority. This proposal faced public resistance at the time but in December 2001, a similar policy was successfully introduced as part of anti-terrorism legislation. According to the same report, the European Union's Directive on Privacy and Electronic Communications "also supports the creation of such data retention laws within the European community and is consistent with international pressure to weaken data protection" (Ibid.). The US government has arguably gone furthest in seeking to control communications technologies due to the perceived threat of terrorism, including enabling law enforcement to monitor internet traffic in detail and limiting access to certain types of public information (Privacy International 2003).

Government surveillance has also increased. Following 11 September 2001, the Kenyan and South African governments introduced new legislation that allowed government intercept or disruption of communications, including the ability to disrupt the communications of large numbers of protest groups (Ibid.). Similarly, India introduced the Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance which allowed the government to monitor all kinds of electronic communications, including emails.

It should be remembered that democratic societies do have a duty to protect their citizens. The events of 11 September 2001 led to a number of legitimate security concerns, not least due to terrorists' sophisticated use of the internet and other communications technologies. Davies (2005: 26) points out there may be high public support for the use of surveillance technologies that can prevent domestic or international security threats. But the amount of information states can hold about their citizens is clearly a contentious issue. Communications technologies increase the potential for governments to hold information about their citizens and, perhaps more significantly, to cross-check the contents of different sources. Citizens may have little capacity to access and amend such information. Related debates over citizens' rights to privacy are also relevant here, both in terms of how much information can be collected and for how long it can be stored, as well as to what use this information can be put and who it can be shared with.

Tensions between privacy and security may always remain, but Davies argues that ultimately citizens should be given the right and the opportunity to opt out of types of technological engagement (Davies 2005: 33). For example, moves towards e-government services have often been accompanied by increased data sharing across departments. Davies argues that users must be given control over how that data (e.g. medical records) is to be shared and they must be given the right to opt out. He points out that citizens already make these 'risk assessments' in their other uses of technologies, from deciding whether to enter credit card details online to choosing

whether to set their browsers to enable ‘cookies’ which enable a website to remember a user from one visit to the next (Ibid.). In order to make the most of opportunities to opt out, however, users need good information as to how their data might be used (Ibid.).

## **2. Towards new forms of democracy?**

Commentators have focused on whether new technologies might enhance democratic processes and structures, but there has been little debate over which kinds of democracy might be affected. In other words, do communications technologies merely help improve representative democracy or can they lead to new forms of democratic engagement altogether? Some have argued that these technologies could lead to more deliberative and participatory forms of democracy (Blumler and Coleman 2001). At the same time, communitarian approaches have also emerged, emphasising the potential for modern communications technologies to foster communities.

This section therefore addresses:

- Deliberative models of democracy
- Community development
- Control and contest.

### ***2.1 Deliberative models of democracy***

For Blumler and Coleman (2001) a major weakness of twentieth century representative democracies was a lack of public deliberation. They argue that communications technologies offer new opportunities to foster deliberation and encourage more direct participation in public policy processes, for example through online consultations and deliberative forums. Thus the new possibilities for deliberation and participation have been vaunted for their democratic potential. Chadwick (2003: 449) envisages deliberative democracy as ‘horizontal, multidirectional interactivity’, important because this form of interaction is in itself “constitutive of democracy”. Dahlberg describes deliberative democracy approaches as forums for free and open dialogue where participants put forward and challenge claims regarding current political problems. In the process, “private individuals become public-orientated citizens” (Dahlberg 2001: 166).

There are only a limited number of examples of governments embracing deliberative arrangements in which citizens can make a direct contribution to the policy process – in other words, moving beyond the ‘top-down’ model often pursued by governments even in the modern networked environment. Coleman and Götze point to an example from local government, ‘Iperbole’, an online civic network for the Bologna municipality in Italy, created in 1995. This involves a network of internet public places, free internet access points, emails and newsgroups which aim to supply information and interactive services to citizens as well as creating dialogue between citizens and representatives on local issues (Coleman and Götze 2001: 36-38). On a

national level, the UK Parliament has run online consultations for pre-legislative scrutiny and debate on Bills. These bring together groups of citizens with relevant expertise and experience to inform and advice representations on specific topics, to date including domestic violence and stem cell research (Ibid.: 36-38). Clift (2004) highlights the interactive potential within parliaments, pointing to Lithuania and the state of Minnesota, USA where elected representatives in Parliament have full internet and email access within their respective meeting chambers. This opens up opportunities for real time communication during debates from the electorate and special interests.

Ultimately, these examples are limited and deliberative uses of new technologies do not seem to have been explored fully by representatives, parliaments, governments or non-state actors. As Coleman (2005) highlights, there is a need to engage with the opportunities of these technologies, not as a substitute for representative democracy but rather to open up communication channels and connect representatives to the many voices often left out of public policy debates. Furthermore Coleman highlights that modern representative democracies have always had elements of more direct democracy, with publics not just engaged through voting, but also through public meetings, meetings with representatives and so on (Ibid.). Thus the introduction of greater deliberation, using modern communications technologies where appropriate, may not lead to radical, new forms of democracy but may help redefine the nature of representation in the modern networked environment and people's expectations of it. For this to occur, however, more research will be needed into how these technologies can be effectively used for public deliberation, in a way that moves beyond a limited number of pilot initiatives. Furthermore, methods for evaluating the effectiveness of these deliberation initiatives will also need to be developed, to test whether in reality they can live up to Coleman's expectations.

## ***2.2 Community development***

Those committed to a more communitarian approach to democracy have vaunted the use of new technology to foster community development (discussed in Dahlberg 2001). Communitarians see democracy as based on the shared values that bind communities together – thus proponents might emphasise the potential role of social networking technology in building communities. Davies discusses the 'communities of interest' that may develop online, pointing to Pew Internet Institute research that half of internet users in the US were engaged in some form of civic or interest based community online (Davies 2005: 55). If people therefore look online for 'communities' they can relate to, Davies argues, this might be a starting point for new forms of political engagement. For example, the UK based site 'Netmums' (<http://www.netmums.com/h/f/HOME/home/>) initially began as an online self help group, but has now emerged as a collective voice for mothers (Ibid.: 55). Stuart McKee extends the importance of these 'communities' further, arguing that greater connectedness could eventually lead to the emergence of a "global citizenry" or a global community (cited in Blumler and Coleman 2001: 32).

For Bryant and Wilcox (2006) the greatest contribution of new communications technologies may be cultural and not technical. They argue that the trend towards increased online participation has emerged with the shift from 'Web 1.0' to 'Web 2.0'.

In essence, they define Web 1.0 as the initial stages in the development of the internet, characterised by the publishing of ‘pages’ within a traditional broadcast model. Web 2.0, in contrast, takes the internet network as a platform. This has led to greater interactivity, as seen with the emergence of ‘wikis’ (pages that anyone can edit), blogs (which anyone can comment on) and free video-sharing websites such as YouTube. It has also led to new forms of interaction as, for example, instant messages, often attached to networking sites like Facebook overtake e-mail, and free phone calls are made between computers (*Economist* 14/02/08).

Bryant and Wilcox (2006) argue that this shift was not driven by sophisticated new technology but rather as the result of a “mass of connected individuals doing some technically very simple things together” (Ibid.). For example, blogs, they argue, are technically similar to the personal homepages that proliferated in the early development of internet, the only difference being that these initial homepages were not “at the centre of millions of connected conversations that are taking place between individuals, without mediation by mainstream media, traditional organisations or IT departments” (Ibid.). Proponents of Web 2.0 might therefore be seen as building an ‘architecture of participation’, supporting many-to-many interaction, rather than the one-to-many model that was previously supported. For Bryant and Wilcox this presents an important new stage in terms of how communications technologies are used; “Crucially, this process has a human voice – it places great importance on the value of conversation rather than just information sharing” (Ibid.).

For Blumler and Coleman (2001), what is now needed is the development of a ‘civic commons in cyberspace’. They argue that the proliferation of websites, and of information available online, means that many question the trustworthiness of online sources. Furthermore, governments have shown themselves slow to engage in more participatory or deliberative initiatives, often preferring to display ‘electronic brochures’ online instead. They suggest that “trusted civic spaces” online have yet to develop, but there should be investment in developing them (Ibid.). Writing in a UK context, they advocate a new form of public agency, publicly funded, which would in essence elicit, gather and coordinate citizens’ deliberations on, and reactions to, the problems faced and proposals issues by public bodies (including local government, parliament and government departments) (Ibid.). Interestingly, civil society offers some innovative ideas in this respect. Mysociety has developed a number of online projects designed to bring democratic benefits. For example, at ‘Fix My Street’ (<http://www.fixmystreet.com/>) people add their UK postcode and report any local problems which are then fed back to the relevant council. One imagines this could be extended, so that individuals can come together to discuss local issues and problems online, thus creating a virtual civic space for political discussion. But greater research is needed into how such ‘civic spaces’ can be created so that they are trusted by users.

### ***2.3 Control and contest***

Web 2.0 or the more recent developments in the internet and other communications technologies, are often seen as ‘bottom up’ processes, beginning – like Google or Facebook – with a small number of dedicated individuals and rising into global phenomena. But Castells reminds us that these technologies are themselves the site of

power struggles between dominant power elites and those seeking to challenge these sites of power (Castells 2007). This has important implications for any examination of the impact on democracy of these technologies.

He points to evidence that major corporations – already dominant in the mass media – have turned their attention to the internet. For example, he points to corporate investments in YouTube, as Burger King has launched its own channel on YouTube and Warner Music recently signed a deal to provide music videos via YouTube. Furthermore, other media giants are planning to launch initiatives similar to YouTube, with Microsoft developing its own version (Ibid: 253). For Castells, this could point towards the consolidation of, for example, networking or file-sharing sites around a small number of major corporations. Potentially, this could inhibit the development of technologies designed to further democracy, as commercial bottom lines mean that these actors lack any real interest in how these technologies might be harnessed in that way.

That said, Castells also highlights that while this pattern of consolidation has emerged in forms of mass media, it is not inevitable in the modern communications age. There is evidence that smaller, less commercial sites are increasingly popular, with people migrating from larger networks like MySpace to smaller networks (Ibid). This may create, in effect, a market that shuts out or undermines attempts to commercialise these spaces. For Castells, this represents a power struggle between dominant political elites, seeking to ‘reassert their domination of the communication realm’, and new social movements, individuals and groups seeking to challenge this (Castells 2007: 258). Communications technologies, for him, thus remain “an increasingly contested terrain” (Ibid.).

This contest may refer not only to the owners of these technologies, but to their development as well. For example, Bennett (2003: 35) argues that “technology savvy activists are writing software that enables automated and democratic publishing and editing”. Therefore, the rise of Wikipedia, where anyone can edit or contribute to an entry, challenges the domination of a handful of corporations over encyclopaedic software and potentially democratises information and its use (though there have also been debates about the authority of information and the balance of content in such initiatives). At the same time, there are increasing challenges over intellectual property rights and patents for these technologies, as seen in recent attempts to prevent file-sharing, e.g. of music. While illegal file-sharing may need to be tackled, contest clearly emerges between those seeking to open up communications technologies’ software and those seeking to protect current intellectual property (commentators including Lessig (e.g. 2004) have analysed this in depth). According to Castells, these contests could result in the creation of a new public space, one that is still unknown to us (Castells 2007: 258). If this is the case, then new forms of democracy, building on those outlined in this section but probably including other initiatives or forms not outlined here, could potentially emerge.

For Barber, writing in 1998, “unless we are clear about what democracy means to us, and what kind of democracy we envision, technology is as likely to stunt as to enhance the civic polity” (1998: 580). A decade on, it seems that a lack of clarity remains regarding the kind of democracy that might be strengthened by technology. But this may be no bad thing. As Coleman (2005) highlights, it may not be that one

democratic ‘type’ alone must be selected – deliberative, participatory models can also be part of liberal representative democracy and in differing ways, technologies may have the potential to enhance many forms of democracy. Instead, when looking for factors that might ‘stunt the civic polity’, we may need to look at the current motivations behind the use of new technologies. Thus, while new civic spheres may be possible, at present they remain vulnerable, located in small initiatives that have not yet had a widespread impact and threatened by commercial motivations which may have little interest in their development.

### **3. Democratic reversals in the modern communications age**

While much of this paper has focused on the ‘vulnerable potential’ of modern communications technologies to enhance democracy, it is important not to overlook their potential to be used to undermine democratic processes and ideas. Authoritarian governments have increasingly proved adept at manipulating communications technologies for their own uses, while even democratic governments have used these technologies in ways that seem to challenge their commitment to accountability and transparency. Furthermore, anti-democratic forces within civil society, such as terrorist groups or far right extremist groups, might also appropriate these technologies for their own ends. Taken together, and alongside questions of who may control informational flows and channels, it seems that there might be significant threats of democratic reversals posed by those actors who can use the power of the networked communications environment.

While protest groups have turned to communications technologies as tools for political activism, authoritarian governments have looked to them as tools for control. Barber (1998) highlights that Nazi Germany was highly adept at using technology and the media for its purposes. Aside from this extreme example, over the last decade or so, authoritarian governments have sought to use communications technologies to block access to information and to the organisational potential of these technologies.

For example, authoritarian governments, from China to Saudi Arabia to Zimbabwe, have sought to limit access to information from the internet, primarily by limiting or blocking access to websites deemed inappropriate. (See <http://opennet.net/> for an analysis of the different forms such blocking can take.) In fact, Kalathil and Boas (2001) point to China as a case study of an authoritarian government that combines both reactive (blocking) measures with proactive measures. For Kalathil and Boas, the Chinese government has been perhaps the most adept in combining ‘reactive measures’, such as filtering sites and content as well as surveillance of users, alongside proactive state responses, including using government owned or controlled sites to counter contradictory information (Kalathil and Boas 2001). Furthermore, Zittrain and Edelman found that a high number of democracy and human rights websites were banned within China, alongside various news sites and a number of sites operated by governments in Asia and elsewhere (Zittrain and Edelman, undated). Their research also highlighted that the set of sites blocked in China was by no means static: “whoever maintains the lists is actively updating them, and certain general-interest high-profile sites whose content changes frequently appear to be blocked and unblocked as those changes are evaluated” (Ibid.). This suggests that more research

may be needed into the variety of ways that governments such as China might be blocking the use of modern communications technologies.

Similarly, the Burmese regime has imposed some of the strictest restrictions on internet usage, mandating a 15-year prison sentence for anyone who uses the internet to undermine the Burmese state, public order or other interests of the regime (Privacy International 2003). All internet traffic passes through government servers, which strictly limit which sites can be accessed. During pro-democracy protests in Burma in October 2007, there were allegations that the internet was controlled in order to try and prevent the flow of information to the outside world (BBC 2/10/2007).

In Saudi Arabia, as highlighted by Zittrain's research, all network traffic going into and out of the kingdom is routed through a central 'farm' of proxy servers. These servers review every web page request from every Saudi internet user. If a page is listed on the government-maintained blacklist, a message explicitly denying access will be displayed in the user's browser (Zittrain 2002). Some filtering is common in most countries with high levels of access to the internet – for example, there are increasing calls to limit children's access to inappropriate sites and spam filtering is also increasingly routine. But there is a clear danger that filtering attempts by some governments go far beyond the protection of certain vulnerable groups (such as protecting children from paedophiles) and instead seek to limit access to information, new political ideas and political organisation. Furthermore, as noted above, too little is known as to how this filtering is occurring, aside from the important research by organisations like the OpenNet Initiative.

Finally, it is worth noting that communication between people may not necessarily lead to the creation of a normative 'civic sphere' that promotes democracy and dialogue. As noted above, authoritarian governments can use modern communications technologies to control and suppress democratic opposition just as pro-democracy groups use these technologies as tools for organisation. Similarly, groups of citizens can meet online, or organise using other communication technologies, to promote anti-democratic causes and ideas. As Denning points out "it appears that virtually every terrorist group is on the web, along with a mishmash of freedom fighters, crusaders, propagandists, and mercenaries" (Denning 1999: 31). These groups have proved themselves to be highly technically savvy, using the internet to organise, spread information and propaganda, and to recruit others.

This is the extreme end of the spectrum, but there are also some potential downsides to the formation of more benign communities of interest online. Davies highlights that people may only affiliate with those whom they already agree with, leading to the loss of the "tension and diversity of the public realm" (2005: 55). Furthermore, others subvert the idea that online forums also lead to productive engagement and dialogue, arguing that in practice "people talk past one another, when they are not verbally attacking each other" (Davies cited in Denning 1999).

Overall then, the potential for democratic reversal resulting from the use of communications technologies by authoritarian regimes, democratic regimes, or civil society groups, may demonstrate above all else that these technologies are themselves neutral. As Kofi Annan (2003) wrote, while serving as Secretary-General to the

United Nations, “while technology shapes the future, it is people who shape technology, and decide to what uses it can and should be put”.

#### **4. Conclusions and questions**

In conclusion, there are many ways in which modern communications technologies might have implications for democracy and for the relationship between government and people. These technologies might be said to have a ‘vulnerable potential’ to enhance democracy, when they are used to challenge undemocratic use of power or to inform citizens and encourage greater political dialogue (Blumler and Coleman 2001). While governments and corporations are finding new ways to maintain power, ‘civic spaces’ are still opening up. Thus as Castells notes, “While the old struggle for social domination and counter-domination continues in the new media space, the structural bias of this space towards the powers that be is being diminished every day by the new social practices of communication” (Castells 2007: 21). A number of questions for further research and investigation are thus set out below.

- How can greater interactivity be encouraged in governments’ and representatives’ communications with citizens? In particular, how might parliaments and parliamentarians make more innovative use of communications technologies? Should pre-legislative deliberation be a core focus of these initiatives and how can they be rolled out from a small number of pilot initiatives? As this paper has highlighted, any initiatives to strengthen governments’ use of communications technologies must also consider how to demonstrate the impact of citizen participation. At the same time, more efficient service delivery should not be prioritised over greater interactivity and participation.
- How can civil society initiatives, facilitated by modern communications technologies, be strengthened? As this paper has demonstrated, a number of bottom up initiatives that seek to promote democracy have been empowered by the effective use of modern communications technologies. More research is needed into which tools are most effective in promoting effective action and progressive change, and in what circumstances. What kinds of education and awareness raising programmes may be needed to enable people to harness the full potential of communications technologies as tools to further democratic development?
- Blumler and Coleman recommend that civil society groups and foundations facilitate the creation of an online ‘civic commons’, establishing trusted sites or forums for political debate. How might this be practically achieved and how would these sites or forums gain legitimacy for users?
- More research is also needed into how to evaluate the impact of government or civil society technological initiatives on democracy. Can a broad methodology be developed, for example for internet based initiatives, to evaluate their ability to meet a number of given indicators?

- What are the broader social and cultural implications of the ‘non political’ use of communications technologies? This paper has pointed to Wheeler’s findings about internet café use in parts of the Middle East but this remains an underdeveloped area of research. Greater understanding and evaluation is needed as to how modern communications technologies which do not seem to be overtly political (such as non political online networking or chat rooms) might broaden peoples’ experiences, views and enable greater personal expression, in turn possibly leading to more empowered political expression.
- How can the tensions between privacy and security best be balanced? This paper has argued that citizens need a greater understanding about how information collected about them is used, by governments, corporates and others. They also need to know how to opt out of data collection, if they so choose. To date, this debate seems to be occurring mainly among fringe campaign groups with a strong pro-privacy agenda. How can a more balanced and mainstream debate be fostered, which recognises the need for security but also citizens’ concerns regarding their privacy?
- Finally, it remains a key area of concern that modern communications technologies can be used to subvert democratic opposition, ideas or practices. More research is needed into how governments are using these technologies – at present, only a small number of civil society based organisations are carrying out research in the face of considerable resistance to their efforts. How might these civil society initiatives be better supported? Are there other activities which might effectively challenge those governments or other actors who use technologies in this way, such as supporting regional civil society mobilisation or awareness-raising?

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