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New Frontiers for Freedom of Expression?

*Increasing access to information and debate
through communications technologies*

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Contents

Executive Summary	3
Chapter 1) Introduction.....	9
Section One – Conceptual framework and overview of the main issues	10
Chapter 2) The traditional media: sources of information and platforms for debate?..	12
Chapter 3) Do networked communications offer new opportunities for democratic public debate?.....	14
Chapter 4) Challenges to increasing access to information and debate in the networked communications environment.....	18
Section Two – Overview of research and debates	23
Chapter 5) Who is using new communication tools and how are they using them?....	24
5.1 Participating in public debate: ‘active’ communications tools.....	26
5.2 Accessing Information: ‘passive’ communications tools	28
5.3 Are there differentials in use along linguistic, ethnic, gender and age lines?.....	31
Chapter 6) The nature of networked communication: Public debate or heated and fractured argument?	35
6.1 Are the lack of a common language and rules to guide discussion in the networked communications environment undermining its capacity to host rational and reasoned debate?.....	35
6.2 Is the vast amount of information in the networked communications environment fracturing, rather than strengthening, the public sphere?.....	38
Chapter 7) The nature of networked communication: Do the same centres of power dominate online and offline?.....	43
7.1 Do mainstream media companies dominate online and offline?	44
7.2 Are there as many opportunities for governments to censor online communications as there are to censor offline communications?.....	52
Chapter 8) Conclusion	53
References	57

New frontiers for freedom of expression?

Executive summary

1. Introduction

Communications technologies have made it easier for people to access more information than ever before. Communication increasingly involves participation rather than simply consumption of information, as tools such as electronic message boards and blogs have grown in popularity. These changes have implications for freedom of expression. This paper explores the extent to which new technologies are enabling the spread of information and ideas, and fostering public debate that can advance democracy.

Section 1: Conceptual framework and overview of the main issues

This paper draws on these key concepts:

- Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) protects the right to freedom of expression. This includes all private communication between individuals and groups. This paper argues that it is also a positive right, allowing people to seek and receive information and ideas.
- The 'public sphere' (defined by Jurgen Habermas) is a communication network through which rational, free, accessible and deliberative debate leads to the formation of public opinion.

2. The traditional media: sources of information and platforms for debate?

The mass media have traditionally played a key role in facilitating public debate and have considerable power to shape public opinion. Even with a public service media model, mass media shape public opinion by their selection and publication of information. There are shortcomings in the mass media model as a platform for democratic public debate:

- Information primarily flows primarily one way, from media to consumers.

- Governmental and private elites influence media coverage, whether by direct control or through close relationships with the media.
- In free market models, intense competition for media advertising revenue has led to more sensationalism and reduced the media's ability to deliver in-depth analysis.
- In many countries the mass media has become a tool of propaganda for the political elite.

3. Do networked communications offer new opportunities for democratic public debate?

Early internet users saw the internet as a new communications sphere that was free from state intervention and power structures. Two strands of thinking emerged about the potential of new communications to foster a public sphere:

- They have the potential to make traditional media more open, by encouraging them to be more accountable to their audiences
- They have the potential to bypass mainstream media entirely and create a new space.

Most analysis now combines these two strands and acknowledges that the new communications environment is undergoing intense change, with its final shape and relationships still being determined.

4. What is undermining the ability of the networked communications environment to increase access to information and debate?

There are challenges present at different 'layers' in the networked communications environment.

At the **physical layer**:

- Many people in the developing and developed worlds do not yet have access to the technology.
- The evolution of the internet depended on shared physical networks. Some companies are arguing that they should be able to close their networks to other service providers, giving them more control over access to the networks.

- The rise in popularity of ‘closed’ hardware – that is, devices that cannot be modified and adapted – may stifle innovation and restrict people’s ability to access the internet in the future.

At the **connectivity and code layer**:

- Some cable and telephone networks are seeking legislation to enable some types of data to be transmitted faster than others. The consequent loss of ‘net neutrality’, would compromise universal access to information.
- The rise of proprietary, rather than open, technical standards could result in disproportionate power for some companies, or the fragmentation of communications systems. Both results would threaten innovation and access to information and debate.

At the **applications layer**, new and unaccountable gatekeepers of information are emerging. For example, the programming of search engines determines what information users can access.

At the **content layer**:

- Internet technology does not yet support information all languages, which excludes many people.
- Without a common code of conduct, online discussions can deteriorate to irrational argument or even abuse.
- Without trusted gatekeepers, users may drown in excess information.
- Mainstream media companies may dominate online just as they have dominated the offline world.
- Governments can and do censor internet content directly.

Part 2: Overview of research and debates

5. Who is using new communications tools and how are they using them?

5.1 People across the world are using communications tools that have the potential to facilitate public debate. **Active communication tools** enable users to participate in debates. E-mail is the most commonly used. There is little data about the purpose or

content of such communication. Interactive tools appear to increase social ties and foster communities of interest, though these are not necessarily political.

5.2 Evidence suggests that the use of online **passive communication tools** expands people's access to information.

5.3 There are differentials in internet use along lines of gender, age, ethnicity and language group. However, some positive developments are helping to close these gaps, including technologies that enable greater linguistic diversity.

6. The nature of networked communication: Public debate or heated and fractured argument?

6.1 Broad standards of internet etiquette have evolved, along with a range of mechanisms for managing violations of these standards. Blogs have been the focus of much debate, and discussions are in progress about a code of conduct for bloggers. Other collaboratively developed codes exist. Online norms of behaviour and codes of conduct need to be considered in the context of the social norms, power structures and politics of the countries in which they are used.

6.2 Some fear that tensions and the huge number of different voices on the internet will lead to a fractured, weakened public sphere. But the picture is complex. Some analysis (e.g. Benkler) of patterns of website linkages, suggests that the internet provides a better basis for inclusive debate than traditional media. Textual analysis studies confirm that networked communications promote public conversations in ways that were not previously possible. Gatekeeping theory gives some evidence that networked communications can further exclude some minority groups. The complexities of the effects of online information on different groups' political views are yet to be fully explored.

7. The nature of networked communication: Do the same centres of power dominate online and offline?

7.1 Some fear that that the online world will continue to be dominated by the same key players from the traditional mass media sector. While some studies of links between

sites suggest a more complex picture, the evidence also shows that a very small number of sites dominate as news sources on the internet. There is evidence that the mainstream media are adapting to the new participatory environment and this is redefining agenda-setting and the character of 'news'. Relationships between 'old' and 'new' media are complex, and vary from country to country. This is an ongoing evolution and its outcome is not yet clear.

7.2 Internet enthusiasts have argued that networked communications create a sphere beyond government control. Yet, there are many examples of close governmental control and direct censorship, most notably in China. Again the situation is complex, with evidence that the internet is nevertheless effecting political change in undemocratic countries.

8. Conclusion

The most significant challenges to the ability of networked communications to increase access to information and debate are:

- the exclusion of large sections of the population from the communications environment, either because of a lack of physical infrastructure or because of linguistic barriers
- tensions between the mainstream media and online informal communications.

Opportunities currently outweigh challenges. However, it is important to engage with the development of the environment to ensure that new institutions and regulatory frameworks promote freedom of expression.

8.1 Areas for further research include:

- in-depth ethnographic research into people's online activities and how these affect their opinions
- development of indicators to allow effective cross-country comparisons about the nature of public debate
- local or national research into online activities in areas where data is sparse
- research into the perceived role of networked communications by national governments, particularly in 'unfree' societies.

- research into the how national and international networked communications affect the relationship between governments and citizens (particularly in unfree societies), even when the communications are not overtly political.

8.2 Potential areas for intervention are:

- advocacy to promote access of minority and disadvantaged groups to the internet
- programmes to empower excluded groups
- fostering participatory networks between people and organisations to support efforts to build new, democratic institutions in the networked communications environment
- advocacy for the development of technologies to support a truly multi-lingual internet
- consideration in all media and communications development programmes of the networked communications environment and inter-relationships between online and offline, and formal and informal, communications.

New frontiers for freedom of expression? Increasing access to information and debate through communications technologies.

Chapter 1) Introduction

This paper addresses the first key question of the Freedom of Expression Project: ***Does the networked communications environment expand the ways we can get information and access public debate?***

In the past decade, new communication technologies have made it easier for people to access a wider range of information than ever before. Most notable amongst these technologies is the World Wide Web which allows people to ‘surf’ the information contained on web pages, and makes it easy for people to publish their own information for others to access. The number of sites on the web exploded from the late 1990s, and people can access them in an increasing number of ways, for example via mobile phones and other wireless connections. The latest stage in the evolution of the internet has been the rise of ‘Web 2.0’, a term used to describe the participatory nature of many of today’s internet sites and applications. These include social networking sites and blogs – technologies that are adding to the richness of online experiences and making it easier for people to engage in dialogue via the internet.

These changes have obvious implications for the right to freedom of expression. As the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) states,

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”.

This paper is concerned with whether new communications technologies are expanding the frontiers of freedom of expression through advancing the ability of people to seek, receive and impart information. It also explores whether this in turn has the potential to strengthen public debate, allowing more people to discuss political issues and shape

public opinion. Such public debate is a central element of successful democracy, enabling citizens to engage in dialogue with their governments and hold them accountable.

Communications technologies are continuously evolving. People's access to them and the effects this has varies greatly between localities, countries and regions, according to underlying economic, regulatory and social factors. Therefore this paper does not set out to provide definitive answers and conclusions, but aims to provide:

- an introduction to the main issues and a framework for thinking about them (Section One).
- an overview of research in this field, and of areas where further research and work is required (Section Two).

The paper concludes by assessing whether new communications technology is an important area of consideration for organisations concerned with promoting freedom of expression and democracy. It also identifies areas where resources would be best directed to ensure that new technologies are harnessed to expand access to information and reinvigorate public debate.

SECTION ONE – CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND OVERVIEW OF THE MAIN ISSUES

Before examining how new communications technologies can expand the ways we get information and access public debate, it is necessary to explore what we mean by 'information' and 'public debate' and why these are important in the human rights framework.

As mentioned above, the first section of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) protects 'the right to freedom of opinion and expression' including 'freedom to hold opinions without interference'. Humans are social creatures and communication is an intrinsic part of what it means to be a human being. The right to

freedom of expression therefore protects private communication between individuals and groups of people for business and pleasure.

In addition to protecting individuals *from* interference in their communication activities, the UDHR implies that freedom of expression is also a 'positive right' which permits people to actively 'seek, receive and impart information and ideas'. It can therefore be argued that freedom of expression includes not only the freedom to hold and discuss opinions, but also freedom of information, defined as 'the right to search freely among all publicly available information and to receive all information that others are willing to communicate' (Jorgensen, 2006:63). These positive tenets of freedom of expression are linked to Enlightenment ideas of the relationship between state and society in a successful democracy. Liberal representative democracy depends on leaders engaging in dialogue with citizens to ensure that they are accountable and therefore politically legitimate. As James Madison, the 'father' of the American constitution, stated in 1822,

"A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives" (quoted in Banisar, 2006:73).

Calhoun (2005) suggests that the concept of 'public' has come to represent the idea of communications that link strangers together, making them part of a larger whole whose opinion can influence the actions of a democratic government. These ideas are explored in Jurgen Habermas' (1964) concept of a 'public sphere', which many scholars have drawn on to explore the roles of communication and freedom of expression in democratic politics. According to this theory, the 'public sphere' consists of a communication network through which public debate leads to the formation of 'public opinion' (Tanner, 2001). Public opinion is defined by Habermas (1964:49) as the 'tasks of criticism and control' undertaken by citizens to keep the power of the state in check. Ideally, this criticism, or public debate, should be 'rational' and deliberative, and public opinion should be based on consensus. These ideas have been criticised for being utopian. Habermas himself argues that rational public opinion was only a reality in 18th and 19th century Europe when the capitalist middle classes, demanding autonomy from the absolute power of the state, discussed matters of 'general interest' in public spaces

and through new literary journalism. However, according to Habermas, the rise of the welfare state in the 20th century eroded the role of the public sphere as an arena for critical political debate. The distinction between the state and the public realm was undermined by state ownership of property and services, and the mass media not only opened debate up to the uneducated and often irrational wider population, but was also subject to manipulation by the state and large public organisations (Habermas, 1964). The concept of the public sphere is therefore not unproblematic. However, it does provide a useful point of reference for assessing whether traditional¹ and new media advance democracy and freedom of expression through acting as platforms for public debate and the formation of public opinion.

Chapter 2) The traditional media: sources of information and platforms for debate?

The idea that the media should play a role in hosting rational public debate has remained dominant in liberal democracies and underpins public service media models. According to these, the media have a responsibility to present a diverse range of information in an unbiased manner, informing public debate rather than directly constituting public opinion. However, throughout the history of the mass media commentators have questioned the extent to which they provide a platform for democratic public debate². For example, Habermas (1964) describes how the role of the media in Europe and America evolved over the course of the 18th to 20th centuries. Beginning as institutions for disseminating news, they then became mediators of critical public debate and, finally with the rise of mass media broadcasting, transformed into tools used by the powerful to manipulate public opinion. No matter how unbiased a media outlet is it still shapes public opinion according to its conscious or unconscious agenda, by determining what information is newsworthy and is in the 'public interest'. They are therefore 'gatekeepers' of information, letting some ideas through whilst excluding others. The content and presentation of information in the media has been demonstrated to have an influence on the issues that citizens and the government

¹ In this paper 'traditional' media is used to refer broadly to offline media that dominated before the spread of the internet, mainly broadcasting and newspapers.

² This discussion refers mainly to independent media in democratic countries. The media in countries where the state exerts direct influence on the press through ownership or censorship are obviously less able to foster a democratic public sphere.

consider to be important (Robinson, 2006; Tanner, 2001). Moreover, the traditional media primarily channel information in one direction, from media to consumers. The extent to which this can be termed 'public debate' is questionable from the outset, even where journalists and editors are bound by public service obligations. The social status of journalists is also often closer to the government and corporate elite than to the majority of citizens, and the media therefore form an arena for debate amongst the elite classes, excluding the majority of citizens³.

These problems have become more acute in recent decades as media models relying on public funding have increasingly been replaced with free market models. Fierce competition for advertising revenue leads to a tendency for the media to rely on sensationalism or entertainment-based content to attract audiences, with commentary replacing the unbiased presentation of facts (Savigny, 2002). This has the overall outcome of the media becoming the debate itself rather than a source of information for debate (ibid), and incapable of presenting less popular but nevertheless important issues. The overall result is a media environment in which it is easier for governments to manipulate political news coverage. With less space, time and resources available for in-depth coverage of political issues, government-produced sound bites designed specifically by media-literate 'spin doctors' to catch headlines are increasingly replacing original stories gathered by investigative journalism (Savigny, 2002). For reporting on issues outside of government, a growing public relations (PR) industry has reduced the need for cash-strapped media to invest in original news gathering. Around \$3.7 billion was spent on PR in the USA in 2005, and spending is growing at around 9% a year (*Economist*, 19/01/06). Factor in the increasing concentration of ownership of media outlets by a small number of global media conglomerates, and it is easy to see why the mass media stand accused of failing to foster democratic debate and public opinion (McChesney, 2001; Curran, 2002).

³ Participation in public debate has been restricted to the elite classes throughout history. Indeed, according to Habermas' model, the ability of the public sphere to host critical debate was undermined in the 20th century at least in part by its opening up to the uneducated masses through the mass media. However, Habermas also contends that access to the public sphere is guaranteed to all, and this is in accordance with the universality of the right to freedom of expression. The question is therefore whether the public sphere can foster effective and coherent public debate whilst remaining democratic and inclusive. This is addressed in the context of the networked communications environment in Section Two of this paper.

In many emerging democracies, the mass media has evolved to play a role in society that is far removed from Western ideas of a free and independent press acting as a two-way mediator between citizens and the government. As local media markets are often very poor, commercial media is not sustainable and the small tax base of the country cannot support public service media. In these circumstances it is easy for media – even notionally “independent” media - to become a tool of propaganda for the government or political factions. Whilst the spread of democracy and its institutions are opening up media markets and eroding state control over content in many countries, particularly through international trade agreements, governments across the world still exert considerable influence over the mass media (for examples see Reporters Without Borders <http://www.rsf.org/>).

Chapter 3) Do networked communications offer new opportunities for democratic public debate?

Many commentators believe that new communications technologies have the potential to overcome the shortcomings of the traditional media, offering new opportunities for democratic and inclusive public debate. These technologies are outlined in Box One. Even before the internet became popular in the 1990s, internet users and theorists had started to consider its potential to challenge the power embodied in the state and institutions such as the mass media. Goldsmith and Wu (2006) describe how the initial architects and users of the internet viewed it as a sphere of community activity that was free from state intervention and power structures; a place where people could use online forums and virtual communities to interact and communicate with each other openly. Rheingold (1993) discusses how early user forums were underpinned by philosophies of community and collaboration. This was echoed in 1995 by the open-internet advocate John Perry Barlow, who stated that ‘we are now creating a space where the people of the planet can have [a new] kind of communication relationship’ (quoted in Castells, 2002:119).

Box One: New communications technologies and opportunities for information and debate

E-mail

Electronic mail – a means of sending messages over electronic communication systems. E-mail was one of the earliest means of conducting one-to-one and group communication over the internet and is still the most common use of the internet across the world.

The World Wide Web

The sum of documents on the internet that are formatted in 'hypertext mark up language' (HTML) and are accessible as web pages via a web browser such as Internet Explorer or Firefox. There are over 100 million websites on the internet, including informal sites produced by individuals, commercial sites, government sites and educational resources (Netcraft website http://news.netcraft.com/archives/web_server_survey.html)

Search engines

Internet applications that allow users to search for information on the web, through an indexed database of websites. Search engines are becoming more sophisticated, making it easier for users to navigate the web and locate relevant information.

Live online chat

A number of applications, such as Microsoft Messenger, allow users to engage in live or 'real-time' conversations over the internet. New technologies and faster internet connections make voice and video conferencing possible as well as typed conversations. These can be one-to-one or group conversations, with personal contacts or in a public chat room.

Message boards and forums

Applications that allow internet users to post messages on websites. They are used in different online contexts, for example: replies to news items on websites and blogs, or conversations in forums dedicated to specific subjects.

Social networking sites

Websites that allow members to keep in touch with friends and make new acquaintances based on shared interests and friendship networks. Examples include MySpace, Facebook and Friends Reunited. Social networking sites have been around since the mid 1990s, but have grown in popularity recently, apparently making up 6.5% of all US internet traffic in February 2007 (ZDNet 15/03/07 <http://blogs.zdnet.com/social/?p=114>).

Peer to peer sharing

Peer-to-peer (or P2P) file sharing systems allow users to swap data files across the internet directly without having to download them from a centralised client. P2P systems such as BitTorrent and E-Mule are widely used for sharing music and video, although any form of data file can be shared. P2P systems are often decentralised and anonymous, making it hard for authorities to prevent the systems being used for illegal file sharing, for example for pornography or copyright infringement.

Blogging

Blogs (short for 'Web logs') are websites that individual users own and update regularly, in the style of a diary or journal. Blogging became popular in 1999 after the release of a number of free online tools that made it easy for people to set up and maintain blogs. Technorati, a website that monitors and provides access to blogs across the world, is currently tracking 72.5 million blogs (<http://www.technorati.com/about/>, accessed 26/03/07)

Wikis

Wikis are websites that allow users to view and edit content. They make it possible for geographically distant internet users to be collaborative authors. The most well-known wiki is the Wikipedia encyclopaedia, although anyone can set up a wiki for any purpose.

Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP)

A protocol that allows voice data to be transmitted over internet connections, allowing users to speak to each other via the internet. VOIP has been popularised by the internet phone service Skype, and can make one-to-one and group interaction via the internet a richer experience than that provided by text and image-based communication.

Mobile phones

Mobile phones have made one-to-one communication easier. Text (SMS) messages and mobile internet access have made mobiles a more powerful communications tool. Mobile phone use is increasing throughout the world, with a global average of 34 users per 100 inhabitants (ranging from 15 in Africa to 85 in Europe – ITU 2005 statistics <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/icteye/Indicators/Indicators.aspx>).

In subsequent debates, two main strands of thinking emerged about the potential of new communications technologies to foster a democratic public sphere. The first concerns their potential to open up mainstream media, encouraging it to be more diverse and accountable to its audience. The second concerns their potential to bypass the mainstream media altogether, creating a new communications arena that more closely resembles Habermas' ideal. Most contemporary theorists combine these two strands and agree that the media environment is still undergoing an intense period of change, the outcome⁴ of which has yet to be determined. Whilst a wide range of scholars have written on the subject, here we briefly review the work of Manuel Castells and Yochai Benkler to give a sense of the main contemporary arguments.

Manuel Castells views the arena of communications itself as a shifting terrain of continuous struggles in which those who are powerful attempt to influence people's understanding of the world in ways that will enable them to maintain and consolidate their power (Castells, 2007). He states that, 'in a world characterised by global interdependence and shaped by information and communication, the ability to act on information flows, and on media messages, becomes an essential tool for fostering a political agenda' (Castells, 2002:160). Thus, 'the control of communication networks becomes the lever by which interests and values are transformed in guiding norms of human behaviour' (p.164). These power struggles are currently taking place primarily in the mass media, but Castells also identifies an emerging 'mass self-communication' facilitated by networked communications. He sees this not as replacing the old mass media or as an alternative to it; rather that the two forms of communication are interacting and influencing each other, creating a new communications space whose governing institutions and map of power relations have not yet been defined (Castells, 2007). However, what is clear is that 'the structural bias of this space toward the powers that be is being diminished every day by the new social practices of communication' (ibid, p258).

Yochai Benkler is more optimistic that new communications technologies, coupled with their associated culture of openness and collaboration, have the potential to prevail over the closed and proprietary institutions of the traditional mass media. In *The Wealth of*

⁴ Some believe that ongoing change and flux are themselves characteristics of the new media environment and will not result in a new, stable media regime. See for example Deuze (2006).

Networks (2006) he describes how new technologies present the opportunity 'for a new public sphere to emerge alongside the commercial, mass media markets' which themselves fail to provide a platform for public discourse because they exclude the concerns of large numbers of people, are liable to manipulation by corporate owners and have a tendency to 'program toward the inane and soothing rather than toward that which will be politically engaging' (Benkler, 2006:10-11). In the developed world, those who wish to communicate with people outside their immediate circle no longer need great wealth to invest in communication infrastructure such as printing presses or to influence those who own the means of communication. The proliferation of cheap communications technologies and the decentralised nature of internet communications mean that those who wish to communicate are able to do so. Individuals therefore have 'enhanced autonomy' to act by themselves, both in new formal organisations and in loose coalitions that are not constrained by traditional hierarchical social and economic organisation. . People are not only empowered to communicate, but to engage in the production of a shared knowledge that can be used as a basis for discussion and the formation of public opinion.

Thus, new communications technologies have the potential to help overcome the limitations of the traditional mass media in fostering inclusive public debate and representative public opinion. However, most scholars agree that whether this potential will be realised will depend on the outcomes of interaction between market, political and technological factors. These factors can influence the nature of the communications environment through acting at a number of different 'locations' or 'layers' within it, from the physical infrastructure of communications networks to the content of communications that flow across it (Figure One)⁵. The next chapter looks at this in more detail.

⁵ For a more detailed exploration of the structure of the networked communications environment and the political, economic and technological drivers of change within it, see the Freedom of Expression Project paper *Shaping the Networked World*, available at <http://gp.gn.apc.org/resources/drivers+of+change/68>

Chapter 4) Challenges to increasing access to information and debate in the networked communications environment

This chapter considers the networked communications environment in 'layers', as illustrated in the model in Figure One, and outlines the main factors that are challenging its ability to increase access to information and democratic and inclusive debate.

4.1 The Physical Layer

The digital divide

Access to and use of networked communications technologies are increasing throughout the world. However, in 2004 the developing world still had four times fewer mobile phone subscribers and eight times fewer internet users than the developed world (ITU ICT statistics).

→ **Implications:** Without the physical access to the technologies required to access the information and debate of the networked communications environment, hundreds of thousands of people remain excluded.

Closed vs. open networks and technologies

The original invention and success of the internet arguably depended on government legislation that required telephone companies to allow 'internet data' to flow along their networks. However, cable and telephone companies, most notably in the USA, are lobbying the government to allow them to close their networks to competing service providers. In many countries issues of whether there should be open access to emerging 'next generation networks' have not been resolved. The evolution of the internet has also depended on open computer technologies that can be modified to adapt to new uses. For example, in order to access VOIP internet telephony (e.g. Skype), most people depend on being able to plug a telephone or microphone into their personal computer. Some commentators are concerned that the rise in popularity of 'closed' hardware for access to communication networks, such as mobile phones, gaming consoles and set

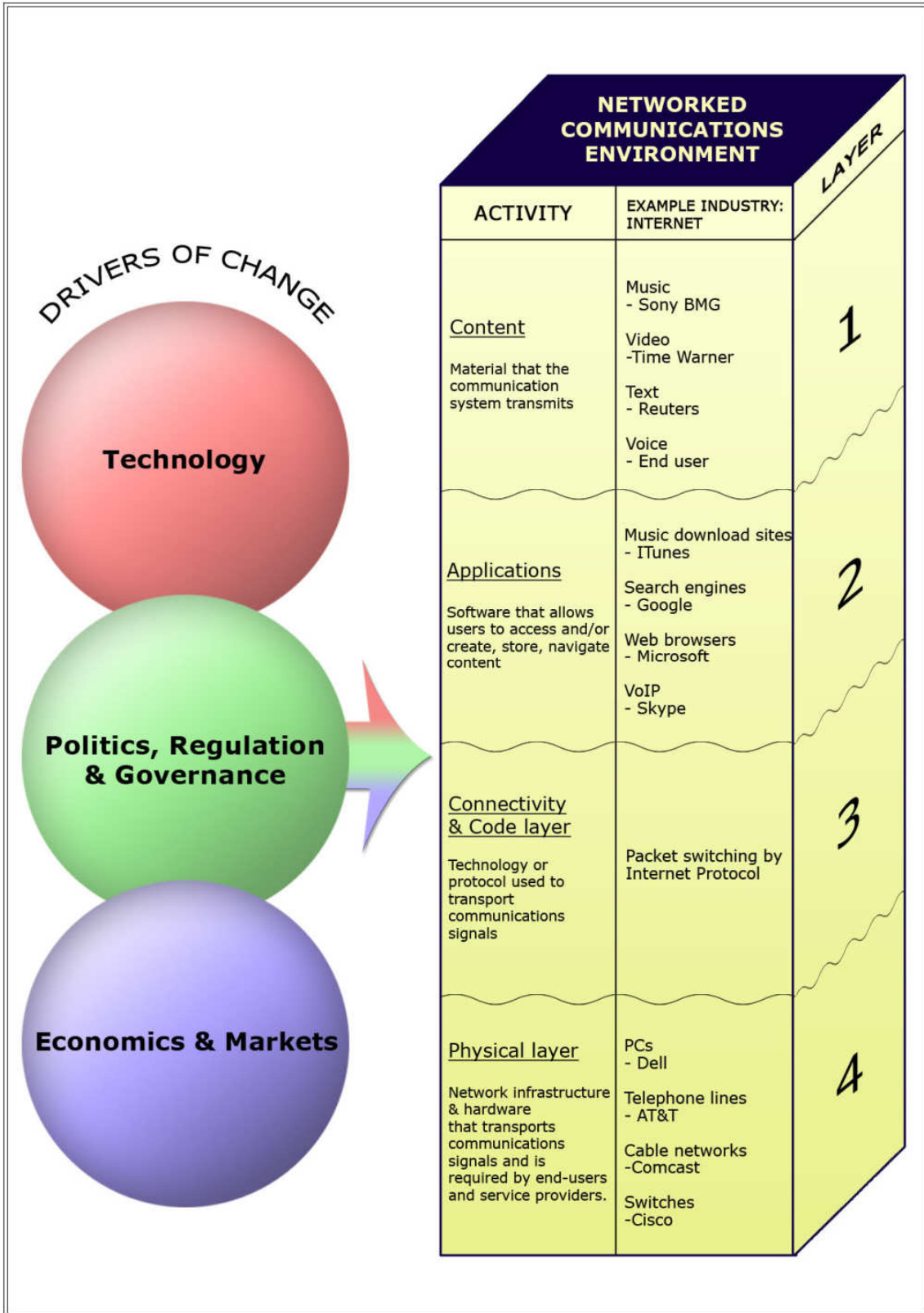


Figure One – A layer model of the networked communications environment

top boxes, will undermine the flexibility and adaptability of communications technologies upon which the internet has to date thrived (Zittrain, 2006).

→ **Implications:** If new networks are closed to competing service providers, their owners will have increased control over the costs of accessing the networks, how the networks are used and the information people are able to access. If closed technologies undermine people's ability to invent new modes of communication on the internet, new modes of accessing information and debate will also be undermined.

4.2 The Connectivity and Code Layer

Net neutrality

The internet thrived as a result of being based on open networks over which anyone can send data using the universal language or code of Internet Protocol (IP). All data sent across the internet is treated the same, meaning the website of an individual blogger can be accessed just as easily as the website of a major news company. However, the owners of cable and telephone networks in the USA are lobbying the government to implement legislation that would enable them to transmit certain types of data on the internet faster than others. For example, a major news company could pay a network owner to transmit their web pages faster than those of a blogger.

→ **Implications:** If net neutrality is undermined to this extent, access to information and participation in public debate will not be universal but will instead depend on the amount of money people are willing or able to pay.

Interoperable and open standards vs. incompatible and closed standards

Innovation in internet technologies has been dramatic since the mid 1990s. This has partly been facilitated by the use of common code and standards so that different devices connected to the internet can communicate with each other. However, the commercialisation of the internet and the proliferation of different means of connecting to it have led to the dominance of proprietary, closed standards.

→ **Implications:** If adapted as common standards, proprietary standards can give disproportionate power to their owners to shape the networked environment and the nature of communications that take place within it. If adapted by only a small group of companies, the result might be the fragmentation or 'balkanisation' of communications

systems: in the case of the internet, users of the standard would only have access to certain sections of the internet that supported it, thereby undermining universal access and inclusive public debate. Either way, closed and proprietary standards can threaten innovation as companies and individuals do not have access to the codes that they would need to adapt and improve the technology.

4.3 The Applications Layer

The rise of new, unaccountable information gatekeepers

As information and debate are increasingly accessible via the internet, new gatekeepers of information flows are emerging. Most notable are those located in the applications layer, in the software that helps users to navigate information content on the internet. For example, search engines return a set of information to users who request it based on the application of mathematical formulae to indexed databases. The formulae and databases used will affect the information that is accessible to the user. Other navigation applications that determine the internet content viewed by users include news portals and music stores such as iTunes.

→ **Implications:** If single 'navigating' applications monopolise the market, as Google is close to doing in the search engine market, they exert a disproportionate influence on the content that users can access. Competition regulation or new codes may be required, to ensure that gatekeepers adhere to certain 'public interest' and freedom of expression standards and to prevent the manipulation of the gatekeeping role in ways that would undermine access to information and debate.

4.4 The Content Layer

The dominance of English language on the internet and the lack of minority representation and participation

More than 90% of content on the internet is in only 12 languages, effectively leaving users of the other 6,000 languages of the world excluded from participation in internet-based communications (Initiative Babel, <http://www.unesco.org/webworld/babel>). Whilst advances are being made in improving the code and applications to facilitate the

representation and use of more languages on the internet, huge obstacles still prevent the networked communications environment from being truly multilingual.

→ **Implications:** If content is not available, and technology does not support, communication in all languages, huge numbers of people are excluded from the opportunities that networked communications present and global public debate is far from inclusive and representative. Without the development of a multilingual internet, there is a risk that the internet will fragment into language groups, limiting access to information and undermining its potential to foster dialogue and debate between people in different countries and cultures.

The lack of a common code of conduct or rules for discussion

All forms of communication are governed by formal and informal 'rules' and 'codes of conduct' to allow for rational discussion without it disintegrating into unproductive and even offensive argument. Most traditional mass media are bound by national and regional regulatory frameworks which oblige them to adhere to rules and standards to prevent them from disseminating information that is untrue or libellous. However, in many instances, such codes are yet to be institutionalised and implemented in the networked communications environment.

→ **Implications:** The lack of codes of conduct to guide internet-based debate can result in it deteriorating into rhetoric and thoughtless argument, undermining the possibilities for rational and reasoned debate.

The public sphere fracturing into incoherence

As the number of web pages continues to grow and the role of the traditional media as gatekeepers of information and debate is challenged, people may find it difficult to keep up with public debate on the internet, not knowing which voices to listen to and trust.

→ **Implications:** There is a risk that the public sphere will become fractured as users drown in excess information. They may listen only to the voices of those who can spend more money to get their message across, or of those who agree with their own opinions (Garrett, 2005). A fractured public debate would prevent the democratic formation of public opinion based on inclusive, deliberative and rational debate and a diversity of information.

The dominance of mainstream media companies in the online and offline communications environments

The ownership of media outlets has been consolidated, with a small number of large media companies operating at national, regional and global levels. These companies now have significant control over information flows and the nature of public debate in the traditional media. Evidence suggests that these companies also dominate the online news environment (see for example Paterson, 2006).

→ **Implications:** The networked communications environment will suffer from the same limitations as the traditional media, as the selection of information available and the nature of debate are subject to political and economic influence.

Opportunities for government censorship on the net

The popular perception that censorship of internet content would be as impossible as 'trying to nail Jello to the wall' (Clinton, quoted in Goldsmith and Wu, 2006) has been proven wrong by effective internet censorship in a number of countries, most famously China. Censorship techniques range from the direct monitoring of internet content to the automatic blocking of certain web pages.

→ **Implications:** In countries that lack the institutions to protect a free press, the internet is no more capable than the mainstream mass media of fostering inclusive and democratic debate as it is subject to the same censorship mechanisms, direct and indirect, and formal and informal,.

SECTION TWO – OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH AND DEBATES

The aim of this section is to provide insight into some of the research that is being done in this subject area in order to assess what evidence exists and what the main areas for further research and action should be.

A multitude of conversations are taking place within the networked communications environment about current affairs, at local, national, regional and global levels. However, in order to assess whether these constitute a public debate and result in the

formation of public opinion (in Habermas' sense), this section first looks at who is using new communication tools and how they are using them. It then moves on to consider the five challenges to public debate that Chapter 4 identified in the 'content' layer of the networked communications environment, reviewing the main arguments and available evidence for each. The challenges in the other layers of the model were explored in a previous paper for the Freedom of Expression Project, *Shaping the Networked World*.

Chapter 5) Who is using new communication tools and how are they using them?

Detailed data are lacking about people's online activities. In countries with relatively higher levels of internet use, governments and market research companies produce data, but a large proportion of these focus on commercial activities such as online shopping. Data about the communication platforms that people are using often do not distinguish clearly between different communication tools that are included within them. For example: surveys fail to ask people who read newspapers online whether they are also using attached tools such as comment and message boards. Surveys also often fail to reveal what the *purpose* of communication activities is. For example, when people use online 'chat' facilities, are they chatting about personal issues or current affairs? When people use search engines, what are they searching for? A lack of detailed analysis makes it difficult accurately to assess whether online communication activities constitute public debate and contribute to the formation of public opinion.

Table One shows the percentages of internet users who are using online communications tools in nine different countries.⁶ The data reveal that internet users across the world are using networked communication tools that have the potential to facilitate public debate. The data presents a picture of an active and inclusive sphere of online communications, but this alters dramatically when the proportion of the overall population accessing these tools is considered, in countries where overall internet use is low. For example, it seems promising that 66% of internet users in China read the news

⁶ Most of this data is drawn from reports published as part of the World Internet Project, with the exception of the USA, South Africa and Kyrgyzstan. See table and references for further information.

on the internet and 15% blog. However, this amounts to less than 1% of the total Chinese adult population.

Internet Activity	USA		China		UK	
	Internet users	Adult population	Internet users	Adult population	Internet users	Adult population
Email	93%	65%	45%	1%	92%	55%
News	72%	50%	66%	1%	61%	37%
Surfing the web	67%	47%	65%	1%	83%	50%
Search engine	84%	59%	46%	1%		
Instant Messaging	42%	29%	44%	1%	56%	34%
Chat	25%	18%	24%	0%		
Information about politics	49%	34%				
Blogging	17%	12%	15%	0%	17%	10%
Phone	7%	5%			13%	8%
Learning/fact checking			31%	1%	78%	47%
Internet Activity	Canada		Chile		Sweden	
	Internet users	Adult population	Internet users	Adult population	Internet users	Adult population
Email	91%	66%	79%	28%	90%	76%
News	53%	38%	60%	22%	55%	46%
Surfing the web			55%	20%	50%	42%
Search engine						
Instant Messaging	26%	19%				
Chat	60%	43%	34%	12%		
Information about politics					22%	19%
Blogging						
Phone	19%	14%				
Learning/fact checking						
Internet Activity	Italy		South Africa		Kyrgyzstan	
	Internet users	Adult population	Internet users	Adult population	Internet users	Adult population
Email	90%	28%	58%	5%	78%	10%
News	66%	20%	20%	2%	79%	10%
Surfing the web	63%	20%			66%	9%
Search engine			69%	6%	42%	5%
Instant Messaging	10%	3%	19%	2%	21%	3%
Chat	24%	7%	13%	1%	29%	4%
Information about politics					36%	5%
Blogging						
Phone						
Learning/fact checking			67%	5%		

Table One - Statistics of the use of networked communications tools in nine countries
(Sources: USA – Pew, 2007; China –Liang, 2005; UK – Oil; 2005; Canada – CIP, 2005; Chile – WIP Chile, 2005; Italy – SDA Bocconi, 2002; Sweden – Findhal, 2004; South Africa – SARRF, 2006; Kyrgyzstan – CAICT, 2007)

Online communication tools can be broadly divided into 'active' and 'passive' tools. Active tools consist of interactive technologies that require input from the user such as e-mail and instant messaging, and passive tools consist of communications that users access but do not contribute to such as online newspapers. This categorisation is loose however, as many 'passive' tools can also be interactive (for example many online news sites include tools that allow users to comment on articles) and 'active' tools also often function as sources of information (for example blogs).

5.1 Participating in public debate: 'active' communications tools

The most common communication tool used in all countries is e-mail, with the exception of Kyrgyzstan where reading news is marginally more common, and China where reading the news, surfing the web and using search engines were more common than using e-mail⁷. The internet therefore clearly facilitates one-to-one and group conversations by e-mail, but little data exists to indicate what people are e-mailing each other about.

Existing data suggests that the use of interactive communication tools by internet users across the world strengthens existing social ties with family, friends and colleagues (see for example Pew, 2006a), with friends usually being the most common group that people communicate with. For example:

- In Kyrgyzstan 47% of internet users communicate with friends within the country online and 38% with friends abroad. 17% communicate with colleagues in the country, 15% with colleagues abroad (CAIT, 2006). 19% communicate with 'strangers' online (OII, 2005)
- In the UK, 20% of internet users have met new people online.
- In China, users of active communication tools have an average of 12 more friends that they had met online than internet users who do not use the tools (Liang, 2005).

⁷ This is attributed in the report to the fact that e-mail communication is not instant. Interestingly, China's top search engine Baidu incorporates a 'Tie Bar' that allows users to communicate and discuss whilst searching, potentially reducing the need for people to use separate communications tools such as e-mail (Liang, 2005).

Thus, it can be concluded that, overall, networked communications increase social ties between individuals, mostly between people who already have social ties but also between people who have never met offline.

However, if online communications are to increase 'public debate' and foster the formation of democratic 'public opinion', they have to be about subjects that might be broadly termed 'current affairs'. This means issues that are relevant to government policy making and the wider public rather than simply of interest to small groups of individuals. As already mentioned, quantitative studies do not tend to address the *purpose* or *content* of communication between people who use networked communication tools. For example, a *Pew Internet and American Life* survey of the use of instant messaging in 2004a discusses where and how people were communicating but not what they were communicating about. Similarly, a Pew 2006b paper assesses the extent to which Americans participate in interactive communications associated with 'Web 2.0' (such as social networking and file sharing) but does not consider the content of the communication.

One exception to this lack of detail is Pew (2006c) research that explores the blogosphere in America. This finds that most bloggers in the USA use their blogs as personal journals, with 37% citing 'my life and experiences' as the main subject matter. 'Politics and government' is the second most common topic cited although this comes significantly behind at 11%. However, this is higher than the number of bloggers who write about sports, general news, business and religion, suggesting that blogs are a fairly significant communications tool for political discussion. The report states that most bloggers do not think of what they do as journalism, but half say they are trying to influence what people think. Whilst this study provides rare and invaluable insight into the use of blogs by the public, further research in other countries is needed to assess whether these findings apply to the blogosphere outside America. Of particular interest would be a comparison of the use and role of blogs in countries with different levels of press freedom. Blogging is still a relatively new communications tool and, whilst it is growing in significance, it is still less popular than other networked communications tools. The fact that specific questions about blogs were only asked in three of the nine studies reviewed here (Table One) is perhaps reflective of this.

Some of the surveys reviewed for this paper asked questions about the impact of networked communications in putting people in touch with each other, offering some insights into the extent to which they help to foster communications outside other offline and traditional communication arenas. A significant minority of internet users in the UK survey (16%) stated that the internet increased their interaction with people who share personal interests, but only 2% said they increased interaction with 'people who share your political interests' (Oll, 2005). Similarly, the report from China concludes that 'internet communication is breaking the structure of traditional social relations by allowing people to make friends according to one's likes and dislikes' (Liang, 2005:88). As Figure Two illustrates, 'going online' increases contact with family and friends and with people who share similar hobbies more than with people who share political interests⁸ in all countries participating in the World Internet Project (Liang, 2005).

Available evidence thus suggests that the internet helps to foster communities of interest, but that these are not necessarily 'political'. Whilst 'active' networked communications have started to build up some form of public debate online, particularly in the blogosphere, its current reach is limited.

5.2 Accessing Information: 'passive' communications tools

This paper places activities such as reading the news, using search engines and surfing the web into the broad category of 'passive' communications activities, because they mainly involve users reading information that others have produced rather than actively contributing to its production.

Table One shows that reading news online is a popular activity amongst internet users. In the surveys that asked respondents to specify what type of news they read, national news was often the most commonly cited. For example:

⁸ The impact of online communication on contacts with people who share interests in hobbies and politics is greater in China than in other countries. The author of the Chinese report attribute this to the fact that the Chinese survey included only cities, but also to 'the limits of traditional Chinese means of communication' (Liang, 2005:90).

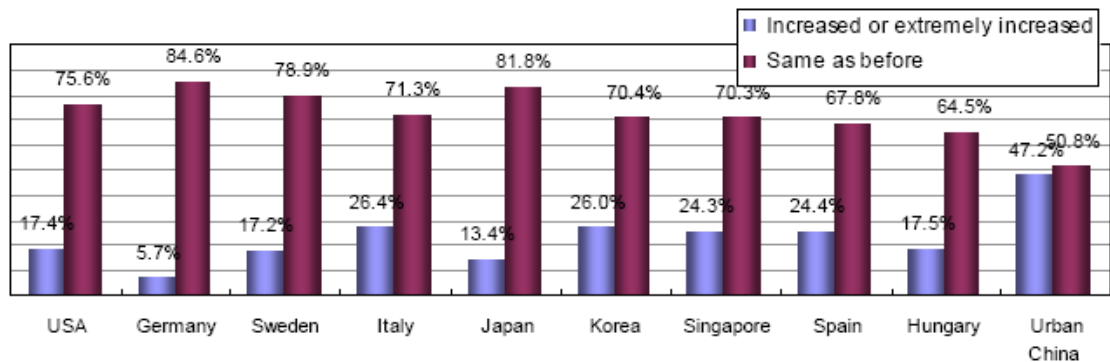
- In Italy, users access national news most frequently, followed by sports, local culture, national political news and finally international politics (SDA Bocconi 2002).
- In China, entertainment news was cited as the most popular news subject, followed by domestic news, social life, international news and sports (Liang, 2005).
- In the UK, 20% of internet users stated that they read newspapers or use news services online that they do not read in print, suggesting that the internet extends access to news for a significant minority of users (OII, 2005).

None of the surveys reviewed here asked respondents specifically which sites they visit to obtain news and whether they used participatory facilities provided on sites such as commenting and message boards. However, other studies suggest that most users access the same mainstream media outlets online that they use offline (Paterson, 2006), and this is discussed further in Chapter 6.

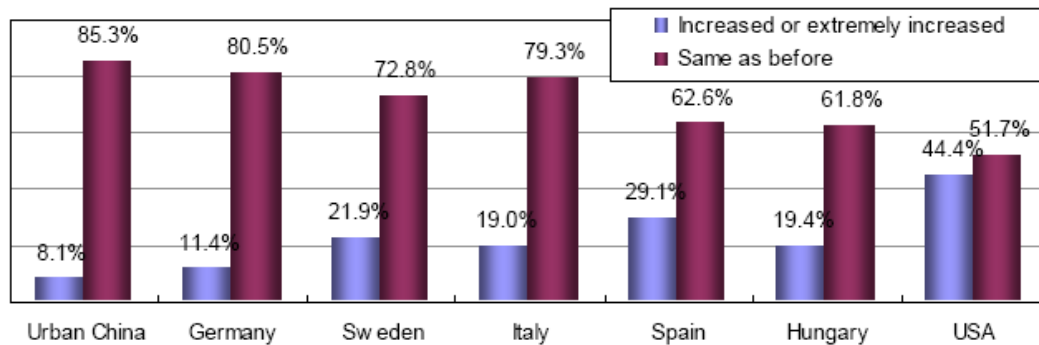
In terms of access to information more generally, most surveys found that the internet expands access to information and aids information seeking. For example:

- In the UK, 33% of all respondents (internet users and non-users) say they would turn to the internet first to find out the name of a local MP (OII, 2005). 78% of internet users use the internet for checking facts.
- In South Africa, 67% of users say they use the internet for research or obtaining information (*ibid*; SAARF, 2006).
- Whilst analysis in the Swedish and Chinese reports suggests that the type of information sought on the internet often concerns entertainment or hobbies, time is also spent searching for information about politics and the local community.

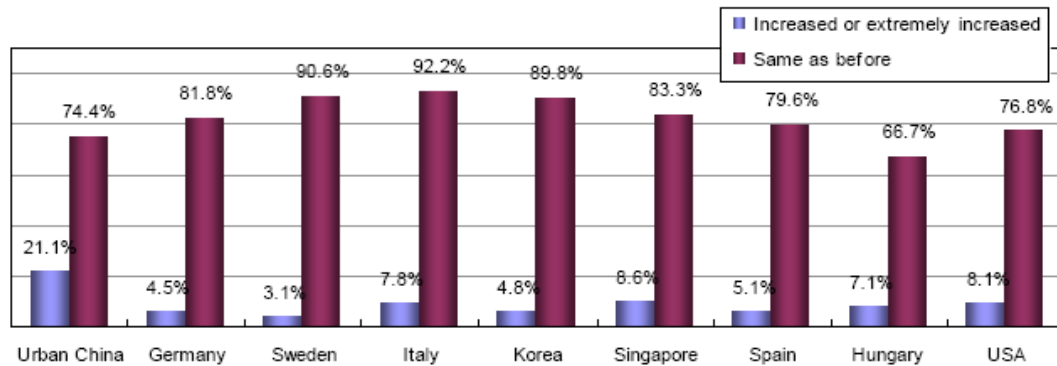
In short, it can be concluded that the internet expands access to information. Whilst this is a positive step towards freedom of expression, it should be remembered that information content can be manipulated and controlled. This is why it is important to



Does going online increase contacts with people who share your hobbies?



Does going online increase contacts with family or friends?



Does going online increase contacts with people who share your political interests?

Figure Two – How going online affects social relationships (Source: Liang, 2005)

consider access to information in tandem with participation in information production or public debate. Networked communications enhance both, but still suffer from a number of limitations. These are the subject of the rest of this paper.

5.3 Are there differentials in use along linguistic, ethnic, gender and age lines?

As outlined in Chapter 4, one of the major challenges to fostering a democratic public sphere in the networked communications environment is the dominance of English on the internet and the under-representation of minority groups in terms of use and relevant content available.

Significant digital divides exist and many are not closing as might be expected as internet penetration increases. For example, Huyer et al (2005) show how disparities in levels of internet use along gender lines are closing at a faster rate in some developing countries, including Thailand, Mongolia and the Philippines, than in richer countries including the UK, Norway and Germany. This indicates that gender divides are rooted in complex underlying socio-cultural and economic configurations including differences in wealth, literacy, employment and cultural perceptions of women. The same is true for divides between ethnic groups, such as those that exist between whites, blacks and Hispanics in the USA as illustrated in Figure Three (Pew, 2007b). In all of the country-studies reviewed for this paper that addressed disparities in internet use between age groups, internet use amongst older groups is less common, as might be expected, and use of 'active' communications tools associated with 'Web 2.0' is even less common. In the USA, whilst the age group of 65+ is the fastest growing group of internet users, this reflects the migration of long-term internet users into higher age brackets. Use within the 70+ cohort remains fairly static at 28% (Pew, 2006d).

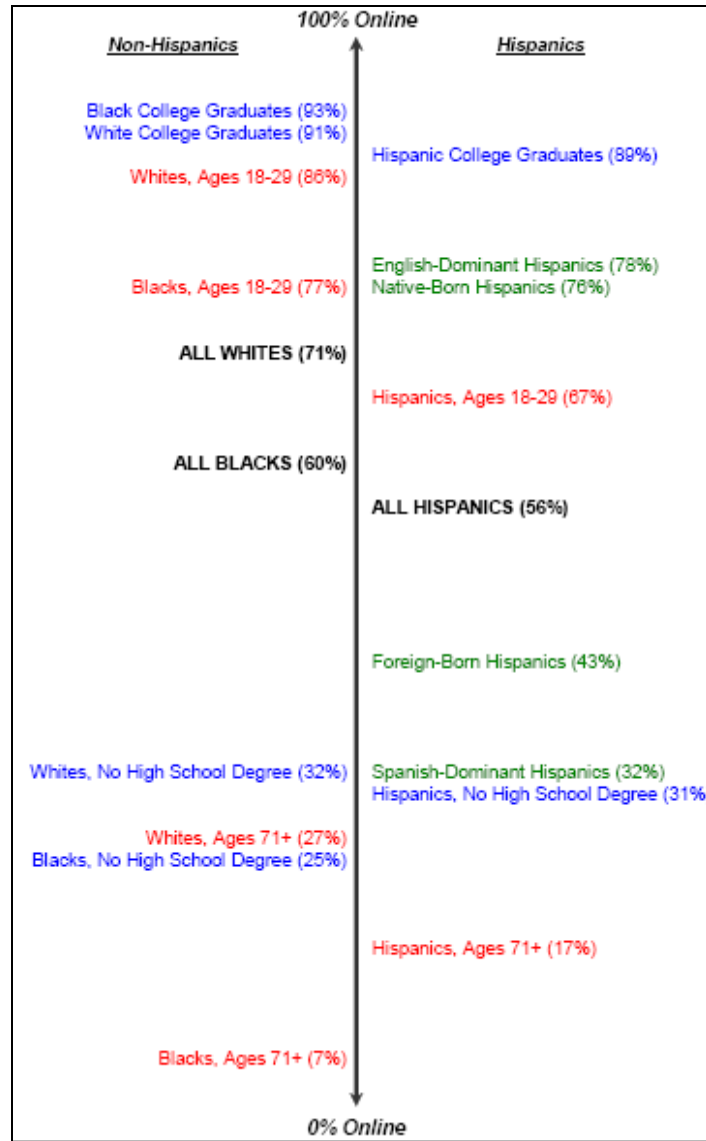


Figure Three - Internet use amongst Hispanics, Whites and Blacks in the USA (Source: Pew, 2007b)

There was much discussion during the UN *World Summit on the Information Society* process of 2003-2005 about the exclusion of minority ethnic and linguistic groups from full participation in the networked communications environment at the global level, through the dominance of English content and conversations on the internet. This continues to be debated in the ongoing *Internet Governance Forum* process. The promotion and preservation of cultural diversity on the net was one of four major themes at the 2006 Forum. The UNESCO-driven 'Initiative Babel' states that over 90% of all content on the internet is in 12 languages.

However, significant steps towards an internet that supports a greater diversity of languages have been made in recent years, particularly in the development of new technologies to overcome the problem that the internet's protocols were built around the Romanic language script, making it difficult to use languages based around other scripts and characters. Block (2004) describes how the development of Unicode, a system that supports a wide variety of letters and symbols, and software that can translate and convert different scripts and alphabets have helped to increase internet use and access in countries where English and other Romanic languages are not dominant.

As Figure Four illustrates, the non-Romanic languages Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Arabic are now amongst the top 10 languages on the internet, and Japanese is now the most common language used in blogs (Technorati, 2007). Progress is being made by ICANN in developing a top level domain system that supports non-Romanic scripts and this is expected to be implemented by 2008 (BBC News 12/03/07). Block (2004) and Danet & Herring (2003) outline a number of examples from across the world where the internet is being used to actively preserve and promote minority languages, as well as to develop new languages, identities and communication cultures. A number of studies show that, where minority groups do have the language and technology required to use the internet, they can start to combat their exclusion from other arenas such as the mainstream media and political process. For example, a study by Mitra (2004) of the development of an internet-based women's network in South Asia found that the internet has given women new voices in society. However, the development of 'discursive empowerment tools' such as writing in the third person were also necessary to ensure that these voices are actually heard within society, highlighting the importance of cultural codes as well as language in communications in the public sphere.

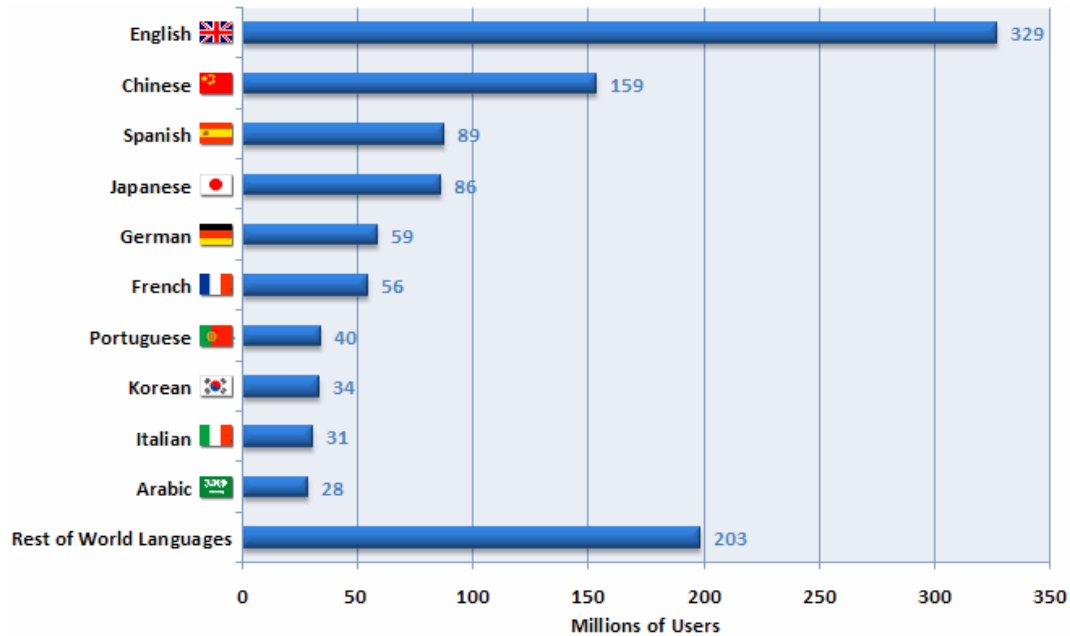


Figure Four - The top ten languages on the internet (Source: Internet World Stats, 2007)

It can be concluded that, whilst large proportions of people are still excluded, networked communications do offer new opportunities for information access and inclusive debate that did not previously exist. Examples exist of minority and excluded groups harnessing new technologies to give them a voice to contribute to public debate, and increasing internet access is helping to reduce digital divides in many countries. Positive recent developments include new possibilities for linguistic diversity and the growth of participatory tools such as blogs and wikis. In the case of linguistic diversity, the development of new technologies combined with international recognition of the importance of cultural diversity has resulted in positive moves towards the erosion of the dominance of English. However, whether minority languages and cultures receive representation on the web is likely to continue to be a function of the relative wealth and power of the populations that use them. Even if all of the world's population had physical access to communications equipment, a significant proportion would still be excluded from full participation in the networked communications environment as a result of language and other economic and socio-cultural inequalities.

Chapter 6) The nature of networked communication: Public debate or heated and fractured argument?

This chapter explores two further challenges that Chapter 4 identified in the 'content' layer of the networked communications environment:

- Are the lack of a common language and rules to guide discussion in the networked communications environment undermining its capacity to host rational and reasoned debate?
- Is the vast amount of information in the networked communications environment fracturing, rather than strengthening, the public sphere?

On the whole, the literature on this subject suggests that networked communications are giving people more opportunities to speak and be heard in the public sphere. The presence of heated and unreasoned arguments and the shutting of some groups of people into walled 'communities of opinion' create tensions, but they do not at present undermine the potential of the networked communications environment to develop a democratic and inclusive public sphere.

6.1 Are the lack of a common language and rules to guide discussion in the networked communications environment undermining its capacity to host rational and reasoned debate?

A number of studies have explored the characteristics of informal conversations that take place via networked communications: via chat rooms, message boards, wikis and comments on blogs. Most agree that conversations in are structured and governed according to a set of formal and informal norms, most of which are drawn from the norms of politeness and respect that govern communications in traditional arenas.

Broad standards of 'netiquette' (a contraction of 'internet etiquette') have been accepted as networked communications have evolved, for example the use of capital letters to signify shouting in text-based conversations. The 'netiquette' entry on Wikipedia outlines the different standards and norms adopted in different communications arenas. The term 'flaming' is used by scholars to refer to discussion contributions that violate these

norms and result in conflict. A number of studies explore the factors that give rise to conflict and the mechanisms used to overcome them (Lange, 2005). Many such mechanisms exist, ranging from the monitoring and deletion of messages deemed to be inappropriate by forum moderators to the collaboratively produced code of conduct ('Wikiquote') that guides the users and administrators of Wikipedia (Reagle, 2006; *Observer* 25/3/07). The important point here is that online spaces of discussion and debate are governed by certain norms and rules rather than being a disorganised cacophony. 'Vandals' and repeatedly offending 'flamers' are either successfully excluded from the conversation or else are successful in collapsing the communications space, in which case a new arena for discussion often rises to take its place.

The blogosphere has attracted particular attention about whether online communications tools threaten to collapse the public sphere into an arena of irrational, heated and even offensive debate. Blogs straddle personal and public communications, used by many to keep a personal journal and communicate with family and friends (Pew, 2006c). Blogs themselves are defined as a tool for conveying personal opinions and analysis, with users free to write whatever they want using any language they want. However, this can become problematic when they cross the boundary from private to public communications. Bloggers are referred to by Rubel (2007) as 'alpha-communicators', with a growing readership and influence on the mainstream media and policy makers. Questions therefore arise as to whether they should adhere to certain codes of conduct and 'publicly acceptable' language. These issues have been hotly debated in the blogosphere and the mainstream media recently following pleas from a prominent US blogger Kathy Sierra for users to stop posting abusive comments, including death threats, on her blog. This has prompted the drafting of a bloggers' code of conduct by other prominent US bloggers, with plans for it to be collaboratively edited and finalised by bloggers via a wiki (BBC News 28/03/07). Following its acceptance, all blogs that agree to adhere to its standards will be clearly marked with a 'civility enforced' badge. Other efforts to define standards for citizen journalism have been made by the US Center for Citizen Media (see <http://citmedia.org/principles>).

As participatory networked communications become more widespread, debates are likely to continue about whether content should be regulated and how. It remains to be seen whether the balance can be struck between preserving the openness of online

communications and regulating content to meet public standards of civility. Measures may need to be taken to ensure that online conversations can contribute constructively to public debate, but these should not compromise the openness and freedom that underlie the initial popularity and success of communication tools like blogs and wikis. One solution lies in the development of what Dutton and Peltu (2007:15) refer to as 'user-empowered governance models' – collaboratively produced, self-organised codes of conduct and rules for online engagement. The most commonly cited example is the 'Wikiquote' that governs the production of content on Wikipedia and has given the site strong resilience to anarchy and malicious editing (Viegas et al, 2007). The success of these governance approaches lies in their collaborative production and maintenance which gives them legitimacy amongst most users.

It should also be noted here that norms of civil and productive public discussion will depend upon the geographical and cultural context in which the discussion is taking place. At the same time, norms and codes of conduct that govern communications in different environments do not transfer unproblematically from the offline to the online world. As discussed in Chapter 3, the early evolution of internet chat rooms and virtual communities were closely bound up with a philosophy of freedom and equality, with early users believing that new communications tools held the potential to free people from the powerful institutions and sometimes oppressive norms that dominated in the offline world. These notions remain powerful amongst many users of networked communications throughout the world today and have undoubtedly influenced the use of contemporary communications tools as means of expressing personal opinions and identities whilst adhering to a philosophy of openness and respect for diversity.

However, the internet is by no means divorced from the power structures and political economy of the country in which it is used (see for example Goldsmith and Wu, 2006). Standards that govern conversations in a particular online communications arena are likely to be hybrids of international 'internet' and local norms. This can create obvious tensions, for example internet-based norms of openness clash with norms that restrain free speech in authoritarian countries. The arrests and trials of bloggers throughout the world who have violated perceived or formal communication norms, from China and Egypt to Greece and France, are cases in point.

Chapter 7 and subsequent papers for the Freedom of Expression Project will explore further whether the use of networked communications can foster public opinion capable of challenging oppressive power structures. What is important to note here is that norms of civility and acceptable online discussion are by no means universal, and attempts to create universal codes of conduct will therefore face challenges. However, new collaborative technologies and tools for global discussion such as wikis, blogs and message boards present new opportunities for democratic deliberation to create new global norms. Yet it would be naïve to believe that the outcomes of such deliberation will not be influenced by the most powerful voices in the networked communications environment. Citizens who want to play an active role in shaping new democratic communications norms therefore need to work together to ensure that they are amongst these powerful voices.

6.2 Is the vast amount of information in the networked communications environment fracturing, rather than strengthening, the public sphere?

Some commentators suggest that tensions between conflicting norms in the networked communications environment can result in a fracturing of the public sphere, preventing the formation of public opinion based on shared values. Benkler (2006) provides a good overview of these arguments, including Sunstein's theory that a proliferation of voices and information on the internet not only undermines the formation of public opinion as there is no longer a commonly recognised source of authoritative information to set the public agenda, but also results in the polarisation of opinion as people are forced to cluster into discussion groups made up of like-minded people. Therefore, rather than the cross-fertilisation of opinions and the critical evaluation of facts to produce deliberative debate and public opinion as in Habermas' ideal, the public sphere fractures into 'self-reinforcing, self-referential' groups holding extreme opinions (Benkler, 2006:238).

Benkler (2006) provides convincing evidence to highlight flaws in these arguments, using analyses of links between websites to show that the proliferation of opportunities to produce and access information on the internet is not resulting in a fracturing of public debate and polarisation of opinion. He concludes that most studies of how websites link

to each other reveal a degree of clustering around sites that share similar opinions and which helps to prevent people being overwhelmed by the number of voices on the internet. However, this clustering does not result in complete fragmentation as many websites promoting different viewpoints link to each other.

Benkler quotes a study by Adamic and Glance which found that 10% of links on political blogs direct users to sites with opposing political opinions, rising to 15% of links on bigger, more popular blogging sites. This is related to a 'see for yourself' culture on the internet in which people who comment on a particular piece of information usually provide a direct link to the original source so that readers can see the evidence and form their own opinions. These links prevent authors and readers of information from being walled into their own communities of opinion. Benkler suggests that whilst 10-15% seems like a small proportion of links that cross opinion divides, the issues that do result in inter-linking represent the most important issues as determined by participants in the debate. 'Conversations' that take place through linking between like-minded sites represent forums in which people with similar political views work out their opinions through deliberative debate. Salient issues will attract more attention and persist at the top of the agenda for longer, and it is these which are likely to include links across opinion divides, promoting inclusive and democratic debate. Benkler thus presents a picture of a lively and democratic public sphere on the internet in which a process of automatic self-organisation prevents public opinion from being undermined by information overload⁹ and in which a culture of linking prevents the fracturing of this sphere into gated communities of opinion. He concedes that the online public sphere falls short of a Habermassian utopia, but concludes that networked communications provide better platforms for inclusive and democratic debate than the traditional mass media.

The main limitation of Benkler's arguments is that they focus on linkages between websites, without considering whether people are actually following these links and whether doing so influences their opinions. None of the other research reviewed for this

⁹ The latest Technorati report on the State of the Live Web reports that the use of 'tags' by both creators and readers of internet content is increasing rapidly (Technorati, 2007). Tags are key words attached to information, allowing users to navigate directly to information grouped under that tag. This has been one bottom-up response to the proliferation of information on the internet, acting as signposts around the web to help prevent information overload and fracturing.

paper specifically addresses the issue of whether networked communications result in a fracturing of the public sphere, but their findings do provide some insight. For example, a Pew (2006c) survey of bloggers in the USA found that nearly half prefer to get news from sources that do not have a particular political point of view. 24% prefer political news sources that challenge their viewpoint, whilst only 18% choose sources that support their point of view. These findings support earlier Pew research (2004b) which investigated the impact of internet use on awareness of political arguments, and concluded that 'wired Americans are more aware than non-internet users of all kinds of arguments, even those that challenge their preferred candidates and issue positions' (pii). The implication is that networked communications create a public debate that is more inclusive of a diverse range of opinions than offline media.

A number of studies have used textual analysis to assess whether online conversations meet the criteria required to constitute democratic public debate in Habermas' terms. The evidence they present paints a picture of openness and the cross fertilisation of ideas. For example, Tanner (2001) studied discussions in a popular internet forum in Chile following the arrest of Pinochet in 1998. He concludes that the discussion did approximate to public debate because participants made rational arguments and cited sources of evidence when making comments. Participants commented on the opinions of others, and around a quarter of submissions in the forum were replies to somebody else. People also commented on how the issues were being discussed, leading to the collective formation of rules and standards for the debate. Participants in the discussion themselves felt that they were participating in public debate, with one stating that 'For the first time, we Chileans have the opportunity to attend and participate in a true debate over the historic events that occurred in the country during the last 25 years. Yes, this is Catharsis!' (p383). From this case study, Tanner concludes that networked communications do have the potential to foster reasoned public debate, although he concedes that conclusions cannot be drawn about whether such debates meet the criteria of being inclusive and representative, as most of the participants in the discussion were men and 90% were Chilean,.

A similar textual analysis study by Al-Saggaf (2006) examined comments posted on message boards of the Dubai-based, Saudi-owned Al Arabiya news website, and drew contrasting conclusions. It concludes that these did not meet Habermas' criteria of

critical and reasoned debate required for constructive public debate. Users asserted their opinions rather than rationally criticised or evaluated information and did not respond to comments on the same issue more than twice. However, comments were posted by a diverse range of users from across the Middle East, and Al-Saggaf stresses that we should not underestimate the importance of the website offering unprecedented opportunities for people to express their opinions about current affairs.

In both of these examples, the authors highlight how participants expressed their appreciation of being able to hear a diverse range of opinions. Thus, whilst there has been a lack of systematic investigation into the effects of online participation on participants' opinions and therefore into whether discussion results in consensus building and the formation of public opinion, there are many examples of networked communications promoting public conversations in ways that were not possible in the age of traditional mass media.

In contrast to the above arguments, Barzilai-Nahon (2006) draws on gatekeeping theory to suggest that networked communications can further exclude minority groups from public debate. In her study of an online community in Israel, she highlights how self-regulation allows participants in online communications to define their own norms and standards, but emphasises that these will always be infused with norms that permeate wider society. In the case that she examined, networked communications allowed marginalised minority groups to communicate more openly than they could using offline communication tools. Strong social ties between group members online enabled them to resist attacks and intrusion from disruptive individuals outside of the group, but they also acted to build walls around the community. The paradoxical result was that networked communications limited debate and the sharing of opinions between those inside and outside of social groups. In Putnam's terms this can be described as a strengthening of bonding social capital at the expense of bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000). Networked communications can make public debate more democratic in that it allows for a wider range of voices to be heard. However, the resulting conversations do not resemble Habermas' reasoned debate and the building of consensus, but rather a multiplication of public conversations that are not bound together in constructive or consensual ways.

Gajjala (2003) stresses that analyses of internet use and its effect on public discourse and opinions should avoid generalisations and 'black and white' conclusions. She refers to a number of studies of internet use amongst South Asian diasporas, some of which use 'cybernetic safe spaces' to recreate traditional cultural identity whilst others use online communications to create new, globalised cultural identities. Whilst these studies do not refer specifically to the public sphere and public debate, they highlight how the internet is likely to have different sociological and political effects depending on the specific contexts in which it is used. Some conversations are likely to create a more unified public debate, whilst others are likely to strengthen internal group bonds and contribute to a degree of fracturing and polarisation of opinion in the wider environment. What is lacking is in-depth ethnographic research of the processes involved in the formation of people's political opinions in online and offline environments coupled with detailed analysis of who is accessing what online and how it shapes their political view points (Gajjala, 2003).

A study by Althaus and Tewksbury (2002) provides some insight here. They explored differences in awareness about current and international affairs amongst readers of offline and online newspapers in the USA. They found that offline newspapers effectively have greater control over readers' opinions through the ordering and selection of news items. In contrast, those who read the same newspaper content online were able to navigate more easily to content that interests them and were therefore exposed to a narrower range of issues, had systematically different perceptions of the main problems facing the country, and were also relatively less concerned about international issues than those reading offline versions. However, it is not clear whether these findings indicate a fracturing of public opinion or simply a more democratic redefinition of its key priorities.

It is important in this context to remember that the mainstream mass media are still major players in the networked communications environment. Whilst there are now challenges to their roles as the gatekeepers of information and shapers of public opinion, traditional mass media institutions still have the loudest voices and the most political clout within hierarchies of power in the networked communications environment (Robinson, 2006). The mainstream media therefore still have a significant role in gatekeeping or managing information flows in the networked communications

environment and, in doing so, they continue to shape public opinion and prevent debate from fracturing into incoherence. This is explored further in Chapter 7.

The degree to which networked communications strengthen or fragment the public sphere will depend on the specific political, social and cultural contexts in which the communication is taking place. However, most of the studies reviewed here paint a picture of a multitude of conversations taking place between citizens in the networked communications environment. These are acting to reinvigorate public debate and, whilst some conversations are inevitably causing tensions, on the whole it appears that they do not threaten to undermine the value of increased and more inclusive public dialogue. As Benkler (2006) stresses, it is important to compare the effect of networked communications to a benchmark of the opportunities and challenges presented by the mainstream media, rather than to a benchmark of a Habermassian utopia. Most research agrees that, whilst challenges still exist, networked communications offer more opportunities for inclusive and lively democratic debate than the mainstream mass media.

Chapter 7) The nature of networked communication: Do the same centres of power dominate online and offline?

This chapter explores two further challenges that Chapter 4 identified in the 'content' layer of the networked communications environment:

- Do mainstream media companies dominate online as well as offline?
- Are there as many opportunities for governments to censor online communications as there are for offline communications?

On the whole, the literature suggests that the mainstream media wield considerable power within the networked communications environment and that there are ample opportunities for governments to censor online communications. However, networked communications offer prospects for increased access to a more diverse range of information and debate than the offline traditional media.

Participatory networked communications have challenged the dominance of mass media institutions in the communications environment, encouraging them to re-assess their

communications and business models and to contribute to the opening up of public debate. Similarly, networked communications have given citizens more opportunities to bypass state-controlled discourse. By bringing international communications to local contexts, they are helping to reshape communications norms and institutions across the world.

However, it is important to remember that the communications environment is made up of a diverse range of actors and institutions in complex inter-relationships and affected by a wide array of economic, political and technological factors. It is a shifting and uncertain terrain of power struggles and negotiations. While it offers more opportunities for freedom of expression than the traditional mass media, its new opportunities are by no means clear cut or manifesting themselves in the same ways across the globe.

7.1 Do mainstream media companies dominate online and offline?

A number of commentators argue that the mainstream media are an integral part of the networked communications environment and, as institutionalised and well-funded organisations, they will inevitably continue to lead public debate and shape public opinion. Moreover, the argument continues, as networked communications increase the number of actors participating in the production of information and entertainment, in a capitalist economy those actors with more financial resources to fund marketing initiatives will dominate: money (and institutions such as the mainstream media) rather than quality of information is a key determinant of the public agenda (Noam, quoted in Benkler 2006). As in the offline world, the end result in the networked communications environment is a landscape dominated by a few major communicators. On the internet, a multitude of small and rarely-read websites link to large and popular sites, most of which are owned by media conglomerates (McChesney, 2003; Barabasi quoted in Benkler, 2006).

Benkler's (2006) analysis of studies into inter-linkages between websites provides evidence that these arguments are simplistic and do not paint an accurate picture of events in the networked communications environment. A hierarchy of sites does exist on the internet and a small number of sites receive a disproportionately large number of

links from other websites. However, it does not follow that nobody reads the smaller websites. Citing studies by Broder of network topology, Benkler presents a scenario in which around 30% of nodes, or sites, on the internet make up a core with high levels of linkages between each other and from websites located outside of the core. Whilst not as heavily interlinked, 60% of remaining sites are linked to this core, either directly or via another site. Only 10% of sites remain completely isolated from this interlinked structure, and unconnected to the core. As a result of these inter-linkage patterns, users can cover large sections of the internet, including sites outside of the core, in a few clicks of the mouse. Reality is thus more nuanced than the picture of the networked communications environment dominated by media conglomerates. Whilst these actors still have more power and therefore louder voices within public debate, their monopoly control over information and public opinion has undoubtedly been eroded: networked communications give more people a voice and, through cultures of inter-linking and browsing between websites, present more opportunities for people to listen.

Benkler's arguments that the public sphere is not wholly dominated by mainstream media conglomerates are convincing, but they do not take into consideration what people are actually *doing* on the internet. Patterns of inter-linkages between sites mean that users do not have to remain gated within the 'core' websites of media companies as they have the opportunity to link to a wide array of other sites containing original information and ideas. However, just because users have the opportunity to do so does not mean that they necessarily do. Research into internet users' preferred sources of information on the web suggests that people use the same sources of information as they do in the offline world.

In contrast to Benkler's positive arguments, Paterson (2006) paints a much bleaker picture of the control of news and information on the internet by a dominant few, referring to figures from the industry rating service MediaMetrix. This reports that in 1999 US web users spent almost 20% of their time on the internet visiting the 10 most popular sites, and by 2001 they spent more than 50% of their time visiting sites owned by 4 media companies (AOL, Yahoo, Microsoft and Napster). Users apparently identify a few preferred channels of information and develop loyalty to these, despite having increasing opportunities for accessing wider sources of information (Paterson, 2006). A Pew (2006e) survey of internet users in the USA found that the most popular sources of

online news are national TV websites and news portals such as those of Google and Yahoo (see Figure Five). Only 3% of users visit international news sites on a typical day, and only 2% visit news blogs and/or 'alternative' news organisations. The CIP (2005) survey of internet users in Canada found similar results. Table Two shows that the most popular websites globally are those of media companies that dominate the offline media landscape, with the exception of Yahoo and Google which simply aggregate news from these sources. Paterson's (2006) analysis of where these popular news sources actually get their information from reveals an even more concentrated information landscape. He concludes that only four organisations do extensive original international reporting: Reuters, Associated Press (AP), Agence France Presse (AFP) and the BBC. A handful of other organisations, including CNN, MSN, the *New York Times* and the UK *Guardian*, do some original reporting, whilst most news outlets do none. Overall, news content on the web is overwhelmingly dominated by news from just two organisations, Reuters and AP.

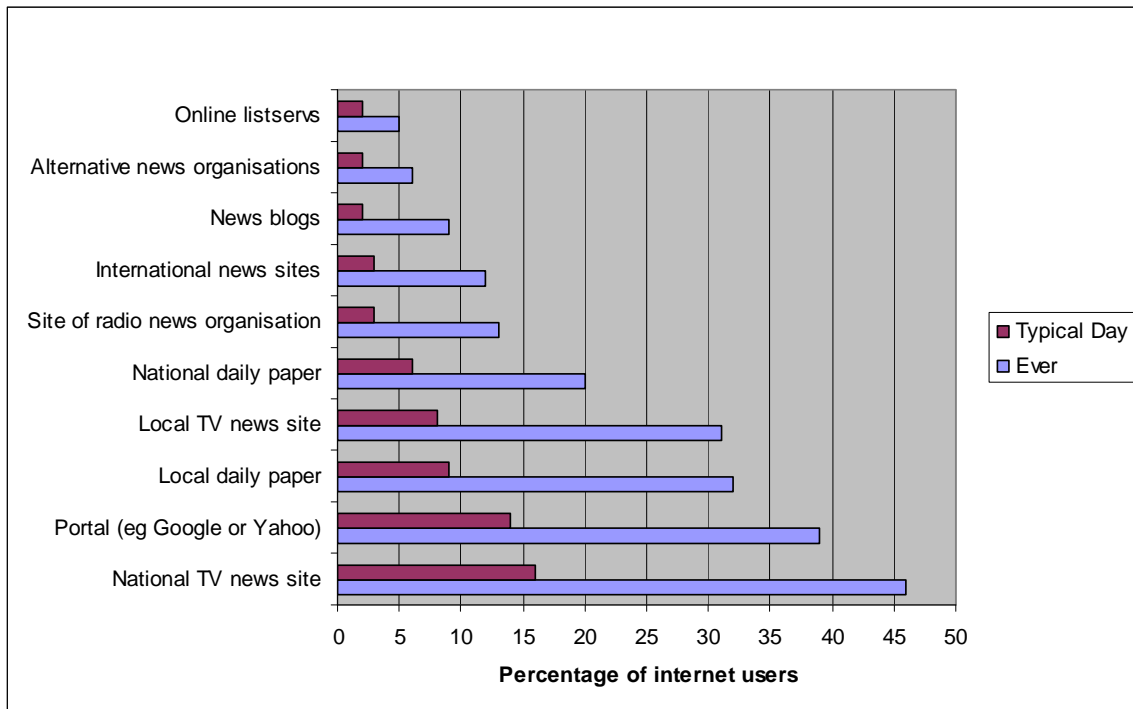


Figure Five - Where USA internet users get news online (Source: Pew, 2006e)

Top news sites globally*	Top sites for current events & global news in the USA***
Yahoo News**	Yahoo! News
BBC Newline Ticker	MSNBC
CNN	CNN
BBC News	AOL News
My Yahoo**	Internet Broadcasting Websites
Google News**	NYTimes.com
MSNBC news	Tribune Newspapers
The New York Times	Gannett Newspapers and Newspaper Division
CNN Money	ABCNEWS Digital Network
Reuters	Associated Press
Guardian Unlimited	Google News
Washington Post	McClatchy Newspaper Network
Fox News Channel	USATODAY.com
Forbes.com	CBS News Digital Network
USA Today	Netscape

Table Two – Top ten most popular news sites

(Source: Alexa.com, 11/04/07; *Yahoo weather and weather.com not included; **These figures refer to all hits on these sites, including e-mail and other services as well as news. ***Nielsen Netratings, 15/04/07).

Arguments and evidence from authors like Paterson (2006) are both convincing and sobering. Users are not only visiting a small number of mainstream media sites, but these sites are dominated by content from an even smaller number of news gatherers. However, once again, reality is more nuanced than this.

The mainstream media themselves are undergoing significant changes in the way that they collect, present and define news, and evidence suggests that the resulting news agenda is becoming more inclusive and democratic. A number of studies suggest that the participation of citizens in online political debates has helped to expand what is defined and accepted as valid knowledge by the mainstream media and in wider public opinion. In both 'free' and 'unfree' societies, norms that govern what constitutes news and valid opinion are generally more fluid online than in the offline mainstream media where statements are either supposed to adhere to Enlightenment standards of

rationality and objectivity¹⁰ and/or support the views and opinions of those who own and control the media outlet. Such norms are not always appropriate in participatory, user-driven online communications, which straddle the boundary between public and private communication.

As Chapter 5 discussed, many networked communications media such as comment boards and blogs are defined by their subjectivity, constituting personal opinions which do not have to be based on evidence and reason or the 'party line' (Stevens, 2004). In the past few years, mainstream media outlets across the world have to varying degrees started to incorporate material based on these norms of subjectivity and personalisation into their media content, for example through allowing users to comment on their web pages and through featuring blogs on their websites¹¹. For example, an Edelman (2007) survey found that, in the USA, the number of articles in popular mainstream media publications mentioning blogs rose from 100 in the first quarter of 2004 to 766 in the second quarter of 2006. Thurman (2006) describes how an array of participatory tools are being adopted by online versions of major UK newspapers, including polls, chat rooms, blogs with commenting facilities and message boards, and Al Sagaaf (2006) describes the importance of participatory mechanisms to readers of the online versions of Middle East media outlets.

In drawing on alternative sources of information, the mainstream media are expanding the scope and very definition of what constitutes news. One example of this process comes from Cammaerts and Carpentier (2006:169). They describe how the incorporation of commentary from the 'Baghdad Blogger' Salam Pax into the mainstream UK and US media during the 2003 invasion of Iraq demonstrated a new awareness of how 'subjective experiences can be factual, relevant, truthful and authentic'. Others

¹⁰ See Stevens (2004) for a description of the gradual adoption of a code of ethics by American journalists from the 19th Century.

¹¹ Allan (2003) asserts that the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001 catalysed this process as both individuals and mainstream media turned to regularly updated and subjective accounts of events posted on the internet, both because of their intrinsic value of providing timely, eye-witness, emotional material and because mainstream media internet sites were unable to cope with the sheer numbers of people trying to access their sites for information. Meraz (2006) argues along similar lines, drawing on example of citizen journalism and activism initiatives in the aftermath of the tsunami in 2004, Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the London bombings in 2005.

draw on similar examples, concluding that they point towards an 'ongoing reconfiguration of what counts as journalism in the global network society' (Allan, 2003:31) and result in a 'new negotiated sense of what we know as news (Robinson, 2006:1).

Deuze (2006) reviews the recent work of three scholars who are attempting to gain insight into this process of news redefinition. All three works identify a changing relationship between producers and consumers of news and entertainment, using terms such as 'convergence culture', 'citizen consumers' 'collaborative control' and 'transmedia storytelling' to describe the ways in which the production of news is increasingly a bottom-up as well as top-down process. The mainstream media are still incredibly powerful shapers of public opinion in the networked communications environment, illustrated in the example of Salam Pax by their ability to choose and amplify his particular voice rather than that of other Iraqi bloggers (Cammaerts and Carpentier, 2006). However, they are contributing to a widening conception of what constitutes truth and news by incorporating the direct voices of the public into their news reporting in new ways.

The adaptation of the mainstream media to the more participatory and collaborative culture of the networked communications environment is by no means a simple process. Most research investigating this from the perspective of the mainstream media describes institutions that are keen to become more participatory, both for moral and economic reasons, but also keen to maintain established editorial principles, standards and overall control. Thurman's (2006) interviews with editors of nine leading British news websites reveal that online mainstream media are open to new business opportunities and to giving readers new experiences, but at the same time they feel they have an obligation to provide relevant and edited content to meet not only self-defined standards but also reader demand. Thurman also reports on the tensions that these editors face in the online participatory environment, including dealing with issues of libel and having insufficient resources to to unprecedented levels of user interaction (see also Hermida and Thurman, 2007).

Along similar lines, Robinson (2006) conducted interviews with journalists from 14 major US-based publications. She found that the main goal of each was to perpetuate the

media outlet's brand and authority as a source of information. However, online news was framed by these respondents in different terms from offline news, with new references to giving readers a fuller experience, a sense of journey and conversation. Online journalists described themselves as 'co-communicators' and 'partner[s] with the public', better able to understand and respond to readers' demands. Robinson concludes that the mass media online have the potential to become a gateway rather than a gatekeeper of information, but that this is far from being realised and is by no means a guaranteed outcome.

Other studies support this view of a mass media system in transition. For example, Dimitrova and Neznanski (2006) found that both US and international news sites have moved beyond using the internet simply to reproduce offline content but that levels of interactivity are still limited. The Project for Excellence in Journalism states that, of 38 international news sites, most only excel in two out of six criteria¹² for successful online media (Pew, 2007c). Some studies couch this transition process in terms of Bennet et al's 1980s theory of 'news repair' in which journalists struggle to dismiss or reconstitute challenges from alternative media in order to repair damage to existing definitions and institutions of news (Chan et al, 2006; McCoy, 2001).

The mainstream media are thus incorporating participatory mechanisms into their online communications, but it is still unclear to what extent they are allowing citizens actually to drive the news agenda rather than simply comment on it. For example, a study into Chinese journalists' use and views of online media revealed that they use the internet a lot in their work, but usually for the gathering of background information rather than for leads and angles (Chan et al, 2006). Similarly a survey of UK journalists found that they are much more likely to use the internet to verify facts or research specific information rather than to browse for story leads (Nicholas et al, 2000)¹³.

However, there are numerous examples of informal debate in the online communications environment acting as sources for stories in the mainstream media, directly influencing offline politics and thereby capturing mainstream media attention and being the subject

¹² These criteria are customisation, participation, use of multimedia, story depth, editorial branding and revenue streams.

¹³ This may have changed in the seven years since the survey was carried out as internet use has grown throughout this period.

of mainstream media articles themselves. For example, the blogosphere was responsible for bringing the story of Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky into the mainstream media in the USA. In the UK, political bloggers have been responsible for breaking or amplifying a number of stories, including the alcohol addiction of the former Liberal Democrat party leader, Cherie Blair signing of a copy of the Hutton report (into the death of the weapons expert David Kelly) for a Labour party fundraiser and controversy over plans to convert the Millennium Dome into a super casino (Dale, 2007).

However, further analysis from most of these cases reveals a more complex two-directional relationship between the online alternative and mainstream media. For example, Conservative blogger Iain Dale has been responsible for stirring up popular debate about several stories, most of which originated in the offline newspaper the *Daily Mail*. Dale comments on these pieces, and owing to his high readership and the addition of new evidence or alternative opinion, prompts further interest in them in online and offline media and political arenas (Dale, 2007).

Benkler (2006) provides further insight into the complex relationship between informal online communications, the mass media and politics. He shows how politically salient stories get picked up and amplified by informal online communicators, whose uncoordinated but mutually reinforcing conversations and activities effectively challenge institutionalised power structures and mainstream media discourse. He gives the examples of successful online campaigning in the run up to the 2004 US presidential election against the political bias of commercial radio stations, and a citizen-driven investigation into the flaws of electronic voting systems.

As already discussed, the networked communications environment is evolving and its practices and institutions are still being worked out. What is clear at this stage is that it is not a straightforward case of the mainstream media retaining full control over public debate, or of informal networked communications consisting of a distinct and separate entity. Hierarchies of power still exist, but the overall picture is one of a more inclusive and democratic process of public debate and news agenda-setting.

7.2 Are there as many opportunities for governments to censor online communications as there are to censor offline communications?

As outlined in Chapter 3, governments' ability to influence mass media content has been one reason why advocates of democratic public debate have placed so much faith in networked communication platforms. In countries with a free press, public service standards are being eroded by the liberalisation of the media industry, arguably making the media more susceptible to government PR, sound bite and 'spin' efforts (Savigny, 2002; Marr, 2005). Countries without a free press suffer from more direct control and censorship of mass media content. Internet enthusiasts have argued that networked communications create a sphere that is beyond government control, by offering users access to information outside the mass media and opportunities to participate in new, unmediated conversation arenas. The early internet activist John Gilmore is reported to have commented, "The Internet perceives censorship as damage, and routes around it" (quoted by Privacy International, 2003).

As internet use has spread and become a key communications medium across the world, these arguments have been proven to be deeply flawed. For example, in *Who Controls the Internet?* and *Open Networks, Closed Regimes*, Goldsmith and Wu (2006) and Kalathil and Boas (2003) show the many ways that governments effectively monitor, censor and direct the content of information and conversations on the internet. As Privacy International (2003) demonstrates, governments across the world from the UK and Australia to Zimbabwe and Saudi Arabia exert control over online communications in ways that can be direct or indirect, blatant or subtle. China is commonly cited as an example of the extent to which governments can control online communications. The Chinese government has developed one of the most sophisticated and comprehensive monitoring and filtering systems in the world, comprising of numerous levels of technical control and legal regulation (Open Net Initiative, 2005). Websites containing banned material are blocked, chat room conversations moderated, bulletin board messages censored, controversial bloggers arrested and service providers obliged to engage in surveillance of users.

However, this does not mean that the internet in China is an apolitical space, devoid of public debate. On the contrary, studies of online debates through chat rooms and

bulletin board systems have found lively discussion and grassroots political mobilisation that spills over into the offline world (Liu, 2006; Kalathil and Boas, 2003). The April 2005 anti-Japanese protests in which hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in China are widely attributed to heated debate in internet forums and online mobilisation. Whilst Goldsmith and Wu (2006) portray this as the subtle manipulation of public opinion by the government through the targeting of middle class internet users, Liu (2006) paints a different picture of a militant population angry at the Chinese government's moderate stance and attempts to quash the protests. As has been argued throughout this paper, the reality is likely to be more complicated than a scenario that pits the state against the people in a straightforward struggle for control of information and power. As Kalathil and Boas (2003) argue, the internet is undoubtedly effecting change in China, but this must be placed in the context of wider political, economic and social change and will not inevitably result in the collapse of the Communist Party and its control over information flows. Whether networked communications have the potential to advance democracy will be the focus of a subsequent paper for the *Freedom of Expression Project*. However, the above discussion suggests that further research into the effect of networked communications in undemocratic countries is required, particularly into how they affect the relationship between citizens and governments, even if the content of the communications is not directly political.

Chapter 8) Conclusion

This paper aimed to assess whether new communications technologies expand access to information and public debate, weighing up the opportunities and challenges that the networked communications environment presents. A review of the main debates and research suggests that significant tensions exist that prevent this environment from fulfilling the criteria of inclusiveness, rationality, deliberation and freedom, which are the requirements of a democratic and effective public sphere as defined by Habermas. However, when compared to the offline communications environment dominated by the traditional mainstream media, networked communications offer significant new opportunities to work towards the ideal (Benkler, 2006). The tensions and challenges do not at present undermine these opportunities.

The most significant challenges are:

- the continued exclusion of large sections of the world's population from the networked communications environment, due to a lack of physical infrastructure and linguistic and cultural boundaries
- and continued tensions between the mainstream media and online informal communications.

Of less pressing concern are the challenges presented by the absence of a code of conduct for online communications and the potential for public opinion to fracture into polarised extremes, particularly as a number of successful bottom-up governance structures are being adopted and replicated across the web.

Whilst opportunities outweigh challenges at present, it is important to ensure that the opportunities for expanded access to information and debate are not lost through the transfer of old institutions into the new environment by the mainstream media and powerful corporate and political bodies. If the networked communications environment comes to resemble the traditional offline environment, the chance to foster a democratic public sphere will be lost. The introduction of new technologies into any industry or social arena often results in changing production methods and associated economic, social and cultural institutions. New institutions to govern communications in the networked environment have yet to be worked out, and it is important for those currently excluded from public debate to engage with this process to ensure that the new institutions include equality, inclusiveness and freedom of expression. Whilst more people have an opportunity to speak in the public arena than ever before, which voices are heard by political and corporate leaders is still heavily influenced by economic and political power hierarchies. Excluded, minority groups are therefore likely to have to collaborate with each other in order to make their voices heard and thereby play an effective role in the building of new institutions in the networked communications environment.

A further objective of this paper was to identify areas where further research is required and possible points where organisations could intervene to help expand access to information and debate in the networked communications environment. Taking the above discussion into consideration, the following recommendations can be made:

8.1 Areas for further research

- In-depth ethnographic research into what people are actually doing online, the factors that drive online participation and how online activities affect the ways people form opinions and think about the world.
- The development of indicators or research frameworks capable of allowing cross-country comparisons of the nature of public debate and levels of access to information in the networked communications environment.
- Local and country-level research into online activities and their inter-relation with media and communications institutions in areas where data is sparse, most notably poorer countries.
- Research into the perceived role of networked communications in society by national governments, particularly in unfree societies, as a starting point for inter-cultural international dialogue and to identify spaces for possible intervention.
- Research into the how national and international networked communications affect the relationship between governments and citizens (particularly in unfree societies), even when the communications are not overtly political.

8.2 Potential areas for intervention

- Advocacy work to ensure that minority and disadvantaged groups have the same physical and cultural accessibility to the networked communications environment as other groups.
- Programmes to empower excluded groups, including a participatory process of identifying their needs in terms of equipment and training in new communications tools and their potential for increasing access to public debate.
- The fostering of participatory networks between people and organisations working on these issues at local, national, regional and global levels in order to increase the effectiveness of efforts to build new, democratic institutions in the networked communications environment.
- Advocacy at the national and international levels for the development of technologies to facilitate a truly multi-lingual internet in which people can access the same information and communications in any language. This is necessary to harness the

potential of networked communications to bring down cultural and linguistic boundaries that have traditionally prevented real inter-cultural dialogue and cooperation.

- Consideration of the networked communications environment and the inter-relationships between online and offline, and formal and informal, communications in all media and communications funding and development programmes.

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