By: Chisheng Li

Abstract

Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) play a critical role in a citizenry’s access to information, opportunities, and ability to participate in democratic practices. Recent worldwide events such as the Arab Spring have underscored ICTs’ and social media’s importance in bringing about social change and engagement. Research shows that ICT infrastructure and access is more prevalent in developed countries, creating a “digital divide” between the global north and the global south. It is crucial that governments and human rights advocates address equity with regard to ICT access—in terms of ICTs’ potential to enhance democratization, as well as ICT limitations when information access is censored or prohibited.

About the Author

Chisheng Li is currently working toward a Master of Science in Information (M.S.I) and a Master of Public Policy (M.P.P.) at the University of Michigan with academic interests in information policy, globalization, and information technology development. He received his B.S. in Molecular and Cell Biology at the University of Michigan in December 2008. Sheng studied U.S. privacy laws, technology, and journalism under Mr. Robert Ellis Smith of Privacy Journal. Sheng plans to pursue entrepreneurship with multinational enterprises focusing on technology-based and market-based solutions to international development.

Introduction

Proliferation of the Internet and digital technologies in the 1990s ignited the imagination of entrepreneurs, scholars, and policymakers alike. Enthusiastic visionaries perceived the Internet as a decentralizing and empowering medium that would triumph over space and time in a globally connected world. Others predicted information and communications technologies (ICTs) would be used as tools to create a Habermas public sphere, where participants are in control rather than state and commercial entities.1 For instance, Mark Cooper, Director of Research at the Consumer Federation of America, suggested that people who use digital technologies would be “better trained, better informed, and better able to participate in democracy.”2 Thomas Friedman, New
York Times columnist, proclaimed that, “the days when government could isolate their people from understanding what life was beyond their borders or even beyond their village are over . . . Thanks to the democratization of information, we all increasingly know how each other lives—no matter how isolated you think a country might be.”

To these “cyber-utopians,” information technologies present tremendous opportunities to advance social, economic, educational, and governmental causes.

Despite efforts in ICT innovation by national governments and international entities, such as the United Nations (UN) and the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), digital technologies have not created the anticipated improvements. Instead, the Internet and relevant technologies have developed unevenly throughout the world, leading to a phenomenon known as the “global digital divide.” At present, only a quarter of the population in developing countries are Internet users. Mobile phone subscription per 100 inhabitants in the developing world is 77.8 subscriptions, compared to 122.3 subscriptions in the developed world.

While serving as UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan was concerned with the global digital divide as a pressing humanitarian issue in the 21st century. He emphasized access and usage of ICTs as a fundamental civil necessity: “The capacity to receive, download and share information through electronic networks, the freedom to communicate freely across national boundaries—these must become realities for all people.” He warned further that for people in poverty who lack jobs, shelter, food, healthcare, and potable water, “being cut off from basic telecommunications services is a hardship almost as acute as these other deprivations, and may indeed reduce the chances of finding remedies to them.”

Former World Bank President Robert Zoellick echoed similar concerns, and called for solutions that would enable developing nations to “use ICT to improve public services, overcome poverty, and enable regional integration.”

The global digital divide is a complex issue that goes beyond a simple gap in physical access and usage of digital technologies. ICTs are democratizing tools that enable decentralized mass communications and user-generated, virally-shared content. Through long-distance networking and political participation, ICTs can facilitate freedom of information and expression, two fundamental human rights and vital elements to a vibrant democracy. Conversely, the global digital divide re-inscribes traditional hierarchies as repressive states stifle ICT access and digital content to exercise state control over citizens. Because the United States and Euro-
pean countries remain the primary source of ICT innovation and digital content, the global digital divide reinforces Western hegemony through ICT governance and by using English as the language of global communication. Based on the potential benefits of ICTs, government should adopt institutional reforms that foster political freedom, while non-government organizations should consider existing entrepreneurial strategies that promote ICT development and basic ICT skills to alleviate the digital divide.

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