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# Information, Identity and Institutions: How Technology Transforms Political Power in the World

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## Contents

<b>I</b>	
Information and Communications Technology as a Source of Political Power	5
<b>II</b>	
States Exercise Control of Information Technology — Imperial Russia and Republican Brazil	7
<b>III</b>	
Activists Use Information Technology to Challenge Institutions — Faxes, SMS, the Web, and Public Telegrams	9
<b>IV</b>	
Transforming Political Identity Through Information Technology — India and Television Ramayana	11
<b>V</b>	
New Technology Used to Construct New Institutions — Taiwan, Cable Television, and Democratization	14
<b>VI</b>	
New Technology and Political Participation — Tsunamihelp Blog and Wiki	16
<b>VII</b>	
What's Old and What's New with the Internet? An Agenda for Future Work	20
References	23



# I

## Information and Communications Technology as a Source of Political Power

While the Internet is still new, using technology to communicate is not. Media, for example, is as old as cave paintings. When the telegraph was invented, a message that once took 40 days to travel from London to Hong Kong suddenly could be delivered in a few hours, sometime within minutes.<sup>1</sup> So, this kind of compression of time and space from using technology is something we have seen before. However, as we look at politics around the world, many feel that the Internet brings some new dynamic to bear. We hear in China that protests against Japan are organized with short messaging service (SMS) over cell phones. We see terrorist groups pour out their messages and recruit new members over websites. These are public activities. In the realm of the private, we see online support groups give strength to people who suffer—whether that is from a medical disease or social discrimination. We also see pornography expanding, with all the human exploitation that follows. In short, some change is afoot. What kind of framework can we use to think about these phenomena in order to analyze better the impact of Internet on politics, which at its core is concerned about the distribution of power in society?

There is a dichotomy in the conclusions reached in the study of Internet and politics. Some believe the Internet changes everything; new communities are formed, more information is available, and greater transparency is unavoidable. Others see the Internet as changing little at all—governments continue to use military force and economic influence to assert control and in the end these forces will prevail. Actually, both are occurring; the challenge is to understand how the old sources of power interact with the new, and to look back

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1. Baark, 55.

in history to see how many aspects of the new have been relevant for a long time.

More information and better communications services sometimes simply extend existing political activity. Before the Internet, if I had a list of donors for an election campaign, I would mail them a letter or send them a fax. After the Internet, I can e-mail them. The original activity is extended; it is cheaper and faster, but the essence of it has not changed. However, sometimes, new communications services technology not only extends political activity, but also transforms it.<sup>2</sup> Transformation can occur if there are two levels of change. At the private level, if better communications services bring in improved information which changes individuals' sense of themselves, then political transformation is possible. For individuals, a wave of new information can either strengthen their local identities in the face of an onslaught of the foreign, or become more cosmopolitan in the light of new influences and interests. Their horizons changed; they now re-position themselves relative their families, their communities, their nations, and their world. Latent aspects of their lives can become more important, whether it is a fascination with a movie star or a buried ethnic identity. At the public level, if better communications services and information enable the creation of new institutions which compete with the old, then political transformation is possible. Marginalized groups find they can mobilize using a new technology. Citizen reporters attract a regular audience for their news which contrasts with traditional media reporting. The old institutions, in the face of new sources of information or alternative interpretations of meaning, can either adapt or face extinction.

I arrived at this framework after looking closely at the introduction of new communications technologies historically in different parts of the world. A few commonalities emerge. Governments are acutely aware of the power of information and seek to influence communications. Second, political activists are frequently at the forefront of using new communications technology, in effect confirming government anxieties about it. Third, there is an intimate connection between the commercialization of a new information technology and its usefulness as a tool of political transformation. In short, only if an application is commercially successful does it become used widely enough to have a broad political impact. Fourth, while the interactive nature of communications has always been discussed, as technology evolves, more and more media allow the viewer to become a participant. The transfor-

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2. I am indebted to J.P. Singh for making the distinction between extending and transforming political activity.

mations of individual identity and social institutions, discussed earlier, are thus magnified by this shift in agency.

## II

### States Exercise Control of Information Technology — Imperial Russia and Republican Brazil

Governments have recognized for a long time that controlling communications technology and networks can enhance their power. Consider in Russia the relationship between the state and the press. In the seventeenth century, Peter the Great shifted control over printing from the Church to the government. In the eighteenth century, Catherine the Great installed a regime that required her prior approval for all new publications, but, due to popular demand, relinquished the government's monopoly over publishing.<sup>3</sup> In the nineteenth century, publisher Ivan Sytin made his fortune publishing educational books like Pushkin's Russian grammar and Tolstoy's "Mediator" (Posrednik) series, a set of books based on the popular lubki morality tales targeting a bridge market between mass readers and the intelligentsia. While Sytin's work with Pushkin gained him prestige and he won awards for technical excellence in publishing, the Church opposed Tolstoy and banned nine of the Mediator tales.<sup>4</sup> Sytin expanded into newspapers. He bought the *Russian Word* and transformed it into the most widely read newspaper in Russia.<sup>5</sup> While *Word* was not subject to pre-publication censorship, it was under constant review and frequently resisted the Moscow press committee's discipline. Once, when the newspaper complied with the government's reporting ban on Bloody Sunday, January 9, 1905, a workers' strike harshly suppressed by the tsarist regime, the newspaper's workers walked off the job in protest.<sup>6</sup> Another time, when Rasputin, fabled advisor to the

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3. Marker, 81–102.

4. Ruud, 29–35.

5. Ibid., 158.

6. Ibid., 70–71.

Tsar's family, died on December 17, 1916, *Word* made it the headline story, in spite of bans by the censors.<sup>7</sup> In 1917, the fiftieth anniversary year of Sytin's printing empire, the Bolsheviks won the Russian Revolution. While Sytin had supported the Russian war effort against Germany,<sup>8</sup> he and the *Word* had criticized the Bolsheviks. Lenin sequestered Sytin and nationalized his presses. Where once the *Word* had been published, *Isvestia* began printing.<sup>9</sup>

Turning to another part of the world, in 1865, Paraguay invaded Brazil's southern Matto Grosso, and it took the capital Rio six weeks to hear about it. When in 1889 in Rio, the monarch was overthrown and country declared a republic, it was a month before word reached the residents of Matto Grosso. The new republic of Brazil, therefore, resolved to build a telegraph system through its interior states to tie them to the rest of the nation. Starting in 1890, Candido Mairano Da Silva Rondon led a series of military units and commissions to establish the first telegraph network across the Amazon. Through Rondon's work, the central government sought to extend its power throughout Brazil, especially the northwest regions dominated by local power. It took a month for Rondon and his soldiers to travel from Rio to Matto Grosso. Between 1900 and 1906, Rondon built nearly 1,100 miles of telegraph lines, 220 crossed the swamps of the Pantanal, 150 through forest; 16 telegraph stations and 32 bridges. Rondon also mapped areas for the first time.<sup>10</sup> The stated goal of telegraph construction was to connect settlements and forts, facilitate troop movements, and secure borders. However, Rondon also underscored the telegraph as a tool to develop the region, populate it with farmers, and build towns where no one lived. In 1921, six years after the line was inaugurated, more than 80 percent of all telegraph messages were government communications. As a tool of the state, it had some results, but the extended benefit of encouraging development had not materialized.<sup>11</sup> The Amazon lands were not incorporated under the center's control, development did not occur, indigenous people were not assimilated. In the end, Rondon's effort to unite the country via the telegraph was not very powerful at all.<sup>12</sup>

Governments have long recognized that control and distribution of information is related to their control and distribution of political

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7. *Ibid.*, 163–4.

8. *Ibid.*, 148–51

9. *Ibid.*, 175.

10. Diacon, 9–18.

11. *Ibid.*, 132–8.

12. *Ibid.*, 156–57.

power. Therefore, they establish institutions and frameworks to influence the production and distribution of information; its interpretation, of course, remains beyond their grasp. Imperial Russia and its early revolutionary government successfully maintained control over the presses, although not without conflict and resistance. In early republican Brazil, government fiat alone was unable to sustain the network marvel of its day; subsequent government efforts to popularize television, for example, proved more successful.

### III

## Activists Use Information Technology to Challenge Institutions — Faxes, SMS, the Web, and Public Telegrams

There is no end to the anecdotal evidence that the introduction of every new communications technology has enabled dissident or otherwise marginalized groups to link together in communities as never before. Faxes were used in the 1989 student protests in China.<sup>13</sup> In recent years, Aceh separatists in their conflict with Indonesia have used short messaging service (SMS) over cell phones to spread information.<sup>14</sup> In Ukraine, opposition politicians used websites to disseminate information during the Orange Revolution in 2004.<sup>15</sup> In addition to these recent episodes, there is historical evidence that such communications technology has been used to challenge state power. The common link between the modern and the historical incidents is that the technology enabled the creation of competing channels of information and media institutions that offered participants an alternative view of the possible. Again, these phenomena are not new to our era.

In 1900, telegrams were used in China to mobilize sentiment against the Empress Dowager Cixi. She had placed the reformist Emperor Guangxu under house arrest. These “public telegrams” were sent to major news centers in China, and then printed in newspapers,

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13. Calhoun, 204.

14. Human Rights Watch, 9, 11, 22.

15. See Kyj.

creating public pressure on the Empress Dowager not to remove him. Activists such as Jing Yuanshan, who was also chief of the Shanghai Telegraph Administration, sent telegrams to newspapers around China and around the world. This triggered more telegrams in support of the Emperor. Some telegrams originated within China and others from abroad. These telegrams, one of which was signed by over 1,200 people, appealed to the Empress not to depose Emperor Guangxu. With the advent of public telegrams, instead of taking weeks to get information, newspapers were able to gather news in two or three days. Anthropologist Zhou Yongming reports that newspapers which adapted to the public telegrams grew in readership; those that did not, failed as businesses. In the end, Empress Dowager Cixi, surprised by the vehemence of public opinion, was not able to replace Emperor Guangxu, but the activist Jing Yuanshan was later arrested in Macau.<sup>16</sup>

Just as governments have long sought to control information technology, activists against them have used technology to express alternate points of view. For governments concerned that new technologies could be used to mobilize sentiment against them, their fears have largely been justified. The question remains, however, what is the significance of these individual subversive efforts? Can they, enabled by technological change, alter the political destiny of a nation? Efforts that are sporadic and scattered will not lead to fundamental change. Two transformations must occur. First, the new information which is made available because of the new technology changes people's identities, their sense of who they are and how they relate to others, and to which groups they belong. If this is not the case, the cause of political change is not the technology but the forces we usually turn—military power or economic strength. Second, the new technologies must enable the creation of new institutions. From the study of states and revolutions, we know that psychological and ideological shifts alone do not lead to dramatic political change, there also needs to be a transformation of relationships among institutions, organizations which have resources to take action.<sup>17</sup> In the case of public telegrams in China, they were used for further protests, against the U.S. for its discrimination against Chinese immigrants and in resistance to foreign control of China's railways.<sup>18</sup> More work would need to be done to see if these grew into institutions that lead to the overthrow of the Qing dynasty. Again, the political transformations

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16. Zhou, 39–103.

17. Skocpo, 18.

18. See Zhou.

triggered by new technologies are a specific subset of all political transformation, where there is a causal link between the technical innovation, the change in available information that resulted, and shifts in both individual identity and social institutions. Information and communications technology is one source of power among many, but to date one that has not been researched as systematically as military force or economic strength.

## IV

### Transforming Political Identity Through Information Technology — India and Television Ramayana

In India for the last decade, one of the most powerful images of the new television is a particular view of middle class life, a life marked by consumer goods and a culture of shopping, a sharp departure from the old markers of identity in Indian society—caste, religion, and language. Practical consequences include dowry demands at marriage which focus on television, refrigerators, and other household appliances.<sup>19</sup> In some instances, this impact has crossed religious lines. Muslim families have begun imitating the Hindi practice of dowries. As Rehana, interviewed by sociologist Purnima Mankekar said, “earlier, people lived more simply. Even if they were rich, they didn’t know where to spend money. Now, with TV, they know.”<sup>20</sup>

In television’s early years in India, programming emphasized national culture, a secular India, united by English and Hindi languages. However, in the early 1990s commercial satellite television signals became available. The allure of foreign entertainment, news, and information put public broadcaster Doordarshan on the defensive. In the face of such competition Doordarshan altered its programming strategy and launched teleserials. Most notably, Doordarshan sought to appeal to Hindu middle classes by serializing Ramayana, one of the two major Hindu epics.<sup>21</sup> Ramayana’s first episode aired in

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19. Mankekar, 99.

20. *Ibid.*, 87.

1987, there were 78 weekly episodes in total, a blockbuster hit.<sup>22</sup> Market research companies estimated audience from 40 million to 80 million per week over a few months. As Rajagopal reports, “city streets and marketplaces were empty on Sunday mornings. Events advertised for Sundays were careful to mention: “To be held after Ramayan.” Crowds gathered around every wayside television set, though few could have seen much on the small black and white sets with so many present. Engine drivers were reported to depart from their schedules, stopping their trains at stations en route if necessary, in order to watch.”<sup>23</sup> Ramayana was a runaway commercial success. The show had twenty-minute commercial breaks. It transformed Sunday morning from a quiet time in television schedules to a major, popular slot. In other respects, it was a breakthrough for Doordarshan. They achieved high viewership across linguistically diverse regions.<sup>24</sup>

There are many versions of Ramayana. In brief, the story centers around husband and wife Prince Ram and Sita. Sita, pregnant with Ram’s twins, is captured and imprisoned by the demon-king Ravan. Ram raises an army and successfully attacks the hitherto invincible demon-king. Sita and the twins return to Ayodhya with Ram, who is now made king. Suspicious about Sita’s fidelity during her imprisonment, Ram banishes Sita and the twins to the forest. When Sita’s faithfulness is confirmed and Ram invites her to return, the twins go back but she chooses instead to return to the earth, where the earth goddess welcomes her.<sup>25</sup>

The broadcast of the Ramayana serial coincided with the rise of the Hindu nationalist movement in India, a movement which has fed communal tension and violence. For example, the teleserial casts the world as Hindi, on the one hand, and on full of demons, Islamic peoples from Central Asia, and different places, on the other hand.<sup>26</sup> The television series gave Hindus great pride in their traditional Hindu identity in a political context where conflating of Indian and Hindu identity excludes other religious identities.<sup>27</sup> While the television serial did not cause the rise of this violence, the TV program gave the movement prestige, visual symbols, and a language to express itself. The activists of the Birth of Ram (Ram Janmabhumi) appropriated

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21. Farmer, 107.

22. Mankekar, 165.

23. Rajagopal, 84.

24. *Ibid.*, 84.

25. Rajagopal 328, footnote 56.

26. Mankekar, 170–75.

27. *Ibid.*, 181.

visual images from television in their demonstrations. As Rajagopal reports, “In the launching of one procession from Delhi to Ayodhya, Ram’s birthplace, volunteers dressed to look like the television versions of Ram and his brother Lakshman, with their bows strung, posed for photographs in front of a pile of bricks intended for the proposed Ram temple.”<sup>28</sup> Processions like these, for example, culminated in December 1992 in the destruction of a mosque at Ayodhya by Hindu fanatics who wanted to build a temple at Ram’s birthplace. These events led to communal riots in cities across India, about 2,000 deaths and 7,000 injured.<sup>29</sup>

There is an irony here. The era of satellite television is part of the economic rebirth of India. It offers access to an identity defined by consumer goods, rather than by traditional caste, religion, and language. Yet, one of the identities to emerge in this satellite television era is a new Hindu identity. While the middle class is gaining materially, it is losing its old religious and historical connections, and looking for new ones.<sup>30</sup> It would not be correct to say that a television series caused communal violence in India. Doodarshan’s Ramayan and other similar religious teleserials create a specific narrative—complete with language, visual symbols, and commercial products—that give this new Hindu identity some material reality.<sup>31</sup> However, without these extremely popular programs, the Hindu nationalist movement would lack the language and visual symbols, essentially the cultural infrastructure, to distribute their ideas powerfully. By enabling the consolidation of Hindu nationalism, this television show contributed to reconfiguring the discourse of nation, culture, and community.<sup>32</sup>

Intuitively, we all have a sense of the truth of this phenomenon. Frequently, popular cultural symbols are adapted to political debates, often at key turning points in a movement. An image, a slogan, a catchy tune flows quickly over the cultural infrastructure driven by commerce to the political system driven by power. In her work on public opinion, Noelle-Neumann shows that people dread isolation more than they fear being wrong. Whether it is fads in fashion or momentum in political campaigns those groups whose members speak openly and confidently give others courage to speak those same views openly and confidently. In contrast, those with a different view keep quiet until in a spiral of silence; as she calls it, they become mute.

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28. Rajagopal, 30.

29. *Ibid.*, 205.

30. Khanwalkar.

31. Monteiro and Jayasankar.

32. Mankekar, 165.

This is more than a person's desire to join the winning team; this is a fear of being disliked, isolated, and ostracized that reaches to an individual's ability to survive and points to the essential social nature of human beings.<sup>33</sup> A television drama that is overwhelmingly popular like *Ramayana* not only articulates a world view, but also silences others. A political movement that adapts the language and symbols of popular culture takes advantage of that world view already propagated, and the silence already generated.

## V

### New Technology Used to Construct New Institutions — Taiwan, Cable Television, and Democratization

Not unlike India, television in Taiwan from the beginning had always been controlled either directly by the government and the Nationalist ruling party. The three main television stations, first established in the 1960s, were all run by the government.<sup>34</sup> In the mid-1970s cable operators in greater numbers illegally installed videocassette recorders, coaxial cable, and transmission equipment.<sup>35</sup> Videotape and satellite programming made it easy to fill up cable networks with programming. Cable boomed because people wanted more news, information, and entertainment.<sup>36</sup> In contrast to the three government television channels, cable services were collectively known as “the fourth channel.”

Parallel to the emergence of the fourth channel was the “Green Team” part of the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Reaching the height of their popularity in the mid-1980s, the Green Team used personal portable video cameras to make about 1,500 documentaries on the difficulties of farmers, students, workers and environmentalists, that offered a viewpoint alternative to official

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33. Noelle-Neumann, 4–7, 182.

34. Chin, 82–3.

35. Hou, 186, Footnote 15.

36. Chin, 83 and Hou, 189.

television. In principle the sale, rental or broadcast of their programs in public was prohibited, but the programs circulated by mail and through street vendors.<sup>37</sup>

To add to this running battle against the Nationalists, just prior to the 1989 election, a DPP opposition party politician's application for a television station license was rejected. These elections were the first time opposition party politicians were allowed to run for office and getting their messages out to the public was important to their campaign. He established a guerilla "Green Television Station," using smuggled equipment to broadcast a two-hour program to introduce its candidates to the electorate two days before the election.<sup>38</sup> The government ordered a full-scale, but ultimately ineffective crackdown. Censors would cut television cables in the morning; cable operators would reattach them in the evening.<sup>39</sup>

In 1990 the DPP announced formation of Taiwan Democratic Cable Television Association, a group of about 50 cable systems that broadcast news and information from the opposition perspective. They jointly produced political programs and also carried video and satellite programming like other cable operators. The DPP protected members from government crackdowns and sought legalization. In the meantime, a new opposition party which had splintered from the Nationalists also began to participate in the cable market and also sought to legalize cable television. A third factor was the international movie industry, which pressed the government to end the illegal pirating of their content by local cable operators.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, the ruling Nationalist party was faced with pressure from two opposition parties and foreign investors, and in 1993 passed the Cable Law, which in effect legalized the expression of opposition views on television.<sup>41</sup> In 1996, Taiwan held its first presidential election, completing the full democratization of its government.

The Green Team videos and the Green Television Station broke the spiral of silence and created an atmosphere where people became more comfortable openly articulating the opposition point of view. Cable television took hold in Taiwan in the early 1990s when cable networks' ability to pick up foreign satellite signals dramatically increased and diversified the volume of entertainment programming available for distribution, even though illegally in the beginning.

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37. Hou, 181–82.

38. Chin, 80–81.

39. Hashimoto, 213–18.

40. Chin, 84.

41. Hou, 187–88.

When the proliferation of cable television merged with the already active distribution of videotapes by the underground opposition party, cable television networks themselves became the major distributors of an alternative vision of Taiwan politics. They began expressing a new political identity. The formation of the two cable television associations was part of the institutional change that challenged and destabilized the authoritarian state. The legalization of cable effectively legalized open political debate on Taiwan's television, which was essential to the democratization process.

## VI New Technology and Political Participation — Tsunamihelp Blog and Wiki

On December 26, 2004, a major tsunami hit several countries in South and Southeast Asia. The magnitude of the disaster across the entire region was of a scale that had not been experienced for many years. Among the range of responses which developed, one was an entirely on-line effort. A small group of bloggers in India spearheaded the creation of a blog (<http://tsunamihelp.blogspot.com>), later transformed into a wiki (<http://www.tsunamihelp.info/wiki/>), that for a few weeks became a major international clearinghouse for people around the world interested in providing assistance to the victims of the tsunami across the affected region. People from around the world started sending messages on what they knew, what they had, who needed what, what was needed where.<sup>42</sup>

“Apurva Chamari is going to Chennai and coordinating efforts as well. Dear all, I write to you all on Monday morning—in light of the tsunami calamity that struck the southern coast of India yesterday. . . . I request your kind help to put up a team of volunteers who are willing to be part of the rescue and relief efforts in Chennai. . . . Whoever is willing to be part of this effort, please let me know. . . .”

*Apurva Chamari. 6:25:00 pm. December 27, 2004*

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42. See <http://tsunamihelp.blogspot.com>.

“Phuket [Thailand] Gazette: Hospitals need clothes, shoes, counseling: Wachira Phuket Hospital and other hospitals say there is an urgent need for shoes, shorts and T-shirts, especially in sizes large enough for foreigners. Shoes are the priority right now.”

*Nandini Chopra at 1:07:00 pm. Wednesday, December 29, 2004*

“There is a shortage of food at the Camp operating in the Sunanda Upananda Temple in Koralawella, Moratuwa [Sri Lanka]. Approximately 680 families are living there right now. They say they have sorted out ways of cooking the food and can help themselves if given dry rations. An aid worker there estimates a minimum need of 100 kgs of rice and 30 kgs of Dal per meal for all the families for the next two days.”

*Morquendi at 11:39:00 pm Saturday, January 1, 2005*

The effort was so successful that within a week of its creation, the blog Tsunami Help was among the top ten humanitarian websites visited in the world, just behind the United Nations, Reuters AlertNet, and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent. How were three bloggers in Mumbai—Peter Griffin, Dina Mehta, and Rohit Gupta—without institutional backing, without large sums of money to use or to give out, without armies or rescue teams at their disposal—able in such a short period of time create such a significant presence in the world?

What is a blog and what is a wiki? A blog is like a series of online opinion editorials, self-published by the author. The writer can post blog entries daily, weekly, monthly, or at whim. It is self-published, there is no editor to filter the content. Blogs are interactive in the sense that readers can post comments to a blog; just like reader mail for a newspaper. Some blogs are really lone voices in the wilderness. But just like other kinds of writing, some blogs collect around a center, this increases the likelihood they will be read. Griffin, Mehta, and Gupta were all established bloggers, who were connected through projects like <http://www.worldchanging.com> and <http://desimediabitch.blogspot.com>. In short, while they each had highly individual approaches to writing, none of these three were lone voices in the wilderness, they were leading presences in the blogosphere. Once they came together to take action and other bloggers heard about it, the word spread quickly. The blog, <http://tsunamihelp.blogspot.com>, consisted of entries from people on the ground who could report what they saw happening, of information on who needed help, how best to help, in India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and other affected areas. Because of the structure of the blog—again remember it is like a series of opinion-editorials in a newspaper—this soon became unwieldy. Readers

looking for information on friends in Thailand had to scroll or search through the entire set of blogs everywhere; this was frustrating and time-consuming.

Consequently, they transitioned to a wiki. A wiki is a website that acts like a series of bulletin boards. There can be a separate bulletin board for every subject—a board for information about aid agencies accepting donations, a board for information about people found and people missing, and a board for news reports. The creators established the initial structure of the wiki, but anyone who uses the wiki can change that structure. Users of the wiki can add bulletin boards or subtract them. Users can post information to the bulletin boards, they can establish categories of information on a board, they can re-arrange the order of other people's information on the bulletin board—just like a user could re-arrange information on a bulletin board hanging on a wall outside this conference room. Note that I do not use the word “readers” with the wiki, as I did with the blog. With the blog, there is more clearly a dialogue—the writer posts a blog entry and readers can post a comment. The reader cannot change the writer's blog entry, however. With the wiki, it is different. One user can post information to the wiki—Martha is missing, for example; a second user can alter that information—Martha is found, to continue the example, a third user can move that information to a more prominent place on the wiki—Martha is one of 5 people found, 2 living, 3 passed away. With the wiki, the tsunami help information was better organized. Those with information to contribute could post it in the relevant sections; those seeking information had an easier time finding what they needed. However, the work of the creators was substantially different; with the blog, they were responsible for posting information; with the wiki, there was a housekeeping responsibility—trying to see that the various pages of the wiki stayed reasonably organized, comprehensible, and free of spam and vandals.

Why did the blog and wiki arise? As one of the initial creators Rohit Gupta told me, there was a void not filled by existing national and international institutions. Gupta had a blogging friend in Sri Lanka who went by the name Morquendi. Morquendi did not have regular Internet access after the tsunami but was able to send frequent SMS messages by cell phone, which Gupta posted to the blog. Morquendi's reports were about the destruction, injury and deaths he saw on the beach. The government was slow to report, the traditional news media had yet to reach the area. Around the world, people who wanted accurate news or who wanted to help found that their governments and other agencies were not responding fast enough with good information.<sup>43</sup>

Dina Mehta, echoing the sentiment of one of my American friends Susan Turnbull who participated in the online effort, underscored the human need to help and to respond to those in need.<sup>44</sup> The humanitarian impulse which exists was not fully tapped by governments and aid agencies. The blog and wiki created a space for the expression of this impulse. Therefore, the interactive nature of this effort was key to its success; just a simple website that gave information would not have had the same effect as this effort which allowed readers to become contributors easily—the readers become users; they become agents, not just spectators.

In the end, the net effect of the tsunami help blog and wiki is difficult to measure. It traded in information, not aid. It sent people to organizations and agencies that were in turn responsible for direct action; the wiki and blog creators took little direct action themselves to help victims. I have had extended conversations in person with all three of the main creators. It is clear to me that this short experience of a few weeks' time has marked them personally and professionally. Griffith and Mehta continue work in establishing websites whenever a new disaster emerges—he undertook similar efforts when Hurricane Katrina hit the U.S., for example—remember they are both based in Mumbai, India. They also mobilized bloggers when the government of India banned blogspot.com in an effort to quell hate-India speech. Gupta regards the experience as one of the most significant in his life, but opposed the institutionalization of the disaster-centered website, fearing the possible corruption that can arise when an organization depends on natural disasters and its victims to justify its continued existence. The [tsunamihelp.info](http://tsunamihelp.info) blog and wiki are an example of how technology changed individuals' sense of their own agency and their relationship with their communities, in many ways redefining the shape and contour of community. Whereas in other international disasters, people with a small amount of information or aid to share had to rely on intermediaries like governments and aid agencies to act, with the blog and wiki an alternative path opened for people to express their concern. In this instance, there was not a permanent institution that emerged; at this time, the need may not be there. More research will need to be done to see if there are other instances where new identities and new institutions emerge as a result of Internet technologies that create the opportunity for political transformation.

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43. Gupta.

44. See Mehta and Turnbull.

## VII

### What's Old and What's New with the Internet? An Agenda for Future Work

Further work could be done on the production, distribution and interpretation of information as a source of political power. Looking back to the feudal history of Europe, Asia and other regions, the source of wealth was land. On the control of land, power bases were built. With the coming of the industrial revolution, ownership of land was no longer the main route to status, wealth, and power. Capital was another option. As Karl Marx argued, the essential change the industrial revolution wrought on the organization of society was to make important the distinction between those who own capital and those who do not. Those who own capital, profit. Those who do not must sell their labor.<sup>45</sup> Now, maybe it is not just capital and land which are possible paths to wealth and power. Information is a third path, another basis of power that divides society among those who have it, control it, and understand it, and those who are at its mercy. Governments have long recognized that controlling information relates to controlling political power. In nineteenth century Russia, the entrepreneurial publisher Ivan Sytin ultimately handed over his popular newspaper to the state. About the same time as Sytin in Russia, Jing Yuanshan in China generated enough public pressure through public telegrams to prevent Empress Dowager Cixi from dethroning Emperor Guangxu. The degree to which technological change is decentralizing control over information and lowering the cost of exchanging information, the more that peripheral groups benefit. However, some technological change centralizes information control, to the benefit of groups at the political center. More research on the distribution of information across countries, within countries, and how this distribution changes would give greater insight into the balance of power. For example, the concept of soft power, the degree of influence over ideas and symbols whether in print, video, or embodied in products, can be considered in terms of who produces, distributes and consumes and the processes involved in each.

More research needs to be done on the commercialization of communications technology and the use of that technology as a political tool. Benedict Anderson identified the innovations in printing presses

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45. Marx, 247–55. For a discussion of England, 877–95.

and development of commercial newspapers as instrumental in constructing a national identity.<sup>46</sup> The quickest road to spreading a new communications technology is development driven by commercial success. In other words, every household may buy a television in order to watch soap operas, but once the television is an established service in everyday life, television programming can convey politically-relevant messages as well. Satellite television in India and cable television in Taiwan leapt when foreign news programming and movies could be shown cheaply—although in the early days much of the content was pirated. For blogs and wikis to gain similar influence, very likely a level of commercialization and popularity of content will be necessary as well. In policy debates on authoritarian states, the argument is often made that economic liberalization leads to political liberalization because middle classes used to choices in consumption transfer that habit to their politics. From the study of communications technology, we can see that there is a close link between commercialization and the effectiveness of technology as a political tool. A new communications technology can become a megaphone for views that were marginal or latent in the body politic, but these are not necessarily more liberal or open. Further work needs to be done on what political forces are unleashed by the commercialization of new communications technology.

The growing interactivity of today's communications technology points out that past political science research has frequently failed to recognize fully the interactive aspects of the old media. In contrast, cultural studies research has investigated this interactivity in depth; for example, Ian Eng's study of the 1980s American soap opera *Dallas* and how audiences around the world had common and diverse interpretations of the program. This perspective is reflected in Rajagopal and Mankekar's study of Ramayana and other teleserials in India. They interview people who watched the programs and unpack the manifold narratives viewers saw. This perspective on interactivity can fruitfully be applied to the study of information politics. For example, in the case of Taiwan, it would be useful to know from the viewers' perspective what was it about government-controlled television that was acceptable for twenty years, but then finally became unacceptable thereafter? When is it that a spiral of silence is broken by a new technology, like cable television in Taiwan, and when does it not? Or when political scientists seek to use the Internet as evidence in their research, discussing explicitly who are the readers and users and how

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46. Anderson, 39.

they view that Internet content would clarify the political significance of that data.

Change in communications technology and massive flows of new information result in significant political transformation if the people who use the technology re-imagine their own identities and if new institutions emerge in society to compete with the old ones. With access to new information and different views of the world, people can see themselves in altered light. In some cases, knowledge of lifestyles in other parts of the world affects the local lifestyle. In other cases, these new views of the outside world are not accepted as good, and an opposite reaction occurs, an ever-tightening adherence to local values and customs. More research needs to be done to understand how people interpret information when it quickly becomes super abundant—whether it is the introduction of satellite television or the World Wide Web. How do people decide to select certain information to identify with but other information to reject? Beyond individuals, new technology sometimes enables the creation of new institutions, organizations with resources to take action. Sometimes this is an alternative way to disseminate news with a different worldviews, or it may be enabling people to band together in new ways to break spirals of silence which existed before. Further work needs to be done to understand how some institutions are more successful than others in mastering the interpretation of the new information. If we accept that information is a source of power, then understanding how it is used, distributed, and interpreted is an essential aspect of understanding politics in a given community.

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## **ABOUT THE FELLOWSHIP**

The Yahoo! Fellow in Residence is a one year appointment, funded by the Yahoo! Fund on International Values, Communications Technology & the Global Internet, at Georgetown University.

The Yahoo! Fellow in Residence is chosen by Georgetown University from applicants drawn from the government, corporate, non-profit and academic sectors. Preference is given to individuals with an interest in China, India, Russia and Brazil, which are populous countries with large markets whose growing integration with the global economy pose important challenges for how communications technologies and the global internet affect, and are affected by, national systems and practices.

The Yahoo! Fellow in Residence is part of the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy (ISD) at the Georgetown School of Foreign Service. The application process occurs in the spring. Complete application details on this fellowship are provided on the Institute's website, <http://isd.georgetown.edu>.

The Yahoo! Fellow will pursue educational and research activities that explore how international values apply to the development and use of new communications technologies. Projects can draw on insights from many disciplines, including politics, economics, business, and socio-cultural research. The projects should explore how value-based principles can maximize the benefits and minimize the costs of new communications technologies for diverse institutions and individuals around the world. Examples of potential research topics might include how international values could guide the operation and regulation of the global internet on issues such as personal privacy, freedom of expression, education, socio-cultural change, and cross-national contacts among civil society groups.

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