

# **ICT'S AND PUBLIC SPHERE<sup>1</sup>**

by Abd Rasid Abd Rahman, Ph.D

Senior Lecturer / Deputy Dean  
Faculty of Communication and Media Studies  
Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)  
Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia.

## **Introduction**

The development of the public sphere is important in order for 'citizens' to be able to participate fully in the democratic process. As pointed out by Dahlgren (1991:2), the concept of the public sphere can be regarded as a normative reference point and as a 'visible indicator of our admittedly imperfect democracies'. Habermas (1989) famously in his work has made a clear reference to the decay of the public sphere as a result of extensive interests of private entities in public discourse. He saw that this could be problematic for organising open democratic expression in the public sphere.

Since the 1990s, many national and local governments have attempted to make certain kinds of electronic information widely available to the public via ICTs ostensibly with the aim of improving democratic communication. Also many make the argument that easier access to an electronically mediated public sphere has the fresh potential for creating autonomous expression. Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) for example has suggested that with newer media, new forms of human interaction in the context of multiple discussions groups are beginning to take place, which 'clouded the difference between stranger and friend' (Meyrowitz, 1985:36)

As far as the technologies are concerned, they are not happening instantly. According to Sclove, they are 'contingent social products'

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(Sclove, 1995:7). What he means is that the reasons for change has always been influenced and accompanied by the prevailing social structures, norms and beliefs. For example in the case of ICTs, while there is possibility of choosing other developments, ICTs are increasingly being 'cited as an emancipatory purposes as well as anti-democratic formations' (Malina, 1999:27).

The most interesting outcomes of this are certainly those related to problems of the use of ICTs as a commercial entity. The claim that electronic commerce is growing, the worries is that the empowerment and democratic participation in the electronic public sphere would have its own consequences, since the worth of public sphere is very much dependence upon these factors.

This is based on the assumption that, in order for every level of society to participate actively in any democratic process particularly where the rapid development of new technologies is concerned, citizens should have the ability to access and use, as of right, any means of communication required for full democratic participation. Golding (1990) for instance has made a remark on the notion of the failure and structured deficiencies in the use of communication tools which has impacted upon the means of 'our democracy' that 'puts its citizen in blinkers' (Golding, 1990:100). With inequality among society still an issue in Malaysia, the most important question here is how this will affect the government's efforts to create greater democratic participation in society in response to issues of unity and national identity.

## **Democracy, Surveillance and Public Sphere**

Philosophically, the notions of democratic processes in respect of political freedom and citizenship are rooted in the idea of the public sphere. Craig Calhoun (1992) suggests that 'a public sphere adequate to democratic polity depends upon both quality of discourse and quantity of participation' (Calhoun, 1992:2). Underpinning the idea of the communication media lies the belief that the non-democratic invisibility and top-down approach of the traditional media has prompted the emergence of ICTs which are perceived as being less hierarchical in

nature and seek for more democratic participation. This is based on the assumption that a varied cultural representation and citizen participation can be well organized under such media (O'Sullivan et.al., 1994).

Centring on the notion of public participation in the democratic process, many have expressed hopes that electronic democracy could be the basis of promoting deliberative democracy and surveillance processes. It is believed that the unprecedented growth in ICTs, such as the Internet, is providing opportunities for political mobilisation, while the vast amount of public policy information will be the basis for the people to be well informed whilst expressing their opinions and making voting decisions (Dutton, 1999:178). With official documentation increasingly available electronically, such as in websites and multimedia kiosks, not only has this contributed to the notion of 'open government' but also has opened up more 'possibilities for people and companies to bypass government control' (Lawson, 1998:7). As such, it would allow for full participation in direct democracy and public deliberation, where the government is seen to be less hierarchical and bureaucratic (Frissen, 1997:114-115).

Meanwhile in the context of surveillance, the continuous use of ICTs by many governments for the means of promoting greater electronic democracy was seen as a tool for such a government to monitor people's private lives. The concerns of the state over crime, security and economic gain have made the issues of surveillance, such as control and privacy, more important than before (Lyon, 1994:85). The concern is based on the understanding that the augmentation of surveillance within society under such processes will be the basis for the 'reinvention of politics' in a society that is becoming more risky (Lyon, 2001:135). This may mean that the rise of a 'surveillance society' in modern nation-states can be seen from two perspectives; one as an effort to control situations to avoid breakdown and chaos, by imposing a new form of order. The other is as a means to encourage democratic participation and search of full citizenship through the advent of ICTs.

The idea of promoting electronic democracy has prompted many governments to rush into making more information widely available to general public via the electronic media involving ICTs. Online political

discussion, tele-voting, deliberative polling and the storing, processing, retrieving and even marketing of personal data for the purpose of managing or influencing, are all increasingly made available online. It is hoped that the political freedom and citizenship participation in the electronic democracy as part of the democratisation process will be further enhanced.

But, as argued by many, the above conceptions of ICTs are recasting the balance between the government and the public. Indeed, this great transition from liberal to organized capitalism, which has shifted much of the relationship between government and the public, can be clearly seen in the work translated by Jurgen Habermas on the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1989 (Habermas, 1989). In his influential work he sees that, besides the possibilities of emancipatory intervention, there lie also the reasons for the deterioration of the increasing capitalist democracies (see Calhoun, 1992).

In his critique of the eighteenth-century European bourgeoisie, he describes the way in which early elites, who constituted themselves as 'the public' and discussed the political issues in the space set apart from the state and civil society, can be regarded as an 'ideal' form of the 'public sphere'. He sees this as the real formation of 'public opinion', which is set apart from the conception of the social and the economic entity, a situation, which he regards as a balance between 'lifeworld' and 'system organisation'. But by the mid twentieth century, the changes in the social system as a result of industrialisation and development have shaken both conceptions. The increasingly interventionist, bureaucratic state and the capitalist media, such as public relations and advertising, have encourage the notion of the public sphere to gradually fall into decline. As pointed out by Malina, 'Differences between public and private in the political and economic domains were blurred, shifting the focus from rational discussion of politics and culture to mass consumerism (Malina, 1999:25-26).

This is a clear indication that the communicative media in the context of the public sphere seem vulnerable at the moment. The ability of modern propaganda to gain profit and consumerism has both diminished the importance of public communication. What is obvious nowadays

is that information is being regarded as a product that is 'privately produced as a commodity for sale' (Schiller, 1996:35). Those with the ability to pay most will probably be in an advantageous position. Although universal access to ICTs is well established, the capitalist mode of production by private institutions and companies taps a lucrative market, which prevents those with the inability to pay from accessing better information. Conversely, this further difference between haves and have-nots will tend to encourage social division to occur. In this, the context of organising open democratic expression in the public sphere, such as those promoted in electronic democracy, can be regarded as problematic.

In another view, Held (1987) strongly argued that the emancipatory potential in this sense can be questioned, particularly in the liberal protective democratic states. What he meant is that there is a clear separation between state politics and civil society when the general focus of the state is continuously supporting private capital for the development of the competitive market (Held, 1987:99). The process of liberalisation, deregulation and the extensive use of ICTs is the best example of this, and it is in such process that many countries, including Malaysia, are engaging as a means of staying competitive in the global economy. The outcome of this would probably be the issue of promoting private entities rather than the public sphere itself.

Currently, there is a widespread belief that the hype surrounding the ICTs is promoting a kind of 'strong democracy' for more of the public to engage in public debate (Becker, 1998:343). A good example is the increasing numbers of political websites and chat rooms that are becoming dominant in cyber-space. It is the advancement in ICTs such as the Internet that will become the basis for more engagement in political discussion. The growing number of government agencies using ICTs to change the way services are delivered is enormous. Norris (2001) in her empirical study to chart the number of government websites around the globe, reported about 14,000 government agencies as being online in mid 2000 (Norris, 2001:116). There is a similar situation with the increasing number of political websites, including radical groups from both Left and Right. Even in the case of Malaysia,

there is growing evidence of how the Internet has been used by both the government and opposition groups to mobilise the democratisation process (see for instance Baharuddin, A. et.al., 2001). There is a hope that through the means of 'open government', the democratisation process will be further enhanced while the relationship between the government and its citizens will be further strengthened.

Despite its new possibilities in offering the elements of decentralised participation, citizenship and democracy, there also lies the question of how ICTs in capitalist democracies can be the basis for revitalising the public sphere's emancipatory potential. Anna Malina (1999) has forwarded her concerns on the issue, mentioning that 'ensuing struggles for technological advantage can produce a range of advantage outcomes, bringing huge benefits to some and profound advantage to others' (Malina, 1999:24). What can be noted is that the promotion of electronic democracy in the increasing 'surveillance societies' is actually promoting the growth of an 'information aristocracy' (Carter, 1997:137). This is due to the fact that the increasing economic value of communication networks and information services provided by many national and local governments, are targeted at maximizing freedom for market forces rather than maximizing public intervention, which will undermine the regenerating new form of the public sphere (Harbemas, 1989). Further to this, ICTs are seen as moving towards providing commercial services rather than a political forum for exchange and interaction. What is worrying is that the continuous support of private capital will lead to greater divisions in society. The 'ability-to-pay' criterion for accessing the information domain may allow those with very restricted budgets to be marginalized since the importance of the public sphere very much depends on the level of the accessibility of the information and communication domain for participation in democracy (Golding, 1990).

It is beyond doubt that the number of people accessing the Internet is increasing over the years while government/political information is doubling, but still there are growing doubts as to how the Internet can be the basis for reviving the democratic process at the click of the button. It has been widely suggested that in comparison with the

traditional media, the limitations imposed by the net are extremely significant. Downey (2001), for instance, has suggested that, because the Internet is a 'pull technology rather than a push technology like radio and television; this means that people have to decide to visit a website and this results in the wrong audience from the perspective of political parties' (Downey, 2001:606).

Although in many instances digital technologies, such as e-mail, are becoming important elements in the dissemination of information to policy and decision makers, it is still the traditional methods such as informal meetings and newsletters which continue to be prominent (OECD, 1999), while others even question the way that information is being gathered and disseminated through the net. The use of elements with a more 'top-down' approach to gathering information rather than a 'bottom-up' methods along with the lack of interactivity do not suggest that we are in the midst of engaging in electronic democracy (see for instance Nixon and Johansson, 1999; and Norris, 2001). But, most interestingly, although political information is increasingly available on the net, it is still the case that 'the people to benefit from this development are already relatively well catered for'. Downey claims that, in many instances the voters have already made their own decision as to whom they should vote for (Downey, 2001:609).

Meanwhile, besides the deterministic views of ICTs' role in the power relationship between government and 'the people', there is also a notion of how the present government should be viewed differently. There are many debates concerning the notion that the emergence of new electronic media, such as the Internet, worsens the meaning of democracy. Many would conclude that the means of censoring many forms of representation such as free speech and pornography as well as government secrecy and official documentation through the process of surveillance in both liberal and authoritarian regimes, do not improve the level of national public debate. This might be true in the case of traditional media where the means of control and censorship are highly regarded as in such authoritarian regimes such as Burma, Libya and Cuba. Even in the case of Malaysia, it is evident that the traditional media are part of the state propaganda system to strengthen

the government grip by imposing certain laws and regulations such as the Official Secrets Act (OSA) and the Printing Presses and Publications Act.

In many instances, the development of the Internet is seen as being completely free from censorship and state control. However because Internet access is directly connected to a particular person who then falls under national jurisdiction, many policy makers around the globe have taken some highly restrictive measures against both users and providers through the regulation of Internet traffic. The introduction of laws such as self-censorship by ISPs (Internet Service Providers) introduced in Australia in 1996, the law pertaining to Cyber pornography and racism in Germany in 1997, censorship measures introduced in the Philippines and the Republic of Korea in 1996 or even in the case of Malaysia, on the monitoring of Internet content introduced in 1996 were among the regulatory measures taken by many national lawmakers to further control the indecent content of the Internet (see for example Hamelink, 2000).

But the ability of the material to cross borders through different networks and channels was among the reasons why it easily slips through state censorship<sup>12</sup>. The example of this can be seen through the development of bloggers and their political blogs. This is an evident as the Internet has begun to mobilise dissident global movements for political freedom, such those in Indonesia, Mexico, Sri Lanka and Tibet or even to strengthen global terrorist networks (Castells, 2004:72). This gives an indication that it is becoming more difficult to silence the critical voices by using the new media compared with the ability to regulate and control the television airwaves. A study by Hill and Hughes (1998) had found that the increasing use of Usenet groups is providing more public space for political discussion, which is becoming more critical for antigovernment voices and those of authoritarian regimes (Hill and Hughes, 1998:17). Some might argue that the importance of such methods is that they might promote 'the growth of virtual counter-public spheres' (Downey and Fenton, 2003:199).

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<sup>2</sup> For example in the case of China, through strict regulation and censorship being imposed by the government through the obligations for the Internet users and ISPs to register with the authorities in addition to the need to sign a declaration that forbidden sites will not be visited. But the use of electronic mail for such purposes is what escapes their censorship



In the case of Malaysia, despite of the heavy promotion of ICTs and liberalisation, the importance of this growth for its political and cultural establishment is still unclear. Whether this will further enhance the democratisation process and public sphere in the country is also unknown. The effort to reinvent the government along liberal democratic lines as heavily promoted by Malaysia will most likely have its consequences for deliberative democracy and the search for greater pluralism. As mentioned by Downey and Fenton, 'shared networks may offer a *sense* of solidarity at the click of a mouse but actual critical solidarity is bypassed' (ibid). Although it might be the case that greater pluralism will emerge as a result of continuous network exchanges, Habermas cautions that this may lead to greater fragmentation of the civil society that will then spill into other areas such as the political and cultural divide.

## **CONCLUSION**

Arguably, the technological development such as the ICTs can be well understood through the increasing informatisation process under the newest mode of capitalism that has changed the course of many of today's informational trends. What is suggested is that it will obviously have direct and indirect consequences such as those in social, economic, political and cultural choices. As suggested by Castells in his trilogy, the Network Society, the process under the new mode of production brought in by ICTs has indeed impacted upon societal transformation including the economy and self, locally and globally (Castells, 2001a 2000b, 2004). As a result, we are witnessing a restructuring in occupational structures and the educational system through the process of deregulation and privatisation, which is very much in line with the Schumpeterian's notion 'gales of creative destruction'.

However, what Castells also suggest is that the changes had their own consequences. Divisions in society are becoming wider than before. The demarcation between haves and have-nots, such as those resulting from class division and the digital divide, is clearly foreseeable, which will further fragment and marginalize society within state and the social systems. In many instances this is perpetuated through the process of globalisation and the need to remain competitive in the global economy. Clearly, the powerful international agencies (TNCs and the

transnational global media) through their capitalist mode of production are contributing significantly to the factors. As such, not only is the role of the nation-state and its governance declining, even the effort to accommodate the forces through the means of ICTs is opening up other possibilities such as the commodification of culture, cultural imperialism and cultural homogenisation or even hybridisation. The role of the nation will then have its impact upon the democratic process and the destabilisation of the public sphere. The issue of access to the ICTs continues to be a major threat, which might degenerate into new forms of fragmentation and solidarity as a result of increasing social inequality and polarisation between both the top and bottom of social scale.

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