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The internet allows anyone with access to view, create, and spread information. However, people and governments can use that information either for ‘good’ or ‘not so good’ purposes. The spread of information and growing communication over the internet can promote democracy, but it can also be used for repression. One thing that is certain is that its importance in society and politics will continue to grow. US Senator Ted Stevens called the internet just a “series of tubes”. There are now 2.08 billion people on the internet; searching on Google & Yahoo; forming social networks on Facebook and MySpace; sharing videos on YouTube; tweeting on Twitter; shopping on EBay and Amazon; playing online games; and accessing news from around the world. The debate on whether the internet contributes to democratization was in part triggered by statistical research that indicates a strong correlation between levels of internet penetration and degrees of democracy, which proponents have argued shows that the internet can contribute to democratization ¹. Opponents claim this is just a result of the fact that developed regions make up for over half of internet use ². Russia and China, important members of the UN security council, are still not liberal democracies. In the wake of the Arab Spring and successful revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, the role of the internet in protest and grassroots movements for democratic reform has become more evident. A parallel debate also runs as to what type of democracy the internet might encourage; this, however, is not included in the scope of this debate. The aim of each side in the debate must, therefore, be to prove the effects of the internet in the majority of cases, rather than arguing about a few ‘bunker’ states such as North Korea, which restrict freedoms across the board.


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The internet promotes the free flow of information both in and out of a country, which is essential for a truly free democracy.

Point:

Media can be one of the most important factors in democratic development. If governments successfully control the media, they can direct information towards their constituents that casts the regime in an undeniably good light. They can prevent news of faked elections, protests, violence, repression, and arrest from ever reaching the people subject to those violations ¹. Without external sources of information people do not question government propaganda, which decreases the likelihood that they advocate for their civil liberties and democracy. The internet promotes the free flow of information that leads to social consciousness and enhances democracy. News of political corruption and scandal in China can go viral in a
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matter of minutes among its 540 million internet users. Even when the government blocks certain websites, and makes avid use of firewalls for censorship, uploading videos to Facebook and YouTube, and posts to Twitter can allow information to be disseminated within the country. Once information is accessible it is almost impossible for the government to continue to censor the internet. For example, in the most recent Egyptian protests, as information leaked out of the country via social networking sites, cell phone pictures and videos were shown on international news broadcasts, making it difficult for the government to spin the situation in a positive light. The internet provides a place to find information, and also a place to discuss and debate it with others. The latter is the essential step to truly shifting views. The internet promotes free media which is essential to both creating and maintaining a functioning democracy as it promotes government transparency.


Countercase:

Governments still successfully censor information. Take China for example. Often the government shuts down Facebook and Twitter, arrests bloggers, and takes down content. Terms like 'Tiananmen Square' and 'Inner Mongolia' provide no search results because of the protests that have gone on there. Governments’ ability to censor information is advancing. Therefore the idea that the internet promotes the flow of unbiased information is not necessarily true, which counters the claim that the internet promotes democracy. Further, the internet is not always used for access to Western news sources, but instead, over 500 million sites in the indexes of search engines are pornographic. In 2003 25% of internet use was for accessing porn. Five of the twenty most visited internet sites are download sites for video games and porn. The internet is not largely used for access to information, but instead other forbidden resources, and therefore cannot be directly linked to democratic development.


The internet can be successfully censored so that it only promotes pro-regime propaganda.

Point:

The internet is said to promote democracy based on the claim that it leads to the free flow of information. Unfortunately, this is false in many parts of the world. 40 countries around the globe actively censor the internet, and 25 have blocked Google over the past few years. This gives their governments a false legitimacy by removing material critical of anti-democratic policies and as acting as a psychological bulwark against discontent and dissent. The government retains the ability to control the information that its citizens have access to and can use this power to promote pro-regime information and prevent anti-regime, pro-democratic content from ever seeing the light of day. The internet is a new tool, but governments can become more sophisticated as well and harness the internet to repress dissent. For example, China has almost no internet freedom and the terms “Tiananmen Square” and “Inner-Mongolia” provides no search results because protests occurred there. Google in 2010 refused to uphold their firewalls and were therefore no longer allowed to operate in the country. The internet can be used by authoritarian government for enhanced media repression.

Even more concerning is corporate surveillance for marketing purposes, which means that people are pushed certain
information from certain sources, meaning that not all voices are equally heard online. Democracy in the online world is not about having your voice published, but about it being seen and heard. As a result some players can gain a lot more attention than other, even if everyone with access can publish.


Counterpoint:
The quantity of information on the internet, and the number of talented computer users makes it very difficult for the government to fully censor information. The more information there is, the harder it becomes for the government to control it. The US is investing $19 million into researching how to break the firewalls of China and Iran¹. There is plenty of easy to use software to evade firewalls². Internet censorship can be evaded. Therefore, regimes cannot entirely maintain control over information, and any external information can be considered good information.

Furthermore, regimes like China and Iran are not the only countries to “watching” their populations. Many democracies including the US and most of Western European use digital surveillance to safeguard their population- watch out for possible activity that may be harmful to the state.


2. Irish Times, 'Bunnies Hop the Great Firewall', 2 February 2011 [9]

Websites can strengthen democratic institutions.

Point:
The promotion of democracy is not only about forming new democracies; strengthening existing democratic institutions around the globe. To do so, transparency and government-citizen communication is necessary. Britain has set up two websites that achieve exactly that. Writetothem.com is a website where people can figure out who their parliamentary representatives are, and write to them about their problems in an effort to create a stronger relationship, and channels of communication between MPs and their constituents¹. 130,000 people were using the website in 2009. Theyworkforyou.com is another website where people can find out who their representatives are, and then read about their recent actions in parliament. This site receives between 200,000 and 300,000 hits per month². Elections are also strengthened by the internet. Voting can be conducted online which makes the process easier and can reduce intimidation at the polls. Now that politicians have websites, their policy platforms can be more easily accessed and understood by voters. Increasing information and communication between leaders and their constituents contributes to a more transparent system and therefore a healthier democracy. The internet is not only useful for promoting movements for democratic reforms in authoritarian countries, but also for making democracy more effective in democratic countries.

What about civil society and alternative media action sites within ‘official’ democracies that aim to bring about greater democratization through their protests and information for example-http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/.

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Counterpoint:
To use such websites governments already need to be committed to democracy. Promoting democracy in already-democratic countries is irrelevant. Countries that are not democratic, and seek to maintain autocratic rule will not be impacted by the availability of those resources and harness the internet only for continued repression 1.

1. Joyce, Digital Activism Decoded, 2010

The digital divide leaves the same people in places of influence and power.

Point:
The internet doesn’t necessarily put power in the hands of the vulnerable; in many places it strengthens the influence of the traditional elite. In low-income countries the cost of broadband is 900% of average monthly income1. Most people simply cannot afford to have internet access. Internet penetration is not up to par in low income, developing, and traditionally non-democratic countries. For example, Africa has 15% of the world’s population and only 5% of its internet users. There are only about 100 million internet users on the continent, which accounts for only 11% of its population2. As the lower income members of society remain unable to afford internet access, the power that the internet boasts remains with those who can afford it. The traditional elites are the ones that maintain the ability to access the internet, and they can use it for their own purposes and to strengthen their position and power – i.e. the internet may actually increase inequalities on the ground, against democracy. The internet could play a positive role in society, but until it is affordable, the oppressed who long for democracy will not have the tools to advocate for it.

1. Joyce, Digital Activism Decoded, 2010

Counterpoint:
There are ways to make the internet affordable. Internet cafes and purchasing multiple SIM cards and pay as you go plans for cell phones can address the need to have a computer and therefore decrease the cost of internet use1. Further, the internet is a jumping off point. Not every low-income person needs to have internet access but if a handful do, then they can be part of the organization of protests and movements by taking the information available online and disseminating it through networks of people through SMS, calls, and word of mouth. Tunisia was not a rich country; in fact, people were protesting the pervasive poverty. Even so, they were able to successfully organize a revolution, with the help of the internet2.

1. Joyce, Digital Activism Decoded: The Power of Mobile Phones, 2010

The internet allows political dissidents to communicate, organize, and grow a grassroots movement.
Point:
Another extremely important requirement for successful opposition movements advocating democratic reform is the ability to organize mass numbers of people. It is one thing if you hate your government, but don’t think anyone else does. It is entirely different if you can access the thoughts of thousands of others and realize that you are in fact not alone. Proportionally the number of people benefiting from repressive authoritative regimes is very small in comparison to the people who are suffering. Therefore, if the people who are hurt by the regimes realize the numbers that they have, it spells trouble for the governments. The internet has 2 billion users, and 950 million people have mobile broadband. Mobile phones with pay-as-you-go access plans are more available and affordable than ever before. Protesters do not need to own a computer: they can access social networking and news sites from their phones. The internet means that opposition groups don’t have to be organized under a particular leader, as there can now be many leaders and various causes that fit under the same umbrella and band together. These loose connections, as in Egypt, strengthen the movement. The internet also reduces the cost of organization, which can be the difference between success and failure. In the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia which called for democracy, the internet was first used to create events on Facebook to increase the number of people aware of and attending protests. Then the videos, photographs, and twitter posts that became available on the internet increased the support for the movement as citizens became aware of the violence the government was subjecting the country to. The internet allows users to communicate, then organize demonstrations, and then grow the movement. All of these functions of the internet are essential factors of a grassroots push for democratic reforms.

2. Melanson, Donald, 'UN: worldwide internet users hit two billion, cellphone subscriptions top five billion', engadget, 28 January 2011
3. BBC, "Egypt's opposition pushes demands as protests continue", 2011
4. Joyce, Digital Activism Decoded: Digital Activism in Closed and Open Societies. 2010
5. Alexander, Anne (2011), "Internet Role in Egypt Protests", British Broadcasting Company

Counterpoint:
The internet is only a place for coordination and cannot replace real-life action so if people are not willing to take to the streets, then the internet is not going to help—and even without the internet, disgruntled masses can still make their points known, as in the French Revolution. Egypt shut down internet and phone service during part of the revolution, yet it continued indicating that this movement is not based online. Therefore the internet is not necessarily the force that propels people towards change. SMS has been a very important part of the organization of these protests, which is entirely separate from the internet. Close to 5 billion people use cell phones and SMS, therefore the impact of the cell phone cannot be distinguished from the internet so it is inaccurate to say that the internet is contributing to democratization when it is very possibly thanks to mobile phones.

1. Wikipedia, French Revolution
2. BBC, "Egypt's opposition pushes demands as protests continue", 2011
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Citizens often use the internet in ways that detract from democracy.

Point:
The idea that the internet promotes democracy also operates under the assumption that the people with internet access will use the tool for ‘good’. Yet, this is also not the case. The internet is the primary medium of coordination for Jihadist groups looking to undermine the few Middle-Eastern states which are in the process of transition to democracy. In April 2007, groups of hackers (allegedly backed by the Russian government) attacked the websites of key politicians, ministries and utilities in Estonia in retaliation for the removal of a Soviet war memorial. Hackers can block access, destroy content, and organize in malicious activity as in the case of terrorism and the Estonian ‘hactivists’¹. Information can also be misused. In the US, neo-Nazism has always been an issue of contention and use the internet to further promote their viewpoints. For example, UK animal rights activists post information about people they feel to be targets, which can lead to intimidation. The internet can often be hijacked for less-than-ideal purposes and therefore does not directly promote democracy, but can be used by the people to counter reform².

Moreover, there are questions over the limits on democratic freedoms due to the ‘corporate colonization’ of the internet. For a start, a lot of the ‘trusted’ news sites that users frequent for their information simply reproduce the views of Western media corporations. And corporate social network platforms like Facebook claim to provide for democratic interaction while undertaking surveillance of their user information so as to produce profiles to sell advertising, profiles that could also be used by governments.

1. Joyce, Digital Activism Decoded: The Double Edged Sword of Digital Tactics. 2010
2. Ibid

Counterpoint:
With any tool there are going to be people who misuse it, yet cases of misuse do not outweigh times when the internet has proven to be an important force for democracy. Internet and SMS have helped to organize almost every uprising in the Middle East and the Orange Revolution in Georgia¹. Cases of citizen misuse are few and far between in comparison to the change that has been made partially thanks to the internet. Further, the internet provides tools to successfully catch the abusers and prevent continued undemocratic actions through tracking IP addresses and other tactics. The same goes for targeting terrorist networks.

1. Joyce, Digital Activism Decoded: Digital Activism in Closed and Open Societies. 2010

The internet enhances communication between countries.

Point:
The internet does not only make information available to oppressed people within a country, but also communicates that situation to the rest of the world. People also learn about other authoritarian—and democratic—governments around the world. For example, the internet allowed information about Tunisia’s revolution to reach Egypt, which made it clear that overthrowing a government was entirely possible¹. Information about the actions of other countries, and their governments can lead to a push for democratic reforms around the world. In addition, as information flows out of a country it becomes more difficult for the globe’s powers to ignore the events that are ensuing, and makes it more likely that they will take action. This action can create the internal and external pressure necessary for democratic reform as was seen in both the
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Contact between countries can also have a more subtle impact as well. It enhances communication between open and closed societies particularly in the form of business, which can bring about an exchange of values. Thanks in part to the internet; Western firms increasingly own large shares of Middle Eastern and East Asian businesses, putting pressure on governments to remove their economic protectionism measures and to allow greater transparency. For example, while China is not a democracy it has made some government and economic reforms that are on the right track.


Counterpoint:

For many countries, communication with outside actors does not make any difference. Iran has some internet freedom and access to outside information, yet president Ahmadinejad casts the West as a great evil trying to destroy Iran’s culture. The government remains a theocracy and while there have been some protests, there are many that still support the system of governance. Additionally, China may have made reforms, but it is not a democracy even though they have extensive contact with the West. Therefore, contact does not necessarily indicate that values will be adopted. When it comes to information flowing out of oppressive countries, the international community might make matters worse. When the West gets involved in local movements, often it can make leaders hold a tighter grip on their power, and turn the blame for the situation on the West leading to violence, and hindering democratic development. This is similar to the situation in Libya.

1. CNN Wire Staff, 'The West is to blame for regional unrest, Ahmadinejad says', CNN World, 18 April 2011.
4. Zenko, Micah, 'Think Again: Libya', Foreign Policy, 28 April 2011.

The internet can be used to quash democratic movements.

Point:

The internet makes it much easier for states to target and locate dissidents. They can be located by their IP addresses or records kept by internet cafes. It is almost impossible by today’s standards to remain anonymous on the internet. Surveillance used to be the only technique for governments to track down dissidents, however the internet has made governments’ task of quashing opposition easier. Since 2003, 202 bloggers have been arrested around the world and 162 of the arrests were for political reasons. The government doesn’t need a true reason because only 37 of the cases were tried in the judicial system. Political parties, ethnic and religious groups, civil rights movements, and leaders can all be targeted through government internet surveillance. When the government can find the names of political dissidents and arrest them, it makes it more difficult for successful movements to occur, because they lack leaders and potential participants are intimidated. The internet can also be used to reverse democratic momentum.

1. Digital Activism Decoded: Digital Activism in Closed and Open Societies.

Counterpoint:

Governments cannot always get away with the targeting of internet dissidents. Bloggers are often famous and followed intently by many people. If a popular blogger all of a sudden disappears it is more likely to generate increased support for the blogger and the cause than lead supporters to defect to the government\(^1\). Further, the government cannot arrest everyone, and the internet provides a tool for social movements to be poly-centric\(^2\)—they have many leaders and anyone can step in.

2. Digital Activism Decoded: Digital Activism in Closed and Open Societies.

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