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Is the Internet creating a better world?

The global village, the gap between black and white and the Internet's impact on the American Political System



Por Joerg Huetsch
Número 20

The Global Village

Nowadays, the digital distance between the Industrialized and Underdeveloped Countries is still growing. There are some initiatives to find a solution for the problem. One philosophy says that underdeveloped countries can be helped to industrialize by implementing Internet and other IT technologies.

Today all 54 countries of Africa are online, but in comparison to the 10% of the world's population they present, not even 1% of it's population is using the Internet no growing tendencies are oberverable. The gap between the „Information-Poor" and „Information-Rich" is still growing. 70% of Africa's Internet users are domiciled in Egypt and South Africa. For comparison, one million South Africans are using the Internet in contrast to the only two thousand Nigerians.

Some initiatives were built to create a platform for IT-companies, so that they can get some help and grow easier. The „Africa - Technology - Forum" is functioning as a result of that. For example, Ghana is now having a cellular network and Internet Service Provider.

Another project is the „World e-Inconclusion", founded by Hewlett Packard. They will spend one billion dollars to buy Hard- and Software for underdeveloped countries during the next years. Also, they are thinking about a „people's computer" and opened laboratories in India and China. Hewlett Packard is playing a leading role in the creating of new markets in these countries. The company clearly says that they recognize a potential market there. However, some critical analysists say that in these countries there will not be a profitable market in the next ten to twenty years.

The gap between black and white in the United States

In the Unites States, there is huge differences in Internet use between black an white Internet users. The white population is now of 50 % online, whilst only 37% of the ethnic blacks. Two years ago these percentages were only 47% and 23%.

That shows that the gap has already been reduced and it is expected to become smaller each year. Nowadays 7,5 millions blacks are online, a study of the 'Pew Internet & American Life Project found that. Lee Rainie, director of the institute, said that this is a good result for the American society.

David Ellington from 'NetNoir' said, that the gap will become smaller during the next few years. But still, the normal black families, whose average income is with US\$ 27.000 much less than the US\$ 42.000 from the whites, do not very easy to get connect to the Internet. Only because some free Internet Service Provider are now offering web access via toll free phone lines. Otherwise they could not afford it.

Clearly, there is a correlation between income and level of education and the use of the web, but fortunately there are no racial aspects anymore nowadays. The economic situation is the most important factor.

There are now portals, like www.bet.com and blackfamilie.com, which are giving an example of the black influence. Another reason for growing is today's culture, as mostly young people are using the Internet. The Clinton administration has undertaken initiatives to make the Internet freely available at schools, resulting in the connection of most of them.

The Internet's impact on the American Political System

Recently there were the US-Presidential elections and we can follow into this step and look a little bit further onto the background. No technological change came so quickly and influenced our lives so much as the Internet. As I mentioned before, almost 50% of the US population is online; people are working with and through the Internet. But as we saw, this tendency mostly for western and the more developed countries. However, the Internet's influence in the third world is very large and hopefully increases during the next years. The mentioned initiative might help to bring faster growth.

A result will be that new features of working will be created in all countries, parties and political systems. Richards Davis, author of "The Web of Politics", Oxford 1999, is surely right with his expression "The Internet is a subject worth studying now and in the future. The question for me and scholars will be how."

Davis acknowledges that studying the social construction of the Internet is studying a dynamic process. The Internet is indeed becoming more like America, something not revealed by data from a single point in time. The gender gap is already on the track to disappear, however diversity in class, race and ethnicity is only slowly increasing in the online population.

During the campaign for the recent US presidential elections, many of us have begun to pay attention to politics, politicians, and political issues. The major candidates have already developed fairly sophisticated web sites, where you can find copies of their speeches and position papers, along with discussion forums and appeals for contributions. Indeed, nowadays just about every candidate for any political office is likely to have a web site. The only question is how much money can they afford to invest in building and maintain these sites.

But there is more to politics than just election campaigns, like there is more to the Internet than just a collection of campaign web sites. Potentially, the Internet serves as a mechanism for more timely and effective communications between citizens and governments at every level. And because it represents a relatively independent channel of communication, it creates an alternative source of information about controversial topics that might be "stonewalled" by official government sources. In theory, the Internet also creates the opportunity for participatory forums and discussions between citizens and their elected or appointed leaders. Well, therefore the Internet dramatically increases political participation within the US and by, extension, in any other country where a majority of the citizens have access to the Internet? And if it leads to greater political participation, will it upset traditional political powers?

The real question is whether all of this "potential" is actually being fulfilled. Or to put it in more fundamental terms: Is the Internet actually improving the political process and will it upset the traditional political powers in the United States? In his book, Davis replies with an emphatic "No." He shows how current political players such as candidates, public officials, and the media have adapted to the Internet to assure that this new medium benefits them in their struggle for power. Davis examined the current function of the Internet in democratic politics, i.e. educating citizens, supporting electoral campaigns, gauging public opinion, and achieving policy resolution, and the roles of current political actors in those functions. His unconventional prediction concerning the Internet's impact on American politics warrants a closer look by anyone interested in learning how this new communication medium will affect us politically.

Lack of the web

Davis points out, that the Web will not transform passive couch-potatoes who wait for information to come to them into activists who aggressively exploit the information available throughout the Internet. Existing activists may become more active and knowledgeable than they already are; but a

couch-potato, is a couch-potato and will be always a couch-potato. Equally important, he argues that politicians are hardly a passive group, and that they therefore will use the Internet to further amplify the messages they already broadcast to the public. Whilst a grassroots populist group can organize an e-mail campaign to influence political discussions, it's also true that politicians can organize e-mail writing campaigns to disseminate their opinions and their requests for votes and contributions to every Internet-accessible voter in their territory.

The goal of Davis' book is to analyze whether and how the growth of the Internet will affect political participation and the distribution of political power. Davis' broad survey of the many social, political, and economic areas impacted by the Internet is straightforward and succinct, supported by solid and generally convincing methods. He avoids concentrating too heavily on the particular aspect of the modern technologies; instead he focuses on larger patterns and trends generated by the expansion of the Internet. By doing so, he has succeeded in writing a book that will retain its relevance on the topic longer than many others.

Supporting these themes is Davis' underlying argument that people will not change - the Internet is not so radical a tool that it will make the disinterested interested, the passive active, or the apolitical political. His work is a thought-provoking argument against the arrival of an information technology revolution!

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