

# **Democracy and the Internet: Will the Internet Foster Democracy?**

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## Honor Pledge: Shin

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Howard Dean, the former governor of Vermont has gained his political power with election campaigning via the Internet. Thanks to the Internet, now he is one of the most prominent candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination in the 2004 election. Howard Dean might not be the only person who receives benefits from the Internet. Advocates of the Internet highly extol its potential, which will eventually foster or further revitalize direct democracy.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, there are several scholars arguing that the Internet has limitations to improving democracy.

### Thesis

The purpose of this essay is to examine whether the Internet will foster democracy or not. Reviewing resources, this essay will explore two controversial stances on the Internet's impact on democracy: utopian views and dystopian views. By exemplifying the 2002 presidential election in South Korea, those two stances will be analyzed and examined. Then, this essay provides solutions that the Internet positively plays a role in improving democracy.

### Background

People were enthusiastic that new communication media would be the catalysts for improving democracy whenever they were first introduced. Historically, new communication

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Rheingold, "The Virtual Community," Howard Rheingold, <http://www.rheingold.com/vc/book/> (October 24, 2003).

media have dramatically transformed politics. Radio demonstrated its effectiveness as a political tool when it was exploited in “fireside chats” of the 1930s and 1940s President Franklin Roosevelt in which he spoke directly to the American people. Television technology supplanted the dominance of radio in the 1952 presidential election. Television had a major influence on the election of President John F. Kennedy, because of televised debates with Richard Nixon in 1960.<sup>2</sup>

The Internet is the newest and the first interactive communication technology. Web sites have been become a common tool for candidates and political parties to communicate their agendas since mid-1990s. Arguments about the Internet’s impacts on democracy are intensive.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This part of the essay defines the concept of democracy and explores two controversial stances to see the Internet’s role in affecting democracy.

Democracy has been a highly desirable form of governance ever since it was first practiced in ancient Greece. Based on a dictionary definition, democracy is a "government by the people, exercised either directly or through elected representatives."<sup>3</sup> The famous phrase of Abraham Lincoln "of the people, by the people and for the people" indicates the essence of democracy, the political or social unit sustained by people. Since today’s democracy is practiced in the form of representative democracy, electing representatives who fully convey people’s

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Holton, *Composing Cyberspace: Identity, Community, and Knowledge in the Electronic Age* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998), 201.

<sup>3</sup> The American Heritage Dictionary, "The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language," Bartleby.com, <http://www.bartleby.com/61/34/D0123400.html> (October 24, 2003).

opinions, needs, and values is critical in order to actualize governance ruled by the people.

Scholars define two basic assumptions for today's democracy: access to information and civic responsibility.<sup>4</sup>

### **Utopian Vision: The Internet Will Enhance Democracy**

Several scholars keep optimistic about the potential of the Internet. They argue that the Internet improves democracy, offering both internal and external ways for citizens to participate in political decision making processes. Internally, the Internet provides resources, raising civil awareness of political decision making processes and critical issues. Externally, the Internet provides a channel for citizens to make their voices heard. The study of Minnesota e-democracy, the world's first election oriented web page, illustrates that the Internet improves government openness and civil participation by prompting active dissemination of information.<sup>5</sup> The Internet fosters informed citizens and erodes monopolies of knowledge, ending civil ignorance of moral, political, and economic issues.<sup>6</sup>

There are two distinctive features of the Internet, ensuring improvement in democracy: "anarchic" and "interactive" nature.<sup>7</sup> The Internet's anarchic nature enables little or no control

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<sup>4</sup> James Mill, *Essays on Government, Jurisprudence, Liberty of The Press, and Law of Nations* (New York: Kelley Publishers, 1967), 16-27; Jurgen Habermas, *The structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Steven Clift, "Minnesota Government Information Access Council," Minnesota E-Democracy, [http://www.eff.org/Infrastructure/Foreign\\_and\\_local/MN/mn\\_giac.note](http://www.eff.org/Infrastructure/Foreign_and_local/MN/mn_giac.note) (October 24, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> James Carey, "Space, Time and Communications: A Tribute to Harold Innis," in *Communication as culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 12.

<sup>7</sup> Alinta Thornton, "Does Internet Create Democracy?," Alinta Thornton, <http://www.zip.com.au/~athornto/> (November 1, 2003).

over the Internet.<sup>8</sup> Thanks to this feature of the Internet, one can find different quality of information from traditional mass media, which plays a role as a “propaganda machine” for political and economic powers.<sup>9</sup> The Internet’s interactive nature has been extolled to be one of the most distinguishing features of the Internet as a medium.<sup>10</sup> It expands the role of citizens from passive message consumers to active message creators. The interactive nature of the Internet enlarges political communication, including real-life concerns of citizens.<sup>11</sup> Via the Internet, citizens lively discuss and debate on particular issues regardless of their political and economical power. Howard Rheingold claims that the Internet opens public discourses at the global scale. The Internet is not a “few-to-many” medium like tradition mass media, but a “many-to-many” medium that gives large numbers of people access to large number of people.<sup>12</sup>

### **Distopian Vision: The Internet Still Has Limitations to Improving Democracy**

Contrary to the viewpoints of supporters, a great number of scholars concern about the Internet’s limitations to improving democracy.

One of the issues to hinder the Internet’s democratic nature is the "digital divide." In the most basic sense, the digital divide is discrepancies between those who have access to the

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<sup>8</sup> Ioannidis Nikolaos, "Internet and Systems of Governance," Ioannidis Nikolaos, [http://homoeccumenicus.com/essay\\_ioannidis\\_system\\_governance.htm](http://homoeccumenicus.com/essay_ioannidis_system_governance.htm) (November 1, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Ioannidis Nikolaos, "Internet and Systems of Governance," Ioannidis Nikolaos, [http://homoeccumenicus.com/essay\\_ioannidis\\_system\\_governance.htm](http://homoeccumenicus.com/essay_ioannidis_system_governance.htm) (November 1, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Alinta Thornton, "Does Internet Create Democracy?," Alinta Thornton, <http://www.zip.com.au/~athornto/> (November 1, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Scott London, “Electronic Democracy: A Literature Survey,” Scott London, <http://www.west.net/~insight/london/ed.htm> (October 25, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Howard Rheingold, "The Virtual Community," Howard Rheingold, <http://www.rheingold.com/vc/book/> (October 24, 2003).

information technology and those who do not.<sup>13</sup> However, digital divide is not only the problem of physical access but a social issue as well. A recent study shows that digital divide is the major unequalizing force in the world economy today.<sup>14</sup> The vast majority of people in the world have not accessed to the phone, not to mention of the Internet.<sup>15</sup> In case of India, the digital divide issue even hampers the development of the country. In spite of big progresses in IT, over 70% of Indians do not have access to the Internet. It is only limited to highly educated people, enlarging gaps between have's and have-not's in a socio-political context.<sup>16</sup>

Government control over the Internet is also problematic. Government's intimidation to restrict the Internet threatens democracy. A recent study shows government has dramatically increased attempts to censor the Internet since 1998.<sup>17</sup> A Human Rights Watch (HRW) report entitled *Freedom of Expression on the Internet* illustrates recent examples of control over the Internet, occurred in several countries. Australian government approved the Broadcasting Services Amendment Act, which forces Australian ISPs to remove objectionable materials from Australian sites and to block access to similar sites overseas. Middle-East Asian countries such as Bahrain, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates have also blocked several web

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<sup>13</sup> U.S Department of Commerce, "Falling though the Net: Defining the Digital Divide," National Telecommunications and Information Administration, <http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/ftn99/contents.html> (October 28, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Robert Wade, "Bridging the Digital Divide: New Route to Development or New Form of Dependency?," *Global Governance* 8, no.4 (2002): 443-67, [https://blackboard.unc.edu/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp?tab=courses&url=/bin/common/course.pl?course\\_id=\\_105469\\_1](https://blackboard.unc.edu/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp?tab=courses&url=/bin/common/course.pl?course_id=_105469_1) (October 28, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Jane Black, "Bridging the Digital Divide," BBC News, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/special\\_report/1999/10/99/information\\_rich\\_information\\_poor/466651.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/special_report/1999/10/99/information_rich_information_poor/466651.stm) (October 28, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Jill McGivering, "India's Digital Divide," BBC News, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/from\\_our\\_own\\_correspondent/2932758.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/from_our_own_correspondent/2932758.stm) (October 28, 2003)

<sup>17</sup> Pamela Mendels, "Governments Expand Restrictions on Internet," *Cyber Law Journal*, <http://www.nytimes.com/library/tech/98/12/cyber/cyberlaw/18law.html> (October 28, 2003)

sites.<sup>18</sup> China restricts transmitting or posting the messages on the web, considered being “anti-government propaganda.”<sup>19</sup>

The greatest impediment to stifle the potential of the Internet is civil indifference and reluctance to participate in political decision making process. A report entitled *The Ever Shifting Internet Population* shows that numerous people are isolating themselves from the web because of the lack of desire and needs.<sup>20</sup> According to the study, among non-Internet users in the U.S., most of them easily access to the Internet either physically or socially.

### **South Korea’s Internet Election**

The 2002 presidential election in South Korea sparked the Internet’s impacts on politics. Numerous domestic and overseas news media and web resources covered the victory of President Rho Moohyun and the victory of citizens catalyzed by the Internet. The election of President Rho was not from traditional power coalition such as media, political and economic powers, but from citizens empowered by the Internet. President Rho was not a big name in politics. His own party even forced him not to run for the presidential race. He also had conflicts with three major, conservative news media in South Korea. The conflicts with these news media would mean plummeting possibility to be elected, since these media dominate over 70% of traditional Korean news market.<sup>21</sup> However, thanks to the Internet and citizens, he won the

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<sup>18</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Freedom of Expression on the Internet,” Human Rights Watch, <http://www.hrw.org/wr2k/Issues-04.htm> (October 28, 2003)

<sup>19</sup> Human Rights Watch, “China Tightens Internet Controls,” Human Rights Watch, <http://www.hrw.org/press/2001/08/china-0801.htm> (October 28, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> Amanda Lenhart, “The Ever-Shifting Internet Population,” Pew Internet and American Life Project, [http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/pdfs/PIP\\_Shifting\\_Net\\_Pop\\_Report.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/pdfs/PIP_Shifting_Net_Pop_Report.pdf) (October 28, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> Howard Rheingold, “First-Hand Report on Korean Election,” Smart Mobs, <http://www.smartmobs.com/archives/001118.html> (October 29, 2003).

election. The Internet has played a primary medium of presidential election campaign in South Korea, supplanting the role of television.<sup>22</sup> The president Rho distributed his political philosophy, opinions on issues and future plans via Internet sites. In the mean time, more than seven-thousand voters sent him e-mails on policy ideas a day, and about one billion dollars were raised by more than one-eighty-thousand individual donors. South Korea has become the “world's leader in a cyberspace campaign,” and has mobilized the grassroots participation in a new form.<sup>23</sup>

Especially, without “Rho Sa mo” and *Oh My News*, his triumph would have been impossible. Rho Sa Mo is the first politician-supporting fan club in South Korea with voluntary involvement of about eighty-thousand citizens.<sup>24</sup> During the campaign, they raised more than seven-million dollars over the Internet, and voluntarily gathered for Roh’s speeches without being paid. *Oh My News*, an internet news medium in South Korea, also played a crucial role in President Rho’s election.<sup>25</sup> *Guardian*, the prestigious Britain news paper, extolled that “*Oh My News* is the world's most domestically powerful news site, which has built up almost as big a readership and as fearsome a reputation for moving public opinion as the Sun.”<sup>26</sup> *The Christian*

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<sup>22</sup> Barbara Demick, “Internet Users Drive S. Korean Politics,” *The Miami Herald*, <http://www.miami.com/mld/miamiherald/news/world/5255669.htm> (October 29, 2003)

<sup>23</sup> Geoffrey York, “In South Korea, It's the Mouse that Roars,” *Globeandmail.com*, <http://www.globeandmail.com/servlet/ArticleNews/printarticle/gam/20021230/UNETTN> (October 29, 2003).

<sup>24</sup> Rho Sa Mo, [http://www.nosamo.org/home/etc/nosamo\\_intro1.asp](http://www.nosamo.org/home/etc/nosamo_intro1.asp) (October 29, 2003).

<sup>25</sup> Yeonho Oh, <http://www.ohmynews.com/> (October 29, 2003).

<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Watts, “World's First Internet President Logs On,” *Guardian Unlimited*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/korea/article/0,2763,901445,00.html> (October 29, 2003).

*Science Monitor* referred *Oh My News* as South Korea's most influential online news site.<sup>27</sup> The election demonstrated the power of the Internet, associated with active civil participation.

### 3. ANALYSIS

This essay has explored ongoing arguments about whether the Internet will foster democracy or not and has shown that the Internet played a major role in the victory of President Rho and the victory of his citizen-supporters in South Korea's 2002 presidential election. Stances on this issue have been divided into two: utopian and distopian. Previously covered literature has examined the Internet's potential in a dichotomous way, thus it has missed negotiatory points. Utopian visions have been too idealistic about the Internet's potential to improving democracy, while distopian visions have missed several points to solve what they are concerned about. Two views have room to be negotiated, and a conclusion can be drawn as follows: although the Internet has several limitations to fostering democracy, it certainly has potential to improve democracy with active civil participation.

The Internet's distinctively encouraging features from other media are its anarchic and interactive nature. Scholars who strongly believe the Internet's potential argue that a government has little or no control over the Internet because of its anarchic nature. As distopian-view-holders concern, however, governments attempt to censor over the Internet. Numerous countries have enacted laws to restrict contents on the Internet, and some of them are even blocking and filtering certain sites, attenuating the Internet's potential to enhancing democracy. In spite of the

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<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Watts, "Technology and Democracy are a Potent Mix in S. Korea," *The Christian Science Monitor*, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0131/p08s01-woap.htm> (October 29, 2003).

anarchic nature of the Internet, those with powers keep intimidating to control over the Internet. However, governments are finding it is harder to censor contents on the web than traditional media, since exchanging information, opinions and thoughts on the web is occurring at the global level. Via the Internet, one meets and debates with others across the world. Governments will soon encounter the reality that having the Internet under their control is almost impossible as they did over traditional media, such as television and newspapers.

The Internet's interactivity empowers citizens. It also helps diverse points of views reflected on the web. The Internet drastically changed the role of people from mere consumer of media products to producer of them.

The power of citizens ignited by the Internet was revealed in South Korea's 2002 presidential election. President Rho Moo Hyun was elected not because of the traditional power coalition, such as traditional mass media, political and economic powers but because of citizens assisted by the Internet. People freely discussed their ideas about candidates via the Internet and like-minded people gathered and organized the Rho Sa Mo, South Korea's first politician supporting fan club. Also, *Oh My News*, online news media operated by citizen-reporters, transmitted not the opinions of power holders but citizens'.

The election has two significant implications in discussing the Internet's role in fostering democracy: the Internet has powerful potential to enhance democracy with civil responsibilities.

#### **4. SOLUTIONS**

As demonstrated in South Korea's presidential election, the Internet has the power to change political landscape, improving democracy with active civil corporations. Among

concerns addressed by scholars with dystopian views, civil participation might be the most problematic and the most difficult issue to solve. Once active civil participation is attained, the other concerns, the digital divide and government control over the Internet, will be reduced over time. Thus, this section focuses on how to increase civil participation.

Civil participation includes voting in elections, joining grass-root groups, and searching for critical information. There are two possible ways to increase civil participation: bringing up well informed citizens and building civil networks. Bringing up well informed citizens starts with educating citizens about their rights and obligations. Citizens should recognize that there are no democratic rights without their efforts to protect democracy. Living in a democratic society imposes civil responsibility since democracy is the form of governance ruled by the people. It is both citizens' rights and citizens' obligations to fully enjoy and protect democracy.

The other solution is building networks with other citizens, which gives the citizens both the feeling of involvement and the sense of obligation to their roles in a democratic society. Networks might be based on a community, a school, a workplace or groups of people who share common interests and values. People in the networks communicate their opinions and thoughts about issues they are concerned with, and encourage others to actively participate in political decision-making processes. Foremost, networks empower citizens. By building networks, citizens not only participate in decision making process but also increase their power to positively affect those processes. Educating informed citizens and forming civil networks function as foundations to stimulate civil participation.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The Internet's democratic nature is now in a lively experiment. Controversy is ongoing whether the Internet will foster democracy or not. This essay advocates the utopian vision over the distopian vision by closely examining South Korea's 2002 presidential election. However, citizens should always be aware that the genuine power to foster democracy comes from citizens themselves, not from the Internet. The Internet prompts the improvement but does not bring changes by itself. With active citizens' responsibility, the Internet's potential to enhance democracy is promising.

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