



## Editorial

# The Global Network Society: New freedoms or old limitations?

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Continuing *development's* exploration of globalization from different facets, Volume 46, no. 1, explores the impact of the information age from global economic, technological, social and cultural perspectives. It is inspired by the pioneering 'Information Age' trilogy of Manuel Castells (1996) and includes the articles of several scholars who attended a seminar on 'Transformations of the Public Sphere in the Age of the Global Network Society' at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research (ZiF), University of Bielefeld, Germany, in May 2002.

The journal maps out the new global society forged by today's restructuring of global capitalism and neo-liberalism, fostered by electronic communication networks in ways that have unsettled some aspects of nation-states and undermined traditional cultures and seen the rise of new forms of politics and civil society actions. The authors aim to help us think through the complexities of how we can be knowing and effective citizens in this new network society.

There are two currents to the articles. One is a positive sense that globalizing processes, notably technological changes, are opening up political spaces and creating the potential for a wider range of stakeholders to influence politics. Citizens are mediating, largely through the new role acquired by civil society, their active participation in a range of economic and political processes that would not have been possible a decade ago. Electronic communication flows have opened up, for those able to access them, new ways to express their views, shape public opinion and protest at negative impacts of globalization. The public sphere seems marked by openness and democracy and the Internet potentially offers a profound change in communication and way of life from the rural village to national central banks.

The other current is a much darker one. Here authors question if indeed the Internet is able to produce such civic change. There is an increasingly daunting mountain of information available on the global computer network. A survey conducted in 2002 determined that there were more than 38 million websites on the Internet, a dizzying increase from the tiny 10,000 in 1994. In addition, according to Google (one of the most popular search engines), there are more than two billion web pages (Taubman, 2002). Much of this information is 'free, open and accessible' to those who can afford it. However, just because people can access this information and interact with it, for example to create for themselves their own web page, join a chat group or set up an e-mail, it does not mean that political awareness follows. Essentially, the politically engaged people welcomed the Internet as a very useful tool for connection, strengthening their own work and engagement. But on its own the Internet is not an educative tool, indeed according to surveys and cases about the use of the Internet, all this information does not guarantee better, more responsible citizenry. Particularly among the young, the use of the Internet is not for educative purposes but for computer games, on-line purchases and e-chatting.

One telling example is a project in 2000 where an ICT business supported the government of India in opening a computer kiosk in the walls of a Delhi slum. The project was seen as a model of how to bring the computer age to the world's urban poor. But the response of the community was to ask for it to be taken away as the children were avoiding doing their homework and neglecting their duties at home. They crowded around the kiosk not to surf the web for educative learning about the world, which was in any case unavailable in Hindi, the only language they knew, but to do paint programmes and computer games (Warschauer, 2002).

The potential to use the Internet to guide economic, political and social practices of a nation might be there along with its subversive potential, but this potential is not necessarily one that citizens take up. This is not to undermine the many groups who have made good use of it, such as the women's movement, which seems to have found the Internet

particularly suited to their needs. According to the authors in the journal, the failure to use the Internet as a political tool, despite many predictions and a lot of hope, is not only information overload, or the digital divide between South and North, but poses larger threats to the democratic vision of the original designers of the Web. If one remembers that the Internet was first a military invention, and the amount of money governments and then private businesses have invested in it, it perhaps should be no surprise that the 'commons' of cyberspace is not operating to foster the world's social capital in quite the way that some pioneers imagined.

From the late 1980s into the early 1990s, the Internet was designed with an open architecture where rich and exciting programmes (text, data and images) resided in people's desktop computers. Everyone with access could see how things were constructed and imitate them. People worked with the norms of sharing information design and otherwise, across geographic and other borders, building up a community of users that was characterized as progressive and galvanized in the search for social justice.

Putting to one side the hate websites, the pornography and sexism that flood the web, in this more critical thread of the journal, the global information age has taken another track (Rajagopal and Bojn, 2002). In terms of governments, the Internet rarely escapes scrutiny – even in Europe and the United States it is an increasingly unequal political space, if not as so obviously unequal as the limited connectivity imposed by nations such as China that restrict those who can have access to the web. Despite the unique decentralizing features of the Internet, governments control information flows through political and economic restrictions on the use of ICT or electronic media (Van Koert, 2002). The political freedom of the Internet, as it was first envisaged, today seems something of an illusion. Even if legally it is difficult to control, the Internet is not beyond transnational checks and balances in favour of those in power (government and business).

The economic control is perhaps the most ominous, and the least recognized. First, the most valuable part of the Internet is privately owned.

The search engines are private companies and steer users to the sites that belong to their business partners. Second, as there are more and more users it takes work and inspired creativity to build web pages that draw and hold an audience. But, more importantly, it takes money and skills. The traffic patterns of today's web indicate this. According to a recent survey, the top four media organizations (AOL Time Warner, Microsoft, Yahoo and Lycos) attract more visitors than any other companies worldwide (and among the next 10 are NBC, Disney and Amazon). The free spirit of small, interconnected independent groups of the web of the early 1990s, if indeed it did exist, is no longer (Levine, 2002). Third, the big companies control the way people accessing the Internet through their portals can move in cyberspace, and their way of operating is no longer fully disclosed. Many techniques have now been patented, preventing imitation. And the transformation of simple pages to the sophisticated transmission of data at huge speeds produces sophisticated sites full of moving pictures and sound, giving an enormous competitive advantage to Hollywood over the local NGO in putting across their message.

All of this could lead us to doubt if the Internet, as it is operating today, is going to be able to foster civic participation and democratic social development. It seems the Internet is as subject to dominant ideologies and similar market-led controls as are all facets of today's globalization.

If from these articles we can draw a message, it is not to give up hope in the Internet and its promises but to be more realistic about what it can do within today's economic and political climate. It does not operate outside the rules. For those concerned to promote the positive values of civil society, we need not to be naïve about the Internet but to look at its short though remarkable history to see the direction it is taking. From that analysis we can understand better how to continue to build participatory community-based interconnectivity that is able to ensure that the Internet is not just an amusing hole in the wall for Indian slum children as part of a model project but a vital, vibrant educative resource for citizens to shape actively their political and economic lives.

Volume 46 of *development* aims to provide a

stimulating resource that shows how civil society groups are working together to promote democratic spaces in the global public sphere through various activities. The second issue of volume 46 on 'Globalization, Empowerment, Reproductive Health and Rights' explores some of the most innovative and interesting work in the area of women's sexual health and reproductive rights. The journal shows the complexities of the broader cultural, economic, political and social environment that impact on women's well-being and rights.

The third issue on 'Migrants: Citizenship, Identity and Rights' endeavours to bring together the opinions of policy-makers, academics, migrants and development workers on their experiences, hopes and fears on migration – deeply concerning, and also one of the most hidden issues in international development policy dialogues today. Taking a human rights approach, the journal discusses issues of gender, racism, health and governance, providing up-to-date resources on migration issues transnationally.

The last issue of the volume looks at the troubling issue of violence and development. The decision to look at violence is driven by the piercing questions raised by the Indian activist and writer Arundhati Roy (2002) about the 'normalcy' of the 'macabre' in our daily lives, where the war of terror, in all its manifestations, becomes the given. How can the international community working for development with its creed of social and economic justice respond adequately to the high level of violence in all of our lives? How do we cope with the harsh reality of random shootings in big cities, the daily starvation of children, the rape and murder of neighbours in the name of religion and the pollution that destroys us and our environment?

The topics of this volume are at the core of the negotiations of many civil society groups as they shape the new economic and political features of the global information age. This first issue of the volume starts off the exploration with innovative attempts to capture aspects of the massive changes we are facing.

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