The decentralisation of power has been the single biggest consequence of satellite television. This process will be continued by the growth of the information superhighway, or infobahn. Regardless of the political ground rules, the commoditisation of information is largely expected to ensure that governments around the world will be unable to control the flow of information.

by Neil Bierbaum

A BEAST LET LOOSE
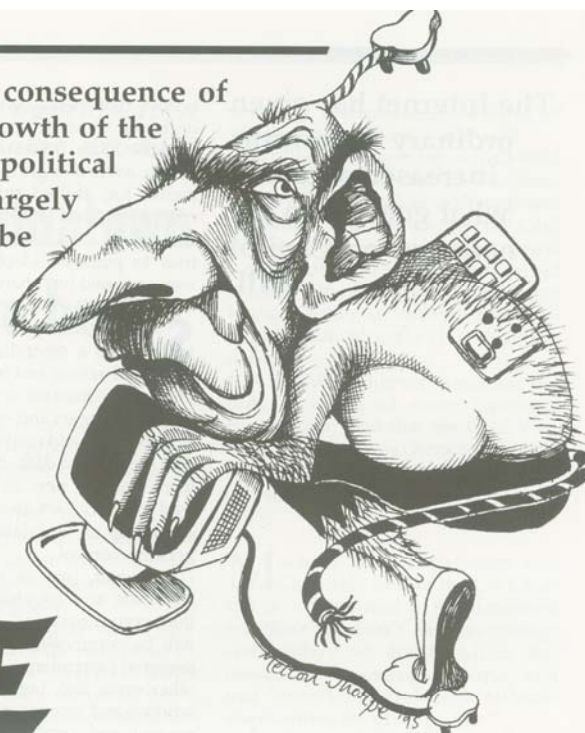
A CNN news report last year showed an American cameraman protecting a Haitian citizen from being arrested by military police. It was symbolic of a new global reality: the power of the camera over the gun. Global economic interdependence and competition has fuelled the need for shared information and rapid telecommunications. While this global interconnectedness is essential for a country's economy, it is at the expense of governments' ability to maintain power and exercise control.

Governments can no longer control their own media image simply by controlling the flow of information. Instead they have to behave themselves. The main catalyst for this has been technology, and new developments such as the Internet will serve only to accentuate this decentralisation of power.

For centuries whoever could control the medium could control the message. The Catholic Church restricted thought and religious debate by restricting the reproduction of the Bible. Only with the invention of the printing press did it begin to relinquish its hold on the minds of its subjects - the result largely of its inability to control the new technology.

In her book *Wild Swans*, Jung Chang tells how the communist government of China managed to convince even its educated citizens that people in the western world were also starving. It was only when the Chinese began receiving satellite images from the rest of the world that they discovered the lie. And they became angry. The uprising at Tiananmen Square was one consequence of this, and one which did not go unnoticed as it might once have done. Images of a Chinese student

lying down in front of a tank were carried by satellite to millions of TV screens around the world. Satellite TV broadcasts from West Germany into East Germany were largely credited for the collapse of the Berlin Wall.

Today we have come to expect live footage of the world's wars and trouble spots, almost to the point where Arnold Schwarzeneger movies have to compete with news reports. Specialist magazines which cover the global satellite industry carry advertisements for portable satellite dishes which video journalists can use to provide live feed from Nepal or Burundi back to Atlanta, Georgia.

The infobahn will have a similar effect. A recent story in *Leadership* magazine told how, during the anti-apartheid struggle, Gabu Tugwana, now editor of *New Nation*, used to compile lists of sports boycott breakers while working in the sports department at the now defunct *Rand Daily Mail*. He would then pass the lists on to someone who was leaving the country, who would mail them to Sam Ramsamy at the Non-Racial Olympic Committee in London. Today he would be able to send those messages instantly by e-mail. He could send photographs, recorded sounds and even moving images, all with a few mouse clicks. With a few e-mail addresses, revolutionaries need never be seen together, need never show their faces. The old apartheid law that a gathering of two or more people could be deemed illegal would have been laughable if all those involved in the struggle had been wired.

Policing in that case would have been almost impossible. Preventing

people from owning computers, restricting the allocation of telephones, such actions would militate against the efficient functioning - and therefore survival of an economy.

Information has become a commodity as essential to any economy as gold is to South Africa.

And that information is no longer in the hands of the government. The Chinese government tried unsuccessfully to ban the satellite dish, but the Chinese people stopped at nothing to acquire them. Then it tried to cripple Rupert Murdoch's *Star TV* by not allowing him to set up infrastructures on the ground by which to collect pay-TV subscriptions. Eventually Murdoch agreed to drop the BBC – which was seen as being anti-Chinese – from his bouquet of channels and in so doing won concessions from the Chinese government. Conceivably it is only a matter of time before Murdoch's channels have such popular support that the government could face mass disapproval if it tried to remove them.

This is an example of how television, a technology that was once centralised and subject to government control through the assignment of frequencies, has become decentralised and diffuse and impossible to control as a result of a technology that put the viewing choice into the hands of the individual on an enormous scale. What was once a powerful and easily controlled medium for government propaganda has become a beast let loose from its cage.

The defining factor here is increased - perhaps unlimited - choice in the hands of the end user. In a recent discussion about a global, multichannel satellite television environment, Koos Bekker, founder and CEO of M-Net/MultiChoice said he does not

With a few e-mail addresses, revolutionaries need never be seen together, need never show their faces.

believe that media owners, who make decisions about program content, will ever be more powerful than governments, even though the control of the media has shifted into these media moguls' hands. "There will be too much choice," he says. "If one media owner tries to push an ideological line, the viewer would just change channels."

Similarly, computers were initially seen as a centralising force, both by organisations and by governments. Through a massive centralised mainframe, managers and bureaucrats were able to access and control the programs and the flow of data, thus fuelling the fears that this new technology would lead to every fact about every citizen ending up on that database under one person's control.

However, just as satellites turned television and television programmes into commmodities, so information will be commoditised by millions of personal computers, each linked to the other on a distributed network, each sending and receiving information, the content and form of which is determined by the user.

This commoditisation of information that arises will truly democratise the world. According to Frank Heydenrych, editor *Computer Week*, "If information control enslaves, then the corollary must be equally true - unrestricted information flow liberates in a manner we can only now start to glimpse."

One question that must be asked is what would happen if one person or organisation ended up owning all the infrastructure, all the means of distribution of information, all the satellites or all the fibre optic cable networks? Conceivably they could cut a disliked user's cables but the victim could simply move next door and log in from there. The effective policing of satellite dish owners in China proved impossible, while the collection of TV licences in South Africa has been highly ineffective and it is debatable whether it will ever justify the cost of collection and monitoring. The sheer volume of personal computers and telephone connections make the idea of policing the Internet even more absurd. Even if such policing could be done electronically, the fact that so much banking, financial and economic information is

on that network would remain an important deterrent to such actions.

The next step will be the convergence of television and telephony, and of TV screens and computer monitors. The viewer will have an unlimited choice and will be able to order movies – or news broadcasts – at their own volition. The fact that in the new South African government the ministerial portfolios of broadcasting and telecommunications have been lumped together under the eye of Dr Pallo Jordan is evidence that the new government has acknowledged this convergence and is preparing for it. One significant beneficiary in South Africa will be education. Used correctly, this technology can provide education to millions of people at a fraction of the cost of classrooms and teachers and restricted learning hours.

Neil Jacobsohn is heading up a project at Times Media Limited which will see *Business Day* being published in one form or another on the Internet before the end of this year. He believes that we are witnessing the "birth of a new definition of individual democracy". Although he acknowledges that it will be confined to those who have access, he points out that for the first time ordinary people will be able to contribute to debate on a wide scale. "One will have an infinitely greater chance of being heard than through the traditional letter to the editor. Your right of reply is guaranteed," says Jacobsohn. "Nobody will interfere. You will be able to address politicians directly. This is a politician's nightmare. Any government that does not actively promote it is frankly shortsighted and dumb."

Certainly, in America, presidential candidates who have managed to master the prevalent medium of their time have tended to be more successful. For Franklin D Roosevelt it was radio. For JFK and Ronald Reagan, television. For Bill Clinton, MTV. Many ambitious American politicians today are going live on the Internet. The most recently successful was Newt Gingrich, the new Republican Speaker, who has become synonymous with a laptop computer.

The Internet has given ordinary Americans increased access to what goes on in the hallways on Capitol Hill.

This is the culmination of a process that started with talk radio and continued with the fax machine. The latter in particular increased the reaction time of special interest groups whose lobbyists could rally enough support during a lunch break to influence a change in the direction of a congressional vote.

Whether having such power in the hands of these special interest groups is beneficial to the American public as a whole is an ongoing point of debate, but the fact of this shift away from being a representative democracy towards being a direct democracy is certainly significant, and has challenged the secure positions of America's leaders. At the moment two percent of Americans say they log onto a network for at least an hour a day. This may sound trivial but it equals the audience figures for some cable networks – and it's growing, fast.

The growth of the Internet will be interesting to watch in South Africa. It is clear that its penetration will remain low and will favour businesspeople, who through the connection necessary for them to do business, will have access to cyberdemocracy. These will include secretaries, credit controllers and financial analysts. Many will no doubt be more interested in alt.sex. stories than in alt.politics.greens. Some may prefer alt.politics.libertarian to alt.politics.nationalism.white, but either way they will have an easy and accessible medium for their own personal voice.

It is certainly much easier to post an opinion to a user group than it is to track down one's local MP and write a long letter, find a stamp and then a post-box, and hope that it isopened. Wired individuals will be far more likely to contribute directly to a parliamentary debate, and so the potential exists for the representation to be skewed in favour of the upper classes. Meanwhile, those left out on the street will have to rely on making enough noise to get good news coverage.

Neil Bierbaum is the media editor of *Marketing Mix* magazine. He recently won the Premier Award in the Businees category at the 1994 Mondi Paper Magazine Awards and was runner-up for the Siemens Journalist of the Year Award at the 1994 Specialist Press Association Awards.

EXCUSE ME. I WAS WONDERING. IF YOU'D BEEN FOLLOWING THE VOTING PROCESS ON T.V.?

NO. BUT I READ ALL ABOUT IT ON INTERNET.