

A new public sphere?

By Herman Wasserman and Arrie de Beer

It is widely accepted that a healthy public sphere is a necessity for democracy, and that the media can facilitate debate in this sphere. In the years since democratisation in South Africa, the media's freedom to fulfil this role has been jealously guarded.

The constitutional guarantee of free speech has given the media a defence to engage in the democratic processes by sniffing out corruption, pointing out shortcomings in government policy and holding politicians and other public figures accountable.

Not everyone agrees that the South African media's approach has always been the correct one under the circumstances, but that it has a vital role to play in the democratic process, is not disputed.

This is certainly true of the traditional news

media, where several hard-hitting stories have shown the media's commitment to democracy and where the exchange of diverse viewpoints has also confirmed the media's role as a forum for dialogue and debate.

But what about the new media of the Internet, email and related communication technologies? Worldwide the Internet has been enthusiastically welcomed as a way of broadening democratic processes and strengthening civil society.

The interactive nature of the Internet has prompted some critics to envisage this medium as the new embodiment of the public sphere, where opinions can be exchanged more freely than in traditional media. Then there is the phenomenon of cyber activism, through which the Internet and related communication technologies have brought a new dimension to political mobilisation.

The question is, however, whether this potential

also applies to African countries, and more specifically, to Africa south of the Sahara.

And, if the Internet can be applied in South African democratic processes, what will the changes that it brings about look like? Will they be revolutionary, or hardly noticeable at all? And what will it say about the application of the Internet for similar purposes in the rest of sub-Saharan Africa? Is there reason for excitement or mild optimism?

Is the glass half full or half empty?

Depending on whom you talk to, or on which highway you find yourself, the future of the Internet in South Africa is either very bleak or extremely rosy. Some critics hail it as a technology that will enable African countries to "leapfrog" stages in the development of communication infrastructure, others say the disproportionate advantages it gives developed countries will



only lead to a widening of the gulf between rich and poor nations. One is often tempted to quote statistics reminding us that Manhattan has more telephone lines than sub-Saharan Africa, that only one out of every 250 to 400 people in Africa has access to the Internet compared to the one out of every two people in Europe and North America, or that the latest census figures have shown that only 2% of black households in South Africa have a computer compared with 46% of white households.

The potential benefits of the Internet for democracy in Africa, ranging from elections, input on policy matters and protest against certain policies, should be considered seriously.

The interactive nature of the medium makes it suited for the exchange of information in a participatory manner. It is therefore potentially ideal for encouraging democratic practices.

How should one think about the role of the Internet in political processes without seeing it in deterministic ways, as if the introduction of a new technology would necessarily be the sole cause of the revolutionisation of political functions?

Overly optimistic proposals of the Internet's role in political life are often flawed because they tend to see the development of new technologies as to some extent separate or isolated from other societal and institutional processes that surround it.

This has been pointed out by the American Internet scholar Philip Agre, who suggested an "amplification model", in which the Internet is not so much a force creating new political effects, but a part of a social network in which existing institutional forces are amplified. From this perspective, the Internet may facilitate change only inasmuch as the political and social institutions of which it forms part

class lines) in both connectivity and "real" access, which would include the skills needed to utilise the technology optimally.

However grim the issue of connectivity might seem in the African context, some success has already been attained in South Africa. In the field of formal democratic processes such as voting procedures and the dissemination of government information, as well as the organisation and mobilisation of interest groups making use of their democratic freedom of association and freedom of speech, the Internet has proved useful.

Although the spread of connectivity in South Africa is far from equitable, it has started to amplify political and societal forces in a recognisable way on both governmental and non-governmental level.

The government has appropriated this medium to extend its vision of citizen participation in the democratic processes and to disseminate information among at least a section of the electorate. However, access to information alone is not enough for citizens to become involved in influencing the policy-making process.

In the last few years social movements and activist groups have harnessed the Internet to give them a more direct say in policy. Examples of this "top-down" and "bottom-up" involvement in democratic processes via the Internet and email, are the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC).

With the forthcoming South African general elections in 2004, the challenge of voter education, access to political information and citizen participation in the voting process will again come under the spotlight.

During these debates it will again be necessary to scrutinise the successes that the IEC has already achieved through its Internet presence, and the obstacles in the way of a viable e-government. The elections

with a high degree of efficiency during election times to make relevant information available that affects voters (eg: whether one's name is on the voter's roll; where voting stations are; which parties participate in the elections). During election times special mobile units are positioned in otherwise inaccessible rural areas, spreading relevant election information from where it is taken further by word of mouth and radio.

The site also provides the voter with several other databases as to how many seats a political party won on local, provincial and national level, and how many votes were registered during elections at each level. This correlates with the notion that any democracy, and its electoral components, should be transparent and accessible.

The TAC (www.tac.org.za) also uses the Internet and email to further its aims. Although one of the TAC's strategies is to "maintain TAC visibility through posters, pamphlets, meetings, street activism and letter writing" and therefore seems to rely on more traditional media, some of its other objectives are well suited for pursuit through the Internet. Its aims, as stated on its website, include to "build a mass TAC membership" and "build networks and alliances with unions, employers, religious bodies, women and youth organisations, lesbian and gay organisations and other interested sections of the community".

These attempts may be amplified by this medium's capability to distribute information quickly across a wide database, to bridge (geo)spatial distances and to build solidarity networks through cross-linking. The Internet and email might also provide a valuable tool to mobilise supporters for civil disobedience actions, such as have taken place earlier in 2003. Statistics show a rise in website visits over these periods.

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and through which it is appropriated have already planned or willed this change.

In other words, if one wants to ask the question as to what potential effects the Internet might have for democracy in (South) Africa, one should first try and find out what the salient forces in the (South) African political arena are that might be magnified through an introduction of the Internet into these democratic processes.

These might for instance include the newly formed African Union (AU), the initiatives around the New Partnership for African Development (Nepad) and the critical responses to this plan, and the continued growth of a vibrant civil society in South Africa.

Of course the detrimental forces will also have to be reckoned with. These include the material factors hampering the development of the Internet in Africa, and the stark inequalities (across racial, gender and

will also be an opportunity to interrogate the progress that was made during the last 10 years of democracy.

These questions have increasingly come from civil society movements like the Anti-Privatisation Forum, the Landless Peoples' Movement and the Treatment Action Campaign. A recent answer to such pressure came in the form of a government decision to change its policy on the provision of anti-retrovirals in the public health sector. This policy change has come about because of immense pressure brought to bear on government by groups such as the TAC, through its relentless media campaigns.

Not only traditional media – where TAC has mostly received favourable coverage – but also the Internet and email was used to enforce policy changes by putting the provision of HIV/Aids drugs on the public agenda.

The IEC (www.elections.org.za) uses the Internet

While there seems to be reason to be optimistic about the potential new media technologies have for citizen participation ranging from formal electoral procedures to mobilisation and debate, deterministic views should be avoided.

Although the Internet in Africa is confronted by socio-cultural, economic and infrastructural impediments, some of the positive social forces for democratic participation are already showing some measure of success.

The glass might just be half-full.

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