Chapter 12
The Politics of Access to Information:
Exploring the Development of Software Platforms and Communications Hardware in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

Over the last few decades, unprecedented advances in communications technology have collapsed vast spatial and temporal differences, and made it possible for people to form connections in a manner not thought possible before. Centred chiefly on information, this revolution has transformed the way in which people around the world think, work, share, and communicate. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) promise a future of a highly interconnected world, wherein action is not limited by physical boundaries, and constrained physical space is replaced by a virtual 'cyberspace' not subject to traditional hierarchies and power relations. But is the promise of ICTs chimerical? To tackle these issues, central to the global policy debate over the potential development contributions of Information and Communication Technologies, and to examine whether and the extent to which disparities in access to ICTs exist, this book chapter provides a demonstration of the ways in which ICTs may be used as tools to further global economic, social, and political advancement, to shape actor behaviour, and to enhance institutional functioning; particularly in the Third World.

INTRODUCTION

The age of Information Technology – IT as we call it – has arrived. I know of no other technological advantage which has brought together so many areas of rapid and exciting development. Computers and telecommunications are converging very rapidly, huge investments are being made, and the impact of information technology will be felt at every level in our society; in industry, in commerce, in our offices and in our homes. -Kenneth Baker (1982)

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The closing years of the 20th century were a period of turbulent change for world politics, and stood witness to two major developments that critics agree played a key role in the sculpting of the political, economic and social landscape of the 21st century. The first was the dramatic unfolding of a series of events, beginning with the symbolic dismantling of the Berlin Wall in 1989, which signalled the beginning of the end for many of the central tenets of post-World War II international relations. A plethora of forces at work in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe over previous decades unleashed dramatic upheavals in essentially all countries of the former Eastern Bloc, culminating in the unexpected collapse of Soviet statism in 1990-91 and the subsequent demise of international communism. At the forefront of these forces were the pressures of technological change on the internal structures of the Eastern Bloc nations and on their relationships with the outside world. These led to drastic economic restructuring to compete in the high technology global environment with huge shifts in the composition of the domestic economies, a rationalisation of military forces, and a seemingly unstoppable flood of information pouring unhindered through the erstwhile Iron Curtain.

The second development was less dramatic and, beyond a handful of scientific and academic circles, was less well recognised: the invention of Hyper Text Mark-up Language (HTML) and the creation of the World Wide Web. Although network computing had been around since the 1960s, the networks themselves were rudimentary – comprising of dispersed computers linked by packet-switching technology – and remained, till the end of the 1980s, the domain of scientists, academics and a handful of graduate students (Toulouse, 1998). The invention of HTML broke this user-monopoly by simplifying network programming and, together with the launch of the graphical browser Mosaic (and its descendants Netscape Navigator and Internet Explorer), made it possible for lay computer users to access Websites and communicate with people across the globe (Norris, 2001). Whilst seemingly unrelated, the developments of the late 1980s share a remarkable thread of commonality: they are both small historical footnotes in a much larger tale. A tale in which advances in science and technology, particularly developments in information and communications technology, have moulded the evolution of international affairs, and altered the relationships within and amongst nations and the fortunes of their peoples.

The starting point of this book chapter is the recognition of an apparently new way of conceiving contemporary society, and the acknowledgement of the pivotal roles that *information*, *communication*, and *technology* play within it. Social scientists have long seen 'information' as *the* distinctive feature of the modern world, however, what makes today's age distinct from before is the growing convergence of digital computing, telecommunications, and human infrastructure; reflected in the shift in terminology from *Information Technology* or *I.T.* to *Information and Communications Technology* or *I.C.T.* (Virkar, 2014). Popular and academic literature tells us that we stand on the edge of the Information Age, where both information and technology have become 'symbol(s) of political potency and economic prosperity' (Martin, 1998: 1). We live and work in 'weightless knowledge economies' and will soon be part of a 'global information society'.

These clichés are not used without reason. The world is continuing to witness the burgeoning growth of new electronic Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) and their associated platforms and applications: the Internet and the World Wide Web have spawned multimedia and interactive technologies, video-conferencing, virtual realities, computer-aided design, the information superhighway, and technologies for consumer profiling and surveillance; all of which enable the electronic production, transmission, processing, communication, and consumption of increasingly vast quantities of information and know-how. Like their predecessors – the printing press, the telegraph, the radio, and black-and-white television – advanced ICTs have become an intrinsic part of our everyday social, political, and economic