Internetization and Digital Democracy

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INTRODUCTION

The new global order of the 21st century has transformed the economic, social and political landscape in a profound and indelible manner. Never before in human history has the pace of structural change been more pervasive, rapid and global in its context. Furthermore, the new order is built on a culture of innovation. Indeed, the signature mark of the new global order is new ideas, new technologies and new initiatives.

The new global order of the 21st century is composed of two interactive forces that include global outreach and the information technology and communications revolution. Global empowerment has melted national borders. The information and communication revolution has made geography and time irrelevant. On the contemporary landscape, electronic connectivity has contributed to a porous global environment that permits the mobility of people, ideas, information, technology and products. In effect, it has made the world a truly global village.

The advent of the new order has resulted in the restructuring of civil society. The role of innovation as a catalyst that drives the engine of progress has become a fundamental postulate of the 21st century. All of this has empowered the democratic process and has served as a driver for a more inclusive role for civil society in the democratic journey.

BACKGROUND

Information and communication technologies play a central role in the new world order of the 21st century. The information technology revolution has profoundly altered the structural parameters and the modus operandi of the new global order. More specifically, information and communications technologies have altered the economic landscape, enhanced productivity growth, transformed physical markets into virtual markets, facilitated the collection of data, spearheaded the transmission of ideas, created electronic communities, engaged civil society in electronic discourse and extended the reach of economic, political, and social interactions. Furthermore, scientific advances and technological breakthroughs have contributed to the success of information and communication technologies in effectively shrinking the time and distance that separate geographical mileposts around the world.

Humanity has been empowered by innovations since time immemorial. Contemporary civil society has recognized the important role of innovation in nation building. In consequence, civil society has devoted its resources and public policy focus towards supporting and enhancing the advancement of innovation. At the very heart of the information and communications revolution is the vital process of scientific discoveries and new inventions. There is no denying that the road well-travelled from invention to innovation is long and fraught with many obstacles. It is not unusual for many inventions to be left behind because of obstacles in securing the necessary financial capital or adapting an invention to

the economic realities of mass production. Indeed, an invention that is the product of a new idea, extensive research, and a successful laboratory- controlled experiment does not guarantee that it will result in the launch of an innovation. Furthermore, in this modern era individual inventors like Graham Bell, Thomas Edison and Guglielmo Marconi who endowed us with path breaking inventions are few and far between. Inventions today are more likely to be the product of a team effort and a concerted research and development initiative of some government laboratory, academic institution, or a major corporation.

The history of science is divided into two schools of thought regarding the process that leads to inventions. The first school subscribes to the notion that inventions are an incremental and marginal process. The second school of thought argues that some inventions are the catalyst for abrupt structural change that permeates the scientific landscape in a tidal wave of operational realignments and technological clustering. Regardless of what school one subscribes to, there is no denying that the great inventions that took place during the industrial revolution between 1860 and 1900 had a profound impact on the economy and personal lifestyle. These inventions included electricity, the internal combustion engine, radio, the telephone, phonograph, motion pictures, the chemical and pharmaceutical industries, advances in entertainment, communications, urban sanitation, and travel in the form of air and motor transportation.

Fast forward to the information technology revolution of the 21st century which has also triggered a new spurt of inventions. It has precipitated expansive structural changes and a cluster of innovations with a far reaching economic and social impact. The list of inventions ascribed to the information revolution is still in its infancy but already it includes such significant inventions as computers, the Internet and wireless telecommunications devices.

EMPOWERING DEMOCRACY

Democracy has a long pedigree and a distinguished provenance. It was born and took its first baby steps in Ancient Greece. Prominent Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle have been acclaimed as its father. They nurtured democracy in its formative years and guided its development. To this very day, Greece is regarded as the cradle of democracy. Indeed, the word democracy has Greek roots. It is a combination of two Greek words "demos" meaning people and "kratos" meaning power. In consequence, the Greek word democracy in its purest form denotes the power of the people and conveys the principle of governance by the people.

Since its birth in Ancient Greece, democracy has travelled around the world. Throughout the centuries it has been recalibrated, refined, renewed, and reformed. Since those early years in Ancient Greece, democracy has matured, evolved, and mutated. It has responded to civil society's values, aspirations, and directives. Many centuries later and up to the present time, democracy remains a work in progress.

The success of democracy is based on the full and equal participation of the people. In effect, democracy is a public good that is owned by its citizens. Furthermore, one of the enduring democratic values is the principle of inclusion which allows progressively more people to participate in the democratic process. In short, a foundational cornerstone of democracy's evolution has been to make it more inclusive. It is worth noting that Alexis de Tocqueville in his seminal publication *Democracy in America* concluded that "the health of a democratic society may be measured by the quality of functions performed by private citizens." (Tocqueville, 1835, p. 42). Tocqueville primarily wrote to describe the emerging American republic in the early 19th century. His conclusions continue to have currency and validity in the 21st century.

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