

The Political Implications of the Advent of Writing and the Internet



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From cavemen drawing on walls, to today's high-tech cellular phones, the way we communicate is changing more and more each generation. The invention of the World Wide Web in the last 20 years is one of the most incredible and rewarding revolutions in communications that humankind has ever witnessed. The Internet allows people to talk to each other from across the world, shop at any store, and receive endless amounts of information on any subject, among many other advantages. Dictionary.com defines the Internet as, "The Internet is the largest internet (with a small "i") in the world. It is a three level hierarchy composed of backbone networks, mid-level networks, and sub networks. These include commercial (.com or .co) university (.ac or .edu) and other research networks (.org or .net) and military (.mil) networks and span many different physical networks around the world with various protocols, chiefly the Internet Protocol." Generally speaking, the way our society communicates is no longer in person but separated by computers and everlasting networking that spreads transversely around the world. The World Wide Web has taken over and is now the major means of communicating quickly and accurately along with the most possible information. Along with it's all of its amazing capabilities, there are also political implications that go along with such freedom. The Internet allows people to be heard that couldn't be heard otherwise. Democracy is allowed to flourish on the web, but along with that comes all the violence and malicious content as well.

Before print, the Internet and all the advanced written communication devices we have today, a simple and very efficient new of form communicating was created This new form of communicating was called writing and it changed the world in many ways. With this new communication came a political movement that allowed ordinary citizens to better themselves through literacy. People were allowed to make decisions for themselves, and express their opinions without being persecuted for it. Writing freed citizens from the shackles of speech, which could be regulated by the government very easily. Writing brought along democracy and this one of the first times it was seen in the world. The advent of writing and the arrival of the Internet have many things in common. The most important similarity is that they both have political facets, mostly democratic significance. The ability to spread knowledge, opinions, and thoughts so liberally radically changed the face of society and politics in each respective time period.

For several thousands writing has been one of the most important ways of communicating for all civilizations. After the dawn of caveman and their ability to communicate through drawings on cave walls, came the invention of writing. "...We must look to the Fertile Crescent, particularly to Mesopotamia, for the long trek to

reproducing and storing spoken language, which began about 8,000 B. C. in Sumer. Small clay triangles, spheres, cones, and other tokens were molded to represent sheep, measure of grain, jars of oil, and other trading goods,” wrote Irving Fang author of A History of Mass Communication. The earliest forms of writing encompassed using symbols for words these inhabitants could not express with their language. Around 3,100 B. C., the Sumerians invented numbers and used them to distinguish the number of sheep from the symbol of sheep. Some historians believe writing and mathematics were conceived around the same time period. (Fang 2). The alphabet’s creation was around 1700 B.C. and was most likely created by the Semitic people who dwelled in Israel. Then the Phoenicians approved upon the alphabet for the purposes of trade (Fang 8). After a while the Greeks added a few more additions to the alphabet and also invented consonants. Not only were letters just sounds anymore, each one was a coined a “theoretical entity.” This system allowed the emergence of later Greeks to have science, philosophy, morality and a social system (Jahandarie 12).

Finding efficient surfaces to write on was a learning process for the civilizations using the new form of communication. “Systematic written language began with the Sumerians, who used reeds to scratch marks on tables of clay,” commented Fang. Even though clay was useful for imprinting accounts of events, its size and nuisances were disadvantages (Fang 4). They needed something more economical in order for writing to evolve. The Egyptians found a much more useful surface named Papyrus. This surface was transportable, held many scribes, and held together for a lengthy amount of time. The impact of Papyrus was evident throughout Egypt. Fang stated, “Egypt under the pharaohs around 200 B.C. underwent a transformation from absolute monarchy to a more egalitarian system of organization that coincided with a shift to papyrus as the medium of communication. The Greeks were also greatly influenced by the ability to write. After they made changes to the original alphabet, democracy through literacy followed. No longer were priests and scribes able to dominate the letters, common citizens were capable of using them since they became written and consequently, simpler to understand (Jahandarie 13). Fang observed, “Yet, written symbols to objectify speech and codify information aided the Greeks and eventually other peoples to govern themselves, to trade, and to express a religious faith. Fixing the spoken word changed the human condition. Writing added to humankind’s ability to think abstractly.” Democracy began to spread within Hellenic schools, which in turn brought literacy to freeborn boys and girls. Students were able to gather a greater amount of information because of their aptitude for reading and writing. As a result, egalitarianism began its predestined march into Greek society (Fang 10). Writing and literacy also opened up doors for more economical commerce and that allowed underprivileged citizens to travel the world and level out the aristocrats (high-level citizens) advantage. Writing made the trade business more legitimate because written documents were able to keep the businessmen honest. Even the earliest forms of written communication had a huge impact on society and the government of these populations. The ability to communicate thoughts and ideas across a hefty area of land was extremely desirable. Literacy and writing changed the world forever because of its undeniable power over politics. Now common citizens could gain more knowledge and likewise, more power in a society that once was ruled by priests, scribes, and government officials.

Put side by side, the advent of written communication and the invention of the Internet are very similar in the fact that they both have strikingly comparable political influences. Yet, the structure and power of the Internet is so unbelievably different from any kind of written communication the world has ever seen. We can mail or fax ideas to anybody in any part of the world by a slight flick of the wrist. Newspapers bring reports from across the world, to our front step. Out of all these written methods of talking, the Internet and the World Wide Web spread verbal communication by the touch of one or two buttons. No longer do we have to move to exchange a few words, a supercomputer does it all for us. It is important to look at how the Internet was conceived before we can look ahead. Contrary to popular belief, there has been some form of the Internet in existence since 1969, when it was developed by the Department of Defense. (<http://lrs.ed.uiuc.edu/students/psallas/history.html>) They began this new marvel in order to research networking, a new way to deliver messages and information farther and faster. Dictionary.com defines networking as “An openwork fabric or structure in which cords, threads, or wires cross at regular intervals.” Just like the papyrus used thousand of years, there were numerous people that sought after using this new means of communication. Consequently, an arrangement called “Request for Communications” was activated, and allowed people to write in these documents. Other individuals were permitted to comment on various views. Thus, democracy thrived because of the power to voice an opinion with out consequence. The Internet and the earliest modes of writing in are alike because both dramatically changed the way societies exchanged ideas and also gave regular citizens a chance to be heard.

When the Internet was started, no one could predict the massive online server it has today, labeled the World Wide Web. There are so many web sites and information stored online that one could literally find anything they are looking for in a matter of minutes. According to John Naughton, author of *A Brief History of the Future*, the World Wide Web is named “...so called because it encloses the globe in a web of billions of electronic threads.” The web began in the year of 1980 by man named Tim Berners-Lee who had attend Oxford University and graduated. He wanted to find an easier way to navigate through all of his work. Berner worked for a company named CERN (European Laboratory for Particle Physics) when he proposed the first kind of World Wide Web. The suggestion entailed, “a simple scheme to incorporate several different servers of machine-stored information already available at CERN.” (http://ei.cs.vt.edu/~wwwbtb/book/chap1/web_hist.html) After years of development, the first web browser was released in 1993. Since then, the expansion of the World Wide Web has captured the world and made navigating information much more uncomplicated.

The advent of the enormous World Wide Web has changed the way society looks for and gets the information that is needed. Like an endless library card catalog, the web uses hypertext software that allows browsers to get from one point to the other by clicking on any given icon. A person can make their own route to any site or destination they please, which makes the web completely user based. (Fang 219) Not only is the web an information haven, it also includes: Online banking, news and sports sites, university and public libraries with online articles and databases, interactive gaming, among many other amenities. The upsurge of web sites is clearly indicated by one specific number.

As said by www.boutell.com, “As of this writing, Google states that they are indexing 4,285,199,774 distinct web pages. But not every page is indexed by the Google search engine, and web sites are made up of multiple pages.” Not only is the web great for the previously stated activities, it can also be used to talk with people electronically. Email is the most efficient way to communicate that we have today. Irving Fang explains, “E-mail in this way makes efficient and frugal use of communication bandwidth. For example, 15,000 people might be able to send one-page letters to 15,000 friends in a city one thousand miles away along the same channel that one person uses to telephone one other person for ten minutes.” (Fang 225) The web has drastically altered our communication methods by making them more proficient and useful. Not only has the World Wide Web made person to person communication easier, it also has opened up doors for individuals to be heard who could not get published otherwise.

Just like the first types of written communication, the Internet has changed the landscape of communication forever. Since the Internet is such a vast outlet of information, anything and everything is accessible at any time. People are allowed to say whatever they want, with minimal constraints. Democracy has thrived on the web as everyone is equal and liberated. There are three political viewpoints from which the Internet can be looked from. Firstly, because of Howard Dean’s activist campaign, the Internet can be seen as the next way to deliver information about political agendas, or express opinions that wouldn’t be allowed on radio or television. The Internet allows a voting citizen to get all of the necessary intelligence about every candidate, without the bias of certain republican or democratic news networks. Secondly, the internet can be seen as the ultimate democratic medium; One that allows freedom of speech to the greatest extent. It is possible that the Internet will have a damaging effect on dictatorships and authoritarian governments. Yet, there is also a possibility that these types of governments can be successful through the Internet as well. Third of all, the United States government has and will try to limit what is on the Internet, and who visits what sites. Will that violate our constitutional right of freedom of speech? The political ramifications of the Internet are astounding, and the how we use this massive medium in the future, is all dependent on what happens now.

One of the paramount benefits that the Internet provides is the extensive amount of knowledge available at any time. Especially in voting, the web can supply a lot of facts about candidates. Howard Dean, for instance, tried to launch a portion of his campaign over the web and was not that successful. Yet, Internet democracy is worth taking a look at. Even though Howard Dean’s campaign didn’t fare so well on the web, does not mean Internet democracy is dead. “Unable to get their voices heard or even find their sensibilities represented in the mainstream media, many, mostly younger, media-savvy people from around the world began to use the Internet in the manner for which it was intended: to share ideas and to network across formerly impenetrable boundaries,” commented Douglas Rushkoff from the magazine Tikkun. Dean turned out to be a different man in the mainstream media, but he did start an interesting movement. “For the Dean campaign did reveal our appetite and aptitude for organizing online, meeting up in real life, and taking the political process into our own hands,” Douglas remarked. That is what the Internet is for, bringing people together for a joint cause, and future

campaigns should not give up of this new movement. On the web, citizens can find out things for themselves without the media telling them what to think and do. “Democracy would be rejuvenated, at least achieving its original meaning of “power of the people,” according to the Economist on the subject of direct democracy. So far the Internet has not made much of an impression on mainstream politics, but that will soon change. “Communication is the lifeblood of politics, and every big change in communication technology, from the printing press to television, has eventually produced big, and often unexpected, changes in politics (Economist 2).” Individual decisions and the well-informed public along with a progressively more enveloping Internet; will change western democratic governments over time (Economist 3).

Although the Internet in the United States is a democratic medium, other authoritarian governments are effected by it as well. “If the Internet will force difficult changes on democracies by handing power to individual citizens, it seems reasonable to believe that it will have a devastating impact on dictatorships,” observed the author of an article in the Economist. However, there is also a flip side to the issue. The web could possibly become a very influential tool for those regimes to harness their power. Authoritarian administrations try very hard to control the stream of information in their societies. More or less, the social status of a country has much to do with the Internet’s bearings on society (Economist(2) 2) “In societies where the government holds all political power and is willing to crack down hard on any dissent, a mere connection to the outside world had not been enough to force change,” Falun commented. So poor countries, where most authoritarian governments are, can gain a good deal from the net. The net provides crucial up to date information for farmers, which could help a largely farm oriented economy prosper and likewise, give more power to the regime. Also with the advances in technology, authoritarian commands can pry into citizen’s lives with more ease (Economist(2) 3). For these types of leadership, there are advantages and disadvantages. Then again, Bill Clinton said some time ago that China trying to “crack down on the internet” was, “like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall.” Behind the United States and Japan, China has the third most Internet connections in the world. Conversely, China has put blocks on search engines and other sites. Despite the fact these governments are trying to control the Internet, it looks as if democracy is making some sort of an impact on people’s actions, even if it is a minuscule one.

For the first 25 years of its existence, the Internet was managed and owned by the federal government. Then the government decided to change all of that. According to Irving Fang, “In 1994, after 25 years of government management, the Internet was turned over to private enterprise (Fang 218). That was the beginning of the net democracy we know today, where it is open to anyone who has something to say. When anyone is given that freedom, there will be people who abuse it. Many sites on the net are dedicated to extremist violence, pornography, satanic cults, and several other sites that take advantage of the free net. Along with that, chat rooms are filled with hateful words and lies. The federal government has passed acts that try to control certain aspects on the web. “The 1998 Child Online Protection Act was the government’s second attempt to keep minors from visiting sexually explicit commercial web sites,” James Morrow from the U.S. News and World Report remarked. During the Clinton administrations, the

Communications Decency Act was passed by congress and then taken before the Supreme Court. This act was more or less to keep children from being effected by porn and other burdening material on the web. However, a court in Philadelphia struck down the law, saying that “its criminal penalties for making “indecent” speech available to minors would indeed chill all discourse in the medium that will dominate the next century.” Basically, the court ruled that not only would porn be restricted, but many other forms of free speech that is our constitutional right (Morrow 2). The CDA wanted to keep children from seeing blatantly provocative subject matter on the net. This all happened in 1997, and the net today had become even worse. Anyone at anytime, can get just about anywhere. Even though the federal government has tried to institute restrictions on the net, it is almost impossible to regulate such a democratic medium all the time. Contrary to some beliefs that the government is always watching, the Internet is a free society where people are more or less permanently free. That is why the Internet has been called, “the most participatory form of mass speech yet developed.” “The best advancement in democracy since universal suffrage.” And “the greatest soapbox ever built (Goldsborough 1).

The comparison between the advent of writing and the arrival of the Internet are staggering. Each left such a huge indent on the way society communicates, and they have also have permitted democracy to grow and prosper. There are political roles that both the advent of writing and the web encompass. Just like how literacy and democracy spread throughout the Mediterranean thousand of years ago due to writing, the Internet has allowed people who don't necessarily get to be heard, a chance to express any opinion they want. Writing was just the start of written communication. Yet, when citizens first were able to use it, they broke the strong holds of priests and scribes while learning to be literate and likewise, make a better living for them selves. The ability to express oneself through a medium that can go much farther than speech, and couldn't be regulated like speech, allowed these people to enhance their standard of living. The Internet is the same way, as anyone can express their views on the web and those views can be read all over the world at the touch of one button. E-democracy is starting to spread and citizens can make decisions about political candidates by surfing the net and finding out information on their own without the media's influence. Also, authoritarian governments could possibly be moved out after a number of years because of the democratic web and its ability to help people think on their own. However, since the web is so liberated, there are many issues that can be seen as detrimental to society. Violence, pornography, militant group pages, ect... Nevertheless, that is part of social equality and the advent of writing helped pioneer freedom of thought and speech thousands of years ago.
