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The Internet, the Media and Democracy

The Invisible Fourth Estate

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In April 2000, President Thabo Mbeki disconcerted world leaders by sending them a confidential letter questioning the scientific evidence that HIV causes Aids. Both the letter and its reverberations through the media and halls of government reflect dramatically on the role of the Internet in South Africa's young democracy. Porous global communication networks ensure that nothing can be kept secret for very long, and once released into cyberspace, information is potent and uncontrollable. The Mbeki letter, whose recipients included President Bill Clinton and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, alleged that suppression of the views of Aids dissidents was tantamount to racist apartheid tyranny. At first, statesmen thought the letter was a hoax but once its authorship had been verified it was leaked and appeared in full on the website of the *Washington Post*, immediately making front-page news around the world. A furore erupted at home and abroad over the President's pronouncing on virological matters without personal scientific knowledge, and in October of the same year Mbeki told the caucus of the ruling ANC that he was "withdrawing" from the Aids debate.¹

Embarrassment by electronic exposure could not have been Mbeki's intention but it was certainly a major outcome. Notably, "the eruption of public debate contrasted markedly with the public expressions of unity and support for Mbeki from within the ANC," according to Deborah Posel of the Witwatersrand University Institute for Social and Economic Research, in a paper on "modernity" and the New South

¹ *Sunday Times*, Johannesburg, 15 October 2000.

Africa.² Posel remarks that while some critics attacked the legitimacy and credibility of the President as an individual, others questioned, more fundamentally, the character of the “new” state – the parameters of its powers and the conditions of its legitimacy.³

Government’s handling of the Aids crisis, probably more than any other issue including human rights in Zimbabwe and Arms Deal scandals, has focused attention on the relationship between the government, the media, the Internet, and civil society. The country’s leading civil society protest group, the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) has set about debunking “Aids denialism”, using the Internet and other media to spread its message, and has successfully taken the government to court to force it to provide antiretroviral drugs to Aids sufferers.⁴ The fundamental issue, for critics of government, is how policy is to be made and executed in the new South Africa – whether at the whim of powerful individuals and groups or by means of rational public debate leading to transparent decision-making within the organs of state. This question goes to the heart of the developmental role that the state has assumed since 1994.

If anything, the heated domestic political and media reaction to the President’s stance confirmed that South Africa’s new democracy had created the conditions for uninhibited public debate. Coverage in newspapers and broadcasting tended to concentrate on the controversy over Mbeki’s personal motives for challenging established scientific opinion. Online forums meanwhile registered a huge outpouring of condemnation and ridicule, with little defence of the President’s stance on either Aids or freedom of opinion. In the course of his letter, Mbeki had written: “The day may not be far off when we will, once again, see books burnt and their authors immolated by fire by those who believe that they have a duty to conduct a holy crusade against the infidels.”⁵ Ironically, this defence of the right to dissent invoked the printed word in a backward-looking reference to the Crusades, Medieval Inquisition and Nazi persecution of intellectuals. Yet it was widely reported that the President’s engagement with Aids dissidents had sprung from his Internet

² Posel, Deborah – “A Matter of Life and Death: Revisiting ‘Modernity’ from the Vantage Point of the ‘New’ South Africa”. Draft online at <http://wiserweb.wits.ac.za/PDF%20Files/biopolitics%20-%20posel.PDF>, p 25.

³ Ibid.

⁴ www.tac.org.za

⁵ Quoted by Jon Cohen in “AIDS Researchers Decry Mbeki’s Views on HIV”, *Science Magazine*, Volume 288, Number 5466, 28 April 2000, pp. 590-591.

surfing and email correspondence with the dissidents.⁶ Modern communications in cyberspace cannot easily be suppressed, and the Internet is not for burning. The dissidents had proved that.

Legitimacy

For critics of South Africa's Aids policy, the questions ran deeper and touched on the legitimacy of the political process. The major questions were not about media freedom as such but rather whether the views of Aids dissidents, represented by an aberrant President and a supportive party caucus, should be allowed to guide health policy in arbitrary fashion. By the end of 2003, an estimated 5.3 million South Africans were infected with HIV, the largest number of individuals living with the virus in a single country.⁷ The legitimacy of government's approach to HIV/Aids was called into question by the apparent ease with which dissidents gained the attention of the President via the backdoor of the Internet.

While millions have no access to the medium, due to the digital divide between information-rich and -poor, those privileged with access can pursue their interests. As *An Information Policy Handbook for Southern Africa* put the issue:

The information economy and society are driven by the global interrelationships of ICTs [information and communication technologies] with economic, political and social forces... Many African countries may ask why participation in the global information economy can have any significance when there are so many basic challenges to address: poverty alleviation, adequate health care including the HIV/Aids epidemic, employment creation, and national and regional security issues.⁸

These are the very issues that President Mbeki himself has raised in speech after speech on the domestic and international scene. Mbeki has also actively promoted the global electronic revolution with the strong proviso that the industrialised countries of the world should confront the

⁶ According to Prof William Makgoba, head of the Medical Research Council, cited in Cohen, Op Cit.

⁷ UNAIDS 2004 Report on the global AIDS epidemic
<http://www.unaids.org/bangkok2004/report.html>

⁸ James, Tina (Editor) – *An Information Policy Handbook for Southern Africa: A knowledge base for decision-makers*. 2001. International Development Research Centre (IDRC). ISBN 1-919692-60-6

challenge of extending communication technologies to developing societies. As Deputy President in 1996, Mbeki delivered this challenge to the G-7 Information Society Conference, arguing in a keynote address that "there are more telephone lines in Manhattan than in all of Sub-Saharan Africa," and that "half of humanity has never made a telephone call."⁹ The fact that the Internet has become what the old left used to call a "site of struggle"¹⁰ is a reflection of the age we live in. Anyone who uses the Internet, from presidents to press officers, will sooner or later become aware of its ambivalent qualities.

Tensions between privilege and exclusion, power and disempowerment, human and machine intelligence, digital efficiency and analogue chaos, free knowledge and secret or proprietary information have existed within the Internet since its inception. Originally devised by the American military as a decentralised network capable of bypassing any nodes destroyed in a nuclear strike, the Internet was quickly embraced by academics and NGOs as a wonderful grassroots technology for the exchange of ideas and mobilisation of activists. The Internet is more than a new mass medium; it is an environment in which all sorts of communication activities, with associated value systems, can flourish. The corollary to that is that if you don't have it, you are at a disadvantage in a fast-paced world where powerful states and transnational corporates use electronic technologies to their strategic advantage.

Freedom

Many of the traditional concerns that we have about media freedom and truth apply also in the Internet environment, though altered by the global and dematerialised nature of cyberspace. Media freedom, civic responsibility and online access lie at the heart of the debate about the role of the Internet in South Africa's democracy. The form that the debate takes is given by domestic political discourse about the modernising developmental state. The term "developmental state" is mostly associated with Japan after World War 2 and the subsequent rise of the East Asian tiger economies. By the 1997 Asian financial crisis the appeal of the developmental state model appeared to have run its course.¹¹ But in South Africa, President Mbeki introduced the term to

⁹ Summary Report on the *The Information Society and Development Conference*, Gallagher Estate, Midrand, South Africa, May 13-15 1996

¹⁰ A phrase apparently first coined in English by a translator of the work of the Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci.

¹¹ A large literature deals with Asian economies and the developmental state. See for instance, Johnson, Chalmers – *Japan: Who Governs?: The Rise of the Developmental State*. 1996. WW Norton & Company. ISBN: 0393314502

public currency in a series of pronouncements, some of them appearing on the ANC's Internet site and thus directed at local elites and audiences abroad. The topic is pursued below. The interplay between government's definitions of developmentalism and critical or competing definitions from arising civil society and from the political opposition form the context in which Internet functions as a democratic medium in South Africa.

In its relatively short history, the Internet has built up considerable lore, and even political philosophy, about the nature of freedom in cyberspace and how it should be used. In the early days, complete freedom for the medium was a matter of passionate conviction for Internet evangelists. Their ethos, which has many adherents across the world today, stresses openness and interaction unfettered by state or corporate controls. The culture of the "open Internet" is supported by the medium's technology which, as a decentralised network of networks, makes external supervision and control very difficult, if not impossible. These principles have an important place in any discussion of online freedom and democracy. Unfortunately, cyberfreedom has created space for pornography, terrorism and money-laundering. The final volume of Manuel Castell's masterly analysis of the global network society, *End of Millennium*,¹² shows how organised criminal activities have proliferated around the world. Reaction from governments has been to step in with state controls and surveillance, while many corporate IT managers have also been obliged to police their intranets. In many parts of the world, including African countries and China, governments have moved to control the Internet because they perceive that free discussion and rapid news dissemination threaten the entrenched elites.

Aside from setting open standards, the Internet challenges the role of professional journalists as gatekeepers. News coverage, in South Africa as elsewhere, is the work of mainstream media dominated by large corporations, all of whom are dedicated to building audiences and so attracting advertisers. Mainstream news media embrace standards of professionalism emphasising "responsibility", "balance" and "objectivity" – the very things missing from much "free" Internet content. Throughout the world, newsgroups reveal features of the Internet that depart from conventional media practice. Written by "amateurs" (as distinct from professional journalists), the content is often highly subjective (as distinct from "objective" reportage and "fair comment"), while little attention is paid to legal niceties (as distinct from the

¹² Castells, Manuel -- *The Information Age. Economy, Society, and Culture*. Volume III: *End of Millennium*, 1998. Blackwell, Cambridge and Malden. ISBN 1557868727

avoidance of defamation that characterises print and broadcast media). Another difference, stemming from the origins of the newsgroups as a genre, is that news articles from the mainstream media are reproduced online mostly without obtaining copyright clearance and without payment to publishers or writers. Here is a subculture that cherishes the ideal of freedom, with the emphasis on *free* in more senses than one. A further difference is that online messaging, of whatever kind, requires almost no resources beyond the computer itself and connection to the Internet. The Internet disrupts conventional notions of the media marketplace, of intellectual property ownership, and of media responsibility.

Dominance

Complete freedom of the Internet – even in the absence of government controls – is unlikely to be realised in modern communication systems as we know them. News coverage, in South Africa as elsewhere, is the work of mainstream media dominated by large corporations, all of whom are dedicated to building audiences and so attracting advertisers. The Internet takes its place in the framework of advanced capitalism and is “structured in dominance”.¹³ Cultural media theorist Stuart Hall applied this phrase to mass media long before the Internet took shape in the form of the World Wide Web. By it he meant that modern communications occurred within a system of limits and possibilities set by political and economic structures. Though much has changed in media theory since the seventies, with the decline of neoMarxism, structural dominance remains a feature the media – in fact media concentration has increased rather than declined in most Western countries. In South Africa, black empowerment and deregulation of broadcasting have increased media diversity, but the press remains in the hands of just a few companies and several independents have been taken over or closed down.¹⁴

The Internet has increased media diversity here too. This is true despite the fact that major Internet online news services are run by the same companies that own newspapers. But there are number of specialised independent services (for example, ITWeb and ScienceInAfrica)¹⁵ and most importantly, activist and research sites have appeared that carry current information in depth, and some are further described below. Still, structural dominance is a feature even of this

¹³ Hall, Stuart – “Race, articulation and societies structured in dominance” in UNESCO: *Sociological theories: Race and colonialism*. 1980. UNESCO. Paris.

¹⁴ ?????????????

¹⁵ www.itweb.co.za and www.scienceinafrica.co.za

medium. The special form that dominance takes is known as the digital divide, which relates to the unaffordability of computers and connectivity for the world's poor. The Internet is not free: it requires investment in infrastructure and outlays on equipment and software. The digital divide occurs not just between information-rich and -poor countries, but also between the relatively well-off and the electronically excluded within nations.

Intensification

In essence the Internet is bringing about an accelerated form of pluralism that strengthens civil society in the South African polity, as it is doing elsewhere in the world. In fact, civil society coalitions locally and globally have become intimately associated and connected via the Internet making them a force to reckon with; a reality convincingly demonstrated by the way anti-globalisation groups mobilised via electronic networks for protests in Seattle, Davos and Genoa.¹⁶ Accelerated pluralism describes the intensification of political activity by different types of actors within a pluralist democratic system. Bimber apparently first applied the term to the Internet in a much-cited article in 1998¹⁷, though the notion that media can act as a catalyst for issue-centred politics is not new. Bimber makes the point that the relatively low cost of creating Web pages and sending out e-mail messages facilitates recruitment and organisation. The Internet has the ability to *intensify* any form of organisational work, at grassroots, within business, within government, offering all the chance to become more productive in return for effort. It is this quality of intensification rather than the special use of the Internet for grassroots mobilisation alone that sets the medium apart from earlier, less interactive media. It is capable of quickening social, economic and political life generally.

How does this relate to societies that suffer the ill consequences of the digital divide? My answer is that the Internet can be a pervasive presence even where the majority of people do not have access to it, though obviously it will have less and less influence as fewer and fewer have access. Though its direct reach to South Africans online at present is limited to around 7.4 percent (3.5 million) of the total population of approximately 43 million (see graph), its indirect influence is far more extensive. It forms a virtual environment for all other media and it

¹⁶ BBC News, "Davos brace for anti-capitalist protests", 22 January 2003.

¹⁷ Bimber, B. – "The Internet and political transformation: Populism, community and accelerated pluralism". In: *Polity*, 3 1(1).

surrounds most institutions of government, business and civil society with communications in cyberspace. The Internet is more than another mass medium; it is a context in which cyber-communications accelerate knowledge exchange and social networking. Even the most remote rural communities and informal urban settlements, which appear to be excluded from electronic communications, feel the pulse of the Internet through the attitudes and actions of government officials, aid workers and caregivers, business and labour representatives, and journalists – all of whom are exposed, more or less frequently, to cyber communications.

There are drawbacks to the Internet, and even the concept of pervasive communication begs the question of who purveys the content and who controls the channels. Pervasive communication is a recognised feature of the Information Age and has been exploited by advertisers in the form of “viral” communication – metaphorically, the spread of a marketing appeal from person to person, beyond the initial “point of infection” in an exciting rumour or buzz started by an ad agency. The extent and nature of the trickle-down effect of Internet communications continues to raise troubling issues about lack of direct access to the Internet by the majority. What is beginning to emerge, however, globally as well as within national systems, is best described as communication by osmosis: the penetration of our skins by the pervasive messaging that goes on in cyberspace. This is set to change the nature of our political systems in an unpredictable but far-reaching manner. To extend the osmosis metaphor, the specific gravity of our political institutions is being altered by the pervasive presence of the Internet.

This can be seen in the case of civic groups. Although most civics across the globe are bounded by local structures and focused on country issues, the Internet fires them with a combination of rapid exchanges, depth of information, and commonality of purpose yielding cross-boundary unity in action. The same dynamics of messaging speed, volume, and ideological fellowship produce greater cohesion within formerly fragmented civics within a country. Though their concerns may stretch across a great variety of issues, from pollution to Aids, they find each other on the Web and engage over matters of shared concern. Use of the technology can accelerate pluralism, and its pervasiveness as a medium creates the opportunity for greater civic engagement with government. For instance, Idasa¹⁸ (the Institute for Democracy in South Africa) has succeeded in using the Internet as means of influencing political debate in the media and possibly within the halls of government, so Idasa’s indirect influence goes much further its direct online

¹⁸ www.idasa.org.za

readership. By providing information and viewpoints via web channels, civic organisations which are not part of the established media system mould the media's agenda for news on key topics.

The *Internet civic engagement model*¹⁹, as it has been called, implies that there are campaigners and researchers with a predisposition to take Internet politics seriously and to produce a constant flow of communications that affect the way political actors and voters think about issues.

The Internet thereby alters the mobilizing structure, providing new points of access into the political system, creating new possibilities for collective action, organizational linkage across distances, and informal networks.²⁰

A new breed of activists has moved off the streets and into web studios to revitalise civil society. They are a sober class of social researchers and policy-attuned investigators and analysts, dedicated to using the web effectively within the context of the network society. These groups usually have access to university or big NGO networks (and sometimes to those of foreign organisations) and they engage with peer groups in other institutional settings such as business and government departments. They also engage directly with government policy-makers plans for the future and government's performance in the present.

Primary definers

Research groups have become primary definers of social reality. Primary definers include anyone who enjoys greater access to information and who can therefore shape the narratives that define our lives. Researchers and others assuming this role on the Internet can influence the media, who become the secondary definers, or subsidiary gatekeepers, in the flow of information, ideas and opinions. Stuart Hall made the distinction between primary and secondary definers in 1978²¹. Following the French Marxist Althusser, Hall viewed the media as a "site of struggle" and argued that ruling groups used media to present their perspectives on reality as if it were the consensus of society – theirs was

¹⁹ Norris, Pippa – *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide*. 2001. Cambridge University Press. ISBN: 0521002230

²⁰ Quoted from the Synopsis to Norris, Pippa, Op Cit.
<http://ksghome.harvard.edu/~pnorris/Books/Digital%20Divide.htm>

²¹ Hall, Stuart, et al. – *Policing the crisis: Mugging, the state, and law and order*. 1978. New York: Holmes & Meier. No ISBN.

the hegemonic ideology that infused the communication system. Primary definers of news were the accredited officials and spokesmen for major institutions from whom journalists took their definitions and amplified them. Journalists acted as secondary definers to enlarge the influence of the dominant consensus throughout society.

While it is certainly true that much of the news depends on what are usually called *authoritative sources*, the media do recognise other, competing or conflicting sources as credible too. Professional journalists in liberal democracies have never slavishly reproduced what the authorities or elites wanted them to say. If a dominant consensus emerged, it was because the media reinterpreted reality through the process of “manufacturing” the news within a commercial context. But viewing news this way – as the product of complex marketing dynamics – opened the door to media variety. In addition, developments on the political scene in Western societies have challenged the very notion of a “dominant consensus”. A *white male* consensus, maybe. Male-dominated news values have been under attack by feminists, blacks, indigenous peoples and green groups at least since the 1960s, and today the Internet has given them new strength. From these trends in cultural and political life emerged the concept of *radical plural democracy*²². This school of postmodern, post-Marxist theory emphasises that there is no single reality but rather a range of definitions of reality. Regarding media, journalists still do the work of secondary definition but within a framework that is perceived to be much more open and flexible than Marxist analysis ever considered likely.

In the Internet age the range of realities is expanding all the time as more and more voices find their way into cyberspace. Today, primary definers spring from a great variety of backgrounds and traditions. This true in South Africa too, where plural democracy has accelerated with the removal of constraints and the granting of equal rights to all. For example, lesbian and homosexual groups can now operate freely, protected by their constitutional rights. For serious campaigners and those who wish to shape social policy, the Internet is a marvellous publicity vehicle. It enables those with slim resources to punch above their weight, becoming primary definers on the issues that they are most passionate about.

²² MOUFFE Chantal (ed.) *Dimensions of Radical Democracy. Pluralism, Citizenship, Community*. 1992. Verso, London/New York.

In the context of pervasive networked communications, the media pick up on what these groups are saying and doing. The more credible the information they place on their websites, the more authoritative they become. The Internet combines a tremendous capacity to capture detail (as sites can be “deep” in data terms), with a relatively low threshold of costs to enter the World Wide Web (so sites can have very wide distribution). The medium is deep and wide, and it flows both ways, from source to receiver and back again. Put together, these features of extensive data collection, low dissemination costs, and high interactivity have allowed pressure groups, NGOs, academic departments, institutes, labour unions and others in civil society to trade information and enter the political fray as never before. If these teeming denizens of the web seem invisible it is because cyberspace is nowhere on the map of political institutions. The Internet is the Invisible Fourth Estate within politics, pervasive in debate and influential in policy-making.

Maturing medium

All of this means that the Internet is coming of age in political terms. It has changed the environment of other media and will continue to do so; it has challenged the profession of journalism; and it is shaping the public sphere of knowledge and debate in ways that remain largely hidden but are deeply significant. Strangely, but perhaps fittingly, the disruption of the media universe began to occur at just the moment, in the early 1990s, that South Africa as a society began to seek, rather than avoid, transformation. A mix of socialist ideas, community mobilisation, feminism, green activism, and new entrepreneurship contributed to the lively grassroots growth of the Internet in the nineties. The real strengths of the medium, however, emerged from the spate of websites arising from private start-ups, academic and research sources, NGOs and aid organisations, travel and tourism services, and banks. Eventually the build-up of a critical web mass included government departments, labour unions, scores of listed companies, the JSE Securities Exchange and key institutions like the Development Bank of Southern Africa.

By early in the first decade of the new millennium, almost all major news media had well-groomed websites with searchable archives. Many journalists had begun to realise the potential of the medium and had plugged themselves into Internet communications, corresponding with sources by email and using web-based research to acquire new information. Pioneered by the *Weekly Mail* (now the *Mail&Guardian*) the online newspaper quickly became a staple of casual readers and of serious researchers. Most online papers, like the Independent Online and News24, were free to the public while others like the *Financial Mail* and

EngineeringNews offered partial free access with full access to subscribers. Dedicated online news services like ITWeb²³, covering the information technology sector of the economy, showed that it was possible to devise a revenue model purely from web advertising and promotions. Radio stations emulated the newspapers with transcripts of shows, adding live webstreaming of on-air programmes; while television channels followed suit with video clips and programme schedules.

Much of this was commercially driven, and by the 10th anniversary of democracy the mainstream South African Internet had shed its free-for-all air and become serious about finding business models to generate revenue. The greater the establishment presence on the Internet, the less it owed to its origins in geek culture and cyber-anarchism, and the more it marginalised those voices that continued to champion total freedom in cyberspace. The banks in particular extended the appeal of the Internet to the middle class with efficient, though not foolproof, transaction systems. In 2003, Absa's e-banking service suffered a security breach in which R500 000 was transferred out of the accounts of clients in the Western Cape. This incident forced banks to tighten their systems but also reinforced the perception that the Internet was being policed and controlled.

The early days of liberation saw the conjunction of technological change and political reformation, and this stirred extraordinary hopes and forecasts. It was believed that a sweeping, and rapid, electronic revolution was about to change the way society functioned and would level out the democratic playing field. All would have equal access to media, to knowledge, and ultimately to political participation. Indicative of this mood was a paper by an educationist in 1994²⁴, asserting that the change from a print to an electronic culture could reshape world-views and change the way we learn. These far-reaching implications have not yet been realised, and even if we have entered a new oral era, the Internet itself is mostly text-based. In another more recent and sobering contribution, Dr Anesh Maniraj Singh of the Durban Institute of Technology, has retrospectively characterised the expectations of yesteryear:

The Global Information Society is a society that breaks all physical barriers and unites people across the globe with the power of information, intermediated by the Internet. In the Global

²³ www.itweb.co.za

²⁴ Dick, Archie L – “Relationships between orality and literacy”. In: SA Journal of Higher Education (SAJHE), Volume 08(2) 1994.

Information Society, all information is transparent, and available to everyone.²⁵

Singh insists that this utopian scenario is wrong, “as there are millions of people who have no access to, and probably will not have access in their lifetime, to the global society”. He provides guidelines for the government in partnership with the private sector to develop the infrastructure for digital communication and information dissemination, applying this to universities where elite and poor students deserve equal access to computers.

Developmental state

President Mbeki made the developmental state the focus of his renewed term in office after the ANC’s third consecutive victory in the Parliamentary elections of 2004. In committing his administration to focus especially on raising skills levels within the public sector, and “ensuring its managerial and technological modernisation, driven by a clear understanding of the developmental tasks of our democratic state”,²⁶ Mbeki also made specific mention of e-government:

The Departments of Public Service and Administration, Provincial and Local Government, and Communications will work to ensure that modern information and communication technologies (ICT) are introduced in these development nodes as quickly as possible, to assist in all their developmental and governance efforts.²⁷

Government *using* ICTs, and democratic accountability *through* ICTs are, of course, not the same thing: they correspond, in the traditional phrase, to government *of* the people as distinct from *by* the people, without necessarily implying that e-government is *for* the people. It is strange, though, that Mbeki did not mention the highly successful instance of online interaction between government and citizenry in the form of the revamped taxation system. This is something the government definitely can take credit for as a user-friendly innovation in the interests

²⁵ Singh, Anesh Maniraj, “Bridging The Digital Divide: The Role of Universities in Getting South Africa Closer to the Global Information Society”. Department of Information Systems & Technology University of Durban Westville. Undated, circa 2002. Obtainable at: <http://citte.nu.ac.za/papers/id7.pdf>

²⁶ State of the Nation address by the President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, to the joint sitting of the Houses of Parliament, Cape Town, 21 May 2004.

²⁷ Ibid.

of all South Africans, and very much in line with modernisation programme. Headed by Pravin Gordhan, the South African Revenue Service (SARS) is an institution outside the civil service which reports directly to the Minister of Finance, giving it the freedom to innovate like any private sector enterprise. From 1996 onwards the tax system was revamped to dig the country out of its looming debt trap. Online processing of tax submissions increased the return on effort by taking into account what the “market” (taxpayers) needed from the service. Individual taxpayers can see their own correspondence with the taxman online.²⁸

The tax example demonstrates that the Internet can be a superb vehicle for interaction between state and people. Ideally, it should be the one of the primary means whereby the developmental state gets in touch with to the populace and gains feedback from them. Yet the digital divide keeps the majority from using the Internet, and this also means that government’s feedback via cyberspace is not coming directly from the poor. In the tax instance, better-off taxpayers and companies are the ones served and can make their views known to officials.

Towards overcoming telecommunications deficiencies generally, telecentres have been set up in rural and urban communities since the late 1990s giving people access to phones, faxes, computers and video cassette recorders. This is the vision of what is called ICT4D – the short form for “ICTs for development” – signifying the use of information and communication technologies as tools is to alleviate poverty and improve communities’ wellbeing. There are many telecentre projects, mostly unrelated to each other, founded by the Universal Service Agency (USA), Vodacom and NGOs to mention some. But need far exceeds delivery: by 2001 the USA, set up under the Department of Communications, had established about 65 telecentres compared with its 1997 estimate that some 5000 would be needed to serve South Africa.^{29,30} Success with

²⁸ The SARS story is told in my forthcoming book, part of the Edge series on innovation in South Africa. Addison, Graeme - *The Competitive Edge: Creating Innovations*. 2005. Engineering Association (SAVI). ISBN: 0-620-31387-0

²⁹ Benjamin, Peter – *The Universal Service Agency’s Telecentre Programme: 1998–2000*. 2003. HRSC Publishers, Human Sciences Research Council, Johannesburg. ISBN 0-7969-2029-X

³⁰ “An Overview of Information Policy Initiatives in Southern Africa”. Chapter 3 James, Tina (Editor) – *An Information Policy Handbook for Southern Africa: A knowledge base for decision-makers*. Op cit.

telecentres has been mixed because uncertain funding, maintenance problems and theft threaten their sustainability³¹.

The role played by dedicated and autonomous officials in SARS prompts comparison with the Japanese developmental state. In the course of Japan's postwar reconstruction,³² a strong bureaucracy faced little political accountability and had hardly any engagement with the small and scattered bodies that made up civil society, including an uncritical media system. They worked directly with the corporations and made little use of social conscientisation. Only towards the end of the developmental era did civil society groups form larger unions and make headway in negotiations with officialdom. The officials commanded the resources of the state and ensured that banking finance was made available for investment in the industries, such as motor manufacture and electronics, that were considered most likely to put the country back on its feet.

There are other thought-provoking contrasts and parallels with the Asian experience. Japanese society was ethnically homogenous, and its corporations drew on the ethos of "company community", groupism or familism³³, to unite employers and employees for the sake of the advancement of the firm (rather than the whole of the economy). A different formula must be sought for South Africa's highly diverse multicultural workforce. Indeed, if the whole society is to remain economically and political stable, and to function cohesively for development, major divisions along racial, religious and linguistic lines need to be bridged, and this takes continual work.

Here the media broadly and Internet specifically confront enormous difficulties. Radio broadcasting has managed to cope with 11 official languages and serve different regions and races with differentiated content. Television offers language and ethnic programming, though English is dominant. Print media in the past adopted the old ethnic divisions of Brit, Boer and Black – newspapers appeared in English or Afrikaans, or they took the form of a "ghetto press" aimed at African and other racial groups in English and the vernacular. Racial structuring in newsrooms along with a predominantly "white" agenda for news confirmed the impression that the press was

³¹ Etta, Florence – "The trouble with community telecentres" article at: www.acacia.org.za/telecentres_etta.htm

³² Pekkanen, Robert – "After the developmental state: civil society in Japan" In: *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 9/1/2004.

³³ Alston, Jon P – *The Intelligent Businessman's Guide to Japan*. 1990. Charles E Tuttle Co, Inc.; Rutland, Vermont and Tokyo. ISBN 0-8048-1633-6

structured in racial dominance. Today racial press boundaries are dissolving, but in the case of the Internet language remains a barrier as English monopolises the medium. Local newspapers and international news agencies with their distinctly Western cast set the online news agenda. This is unlikely to change markedly although minority efforts have produced some vernacular webcasting, and there is even a service that translates software into Afrikaans, Zulu and Sepedi³⁴.

Racial overtones creep into much of the informal talk on the Internet. An impression formed by the writer from reading Internet chat forums on financial, political and social issues over the years is that these forums are largely the realm of conservative opinion about the government's developmental undertakings. No systematic study of local Internet forums exists, but what the tone of exchanges suggests is that the white elite does not buy the government's line on labour equity, black empowerment, land redistribution, HIV\Aids, Zimbabwe and much more. Very few correspondents question the need for development, but few defend the government's record. Black opinion-formers supporting the developmental project have been slated. On *Moneyweb*, when Thulani Gcabashe, CEO of Eskom, propounded his ideas on African leadership, arguing that it was important to overcome the colonial heritage and "identity the factors that make it possible for Africans to perform at the highest level",³⁵ anonymous critics countered:

A load of waffle - more like a load of cra.., Eskom cannot even sort out your account! – King Rat³⁶

And

You should know that this man spent large sums of Eskom's money conducting "research" to show that African management is different from Eurocentric management. Stunning vision. – Logica

The cynics did not go unanswered, by black respondents who gave their names. One of them remarked diplomatically:

³⁴ Translate.org.za is a non-profit organisation producing free and open source software intended to empower South Africans. www.translate.org.za

³⁵ Gcabashe, Thulani S – "The future of Leadership in Africa", posted at 2003/10/09. www.moneyweb.co.za .

³⁶ Ibid. Search and follow forum.

It is nice to note the level of interest that people show on the above subject. Establishing an institution that focuses on the training and development of generations of African youths as future leaders is a step in the right direction. – David Eboh

The dialogue, if it can be called that, is scarcely of a level to encourage the belief that the Internet could be a cyber-parliament of the people on the serious topic of development. A study of Ghanaian Internet forums concluded, “By and large, discussions degenerate to name calling and vituperative partisanship that appeals to ethnicity in most cases” adding:

The discussions that take place on the web are certainly not qualitatively different from what obtains in the real world of nasty, acrimonious politics. They essentially do not contribute much to advancing a discourse that promotes democratic ideals³⁷.

It is easy to dismiss the more emotional responses as trivial or simply racist but the fact that they occur in public space, and they do embody alternative views with some substance, makes them political and adds to the debate around developmentalism. The exchanges do not stick to the topic and do not logically follow on from each other. Perhaps what they lack is the element of “intersubjectivity” on objects of public concern. This concept is applied by the German critical theorist Jürgen Habermas when describing the ideal speech situation in which people really do trade views in search of understanding and objective truth.³⁸ If interactivity on the Internet does not equate with intersubjectivity, partly because many of the cues to human communication are missing – body language, eye contact, tone of voice – this does not preclude effective communication where the parties commit themselves to serious dialogue.

In any case, forum exchanges contribute to the pervasive sense that development is on the agenda and has complex ramifications. Internet feedback of this kind is secondary to the “primary definitions” created by media gatekeepers in relaying pictures of the world. Some of the primary definers are not to be found in mainstream print and broadcast media at all but operate over the Internet, engaging researchers with each other and

³⁷ Tetty, Wisdom J – “Information Technology and Democratic Participation in Africa.” *Journal of Asian and African Studies*; 2/1/2001

³⁸ Eriksen, Erik Oddvar; and Weigard, Jarle – *Understanding Habermas: Communicative Action and Deliberative Democracy*. 2004. Continuum International Publishing Group (June 1, 2004) ISBN: 082647179X

with government over the goals and outcomes of development. In this sphere, the Internet is displacing conventional media and has moved from the periphery to the core of democratic debate.

The developmental state in Asia was a centralised, top-down mechanism for the allocation of resources to strategic ends. On this model, the South African government seeks – but may not fully succeed with – a centralised form of co-operative governance between the national, provincial and municipal tiers of the state.³⁹ This point was raised by political analyst Patrick Laurence in *The Star*, commenting on Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) publication, *State of the Nation, 2004-2005*. The report reflects the parallels between Malaysia's state-driven new economic policy of 1970 and Mbeki's campaign to halve poverty and unemployment by 2014 through accelerated economic growth. Strong centralisation was a feature of the former and is proposed for the latter. The South African Constitution however defines the division of powers and responsibilities between the tiers, and in opposition areas these divisions are jealously guarded.

Official policymakers do not have things all their own way in South Africa. The pervasive presence of the Internet ensures that information spreads quickly from government, either by being distributed online by the Government Information and Communication Service⁴⁰ (GCIS), or by simply leaking from departments. Opposition, civil society and global investors and aid agencies soon know what is being talked about and planned in Pretoria and Cape Town. This adds a dimension to the developmental state that was missing in the Asian examples. Local civil society organisations and the media are undoubtedly stronger than anything faced by the Japanese bureaucracy in the early days of reconstruction. Local organisations, though somewhat weakened since the heyday of the mass democratic movement in the 1980s and constrained by political correctness today, are still nodes of independent thought and action. The challenge mounted to government by the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) in legally forcing the Department of Health to provide antiretrovirals for Aids sufferers, shows that civil society has teeth and can bite. Positive media publicity surrounding Zachie Achmat, the TAC's leader and Nobel Prize nominee, in contrast to the negative coverage of the Minister of Health, Dr Manto Tshabalala-

³⁹ See the analysis by political commentator Patrick Laurence, in *The Star*, 9 November 2004, "Left could be interpreted as right: Mbeki's speeches point to shift in policy direction".

⁴⁰ www.gcis.gov.za

Msimang, symbolises the critical distance that media have put between themselves and government on controversial issues. Internet newsgroup commentary on Aids issues and personalities has been, typically, far more scathing than anything appearing in the print media.

To sum up, the three most important differences with the Japanese developmental experience are that here, firstly, politicians decide policy and officials try to do their bidding while the opposition and civil society react to them; secondly, this is not a culturally homogenous society but an ethnically diverse one, which poses all sorts of problems and dilemmas for media; and thirdly, the internal cultures of South African business organisations and government departments bear little resemblance to the familism of Japanese firms. On the last point, moves are afoot to build a culture of *uBuntu*, or common purpose based on African humanism, as the basis for accepting diversity and building strong teams in South African corporates. Eskom Chairman Reuel Khoza is known for his championship of *uBuntu* as a transformative philosophy for organisations, and is promoting the idea through Eskom⁴¹ and the Institute of Directors. This striving for solidarity has a long way to go and it is doubtful whether the individualist, competitive ethic the West can be completely supplanted. At any rate, the South African organisation is unlike the Japanese in key respects.

Government intervention

The Internet challenges government by creating new, unregulated spaces for public discussion and the development of civic awareness. Regulation is under way in South Africa, yet the local Internet is untouched by direct state censorship while such controls as have been put in place have an indirect effect, if any. The debate that is shaping up between government and its critics on the topic of developmentalism may provoke calls for greater regulation. More likely, it will take the form of browbeating by government for everyone to join the consensus on its definition of what development means.

From a theoretical perspective, any communication channel may contain constraints on, and opportunities for, the exchange of information, ideas and attitudes. *Freedom for* unfettered communication, or positive freedom, implies that in an open channel people may interact freely and creatively; while *freedom from* censorship, surveillance, or hidden controls, known as negative freedom, implies that the limits on communication are kept to a minimum. Distinguishing between positive

⁴¹ Khoza, Reuel – *Let Africa Lead: African Transformational Leadership for 21st Century Business*. 2005, Eskom. (forthcoming).

and negative forms of liberty goes back at least to the philosopher Emmanuel Kant, but was explored in depth by Isaiah Berlin⁴² after World War 2.

Positive freedom is associated with the inventive and imaginative capacities of human beings, the freedom to hold conversations and access what is known, and to conduct research, report events, and express new ideas. Paradoxically, positive freedom has also been critically viewed as the freedom of the state to prescribe to people what they are allowed to use freedom for. The 1977 Constitution of the USSR, for example, guaranteed its citizens full social, economic and political rights including freedom of speech, the press and assembly, provided that the “exercise of their rights and freedoms is inseparable from the performance of their duties and obligations”⁴³ as Soviet citizens. This included measures to defend the interests of the state, protect socialist property and maintain public order.⁴⁴ From a libertarian standpoint, such directed freedom was no freedom at all as it required all citizens to endorse communism and accept the way the state was run by those in charge. The USSR has passed into history but the notion of freedom-for-the-state lives on in principle and practice, insidiously, where governments prescribe what people may think or say under the guise of protecting civil, cultural and personal rights.

This danger is ever-present in any nominally democratic state. It is acute in developmental states where government regards itself as the custodian of all the people’s interests and rights, for the sake of economic growth and social stability, in effect denying legitimacy to those with differing views on how best to achieve progress. In South Africa, the Democratic Party opposition believes that the ANC plays on race to deny it legitimacy. After the 2004 general election DP leader Tony Leon told the BBC’s Tim Sebastian:

If this country’s going to be a democracy, there has to be a contest. I don’t believe it should be done on racial grounds... And that means that you don’t hold onto race. I cannot believe there’s a single instance of where we said: “Don’t vote for this government because it’s a black government, or a black party”. There were plenty of instances where the ANC said: “That’s a white party—

⁴² Berlin, Isaiah, ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’. 1969. In Berlin, Isaiah, *Liberty*. 2002, new edition, Oxford University Press. ISBN: 019924989X

⁴³ Article 59 (1). In: Soviet Constitution, adopted on: 7 Oct 1977.

⁴⁴ Article 131 (3)

you shouldn't support them". And I think that kind of race-holding actually holds us back, democratically.⁴⁵

As the opposition sees it, the ruling ANC would like to accord itself the right to decide who may oppose it and how. In this scenario, positive freedom would be the limited freedom to critique the ANC's social, economic cultural and political programmes from within the paradigm the movement has set itself, not outside it. A groundswell of ANC opinion does regard the DP as the historical inheritor of the ideology of privilege and white exclusivism. The political system is undoubtedly dominated by a single party which seeks a national consensus on "unity in action for change" – the title of a speech given on Freedom Day 2001 by President Mbeki.⁴⁶ However, negative freedom – in the form of checks on the powers of the state – remains very much alive in South Africa through independent opinion, reflected by Constitutional Court cases and judgements, Parliamentary opposition, and the views expressed by media, NGOs, labour and business.

The Internet is growing in size and significance as an avenue of free expression, with its special features that make controlling it negatively or directing it positively very difficult for any authority. There are, of course, ways to curb freedom in cyberspace. In neighbouring Zimbabwe, President Robert Mugabe has suggested the Internet is a tool of colonialists and his government has moved to control email through the Internet Service Providers (ISPs). The latter would be required, in the event of an investigation, to pass to government officials user details relating to material featuring anything from obscenity to "anti-national activities".⁴⁷ In South Africa, the Department of Communications tabled a Bill⁴⁸ in Parliament proposing to take over the administration of domain names from the Namespace ZA, an autonomous civil society body, but the measure was withdrawn following protests from the Internet community. Government called a truce and opted to appoint an official regulator along with a nine-member advisory board representing the existing domain name community, labour, business and academia, among

⁴⁵ *Hard Talk* with Tim Sebastian – BBC World. Guest: Tony Leon MP Leader of the Opposition, Parliament of South Africa. 22 September 2004.

⁴⁶ ANC website. <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mbeki/2001/tm0427.html>

⁴⁷ BBC news, Monday 31 May 2004. "E-mail controls loom in Zimbabwe".

⁴⁸ Electronic Communication and Transactions Bill ("ECT Bill"), some of which was incorporated into the Bill's most recent draft (made available 6 June 2002).

others.⁴⁹ The browbeaten Internet community accepted the compromise, pointing out that:

Registration of a domain name is not the same as Internet access. Government control of domain name administration will not assist in the delivery of Internet access to any sector of the South African community.⁵⁰

Skirmishes with government over the Internet have continued. The impending, but slow and confusing, deregulation of Telkom's monopoly over access to world cyberspace, has kept the government at odds with the Internet Service Providers Association (ISPA). This *is* an issue of access because ISPA argues that connection costs are kept artificially high due to lack of competition in the provision of basic telecommunications services.⁵¹ Controversy erupted over the enactment of Internet "spy legislation" in 2002 – the Regulation of Interception of Communications and Provision of Communications-Related Information Act⁵², or RICA. In line with the "war against terror" and efforts to stop international money-laundering, Parliament adopted the bill allowing police and security services to monitor terrorists and serious criminals online and via radio or other channels. There was surprisingly little public or media reaction to this potentially restrictive law, except for the fact that business objected to having to bear some of the costs of installing interception equipment.⁵³

Consensus

The President's oft-repeated commitment to the developmental state could have revived old liberal fears that the media were to be mobilised purely to serve the policy goals of the governors. The fact that most commentators acquiesced, and even strongly endorsed, government's definition of the developmental state suggests that acceptance of the "new struggle" runs deep in the hearts and minds of editors and publishers. The government's efforts to forge a social compact with business and the "third sector" of civil society appear to be

⁴⁹ www.itweb.co.za, 22 November 2002. "Domain space authority due by February".

⁵⁰ Namespace ZA Press Statement, 7 June 2002.

⁵¹ "ISPA lodges Telkom anti-competitive complaint with ICASA" [the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa]. ISPA Press Release, 19 March 2003.

⁵² See www.acts.co.za for legislation.

⁵³ www.itweb.co.za, 12 March 2004. "Spy act need some serious thawing", by Paul Vecchiatto.

succeeding. Consensus on developmentalism is firmly embedded in language and attitudes across the political spectrum, so that debate concerns implementation rather than goals. The new struggle entails eradicating poverty, creating jobs, spreading the benefits of the economy through equity and black empowerment, reallocating land and mineral resources, fighting disease, reducing crime, enhancing links with Africa, and generally setting to rights a skewed racial system that favoured the minority at the expense of the majority. However, the programme for national rejuvenation is presented as a party-political one by Mbeki himself, as in this example from his weekly Internet *Letter from the President* in February 2003:

We must stress the point that the progress we have made in the transformation of our country and the numerous positive changes ...did not come of their own. They are an outcome of the hard work by government and the people as a whole against formidable obstacles and challenges... as members of the ANC, [we] should continuously ensure that we fully understand these policies that inform the work of government, so as to appreciate better the umbilical connection between the said policies and the historical positions of the movement... This is necessary because part of our responsibilities, both in our political education work and mass mobilisation, is to demonstrate the continuum of the objectives of the movement since 1912 and the consistency of our strategic objective on the question of liberating Black people in general and Africans in particular.⁵⁴

Similar views are expounded regularly on *ANC Today*, the online voice of the African National Congress.⁵⁵ While broad developmental goals are acceptable to opposition spokespersons, business, civil society, and foreign commentators, many differ with the ANC on grounds of political philosophy and economic policy. The main opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) counters with its own *SA Today*⁵⁶ weekly letter from the Leader of the Opposition, in which Tony Leon castigates the ruling party and its leader for presuming too much. The DA's website informs users that all information on the site is available in all 11 official languages "on request", an offer not made by *ANC Today*. Custom-

⁵⁴ Letter from the President: *The people's contract for a better tomorrow*. Volume 3, No 7, 21-27 February 2003.

⁵⁵ <http://www.anc.org.za>

⁵⁶ <http://www.dp.org.za>

translated stories are a feasible logistical exercise, but clearly the massive task of translating the English website into 10 other languages is beyond possibility. Anyway, the target readership of these sites is mostly the educated elite, who have access to the Internet and can read English.

Cyberdemocracy

If the term *cyberdemocracy* is to have any real meaning in the South African context, it needs to be articulated in terms of developmentalism, including language and cultural issues. Proponents of the developmental state believe that mass communication is one of the tools required to tackle the problems of underdevelopment under the leadership of the state. Media are seen as forming part of a social compact dedicated to eliminating poverty, creating jobs, building houses, providing healthcare, and improving the quality of life of all. In the conversation that is being conducted between government, the private sector, academia and civil society, the role assigned to the media in general, including the Internet is controversial because the media cannot merely carry government propaganda – but what is the alternative? Should they get on the team with government and its partners and simply work to clarify messages in simple human terms? Should media be totally independent “watchdogs on development”?⁵⁷ Should they ignore the state’s agenda and carry on reporting and commenting on all the news that’s fit to print, as if the massive state-driven undertaking is a normal part of national life?

There are no simple answers to these questions, but my observation is that the Internet has become an integral, and critical (in both senses of the word) part of the debate over developmental means and ends. Communication flows on the subject are deep and strong, and have the power to move policy. Web-based information collection and dissemination by highly professional researchers in institutes and university departments is one important stream in these communication flows. In the area of telecommunications – to cite just one area of policymaking – an example of academic engagement is provided by Research ICT Africa! (RIA)⁵⁸. This research unit at the School of Public and Development Management (P&DM) at Wits University produces an annual *South African ICT Sector Performance Review (SPR)* which evaluates policy in the telecommunications sector and comments on how national policies are impacting on the economy and society. Government

⁵⁷ Addison, Graeme. “The watchdog role of development journalism”, in: *Communicare: Journal for Communication Sciences in South Africa*. Autumn, 1993.

⁵⁸ www.researchictafrica.net

cannot afford to ignore its views – or to recast that statement, government is afforded precious insights by an independent observer whose concern is to improve the way policies are made, applied and revised over time. More effective governance is the goal, and whether officials and Ministers like it or not, the information distributed by institutes like RIA has pervasive influence on how their actions are seen, understood, and critiqued.

Symbiotic relationships develop between research units like RIA and the government's own intellectual greenhouses. In the brainstorming of departments like Trade & Industry and Science & Technology,⁵⁹ ideas are hatched and translated into policy directions. Indirect contributions to political debate also come from the foreign aid sector especially where funding is available through sources such as the Canadian-sponsored International Research Development Centre (IDRC)⁶⁰. The IDRC's Acacia Initiative specialises in studying how poor African communities can be empowered with information and communication technologies, and has assisted a number of NGOs to monitor and report on their ICT usage. Another fount of data relevant to politics is the economic monitoring that goes on in banks, financial and business consultancies which are the think-tanks of the private sector. Here market forces are analysed and responses to government policy formulated. Examples include Accenture in South Africa, which styles itself as a "credible thought leader" for industrial clients and punts an African emphasis, offering its services to partner in growth projects all over the continent.⁶¹

In the area of commissioned research, even small outfits can make a difference. Web research firm WorldWideWorx, headed by journalist and IT enthusiast Arthur Goldstuck, regularly produces reports and strategy documents for clients on the Internet, e-commerce, the cellphone industry, and wireless technologies. Well promoted through conventional media, summaries of the reports have helped to set the agenda for discussion on how much impact information technology is having on small and medium enterprises⁶². In November 2003, for instance, WorldWideWorx forecast that the number of Internet users in South Africa would grow rapidly in 2004, and they were right. From a sluggish 7% growth in 2002 (representing 3.1 million users) the figure leapt 13%

⁵⁹ The author has worked with these departments and draws conclusions from direct personal observation.

⁶⁰ www.idrc.ca, and search for Acacia

⁶¹ www.accenture.com follow links to South Africa

⁶² www.worldwideworx.net

to 3.5 million in 2004.⁶³ Factors driving this, said Goldstuck, were the wider choices resulting from the rollout of competitive access services; the growth of small business usage; and the greater number of schools being connected⁶⁴. The information and insights are vital to state policymakers concerned with industrial strategy, education, and telecommunications growth.

To some extent – perhaps to a considerable extent – researchers as primary definers are coming to supplant professional journalists as providers of media content on important developmental issues. Their efforts are lending new legitimacy to the political process, though much of what they do remains invisible. The fact that professional journalists are plugging into the Internet and learning to use web-based resources means that the media system is receiving an injection of coherent information and cogently argued opinion that was previously much harder to come by. Journalists need to consult with specialists, and that is one reason for the rising status of researchers in an increasingly complex world.

Another factor that is accelerating pluralism in South Africa's democracy is that hitherto marginalised civic groups have found a voice in the Internet. Hitherto, white male journalists have predominated as primary definers of news narratives and have been repeatedly criticised for distorting reality. Feminist campaigners and black advocacy movements typically fit the profile of outgroups whose framing of the news does not accord with framing by white males, and they are increasingly resorting to the Internet to put the record, as they see it, straight⁶⁵. It should be kept in mind that almost any person or aggregation of people from the blind to the aged, rappers to bikers, would wish to exercise their own agendas. And they can, given access to the Internet forums and easy-to-build websites.

Where does developmentalism leave issues of civic and media freedom? If the experience of Japan is anything to go by, the success of the developmental state was actually its undoing: it created the social cohesion that effectively undermined the position of the strong bureaucracy and opened the Japanese government to challenges from the political opposition. Civil society grew, coalesced in larger unions, and stood apart from the bureaucracy that had initially helped many small civic bodies to come into existence. South Africa will not have to wait for

⁶³ Internet Usage Statistics for Africa, www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm

⁶⁴ SA Internet Use to Leap in 2004. www.theworx.biz/access03.htm

⁶⁵

the end of the developmental state: the new democracy was born partly out of a strong civil society movements linked with deep-rooted traditions of political organisation. Today any citizen with access to the web can quickly obtain information about government, legislation, parliamentary debates, political parties, policy studies, provincial and city authorities, pressure groups, and social and economic research.⁶⁶

The promise of the Internet as a channel for democratic communication in South Africa is profound. It has dramatically expanded access to political information. It exists as an environment of pervasive communications to which even those who are digitally excluded have indirect access through opinion formers, the media and other primary and secondary sources that touch the grassroots. It has become an Invisible Fourth Estate monitoring government and calling attention to shortcomings as well as opportunities facing the developmental state. How quickly the medium expands to serve a broader populace will depend partly on progress with telecommunications infrastructure. But the reach of Internet is not restricted by infrastructure and connectivity. Other media are already making use of the Internet extensively and can enhance the benefits by tapping into the invisible web⁶⁷ of data sources and social criticism that are truly turning the Internet into a “world brain”.

How South Africans choose to make use of the Internet will depend on the resolve of citizens to use it for probing dialogue that does not degenerate into silliness or slander. Also, the Internet can assist with the development of civil society beyond the stage, at which many now find themselves, of being handmaidens in government development programmes. Mainstream media too will need to divorce themselves further from “serving the governors” (a phrase with a long association in South Africa) to show much more vigilance in cases where development stalls, fails, or falls into nests of corruption. In the pursuit of civic and media freedoms, the Internet’s openness, its pervasive influence, and its depth, should strengthen democracy in Africa’s most electronically advanced country.

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⁶⁶ For useful links, see South Africa: Politics and Government on <http://www-sul.stanford.edu>, and www.polity.org.za

⁶⁷ “Invisible web” describes the deep web mines of searchable databases and other resources listed in web directories. See www.invisible-web.net

Today he runs the Vaal Cybercentre, in Parys, South Africa, managing websites and conducting Internet research and publishing.