Chapter 6
Social Tyranny and Democratic Governance in the Information Age

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ABSTRACT

The development and diffusion of inexpensive, reliable and easy to use public Internet access means that large portions of the U.S. and global populations now regularly communicate with one another. Will the increasing penetration of the Internet into the social and political lives of people facilitate Thomas Jefferson's vision of a world "founded on the primacy of individual liberty and a commitment to pluralism, diversity, and Community"? While many people believe that the answer to this question is "yes", such affirmations often rest on adducing cases not theoretically linked to one another. In contrast, the present paper provides a broadly philosophical, conceptual analysis of how use of the Internet can lead to forms of "social tyranny" in which one or more elements of a community impose their own beliefs and interests on others in that community. For instance, dependence on Internet access and use for social action or pertinent information about social activities may lead to marginalization and exclusion for people whose Internet access or use is limited. Furthermore, the connectedness or mode of connectedness of groups or organizations may give them an unfair advantage disseminating and advocating the messages they deliver to members of the communities in which they exist. The conclusion is not that we should adopt attitudes and policies that are antithetical to the use of the Internet. Rather, using ideas from Dewey and Habermas, amongst others, the conclusion is that it is important to reflect broadly and critically on how use of the Internet can transform the character of the public domain and the deliberations about governance that occur within that domain.

1. INTRODUCTION

As noted by Charles Jonscher, the Internet "was born through an alliance of two unexpected bedfellows: the academic community and the military" (Jonscher, 1999). In 1958, after the launch of sputnik by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), "there was concern among Americans that they were losing the technological lead in an area of potentially vital combat value" (Jonscher, 1999), most importantly, command and control (Brendon, 2001). In response to this

perceived threat, the U.S. Defense Department created the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) to formulate and execute research and development "projects that would expand the frontiers of technology beyond the immediate and specific requirements of the Military Services and their laboratories" (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, 2011).

In December 1967, ARPA, which by then was the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), embraced the vision of J.C.R. Licklider who, in the early 1960s, called for a "Intergalactic network" of people connected to a single time-shared computer system (Licklider, 2001). As a result, DARPA funded a project to link computers together into a network, thereby creating the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET). Once the infrastructure was in place, "On 29 October 1969, Charley Kline, a student in the Network Measurement Center at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), sent the first ever message from one computer to another on the ARPANET" (Cerf, 2009). While there are currently few restrictions (at least in the U.S. and Western Europe) on who can use the Internet, "[A]ccess to ARPANET was," writes Steven Miller, "restricted to people who worked for the military or companies and universities that had defense contracts" (Miller, 1996).

"Inspired by ARPANET's success, the Coordinated Experimental Research Program of the Computer Science Section of NSF's [National Science Foundation's] Mathematical and Physical Sciences Directorate started its own network" (National Science Foundation, 2011). Intended as an extension to ARPANET, the goals of the network, called CSNET (Computer Science Research Network), included open access to computer researchers throughout the world (including those not linked to ARPANET), and financial autonomy through fixed annual dues and fees. By the end of the 1980s, the National Science Foundation Network (NSFNET), originally created to link five "university based super-computer centers to enable

sharing of resources and information" (Crocker, 2011a), superseded CSNET. With the shutdown of ARPANET in 1990, "NSFnet emerged as the major long-distance backbone connecting local computers and networks" (Miller, 1996).

Although NSFNET management prohibited commercial use of NSFNET "in order to maintain use of the bandwidth for research purposes" (Crocker, 2011b), increasing pressure to permit commercial stakeholders' access to the network led, in the middle 1990s, to the dissolution of NSFNET and the migration of its connections to commercial Internet providers. As a result, the late 1990s and 2000s saw the development and diffusion of inexpensive, reliable and easy to use public Internet access. Because of the widespread availability of access and the increasing public use of communication modalities hosted on it, the Internet now connects large portions of the global population with one another (Langman, 2005). For example, the U.S. Department of Commerce, using 2010 U.S. Current Population Survey data, estimated that 68 percent of U.S. non-institutionalized, civilian households "used broadband Internet service" in 2010, "up from 64 percent the previous year" (Economics and Statistics Administration, National Telecommunications and Information Administration -- U.S. Department of Commerce, 2011). A more recent survey (April/May 2011) by the Leichtman Research Group (LRG) found that over 80 percent "of households in the U.S. now subscribe to an Internet service at home" (Leichtman Research Group, 2011). Globally, the Internet World Stats Website reports that, as of June 30, 2012, over 34 percent of the world population use the Internet, representing a 566 percent growth from 2000 (http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm). By 2017, Cisco Systems estimates that "more than 48% of the world's projected population of 7.6 billion" people will be connected to and use the Internet (Sullivan, 2013).

As evidenced by this brief account, an important trend in the history of the Internet's creation

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