

## A Brave New Democracy

### Pros and cons of the Internet.

Access to the Internet enables us to communicate instantly and for free with anyone anywhere in the world by e-mail or Skype. We carry our PDAs (“personal digital assistants” such as Blackberrys—essentially, hand-held computers) with us wherever we go. We give and get instant eyewitness accounts of events. YouTube allows us to post videos online for all the world to see. Blogs, Facebook and Twitter keep us up to the minute on the activities and opinions of anyone who interests us.

Barack Obama’s presidential campaign made use of these. His Internet-savvy organizers were able to mobilize massive grassroots support by using e-mail and these so-called social media. On the night Obama was elected, a CBC TV reporter in front of the White House was alarmed when thousands of students spontaneously converged on the Mall carrying signs demanding “Bush Out Now.” This instant rally, arranged by cell phone text messaging, would have taken a month to organize in the 1960s.

Without a doubt the Internet has the potential to change the way we do politics. Certainly, voting online would save us a lot of money. E-communication can alert us immediately to what’s happening, enable us to organize a response and mobilize people quickly. Since anyone can have a blog, anyone can participate in the discussion of public issues, express a unique point of view and find like-minded supporters. Diverse perspectives mean potentially many more creative ideas and suggestions for solutions to our shared problems. Decision makers can take into account the concerns of people not usually heard. If democracy is majority rule, then the more active discussion of the issues by all members of the society, the better. The Internet makes it possible.

Although Google gives us fast access to information, the free

Internet undermines print. The print media are in trouble, and many book publishers are going out of business. Dying weekly newsmagazines are thought to be nothing but old news, and even daily newspapers are considered too slow. The book may become “a shining artifact of the past.”

Without accurate reporting by trained journalists, without thoughtful, reasoned analysis, without painstaking research, we can’t be truly informed. Responsible publishers, editors and writers provide a service in seeking to ascertain the truth and usefulness—the worth of what they print. They need to be paid for their work somehow. The medium is the message in terms of enduring value. A hardbound book can be a companion for life. Quality magazines are saved for future reference. A newspaper lasts a day. Instant net info is instantly irrelevant.

With what authority will people speak on the Internet? Democracy is not just the “multiplication of ignorant opinion.” If the purpose of democracy is to provide good government for and by the people, then a great deal of actual knowledge and wisdom must inform the policies and plans of that government. Responsible representatives and their electors need sound knowledge to make good decisions.

Electronic communication can endanger democracy when it substitutes for actual interaction. If democracy means people working together for their mutual well-being in real neighbourhoods, cities and regions, then people have to disconnect from the Internet and talk to each other face to face in associations where ideas and plans have real consequences for everyone in the community. This takes more time, courage and compromise than remaining behind the monitor of a computer.



*Jackie Flanagan*

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