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What role can the Internet play in the development of democracy in Africa?

ABSTRACT

This article explores the recent trends in information technology, specifically the Internet, and what role it can play in the development and sustainability of democracy in Africa. It examines what role it can play in revitalising the public sphere and how it can influence political decisions in the continent. However, I argue that even though the Internet has had profound effects on people's lives, contributing significantly to communication and information sharing, its real potential is yet to be realised in Africa. This means in effect, that although it might have contributed to various sociological phenomena, it could potentially be dangerous to the growth of democracy in Africa because it is still in the hands of a few, especially those in power.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Information technology, especially the Internet, has had profound effects on people's lives. The way we do and relate to each other, and the way we communicate, work, play and socialise have all been affected by information technology. As the number of people using the Internet increases, individuals, governments and various organisations are exploring what effects it will have on various issues, including the growth of democracy in the world. In Africa, as in the rest of the world, there is growing interest in democracy as a system of governance that will allow people take charge of their lives and chart their destiny.

It is against this backdrop that we would like to examine the Internet's potential to contribute to that freedom of expression and provision of information needed to make informed decisions and choices, critical factors in the development and sustainability of democracy. This article will explore the impact and contributions of the Internet, being a mass medium, perhaps bigger than any other before it, on politics and democracy in Africa. It will also look at whether it can revitalise the public sphere and influence political decisions on the continent. We situate the Internet within the realms of the mass media because of its ability to reach millions of people across the world.

2. THE INTERNET

The Internet, being one of information technology's greatest innovations, has had a huge impact on communication. It has revolutionised communication, enabling information dissemination, reception, sharing and interaction between individuals without regard for geographic location or time differences. Unlike the telephone, which primarily supports one-to-one communications, or radio and television, where information flows in only one direction, from a single source to an audience that can only listen passively, the Internet supports simultaneous, interactive communications among many (Browning, 1996).

People have traditionally been passive recipients of information from papers, radio or television and only enjoyed modest participation through letters to the editor and phone-ins, for example. With the advent of the Internet, however, they have the opportunity to become more involved and to interact with the political realm (Street, 2001). Because of its potential to transcend time and space, the Internet, which links millions of people globally through computer and telecommunication networks, gives rise to new forms of communication, information sharing and expression, facilitating the emergence of cyberspace, a computer-generated public domain devoid of physical boundaries uncontrolled by any authority.

What is becoming of increasing interest and forms the central focus... is the possibility of cyberspace giving rise to new forms and expressions of governance: a paradigmatic change in the constellation of power relations between individuals, governments and social institutions. Such contention arises from the transcending qualities of ICTS [information communication technologies] as a means to facilitate the demise of modernist forms of governance based upon territory, hierarchical managerial control or populations, and policing. (Loader, 1998:1.)

The Internet is today a global resource connecting millions of users, which began as an experiment over 30 years ago by the United States Department of Defence (Leiner *et al.*, 2000). Since then, the Internet's growth has eclipsed all the other technologies that preceded it. Radio was, for example, in existence 38 years before 50 million people tuned in; TV took 13 years to reach that mark. Sixteen years after the first personal computer kit came out, 50 million people were using one, and once it was open to the general public, the Internet crossed the line in four years (Meeker & Pearson, 1997:2-6). It is now estimated that almost 650 million people are connected to the Internet in the world, most of them in the developed countries, specifically in North America and Western Europe (Global Reach, 2003). However, despite these impressive figures, huge portions of the world and millions of people, especially in the developing and low-income countries of Africa and Asia, have no access and in fact remain ignorant of this phenomenon.

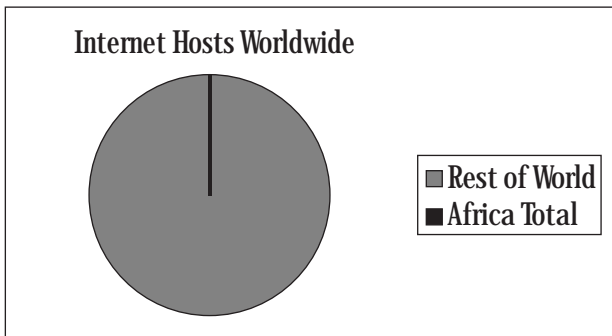
The Internet is considered a major breakthrough in human communication for various reasons, including:

- It has the potential to link the whole of humankind in an interactive network that provides instantaneous communication and is cost-effective and low-cost to the user.
- It is based on neural communication, rather than point-to-point communication on which telecommunications were based so far, which makes potentially possible the simultaneous involvement of millions in the diffusion or exchange of messages and information.
- It supersedes the passive role of a recipient of communication, or the active role of a sender of communication, by making possible the active and interactive search for information and databases world wide.
- It provides a new way of accessing information with its ability to draw on complex databases and information, and to process these and adapt them to the user's specific needs.
- It facilitates interactive voice and video communication, on the same basis that written information is transmitted today, which will provide a further quantitative and qualitative leap forward, with the potential of democratising international relations and bringing people closer together in what amounts to direct visual and verbal contact and communication (Singh, 2000).

3. THE INTERNET IN AFRICA

The Internet has grown rapidly in Africa in the last few years. By November 2000, all 54 countries on the continent had access to the Internet compared to only 11 that were connected to the global network by the end of 1996 (Jensen, 2000).

However, the Internet in Africa is largely confined to the capital cities, and statistics show that outside South Africa, only one out of every 5000 Africans has access to the Internet, most of them the young, educated and propertied elite (World Bank, 2000).



Jensen (2000)

There are numerous reasons for the slow pace of Internet connectivity and use in Africa, including poverty and the lack of clear policies on the use and development of information technology.

Aden (1995) points out that the two greatest impediments to the development of electronic communication, including the Internet, in Africa are insufficient infrastructure and regulatory barriers. Infrastructural limitations include scarce and/or poor quality telephone lines, unreliable power supplies, outdated equipment, and a lack of knowledge and training.

Regulatory barriers include government monopolies on telecommunications, high access rates for telephone service and legal disincentives to foreign investment. Aden argues that the majority of national telecom operators are guided by policy-makers, mostly politicians, with little background in telecommunications technology and its value for development.

These politicians often perceive telecommunications as trivial public utility; sometimes as a utility for "high officials". The guidance of policy makers has made telecom

operations management inefficient and unconfident in decision-making. Such arrangement has blocked visions towards deregulation and increased conflict in adopting the most appropriate deregulation and privatisation models based on national situations (Aden, 1995).

Poverty has contributed immensely to the slow pace of Internet development in Africa. The widespread poverty in Africa is a critical factor in the spread and use of information technology. In a continent where, according to World Bank figures, the majority of the people live on less than a dollar a day and are concerned more with basic needs like food, water, medical care, shelter and clothing, the Internet remains a luxury only a few can afford.

But how would the Internet impact on democracy? Before we embark on this issue, we would like to explore the impact of information and communication, two factors critical to political communication, and the media, as the dominant public sphere, on politics and democracy.

4. THE ROLE OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEMOCRACY

Information and freedom are indivisible. The information revolution is unthinkable without democracy, and true democracy is unimaginable without freedom of information. The great democratising power of information has given us all the chance to effect change...in ways we cannot even imagine today (Annan, 1997).

When the General Assembly of the United Nations drew the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on 10 December 1948, they recognised the importance of information and media¹ in human and societal development. To the United Nations and indeed the world at large, the right to information is one of the basic freedoms and the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas freely without interference is the touchstone of all freedoms.

It is thus widely acknowledged that information and communication play a vital role in human development and are considered the pillar on which a free society rests. Free and reliable information combined with adequate and effective communication can bring about desired change, be it political, social or economic. Information and communication are considered vital organs through which society operates.

¹ Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted and proclaimed by General Assembly resolution 217 A (III) of 10 December 1948 states: *Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontier. See full information and other articles at: [Web:] <http://www.unhchr.ch/udhr/lang/eng.htm> [Date of access: 29 Nov. 2002].*

“The quality of life, as well as prospects for social change and economic development, depend increasingly upon information and its exploitation,” says Martin (1995:3), “...living standards, patterns of work and leisure, education system and the marketplace are all influenced markedly by advances in information and knowledge”. Martin considers the world today an information society where people cannot live without information and an effective medium through which to send or receive that information. Political theorists posit then that democracy is a communications-intensive mode of governance in which there is continual discussion, analysis, debate and study (Martin, 1995:18), and where the educated and informed public relies on information to make informed decisions and choices.

Although it is information that plays a pivotal role in human and societal development, the same information, if held by one person or a small group of people, cannot be considered useful unless it can be replicated and shared by many diversely located people. Thus, telecommunication and other forms of communication, and especially the mass media, make it possible for widely dispersed citizens to receive and disseminate information.

... [The media] now make it possible for tens of millions of widely dispersed citizens to receive the information they need to carry out the business of government themselves, gain admission to the political realm, and retrieve at least some of the power over their own lives and goods that many believe their elected leaders are squandering (Grossman, 1996:6).

In replicating and availing information to the masses, the media continues to play a vital role in the promotion of democracy around the world. It not only provides information but is an arena and a channel for wide debate, for citizens to express themselves, and share opinions on issues in which they are interested. Commentators consider the media the chief institutions of the public sphere (Hartley, 1992; Dahlgren, 1995; McQuail, 2000).

“Television, popular newspapers, magazines and photography, the popular media of the modern period, are the public domain, the place where and the means by which the public is created and has its being,” says Hartley (1992). This development allows many people, widely scattered, to participate actively in meetings from the comfort of their houses without the necessity of meeting in one place or travelling long distances to be at some physical location. This has in turn opened up the public space and allowed many people who would have been barred by distance and time to deliberate actively and share views and information on issues they feel strongly about.

In earlier eras, democratic participation was limited because of the problems of assembling large numbers of people at one time and in one place, because of the limits to political knowledge of ordinary citizens, and because of the inequalities in the distribution of resources which hamper people's access to power and their capacity to participate. ... these difficulties have made direct participation and popular deliberation both impractical and undesirable. Electronic democracy seems to offer a solution to all these problems thus opening up the possibility of full participation (Street, 2001:217).

Street is optimistic because a 'wired-up' world eliminates the constraints of time/space and communication, and participation becomes instantaneous. Curran (1993:83) likens the media to the "zone where access to relevant information affecting the public good is widely available, where discussion is free of domination by the state and where all those participating in public debate do so on an equal basis" even though this is a utopian view considering the commercialisation and the different interests held or promoted by the media in the world today. To Curran, it is within this public sphere that people collectively determine through the process of rational argument the way in which they want to see society develop, and the media facilitates this process by providing an arena of public debate, and by reconstituting private citizens as a public body in the form of public opinion. However, in reality, this picture is foggy. Up to now and in most parts of the world, the media is often open or available only to a few people, especially the monied and educated elite and those in power. Commercialisation of the media makes it extremely difficult for the common man and woman to access it and use it to determine their destiny 'collectively'.

Although in established democracies, it is common for people to have access to these media, including television and now the Internet, radio still remains the main source of information for most people in the developing world and the most 'potent' and effective mass communication medium. It is perhaps for this reason that the ruling class, in their 'selfish' interests to preserve their positions in government, has always maintained near monopoly through strict control over the electronic broadcast media, especially radio and television².

² A study conducted by Article 19, the international anti-censorship centre in London, concluded that "radio is still the most effective medium in Africa". Report quoted by Niemann Reports (Spring 1996). The Kenya government has either refused or continues to delay granting organisations and individuals licenses to start radio broadcasts and stations. The government controls the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) which operates the country's premier radio, broadcast television, and cable television networks. See US State Department Kenya Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998 released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labour, 26 February 1999. [Web:] http://www/state/gov/www/global/human_rights/1998_hrp_report/kenya.html [Date of access: Sept. 2002].

Nonetheless, the dynamics of democracy are still intimately linked to the practice of communication because societal communication is increasingly taking place within the mass media, which not only acts as the public sphere but as a people's watchdog (Dahlgren, 1995; Catinat & Vedel, 2000).

Therefore, although there is increasing commercialisation of the media, it still plays a critical role in shaping opinion and contributing to people's thinking and actions. Recent technology developments have bettered communication allowing more people to access the information they require either to participate in public forums or to make informed decisions. Computer-based information technology has without a doubt widened and revitalised the public sphere to include those who would have been left out by the so-called traditional media (cf. Rheingold 2000:XXIX).

5. THE INTERNET, POLITICS AND DEMOCRACY

In countries where the use of the Internet has been tested as a political medium, there are suggestions that it has catalysed a paradigm shift in democracy by reengaging the citizenry in the political process and enabling their active participation in both the decision-making processes and in the business of governance (Hacker & Van Dijk, 2000).

In fostering information dissemination and reception, sharing knowledge and exchange of ideas, the Internet opens up the political space, allowing everybody and anybody to participate actively in public debates. And since some of the greatest tenets of democracy are free expression, acquisition and use of information critical to the decision-making processes, the Internet is now considered an important tool through which people can develop and promote democracy and enrich individual participation in government, and effect change.

Electronic communications increases the role of citizens in the policymaking process at the expense of the political "middlemen" who have historically provided the forum by which ordinary citizens could make their interests on specific issues known through interest aggregation and representation. (Grossman, 1996:162.)

In providing opportunities for people to participate in forums to discuss and debate issues that concern them, and share and exchange information, the Internet is now considered an 'electronic' agora, akin to the marketplace in which citizens discussed the issues of the day in the classical Athenian city state (Rheingold, 2000:XXX). It is this sharing of information and two-way communication that is crucial to democracy. In Africa, for example, where only a few, especially those in power, control the media especially radio that has the widest reach, people need both reliable and objective information that enables them to make informed decisions. In most instances, those in

power or governments have little or no control over the Internet and can thus not influence, censure or manipulate the information being shared.

Commentators, for example, Elberse, Hale and Dutton (2000:130), believe ICTs lower economic barriers created by conventional media, “such as the prohibitive costs associated with TV advertising”, thus enabling more candidates to reach a wider audience and increase public access to high quality information and in the process nurture greater interest in politics and political discourse.

Experts posit that information and communication technology (ICT) affect and change the functioning of a democracy “especially the fundamental operations of expressing opinions, debating, voting, making decisions” and opine that the use of ICT ensures democratic values.

Public debates would take place within fora which would trigger citizenship and allow for direct participation of people in public affairs through new procedures. New relationships among citizens, and between citizens and governments, would be established (Catinat & Vedel, 2000:185).

The Internet thus increases the scale and speed of information provision, giving people more control over their “information diet” and “arms” them with the information they need to participate in democracy. Unlike in the other media where the information flow is mostly uni-directional, especially from the top to the bottom or more specifically from the government to the citizens, the Internet allows for a two-way communication, giving anyone a chance or platform to air their views and participate in public discussions on issues affecting them, leading to a more ‘horizontal’ and less ‘vertical’ communication (Bryan, Tsagarousianou & Tambini, 1998:6). From this emerges the argument that the Internet can empower “the shy, the disabled” and other socially disadvantaged groups by offering them both a platform for political voice and opportunities previously impractical and include them in the process of democratic participation” (Bryan *et al.*, 1998:6). For example, Dr Christine Barton who is wheelchair-bound was able to vote in the 2002 local government elections in the United Kingdom for the first time in more than five years without the assistance of aides thanks to the Internet and other ICT advancements (Parker, 2002). With software that recognised her voice, Dr Barton logged on to the website, read out two voter identification numbers and said the name of the party she wanted to select. “It’s really good when technology moves in a way that not only opens up things for disabled people, but does the same thing for the non-disabled too,” she says. Thus the Internet, using advanced technology and software, can and evidently provides the people with an opportunity to join in the public discourse of issues and a chance to participate fully and effectively in decision-making processes and governance.

The optimism bestowed on the Internet's capacity to promote democracy extends to those who now consider direct democracy possible. For example, an American online initiative, Direct Democracy Project (2002), believes it is now possible to have direct democracy because "decisions in democratic nations will be made by the people, not just by their representatives, in real-time". This will create what Catinat and Vedel (2000:185) call a digital democracy, which they define as a "continuation of representative, liberal democracy, but with a greater participation of citizens in public affairs, a wider access of social forces to public debates, a better accountability or governments". This digital democracy, they believe, will replace representative democracy and establish a form of direct democracy.

To Direct Democracy Project (2002), representative democracy was originally devised because people could not be physically present in one location to "debate and cast a ballot", something which has changed dramatically with the advent of the Internet as "all the citizens of democratic societies will soon be able to use secure authenticated linkage to first become fully informed about any issue, hear all of the arguments for and against a proposition as they are presented, and then cast a vote, all in real-time".

However, even though these theorists paint an optimistic picture of democracy around the world, they forget (perhaps they are only informed by events taking place in the West) or indeed ignore the fact that although the use of the Internet is now widespread, a large majority of people in the world have little or no access to the Internet. The portrayal of the Internet as a homogenous virtual or common space does not reflect the reality on the usage and availability of the Internet across the world. In fact the Internet has further stratified the world and countries into the information rich and information poor (Van Dijk, 2000; Castells, 2001). This stratification means that in most of Africa, as in the rest of the developing world, even in parts of the developed world (cf. Castells, 2001:212), the electronic agora that is the Internet is dominated by a few, mostly the well off, young, English-speaking and educated. This leaves the majority of the people out of this political marketplace.

This in turn means that most of what is discussed on the Internet only reflects the concerns of the dominant group, so that the subordinate groups' concerns are not even raised. Indeed, Rheingold (2000:XXX) warns that although the Internet might help revitalise the public sphere, it can, if improperly controlled and wielded, "become an instrument of tyranny". This argument is backed by Van Dijk (2000:166) who opines that ICTs could undermine democratic institutions if used in ways that "further distance the public from candidates and erode the quality of debates by encouraging single-issue politics, and only serving actively involved participants" and believes that the Internet could reinforce existing patterns of control by politicians.

This stratification and widening gap and the (over)use of English have led to what Gumucio-Dagron (2001) calls an “‘electronic apartheid’, bigger than any other form of discrimination the world is experiencing today”:

Whoever doesn't read, speak and write English is out of the game, segregated, banned, and sent straight to the ghettos of Spanish, Hindi, French, Mandarin or any other underrepresented language. The 'official' language of Internet has become the new skin colour of cultural supremacy, of cultural domination at its best (Gumucio-Dagron, 2001).

Apart from the language issue, Gumucio-Dagron wonders whether it is a priority to have the Internet at the expense of such basic needs as food:

We have seen organisations in developing countries spend time and energy 'translating' web contents into local languages in the hope that the Internet will eventually help people to feel that they are part of modern society. We have seen computers and Internet connections pushed into rural areas where drinking water is not even available, in the name of an ill defined 'right to knowledge' - as if knowledge was a privilege of industrialized societies graciously given to the 'poor' via new 'access' technologies (Gumucio-Dagron, 2001).

The fact that the Internet remains in the hands of only a few people therefore means there is little evidence to suggest that it has played any role in the growth of democracy or indeed contributed to public debates on issues that affect them. Moreover, evidence suggests that politicians use the Internet not as a way of encouraging political participation or indeed dialogue but as a means of reaching a wider audience, a constituency of voters, and opinion shapers unreachable by traditional media.

Evidence from the 2002 elections in Kenya, for example, underpins this argument. The leading presidential contenders, Messrs Mwai Kibaki, Uhuru Kenyatta and Simeon Nyachae³ set up websites not only to disseminate information, their manifestos and campaign material, but also to seek feedback from readers. However, my efforts to solicit information from them did not elicit any response. My conclusion was that whereas the Internet might provide a cheaper alternative to reaching a constituency of voters, especially Kenyans in the diaspora, the politicians are not interested in using the facility as an avenue for political dialogue or as a forum for the discussion of issues affecting

³ Kibaki [Web:] [Date of access: Nov. 2002], Uhuru Kenyatta [Web:] [Date of access: Nov. 2002] and Simeon Nyachae [Web:] <http://www.nyachae.org/> [Date of access: Nov. 2002] were the main contenders in Kenya's presidential elections held on 27 December 2002.

Kenyans. To most politicians, the Internet is seen as a tool for the achievement of short-term political objectives – winning the votes they need to ascend to power. This argument is supported by observations (Hacker & Van Dijk, 2000:3) that when the Internet “becomes another channel for those who already are high in political sophistication, then it does little to enhance democratisation and a great deal to enhance the status quo of existing democratic or non-democratic systems”.

Furthermore, there is little evidence to indicate that even though millions of people around the world are using the Internet, they are using it to communicate or share information on democracy or for meaningful political dialogue, a view shared by Loader (1998:9) who suggests that what is taking place on the Internet has more to do with ‘sound-bite’ politics, which epitomises commodification of political discourse rather than informed political discourse.

Studies indeed show that most people use the Internet either to shop or for purposes other than sharing information on democracy (Kedzie, 1996). In the case of Africa, most people use the Internet for email purposes, to communicate and share information. But this information need not be necessary on issues of national concern or democracy for that matter. To most people, emails have played an important role in fostering social interaction, speeding up communication and information sharing at a relatively cheaper cost. Compared with the cost of making a call to the UK, for example, a one-hour Internet use in Kenya costs less than an equivalent of US\$23 in cybercafés in the capital Nairobi whereas a three-minute phone call to the UK from Kenya might cost about US\$12.

The growing number of kiosks, cybercafés and other forms of public Internet access, especially in urban centres in Kenya, attests to the fact that many people are now using emails to communicate with friends and families around the globe. The intensive use of email for communication is thus considered, first, as a means of sustaining social and family relationships although there are suggestions this could improve the sharing of information critical to democracy.

Email, but not necessarily the other [Internet] services offer the specific capability that is hypothesised to have dynamic implications for democratisation: multidirectional discourse across borders in a timely and inexpensive manner, unbounded by geographic and institutional constraints. (Kedzie, 1996.)

Numerous virtual communities, associations of people with common interests, have also come up to deliberate or chat about issues that affect or interest them. Rheingold (2000), for example, writes how he met a large group of people, his virtual community, with whom he could talk about anything. In the virtual meetings, people do not have to

be in one place or indeed the same geographical location or time zone. Many of the participants in the virtual meetings come from different parts of the world and are only brought together by common interests, hobbies, issues of common concern or even trade.

Some Africans in the diaspora are thus coming together in such groups to discuss problems affecting the continent and how they can effect change. For example, the Kenya Community Abroad⁴ (KCA) is one such group. In its website, KCA raises and discusses various issues, especially concerning political and economic governance of Kenya, two issues important to Kenyans struggling to consolidate democracy. Founded in 1997 in Pennsylvania and Minnesota in the United States of America, KCA is composed primarily of Kenyans living outside Kenya with an objective of giving them a “platform” on which to exchange views and “help bring change back home” (KCA, 2003). By maintaining the website, KCA seeks to provide the platform, a chat room, an arena and a channel for wide debate, for Kenyans to air their views, and share and distribute diverse information and opinion. In doing this, the organisation has widened the public sphere and included in their public discussions and meetings those interested in Kenyan issues. So many other localised organisations like KCA exist on the Internet. But how effective are these virtual platforms, arenas and chat rooms, especially in Africa?

There is no denying the fact that many people spend a lot of time chatting and surfing the Internet. However, it is hard to determine whether these people chat about democracy, or indeed engage in meaningful political discourse. The availability of large amounts of information is not necessarily important or helpful to democracy. Street (2001:219), for example, points out that huge amounts of information might hamper or affect decision-making. “All decisions require a judgement and the art of judgement may...that information has to be examined and explored in dialogue, not simply computed,” he argues. This view is shared by other commentators who suggest that information in its raw form does not necessarily enhance democracy.

[Information] is often useless to those who do not know how to evaluate it. Information needs to be placed in context. Information rights must be complemented by knowledge rights which sustain the public’s access to the widest possible range of interpretation, debate and explanation (Catinat & Vedel, 2000:186).

⁴ *The Kenya Community Abroad* (see more information at: [Web:] [Date of access: May 2003]) is a socio-political organisation registered in the states of Pennsylvania and Minnesota, and Washington, DC in the United States of America founded in March 1997 to provide a forum in which Kenyans could engage in intelligent discourse on economic, political and social issues that affect Kenyans. The organisation hosts an online forum where people can share views on different issues.

To these scholars, information is never neutral; it embodies national or social culture and free flow of information may lead to cultural domination or homogenisation. Above all, we need people with critical minds to make effective use of the abundant information available on the Internet.

6. CONCLUSION

The fact that the Internet has enormous potential to expand participatory democracy and expand the public sphere is not in doubt. Information technology, as we have seen, has had a positive impact on political communication and democracy. Unlike radio, television and the print media, which can easily be manipulated and controlled by the state and the government, the Internet as a global medium with little state control has the potential to challenge the political status quo in any country.

In providing opportunities for people to participate in forums to discuss and debate issues that concern them, the Internet opens up new channels of communication between citizen and the state, between governors and the governed. As an 'electronic' agora where ideas are freely churned out and debates held on issues affecting the people, the Internet has a huge potential to develop, promote democracy and enrich individual participation in the government, and effect change like no other media before. However, the Internet is still in very few hands in Africa to make any meaningful or significant contribution to people's way of life. The Internet cannot spread to the common man and woman in Africa unless cheap computers, training and improved telephone reliability are provided to make the Internet the mass medium it has become in the industrialised part of the globe. And even if these facilities were readily available, the use of foreign languages bars many people from accessing and utilising information from the Internet.

Gumucio-Dagron rightly observes that the overuse of English on the Internet cannot promote democracy because most of the world does not speak it in the first place. "Is it fair that everybody in the rest of the world has to learn English in order to be part of the 'electronic democracy'?" he wonders. Furthermore, is the Internet a priority in a continent plagued by poverty? A continent where most people have more pressing problems than to afford the "luxuries" of the telephone and Internet?

So, to make the Internet available to the masses and truly transform it into a mass medium, there has to be a poverty eradication programme that will ensure people meet their basic needs first. Everything else, including the Internet, even in the developed countries, is secondary. Afterwards, if measures were put in place to increase access to the Internet to all groups of people, it may present a real opportunity for greater participation, democratic growth and a true revitalisation of the public sphere. The

mere fact that the Internet is only in a few hands, especially those in power, makes it dangerous to democracy in Africa. Just like the other media, which are beyond the common man and woman, the Internet and other computer-based information technology have become modern tools used by the monied elite to continue their dominance and control of the majority poor, a great threat to the consolidation of democracy in Africa.

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