

Double-clicking on Democracy

Utopia or dystopia? Is information technology the tool to create a rosy democracy or the sword which will ultimately destroy global society? **Ian Angell** and **Simon Davies** argue against mass invasion of privacy (below), while **Patrick Dunleavy** finds grounds for optimism (overleaf)

When did democracy don the mantle of morality? For how much longer can we keep up the pretence that democracy is a stepping stone to a global social utopia? When will it be seen for what it really is: a body-count of the manipulated mob, to be abused by any determined control-freak? An alliance of cronyism, corruption and self-interest. Steered by a concoction of vox-pops and pick 'n' mix marketeering, governments ram through ever more pointless and dangerous legislation – proclaiming, invariably, that they are acting for the 'public good'.

Iceland's government has sold the medical records of its population to private company deCODE Genetics. The UK population is forced to register names and addresses on the electoral roll. The roll is exempt from the Data Protection Act, and is sold to whoever will pay. Burglars cross-reference likely targets against directories on compact disks, and then telephone to check their victims are out before breaking and entering.

A democratic vote is an excellent way to justify trampling on individual privacy. Tony Blair wants every police force to follow the example of the Lothian and Borders Police, who are archiving DNA data from everyone arrested. Apparently 75 per cent of the local population support this action. But did the people of

Edinburgh realise that a motoring offence would place them in the database? Elsewhere in the UK, 92 per cent of the citizens of the London Borough of Newham want CCTV cameras to watch over their town centre. Newham is at the forefront of new technology. It uses face-recognition software. The movement of individuals can now be tracked around the borough. The odd few per cent who want anonymity will just have to shop elsewhere. Plato claimed that democracy always leads to despotism and tyranny. Big Brother turns out to be the manipulated voice of the tyrannical masses insisting on a state-led invasion of privacy.

What do we get in return for abandoning our privacy? An insignificant input into an inconsequential national election of a nanny-state, every four or five years, that has little or no influence on the general scheme of things. But do we care? The BBC extended its nine o'clock news bulletin by 20 minutes to report the 1997 General Election. Its normal viewing figures of 5.5 million dropped to less than 4 million. The cost of administering the same election on the remote Atlantic islands of St Kilda would have cost the 29 adults living there a total of £5,000. They decided not to bother and save the money.

Meanwhile, pious words abound concerning 'extending democracy' in an 'Information Society'. The United States administration has placed more than 100,000 documents on the internet. However, a snowstorm of selected

information from Washington (or Brussels, or Westminster) changes nothing. True, cable, telephone and the internet will enable the public to receive far more relevant and in-depth explanations of political issues. But will they participate more intelligently in the political process?

They won't need to. The new generation of interactive television will monitor customer habits, viewing patterns, spending profiles and opinions, and offer a quick 'n' easy online democracy, complete with personalised prompts.

But governments won't have it all their own way. Far from allowing the manipulated voter into the policy and decision making process, technology actually spreads Demosciosis (Jonathan Rauch), a disease of government. Mass lobbying by vested interests causes stalemates on every issue, forces through economically insane proposals, thereby driving government to its knees. On 5 November 1996, voters in California approved Proposition 218. All property-related assessments, fees, and charges have to be approved (but more likely disapproved) by the vote of property owners. Consequently Moody's lowered the ratings on the various bonds of the City of Los Angeles, completing a self-fulfilling prophecy that the City would lose tens of millions of dollars in revenue.

The old cosy relationship between lobbyists and politicians, riding the gravy train of public money, is coming off the rails. So should indi-

viduals be worried about the rabble-rousers in government? Modern technology extends the opportunity for any self-appointed control-freak to mobilise the masses. Anyone with deep pockets can manipulate the bigoted moral majority, and call for support on single-issue campaigns. They will disseminate blacklists of names of those who dare stand out against them.

Perhaps the difference these days is that not only are desperate governments more willing to succumb to such tactics, but also the exposed politician has become a rabbit caught in the headlights, needing to please all of the people, all of the time, on every single issue, or face their wrath come re-election time. Adding to the paranoia are advertisements, opinion polls, talk-radio spots, and mass telephone calls funnelled through toll-free numbers. Astronomical sums of money will be needed for mass propaganda. In a democracy, like everywhere else, money talks.

Self-serving politicians will promise a wish-list of jam today and jam tomorrow. The hell of a collectivist heaven will poll the opinions of the herd to reinstate capital punishment, to ban homosexuality and immigration, and to insist on a fair(?) distribution of wealth by stealing from the few rich. However, 'a democracy cannot exist as a permanent form of government. It can only exist until a majority of voters discover that they can vote themselves largesse out of the public treasury' (Alexander Tytler). Today, that largesse is free welfare and medical payouts, and other social security safety nets. But no society can vote itself into an economic utopia. The invisible hands of untamed economic forces are at play. Individuals, companies, countries can only steer within the limits allowed by the flow of self-organising trends of the global economy. Going against the flow is futile. If a society doesn't earn its wages then economic reality can be kept at bay only for a little while.

Ultimately, by insisting that society can pay itself unreasonable salary levels, or set excessive levels of taxation, either inflation or recession will return, and jobs will disappear. Nevertheless, to get elected, democratic governments will be forced to play this game. The needs of the masses will justify the invasion of individual privacy to check that everyone is paying their fair(?) share. However, the rich, their wealth and their privacy will emigrate, as Christopher Lasch predicted in *The Revolt of the Elites*. In the Information Age, the politics of envy is suicide. The big political question of the coming decades is how to find a socially acceptable means of dismantling democracy. ■

Digital government and the 'end of the state'

New goods often bring out a rash in people – especially rash utopian or dystopian predictions. Utopians look forward to the improbable resolution of deeply ingrained social problems by quick technological fixes. Dystopians predict the improbable collapse of deeply entrenched social institutions from simple contact with the new products – the shock of the new. In the end things are usually more complex, more boring and less alarming. Social institutions assimilate and absorb the new goods, changing substantially in the process but not transforming or disintegrating utterly. Our standard reaction has become, in the slightly cynical words of the American band REM: 'It's the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine.'

Could things be different with the internet revolution? It doesn't seem all that likely if we just look at the technological end of things, for here the utopias and dystopias of today are following closely the standard sci-fi rules of yesteryear, such as extrapolating current trends to the nth degree. In the 1950s Isaac Asimov wrote novels in which a single giant computer MULTIVAC took over world government and solved intellectual problems which had baffled humanity for generations. My favourite story is the one where MULTIVAC was asked where jokes come from, and after correlating all the available evidence concludes that jokes were invented by space aliens as a method for exploring human psychology – the main evidence for this being that no one ever made up a new joke, but always relayed ones told them by someone else.

Now the cyberpunk novelists have been making our flesh creep for a generation at least with net-based fantasies of virtual reality universes. In his now numerous publications, Ian Angell has pictured a social universe already better drawn in Marge Piercy's 1985 novel, *Body of Glass*. She envisages a net-based world run by 'corps' (multi-national corpora-



tions), where government has boiled down to an authoritarian environmental police (who enforce a death penalty for polluters), where large areas of the urban megalopolis have been relinquished to gangs and mafia-style criminal organisation, and where only a few small independent guild towns survive in the interstices to provide islands of relative democracy and liberalism. Professor Angell has a few variants of his own, my favourite being off-planet banking (which should feature in a James Bond film before long), but the basic picture is the same. But just as Asimov's MULTIVAC never materialised, and computers got smaller and more decentralised not bigger and more unitary, so even the extrapolation of cur-

rent technological paths remains a deeply problematic enterprise, let alone predicting the interaction between social forces and technological changes.

Somewhere between the confident futurism that should only be the domain of novelists, and the predominant backwards-looking stance of the existing academic disciplines, there lies a more legitimate zone for innovative forms of social science enquiry to map the emerging lineaments of the 21st century advanced industrial state.

As an example of this kind of work I would point to the research which LSE Public Policy Group has just completed for the UK's National Audit Office, in a report called *Government on*

the Web. If the development of the internet was a threat to democracy then our extensive research within a wide range of civil service organisations should have offered some signs of threatening developments, some evidence of the bureaucratic onslaught on our liberties which Ian Angell and Simon Davies are so exercised about.

Sad to say the research team's experiences offered no indications of this kind of central planning actively mobilising bureaucracy. In some ways, we wished there was more evidence of any such ambition or capability – for our experience was of a degree of bureaucratic drift and inability to seize the implications of the web era which made us alarmed about the pace of progress towards digital government. We think of the surprised reactions of civil servants at being asked for usage figures on their sites; their inability to track down a budget for web and internet spending; their assumption that change would take place at the leisurely pace of yesteryear; their happy ability to speak of 'electronic transactions' and 'information age government' as being advanced by dealing with citizens over the telephone (an 1890s technology) rather than on paper (a renaissance technology). The stand-out moments of our research included:

- The public relations manager who proclaimed his complete responsibility for his agency's website, but then stopped the interview at a later point to ask: 'What is this HTML you keep talking about?'
- Another web manager who insisted that he could not change a single page on his website without ministerial permission, which in his view justified why almost nothing had altered in two years.
- The officials who explained that they spent only £14 on their website out of every million pounds in their agency's running costs budget because most of their customers did not have PC access – only to find on looking at their site data that over 300,000 users a month were spending an average of 35 minutes per session on their site (around three times the average session length for business-facing agencies).

We could go on, but the message would be the same.

Government agencies, along with many, many large corporations, confront severe difficulties in adapting to the challenge of the web and internet era. Corporations will have to evolve fast to survive in the marketplace, despite the normal get-outs of takeovers and acquisitions as substitutes for real organisational change. But government agencies are under no such pressure, and may tend to hold fast to outdated methods simply for fear of mucking up the large IT investments needed to adapt to the web era. As I write (spring 2000)

only a couple of hundred of the 67,000 employees in the UK's Benefits Agency yet have on their desktop a PC that can run a web browser, let alone access their own agency's website over an intranet or the external internet. Similarly the Inland Revenue in Britain can muster only 1.5 per cent of tax forms submitted online in 1999, meaning that thousands of employees are still re-keying the other 98.5 per cent from paper forms. There is a familiar channel rivalry problem here – the employees and managers who make a livelihood out of the old ways are not going to particularly welcome 'zero touch' technologies that consign their roles to a historical museum. And even if the large government organisations really want to push for the achievement of digital government, the chances that they will make a good job of getting there are relatively slim. Culturally, politically, organisationally, historically – the limits in their path are myriad, subtle and close-binding. So (as ever) incompetence and complexity form a large part of the answer to why the current crop of IT dystopias are not going to happen.

But the advent of the internet, unlike other IT waves, also creates much more substantive grounds for optimism. Most other innovations in computing have strengthened the power of big bureaucracies against the little person. The diffusion of PCs cracked this trend a bit, but the internet potentially could shatter it more completely. For once, the web era holds out the promise of genuinely open government (backed by the power of rapid reaction, cost-sharing online communities) at the same time as more efficient government. The cultural change that the British civil service needs to grasp in the web era, and yet still finds hard to face, is a change towards making organisational operations visible in detail. Within the next three years or so US taxpayers will be able to see and manage their own tax account on the web. In the same period the tracking facility that lets you trace parcels you send via DHL or FedEx should let you trace your benefits application, your appeal against your property tax, the progress of your case through the NHS bureaucracy. The technology for this is all coming into place, and the social push is lively, even if only just beginning. So the utopians could yet be partly right, that the internet will shed more public light on the workings of the state, could empower 'isocratic administration' by individual people and enterprises, could let civil society steal a march on state bureaucracies. The trick will be, to make it so. ■



The New Barbarian Manifesto. How to survive the information age

Ian Angell
Kogan Page 288pp £17.99 hb

Dubbed 'the Angell of Doom' by *The Times* newspaper, Ian Angell lays out his manifesto for the New Barbarians who will lead the economic elite into a brave new world over the next two decades. He regards information technology as the seed for a new society in which the winners in the knowledge economy will construct their own 'smart regions' founded on libertarian principles and enlightened self-interest.

Government on the Web

National Audit Office
London: The Stationery Office 1999
Session 1999-2000

Available for free download on
www.GovernmentOnTheWeb.org

LSE Public Policy Group compiled this report, a groundbreaking study and the first ever fully outsourced value for money report for the UK National Audit Office.



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