

**How Revolutionary Was the Digital
Revolution?**

*National Responses, Market Transitions, and
Global Technology*

EDITED BY JOHN ZYSMAN and ABRAHAM NEWMAN

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WEAVING THE AUTHORITARIAN WEB

*The Control of Internet Use
in Nondemocratic Regimes*

Taylor C. Boas

In the preparatory meetings leading up to the December 2003 World Summit on the Information Society in Geneva, the delegations of several authoritarian regimes reacted strongly to the hands-off approach to Internet regulation promoted by the United States and other advanced democracies. Saudi Arabia, for instance, proposed that the development of the information society “shall be done without any prejudice whatsoever to the moral, social, and religious values of all societies” — values to which the Saudi government has appealed when justifying its own regime for Internet censorship. The Chinese delegation campaigned strongly against a statement of support for the principles of free speech enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Ultimately, the summit’s final declaration disregarded the objections that these and other authoritarian governments had voiced during negotiations, but their positions stand as a strong statement that not all countries accept a *laissez-faire* vision for the future of the Internet.

At first glance, the negotiating positions taken by China and Saudi Arabia might suggest that authoritarian leaders in the information age face a stark choice: promote the development of an Internet that remains free from extensive government control, or exert control over the technology by restricting its diffusion. Whether because of inherent technological characteristics that complicate efforts to censor the Internet or because countries are under pressure to align their policies with those preferred by the international community, many scholars have assumed that the only effective way to control the Internet is to limit its growth or even keep it out entirely. Milner (2003a, 2003b), for instance, hypothesizes that authoritarian leaders will be less likely than democratic ones to promote Internet development, and she uses indicators of