

Book Reviews

Open Network, Closed Regimes

Shanthy Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas. Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003. \$18.95. 215pp.

The bursting of the dot-com bubble transformed our expectations of the impact of the Internet and of the much vaunted 'new economy'. Our exaggerated expectations about the revolutionary impact of new information and communication technologies in 'Internet time' have dissipated. We now have a more sober and realistic understanding that, while these technologies are transforming society, they are not doing so in quite the unprecedented way that the Internet gurus of the 1990s proclaimed. Instead, business is getting on with making money from the new technologies. Individuals are getting on with absorbing them into their lifestyles. Governments are exploiting the technologies to make long-overdue improvements in the way they deliver services and interact with their citizens.

This pragmatism has been reflected in the study of the impact of the Internet, with an increasing focus on its 'grounded' nature. The dot-com era hype that postulated the Internet would create a new civic space outside borders has given way to a recognition, by policymakers and the public alike, that the Internet needs and has borders that require policing. An increasing number of studies have demonstrated the extent to which the Internet reflects existing distributions of power and privilege. This is the case whether one considers the digital divide between the wired, developed world and those in the developing world with no telecoms access, or the digital divide between broadband enabled urbanites in British cities and their deprived rural compatriots.

Open Network, Closed Regimes is an invaluable contribution to this revisionist literature. It provides a timely, welcome and overdue counter to simplistic claims for the politically liberating effects of the Internet. Too much political rhetoric and narrowly focused analysis, often fuelled by anecdotal evidence, has been based on the premise that the Internet will undermine authoritarian rule. The notion that new information and communication technologies will be the death of authoritarianism has a history, not least with the view that the information revolution undermined the stability of the USSR. More recent anecdotes frequently cited include the ability of Mexico's Zapatistas to leverage international support, the role of text messaging in mobilising popular unrest in the Philippines and the threat posed by Saudi Islamists in cyber-space to the House of Saud.

A number of studies have indicated that the correlation between the growth of the Internet and political liberalisation is not so simple. *Open Networks, Closed Regimes* performs the invaluable service of reviewing the available evidence in comparative context to take a rounded view of the likely impact of the Internet on authoritarian rule. The book combines in-depth case studies of China and Cuba with briefer sketches of three Asian countries (Singapore, Vietnam and Burma) and three Arab countries (Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia). The authors compare the situation in each country and provide pithy conclusions to each regional section.

Their conclusions are refreshingly commonsensical. The Internet is only one force among many that affect a country's politics. In all cases, the Internet cannot be

separated from the broader information environment, including satellite TV, radio and other media, which remain more influential, especially at the popular level in cultures that remain predominately oral. While the Internet provides a vehicle for diaspora opposition groups to organise and spread their propaganda, the political strength of these opposition movements and the attitude of Western powers to the government in question are more influential.

Furthermore, the Internet can be used to reinforce as well as to undermine authoritarian rule. The authors demonstrate the often marginal political impact of even well-publicised breaches of government control (for example, the use of email 'anonymisers' to evade government monitoring mechanisms). What is far more important is the fact that all the governments studied can constrain and shape the usage of and access to information and communications technology in their countries. When some authoritarian governments, such as Egypt's, choose not to impose technical controls on access to web content, it is often the case that the traditional 'soft' controls exercised by these states are more efficient and significant. Moreover, the authors point out that the states in question may be the greatest beneficiaries of the Internet. Not only can they deploy the Internet for their own propaganda purposes; if they succeed in delivering better public services via e-government programmes that improve the delivery of social services then their legitimacy will increase.

The most important finding in this book is that the political impact of the Internet will be determined more by the underlying political dynamics of the country in question than by any intrinsic quality of the Internet itself. For instance, in countries such as Singapore and the United Arab Emirates where there is no effective political opposition, the Internet has little potential to spark liberalisation. In countries such as Burma and China where there is either an active opposition or where society is in great flux, then there are points of weakness that the Internet will help to leverage.

In a concluding chapter, aptly entitled 'Beyond Blind Optimism', the authors argue that as the United States frames a global communications strategy for the war on terror, it needs to adopt a more nuanced and grounded understanding of exactly how the Internet can promote liberalisation. Four points are especially important. First, the US must not privilege the Internet or, more generally, a technology-led approach to building civil society and democratisation over traditional face-to-face and community-based approaches. Second, the Internet is one facet of the broader programme of globalisation. Therefore, promotion of Internet access must be accompanied by World Trade Organisation activities to encourage more liberal ownership and access policies. Third, it is important to remember that the Internet grassroots activism that emerges may not be pro-Western. Fourth, political change does not happen in Internet time. Military action can bring about the rapid collapse of authoritarian regimes; the Internet will merely contribute to a gradual, and reversible, process that must be seen in the broader political, economic and social context.

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