"Can You Hear Me Now?"

Access to ICT Networks as an Imperative for Participation in Global Civil Society
By Anoush Rima Tatevossian

Winner, Best Student Paper in Public Diplomacy 2009
University of Southern California Center on Public Diplomacy at the Annenberg School

Transnational Civil Society in the 21st Century[1]

If, in fact, the rise of transnational civil society — and global civil society networks — is a reality in the world today, then it is imperative to recognize how people across borders are finding one another and coalescing around common values to form advocacy networks, and where these networks exist.

In her 1999 piece entitled "Transnational Civil Society," activist academic Mary Kaldor attempted to analyze the evolving conceptualizations of transnational civil society and describes that the lessons of the 1980s were that civil society has to be built from below through the efforts of self-organizing groups of citizens working together across national boundaries (illustrated by the social movements in Eastern Europe), and that the 1990s proved transnational civil society not only has to cross the global/local divide, but also has to embrace both citizens and independent citizens groups as a political project (illustrated by the rise of professional NGOs). Yet another reinvention of the concept of transnational, or global, civil society is necessary in the context of continuing globalization (the "stretching of time-space distanciation" due to travel and communications revolutions[2]) in the 21st century.

It is my contention that 'new media'[3] and information communication technology (ICT) networks are requisite to the success of the political project that is transnational civil society in the 21st century because it is increasingly in this space that transnational civil society networks are formed. And thus, it can be deductively argued that foundations/organizations/governments are justified in their efforts at endeavoring to "wire the world," despite the limitations and power inequalities that exist in the digital space.

What's the Internet Got to Do with It?

To understand civil society, it is imperative first to define "the public sphere". Whereas civil society is the organized expression of the values and interests of society, the public sphere is the space for the communication of ideas, where "people come together as citizens and articulate their autonomous views to influence the political institutions of society." In other words: the marketplace of ideas (Castells, 2008).

The expression of a public sphere, as a physical, public space as Habermas (1973) original theorized, has morphed over time and through various societal contexts. It has been argued that in today's 'network society', the public sphere is organized on the basis of media communication networks (Castells, 2008).

Today, online networks, particularly social networking sites (such as Ning, Bebo, Hi5, MySpace, or the hugely popular Facebook), collaborative workspaces (such as Wikipedia), self-publication platforms (such as blogs – a website which allows users to posts entries in reverse chronological order, YouTube- a video sharing website, or Twitter- a service for exchanging short messages), and the explosion of mobile phone technology, have created a powerful component of the new global public sphere[4]. This digital, "multimodal" communication space is increasingly where international debate, dialogue and conversation (between societies, state actors and intergovernmental institutions) occurs, and will continue to occur, in the 21st century.

However, this ICT based manifestation of the global public sphere (and by extension, global civil society)

is not without its limitations and glaring inequalities. As Clifford Bob (2007) has described, the growing global network of transnational actors follow a "market model," which states that particularly in post-materialistic (the global north, or developed) societies, people find ideological issues and causes to invest their time and money in them. And thus, a defining question for society today is not who controls the means of production but rather who controls the means and tools of information and communication technologies, as this will dictate whose ideas are represented in the global public sphere, and therefore dictate the causes, norms and direction that transnational civil society may/will take[5].

Limitations (and Some Defences)

A glaring problem identified by many in the communications and international development fields is the gap between societies which have access to new information communication technologies and can acquire the related skills, and those who do not — an inequality otherwise known as the "digital divide." The concern was taken up by the United Nations in 2001 with the establishment of the UN ICT Task Force, and later with two conferences devoted to ICT issues called World Summit on the Information Society, whose goal was to create a way to provide information to all people in every nation. The first summit produced Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action, which set out a goal of bringing 50 percent of the world's population online by 2015. In an attempt to redress the inequality, the media/ICT/development communities have been actively seeking ways to "bridge the divide," by bringing ICTs to developing countries, encouraging pro-ICT government policies, and providing new media trainings in the developing world.

However, an unintended consequence of these very attempts has been that the ICT/development community has become complicit in perpetuating a patriarchal relationship between the global north and south. Many of the organizations and professionals providing training and advice on ICTs, and equipping citizens in the developing world with the latest online tools and platforms, are from the U.S. or Western Europe (often in the form of pro-democracy organizations or institutions, and sometimes directly funded by Western governments). For example, Internews Network (an international NGO that fosters independent media and access to information worldwide by providing training, production assistance and infrastructure support) is primarily supported by grants, and its donors include the U.S. Department of State, USAID, The Government of the Netherlands, and the Open Society Institute. Global Voices Online (and its outreach initiative — *Rising Voices* — that has the laudable mission of helping bring new voices from new communities and speaking new languages to the global blogosphere by providing resources and funding to local groups reaching out to underrepresented communities), as another example, began as a project supported by Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet & Society. These and hundreds of other such initiatives reinforce the north to south flow of resources, technical expertise and knowledge, and maintain existing accountability imbalances outlined by scholars such as Ahmed and Potter (2006) who suggest that accountability is strongest to the Northern Donors, and the biggest losers in the interlocking accountability (i.e. financial resources) flow are the beneficiaries, who generally have little to no means of holding the NGOs responsible or dictating which issues actually need to be addressed.

Furthermore, the Western-led mission of "teaching the world to blog" brings up a second, related concern. Is there anything destructive or even dangerous about the enthusiastic Western-led trainings and selling the promise of new media as a mechanism for freedom and democracy around the world? Evgeny

Morozov, a fellow at the Open Society Institute, represents one side of this debate, focusing on the broader consequences of internet-based activism. Morozov (2009) questions "why bother supporting internet activists in places like Egypt if the political benefits of their campaigns are negligible and are greatly outweighed by the risks of arrest and intimidation (particularly among online supporters of such campaigns who may have joined them unaware of the risks involved)." Morozov is also concerned with cyber-optimists who are techno-determinist about the fact that new media will inevitably spread freedom, and even questions whether technology's impact may actually help bolster existing authoritarianism in some countries. He recognizes that "Facebook activism" could easily backfire precisely because of its very open and public nature — which could allow authorities to "quickly and easily identify all dissenters — even those who were willing to lend only their virtual support to the campaigns — and put them on their 'to be watched closely' list (and then to actually rely on technology to carry out their surveillance)."

Individuals like Ethan Zuckerman (co-founder of Global Voices Online) and James K. Glassman (former U.S. Under-Secretary for Public Diplomacy) on the other hand, represent a different view. For them, it can be argued that the real 'divide' is the inequality of ICT access not on a nation-to-nation scale, but between sources of power and access within societies. The new technology is here, and may inevitably be used for sinister purposes by terrorists, or by repressive regimes. If this is the case, however, then every day citizens too deserve to learn about how to use the tools to empower themselves and make their voices heard — if they so chose — irrespective of where the trainings and resources originate. After all, German inventor Johannes Gutenberg may have invented the movable type printing press, but few would argue that it would have been best had the technology not been introduced to the rest of the world.

Conclusion

It is my conclusion that despite the concerns outlined above, the effort to engage more populations in the 'new global public sphere' by advocating for universal ICT access and providing training in new media tools is positive and necessary to produce a responsible transnational civil society that develops norms and takes up causes in an informed and participatory manner. Not because of a zero-sum outlook that "democracy will triumph" in "war of ideas" (as individuals like former U.S. Under-Secretary for Public Diplomacy James Glassman might suggest), but purely because it is imperative that all voices and interested parties have a voice (or at least the tools necessary to express themselves, if they so desire) in the global public sphere (more in the Ethan Zuckerman or Manuel Castells school of thought). It is based on the idea of a pluralist civil society where there is the propensity for different, unmerged voices and consciousnesses, to be heard and given equal weight.

While ICTs (particularly the internet) provide a dynamic and promising space for the new global public sphere in the 21st century, if access remains globally disproportionate, organizations, blogs and websites will find a limited number of active participants, who may either hold very similar ideologies or represent extreme points of view which can lead to flaming and insults, killing discussion and constructive debate. Furthermore, if the voices and opinions of huge swaths of the world's public are not heard, global transnational civil society networks may be under informed about the cause célèbres they take up falsely on behalf of "all global citizens," exacerbating the accountability gap between North and South.

Essentially, the "digital divide" issue may be better understood as a *participation gap*. As media scholar

Henry Jenkins has distinguished, the early discussion of the digital divide assumed that the most important concern was "insuring access to information, as if the web were simply a data bank." But with a more contemporary perspective, it is clear that the power of the web and ICTs comes through participation within its social networks: Being left out of these social networks means being left out of the global public sphere, and by extension, transnational civil society.

Endnotes

1. This paper refers to the phrase "transnational civil society" in the introduction; however, the phrase "global civil society" will be used interchangeably throughout. **2.** As defined by sociologist Anthony Giddens in *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990). **3.** This paper will define new media based on the characterizations outlined by Williams, Rice and Rogers (1988), who described new media as "communication technologies that enable or facilitate user-to-user interactivity and interactivity between user and information, which have three main characteristics: interactivity, demassification and asynchronicity." The major forms of new media today include mobile phones and Web 2.0's associated 'social media' applications such as blogs, photo-sharing platforms, video-uploading sites, and social networking sites. **4.** See Appendix A and annotated bibliography for an examination of Global Voices Online, an international blog aggregating project, as a symbolic microcosm of the increasingly online global public sphere. **5.** In *Transnational Marketing and World Politics. The Marketing of Rebellion: Insurgents, Media and International Activism*, Clifford Bob (2005) gives examples of transnational civil society networks and NGOs eagerly catapulting domestic issues into "global" ones – such as the plight of the Zapatistas in Mexico, or the conflict of the Ogoni in the Niger Delta whose movements were reframed or misrepresented at best (or "hijacked" at worst) to fit their key overseas supporters' ideological proclivities.

Annotated Bibliography

Ahmed, S. and Potter, D. (2006). NGOs and Transnational Accountability in Bangladesh. NGOs in International Politics. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, pp. 125-51. This chapter shines light on the inter-locking web of accountability between NGOs, the international donor community, and populations in the developing world which are recipients of aid money and resources.

Bob. C. (2005). Transnational Marketing and World Politics. The Marketing of Rebellion: Insurgents, Media, and International Activism. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 178-195.

Bob, C. (2007). Globalizing the Right-Wing: Conservative Activism and Transnational Politics. 2007 Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association (Draft Paper), 1-11. Clifford Bob offers a refreshing and important critical perspective to a field which is often oversaturated with over enthusiastic optimism. For Clifford Bob, transnational civil society is a concept that deserves critical examination, particularly with regards to the north-south relationship between NGOs and the populations that they often purport to represent. He writes about voices and philosophies which are underrepresented in the transnational civil society literature, and critiques he way that NGOs take on (and distort) 'causes' in the developing world to make them easier to market to the international community.

USC Center on
Public Diplomacy
at the Annenberg School

Boyd, D. and Jenkins, H. (2006). "MySpace and Deleting Online Predators Act (DOPA)." MIT Tech Talk. May 26. Henry Jenkins and Danah Boyd are two widely cited new media scholars; In his 2005 book Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide, Henry Jenkins (director of comparative media studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology) discusses the "convergence" of new and old media. He explains that the convergence represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content. Thus enabling participatory culture, which, according to Jenkins, "contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship." Furthermore, his perspectives on the challenge of the debate on the digital divide was critical in forming arguments found in this paper: "The rhetoric of the digital divide holds open this division between civilized tool-users and uncivilized nonusers ... As well-meaning as it is as a policy initiative, it can be marginalizing and patronizing in its own terms."

Castells, M. (2008). "The New Public Sphere: Global Civil Society, Communication Networks, and Global Governance." The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Vol. 616, No. 1: pp. 78-93. Manuel Castells' essay on the new public sphere links public diplomacy, social justice, new technology and media, and globalization with a unique macro-level perspective. In Castells' opinion, public diplomacy is that of the people, not necessarily of the governments, and 21st century communication technologies give publics an unprecedented opportunity to make their voices heard, and thus increasingly requiring the traditional forces of the state-centric international system to pay attention.

Florini, A. (2000). The Third Force: The Rise of Transnational Civil Society. Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. After two years of running a project investigating the matter, Ann Florini of the Carnegie Endowment, compiled a book entitled The Third Force, which concludes that the growing attention to transnational civil society is "not hoopla". The book examines six case studies in which transnational civil society networks were active participants in the management of various global issues.

Glassman, J. (2009, April 3). Frankensteins, or Davids? Retrieved May 1, 2009, from James K. Glassman Blog. As Under-Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy during the end of the Bush Administration, James Glassman raised the profile of "Public Diplomacy 2.0" immensely, due to his strong and vocal belief in new technology and how, if engaged with properly, freedom and democracy can overcome extremism in the "global war of ideas." Two publicly lauded attempts at using web 2.0 for public diplomacy included the Democracy videos project launched by the State Department in 2008, and the State Department co-sponsored *Alliance of Youth Movements Summit* which brought together a network of young people from around the world in order to give them case studies and best practices of how to mobilize against violence, extremism and oppression. This recently launched blog is only a small manifestation of his broader statements and actions with regards to new media that have informed this paper. Recent blog posts summarize his essential philosophy on the matter: "We pursue the goals of reducing threats and promoting freedom by emphasizing a war of ideas against violent extremists…We engage in the Public Diplomacy 2.0 endeavor, the Grand Conversation, because we have a confidence that ideals like tolerance, free choice, respect, and democracy will, in a wide-open and fair discussion, triumph. Is this naive? I don't think so."

Global Voices Online and "Rising Voices." Retrieved February 20, 2009 from Rising Voices What is known as the 'blogosphere' is a symbolic microcosm of the increasingly online global public sphere. The popularity of blogs as a means of communication has exploded since its modest beginnings in 1999 – particularly as free blogging websites become more abundant and easier to use. Today, the website BlogPulse identifies a total of 107,574,587, and finds that over 59,000 new blogs were started in the last 24 hours (accessed 5/9/2009). The international blogosphere is characterized by different cultures and languages and in many countries; bloggers (or citizen journalists) provide first hand accounts and insights from around the world (such as the widely read "*Salam Pax*" written by "the Baghdad Blogger", chronicling life in the Iraqi capital after the US-led invasion, or "*Generación Y*" — which is published despite Internet censorship in Cuba — by Havana-based blogger Yoani Sanchez, who was listed among Time Magazine's list of the world's 100 most influential persons in 2008), often sharing information, commentary or news on subjects otherwise obfuscated or ignored by traditional media.

Projects such as Global Voices Online have emerged as something of a 'global public sphere', giving a platform to the most interesting conversations and perspectives emerging from citizens' media around the world — with a particular focus on the non-Western blogosphere. Global Voices Online (GV) operates through a network of regional curators/editors or "bridgebloggers" — i.e. bloggers who seek to mediate between the different cultures and languages of various regional blogospheres. Their motto, appropriately, reads, "The world is talking. Are you listening?"

Habermas, J. (1973). The Public Sphere (as reprinted in Jurgen Habermas on Society and Politics: A Reader). Boston: Beacon Press, 1989. Jurgen Habermas's eminent writings on the public sphere have informed sociologists and media scholars' efforts at understanding how media plays a role in fostering civil society, as well as how consensus and debate are critical to deliberative democracy. I applied his, and Manuel Castells' development of the concept into "the new global public sphere" as a basis to the argument presented in this paper.

Internews Network "About Us." Retrieved May 7, 2009. Internews Networks is one of the largest NGOs that work on spreading media freedom internationally. It is an ideal case in point of Western dominated organizations that provide resources and training to developing countries around the world.

Luce, H. (2008). Roundtable: Human Rights and Technology. Retrieved May 1, 2009 from iRevolution. Although not directly referenced in the paper, this blog post by Henry Luce (Ph.D. candidate at the Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy) was informative in reinforcing related risks of Western promotion of online activism/democracy promotion. He notes the potential danger for dissident bloggers who are over publicized and or seen meeting with/being linked closely with the U.S. Government.

Morozov, E. (2009). Texting Toward Utopia: Does the Internet spread democracy? Retrieved May 1, 2009 from the Boston Review

Morozov, E. (2009) Why promoting democracy via the internet is often not a good idea. Retrieved May 1, 2009 from Foreign Policy (FP). Evgeny Morozov offers a necessarily critical voice to moderate the often starry–eyed cyber–optimism reflected in commentary and new media scholarship today. He writes: "All in all, the world of international digital activism is much more complex that it appears on first

USC Center on
Public Diplomacy
at the Annenberg School

sight. As much as I'd like hope that we are already long past the point where most Western governments, agencies, and NGOs operate on the assumption that "Internet=democracy", I think that the field is still dominated by cyberutopians who do not see the inherent dangers of many cyberactivist campaigns; nor do they see how these campaigns may actually strengthen the governments they were supposed to challenge." These two very important articles uncover some of the very real problems with utilizing new media/web 2.0 to foster democracy internationally, as well as offer statistics and practical wisdom that question the productivity and usefulness of such endeavors in some circumstances. It is clear that Morozov's perspective is appropriately critical and some of the concerns he raises, in my opinion, will appear more prominently in these debates going forward.

Kaldor, M (1999). Transnational Civil Society. In T. Dunne and N. Wheeler (Eds.), Human Rights in Global Politics (pp. 195-213). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. This chapter, as well as Mary Kaldor's vast body of academic work on transnational civil society formed the backbone of my paper. Her definitions of the concept are nuanced and in this particular chapter she is able to trace the evolution of the concept and give it contextual relevance.

Williams, Frederick, Rice, Ronald E. and Rogers, Everett M. (1988) Research Methods and the New Media. New York: Free Press. As the definitions of "new media' are diverse and often ambiguous, it was important to anchor my definition to at least one academic source. In the *Handbook of New Media: Social Shaping and Social Consequences of ICTs* (Lievrouw and Livingstone (2006; 207-209) give a highly comprehensive literature review of the scholarly defined characteristics of new media and rely on the characterizations offered by Williams, et al. as their root, or anchor; I chose to follow suit.

World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) [Web site](). Retrieved May 1, 2009. The WSIS website houses primary source key resolutions, objectives and summaries of the conferences in 2003 and 2005. These large scale conferences were exemplary of the United Nations' philosophy on the importance of ICTs and overcoming the digital divide.

Zuckerman, E. (2008). [Meet the BridgeBloggers](). Public Choice, 134: 47-65. Retrieved February 20, 2009. Ethan Zuckerman, co-founder of Global Voices Online, has become one of the leading tech-philosophers today. This recent journal article summarizes many of his key beliefs about the importance of freedom of expression in the web 2.0 realm, the international blogosphere, and how people he calls "bridgebloggers" can act as cultural interpreters linking various blogospheres (between language and countries) to lead to better global understanding.