



New Net City

Web Politics in the Global Village

Shel Kimen

Many argue that the world is fragmenting and dwindling into bite size, ever more specific, chunks. Some believe fragmentation will shatter power structures and strengthen diasporic communities and organizations like the UN. Others, spouting sci-fi predictions of bleak hegemony, anticipate chaos. The puzzle is thick.

Examining technology - specifically the accelerated adoption of the Internet and networked devices - provides at least one powerful lens through which we can view globalization and its blurry relationship with the local and the national. Across the world, the internet has the potential to level the playing field and promote democracy by disrupting the political and social institutions that disenfranchise. For example, networked devices (such as the fax machine) aided student demonstrators in Tiananmen Square, and software has helped Africans learn previously lost native languages. Yet at the same time the internet can be used as a tool for surveillance by totalitarian governments and controlling parents (AOL will tell you about every website your child tries to view and every email she gets).

The internet encourages the global and the local simultaneously. It promotes and exposes the limitations of democracy, highlights the complications of sovereignty, and celebrates

Across the world, the internet has the potential to level the playing field and promote democracy by disrupting the political and social institutions that disenfranchise

the individual ahead of all-encompassing super-structure systems. But the relationship between the internet and the nation is particularly tricky. According to a recent study from Harvard University that looked at website censorship in China, from May 2002 through November 2002, 19,000 religious, news, and pornography websites were inaccessible. China also blocked sites about Chinese culture and, as of March 28, 2004, all blogspot sites (Blogspot freely hosts diary-typed online journals by providing server space and easy to use publishing tools).

While China now embraces its own brand of capitalism – articulating its desire to play the globalization game – it has certainly stopped at tying ideals of open democracy and the cultural freedom to internet usage. But, of course, it is impossible for China to control even a slice of the internet's reach, given the latter's architecture of accessibility and worldwide adoption. To what degree can we call China a sovereign nation when it increasingly becomes less Chinese and more 'global,' and to what extent must China reinvent or reassert itself in order to preserve notions of sovereignty? Can the 'global' be thrown into the cocktail of what it means to be Chinese?

Around the world, the internet challenges sovereignty along several axes. It complicates intrastate taxing and communications regulations. In many locations, one can talk via internet telephony using existing phone, cable, and DSL lines at a lower cost. Further, Global online

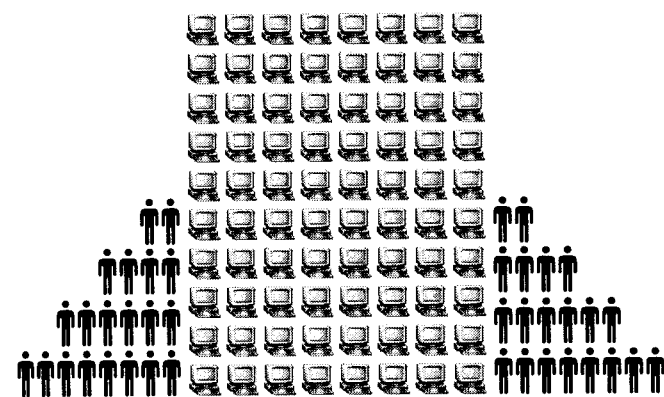
Can the 'global' be thrown into the cocktail of what it means to be Chinese?

purchasing power threatens local cultural customs and norms by making certain fashions, music, and technological gadgets not only desirable, but accessible – against the wishes of non-secular nations. As the internet reconfigures national spending, laws, and customs, it is easy to see that sovereignty, as we once understood it, may now be at risk.

And yet, at the same time, the internet seems to *promote* national identity. The website Indymedia.org (an activist 'write your own news' resource) has sub-sites based on city centers (Indymedia NYC and Calgary), national sites (Indymedia Mexico, Belgium, and France) and even regional sites (Indymedia Rocky Mountain). Its main stories are translated into eight languages, and headlines vary from site to site based on local relevance. So, while Indymedia serves to unify activists from all over the world, it also re-enforces local, regional, national, linguistic, political, and cultural differences. Nearly every country in the world has at least one national

website. Local and national government services, ranging from vehicle registration to food stamps suppliers, have informational and sometimes transactional websites. In New York, residents can pay parking tickets and file for unemployment online. During and after the Bush/Kerry election of 2004 it was a popular game to compare blue states and red states in interactive maps on websites like that of *The New York Times* – an exercise which re-enforces local identities.

while Indymedia serves to unify activists from all over the world, it also re-enforces local, regional, national, linguistic, political, and cultural differences



In 1996 there were 16 million internet users, mostly residing in North America. At that time, many feared the internet as the harbinger of American imperialism and globalized English. As of September 2005, there were more than 957 million worldwide users, only 23.4% of which were North American. Asia now has the lion's share of internet users (34.2%) and Europe takes 28.5%. And although English still dominates the world wide web (31.7% of sites are in English), the languages of Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, and German together represent the next 33.3% of web output.

Michael Castells claims that globalization 'backlash' produced a "widespread surge of powerful expressions of collective identity that challenge globalization and cosmopolitanism on behalf of cultural singularity." Others contend that a rise in fundamentalism, aided by advances in communications technologies, is a direct response to globalization. Even the most perfect draft of an Iraqi constitution cannot overpower the internet's ability to import pornography and create local, cultural demand for decidedly un-global identities. Nor can it stop the increasing online calls for Jihad.

Befitting this massive entanglement of concepts and contradictions embodied by the internet, Anthony Giddens uses the technological metaphors of 'networks' and 'nodes' to explain globalization. In his book *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990) Giddens writes of a world containing shifting, overlapping spheres of influence. He refers to this world as a "network" upon which various "nodes," or power points, impact each other; and he maps out a series of political, social and economic relationships that form this network. Sources of concentrated power are seen in this scheme to be scattering previous understandings of politics, location, and the self.

To view globalization merely in terms of fragmentation and opposing extremes synthesized within a matrix, would undermine the political significance of the web. The internet challenges our traditional understandings of space, time and place, and therein lies its liberatory power.

/

³ INTERNET WORLD STATS: USAGE AND POPULATION STATISTICS. <OCTOBER 2005>

⁴ CASTELLS, MANUEL. THE POWER OF IDENTITY. MALDEN, MA: BLACKWELL, 1997.