
When it first appeared, the Internet was widely seen as a revolutionary tool whose political impact would be as dramatic as that of the printing press, bringing a new age of liberation and enlightenment. But in the last few years, it has come to represent not freedom but convenience and the amassing of wealth, in the form of e-commerce. Those curious about the forces behind this apparent technological volte-face will benefit from Donald Gutstein’s *E.con: How the Internet Undermines Democracy*.

A central value of the book is Gutstein’s ability to discuss the politics behind the Internet without getting drawn into the fetishistic awe of the new technology that mars much popular writing, nor getting trapped in a romantic yearning for some mythical past of authentic communication. He goes beyond simply describing the new technologies as a part of the neo-liberal order, supplying the details about the political decisions being made that affect how information is controlled. This allows him to do something that most others, including even Manuel Castells (1996), have yet to do: defend a project of reclaiming the technology for more democratic uses.

The book starts with a comprehensive and powerful critique of the Liberal government’s “Connecting Canadians” policy, which was designed as a plan to bring Canada into the information age. Gutstein shows very clearly how this strategy is oriented towards letting private industry dominate, and benefit from, the development of the information infrastructure in the country. This should not surprise anyone, but the analysis is important, and the facts he supplies should be more commonly known than they are.

This is followed by a revealing discussion of the process by which control over the network of high-speed data lines known as “CA*net” was transferred from public agencies to a consortium, dominated by private corporations, named CANARIE. CA*net was “publicly financed and supported ... providing access to mainly non-commercial users” such as universities (p. 90). But CANARIE’s goals included “encouraging potential users of the network to develop commercially viable applications using taxpayer subsidies” (p. 83).

The argument also includes useful discussions about the private-sector control of the introduction of new technologies into Canada’s public libraries, and into all levels of the country’s educational system. The resulting analysis provides an important overview of the commodification of information that results from the gradual privatization of these once-public institutions.

Gutstein sets out his suggestions for “reclaiming public information” and reviews the reasons that many originally saw the Internet as an opportunity to strengthen democracy. The history he relates of the early attempt of “freenet” on-line communities and other progressive networks is worth close attention. After all, as the mass media never tire of telling us, the wave of anti-corporate protests that began in Seattle was co-ordinated by a new generation of “net-savvy” activists, and this might be seen as the outcome of the work of those cyberspace pioneers. But why this discussion should be consigned to the last chapter, while the corporate use of the information infrastructure is identified throughout the book as dominant, is never coherently argued.

Earlier in the book, Gutstein presents his assumption that an effective democracy requires a public that is adequately informed. He argues that:

> the Internet makes possible the buying and selling of information and knowledge on a far broader scale; such transactions are available to anyone with a PC and an Internet connection, and who can afford to pay. That changes everything, So while the explosive growth in the use of the Internet seems to indicate greatly expanded access ... in fact there will be less access. And because democratic society rests on a bedrock of
freely exchanged public information, Connecting Canadians will undermine democracy. (p. 22)

This line of logic is reasonable, but some concrete details about specific uses of privately provided information that restrict the ability of citizens to participate in the governance of the nation would have strengthened the argument. The fact that information can be bought and sold by those with the resources does not necessarily imply that information will not also become more freely accessible as a result of the new technology. The truth may be more complicated than this.

For instance, Gutstein provides ample evidence that the educational system, after suffering serious funding cuts at the hands of neo-liberal governments, has become vulnerable to influence by its new private-sector funders, including Microsoft. And many public libraries in Canada are coming to rely on donated equipment from Microsoft’s charitable foundation. Such corporate influence over what children learn in school and what citizens find in libraries is dangerous and needs to be exposed. The argument would be more compelling though had Gutstein been able to identify a school which changed its curriculum to suit some corporate donor, or a library which restricted access to some particular information as a result of the need to accept corporate support. Without such evidence of real effects, we are left to ponder the question, “Will Microsoft rewrite history?” (p. 227). Rhetorical questions are a poor substitute for evidence, and the program’s defenders might reasonably argue that Microsoft is not so concerned with what is taught or read, as long as schools and libraries buy the next upgrade of Windows.

Even the discussion most central to the question of the role of the Internet, concerning the privatization of the “backbone” (the hardware that connects the country through fibre optics and computerized switchboards), is only loosely connected to the undermining of democracy. Given the assumptions about democracy and information outlined in the first chapter, an argument can easily be made that CANARIE’s control of the backbone certainly makes a democratic system, with more equitable access to information, less likely.

But there is little to show that the average Internet user has been noticeably affected by this transfer of control of the hardware. CANARIE upgraded the capacity of the backbone, but the commercial uses would have been equally facilitated by a network that had been upgraded publicly. The deregulated and monopolistic control over the infrastructure might lead to less competition for Internet service and higher prices, and this might exclude more citizens from the benefits of Internet access, but Gutstein simply has not provided evidence of this, nor of any other, political effects. And even were there evidence of such inequalities, access through public libraries and schools could be seen as counteracting this, instead of as further proof of the corporate dominance of the Internet.

The privatization of a different system that is likely to have more profound effects on the flow of information in the country is what is known as the “domain name system” for the country. This refers to the co-ordination of the process of registration of Internet computer connections with the suffix “.ca”; it has undergone important changes in the last two years, which has seen control shifted from a publicly supported committee of university workers to a competitive registration process that allows private companies to register new users of the .ca domain (Geist, 2000). Who gets to register Internet hosts connected to the CANARIE network might be considered as important as the question of who is profiting from the network; that Gutstein fails to discuss the implications of this process is an important omission.

Ultimately, with regard to the flow of information, there probably is not as much democracy to undermine as Gutstein presumes. What there is probably would not be much more effective with more public support for libraries and schools. He overstates the case when he claims that “If libraries surrender their traditional role, then democracy will have lost a key foundation stone” (p. 37). Since the vast majority of the information Canadians
receive about politics and society already comes through outlets that are privately owned and supported by advertising (and not “freely exchanged public information”), it does not seem so significant that there is some corporate funding in libraries or private control of the Internet service providers in the country. The reliance on advertising is arguably a much more powerful force undermining the public role of the Internet than the ownership of the machinery behind it. The lack of discussion of its increasing role in cyberspace is another serious oversight in the book.

More attention to the specificities of the technology would also have improved the argument. What Gutstein assumes—that control of the medium determines control of the content—is true of older technologies such as television and print, but the Internet differs from television in important ways. Even if the majority of content serves private and not public interests, and even if the backbone is in private hands, the Internet still makes the distribution of all kinds of information, including that intended to serve public needs, easier. After all, private ownership of telephone lines does not exert pressure on what individuals say on the telephone.

E.com delivers a cogent, well-supported critique of federal information policy, revealing its bias towards corporate control of the flow of information, but it does not explain how other uses of the new technologies are excluded by that policy. The political contest over who is able to use the Internet, and for what purposes, is not over; conflicting uses of the Internet co-exist, as the book shows. What is needed is an exploration of the comparative effectiveness of the different uses. The Internet might both undermine and strengthen democracy at the same time, and the resulting contradictions still need to be explored. In the meantime, those looking for an analysis of the policies behind the Internet’s transformation into the dot-com world will value Gutstein’s contribution.

Note
1. “CANARIE” is an acronym for the Canadian Network for the Advancement of Research, Industry and Education.

References

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