
Launching into Cyberspace explores the impact of the Internet on international relations in the twenty-first century through a comparative analysis of Internet development in five regions of the world: Africa, the Middle East, Central/Eastern Europe, and Asia (India and China as case studies). Franda’s aim is to look at the complexities of intersection between Internet development, local culture, and world politics.

This book is the second in a three-volume series that evolved from Franda’s long-term research into the development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and international regimes. The first volume, Governing the Internet, focused on ICTs in technologically advanced countries in North America, Europe, and Japan. The third volume (2002) analyzes Internet development in China and India. Although Launching into Cyberspace is the second in this series of books, it could be read independently of volumes 1 and 3.

This is a timely book, appearing at a point when ICTs are considered as tools for developing countries to “leapfrog” into global development. Drawing on a wealth of primary sources, case studies, statistical data, and secondary materials such as interviews, newspapers articles, seminar papers, and field works, Franda problematizes Internet development within the spectrum of international politics and the economy. The underlying assumption of Launching into Cyberspace is that the Internet “has had differing impacts in the various regions and countries of the world and that an understanding of the relationship between the Internet and international relations will require familiarity with these differences” (p. 3). As a result, Franda argues that it is much too deterministic to claim at this present stage of the Internet that its introduction into developing countries will bridge the gap between the poor and rich, and between developed countries and less-developed countries. Evidence shows that the Internet is producing an opposite effect, and instead of closing the gap between the North and the South, it is actually widening the gap, “because it has enabled some nations to create sources of wealth and of international diplomatic and political power relative to others” (p. 11).

Socio-economic factors and historical underpinning are highlighted as the primary reasons for the comparative advantage of nations over others in the Internet age. The absence of telecommunication infrastructure (in the case of Africa, especially), fear of cultural/religion imperialism (in Arab/Muslim states), and extensive government control of ICTs (particularly in China) are cited as some reasons for “differences” in the impact of the Internet in some parts of the world.

With lucid explanations, Franda provides a wide-ranging survey of the essential literature on globalization, politics, economics, and modernization to situate his analysis of the Internet and international relations in the classic paradigm in which nation-states are “sovereign entities dedicated to their own self-preservation, ultimately able to depend on themselves, and prepare to resort to force” (Krasner, 1983, p. 116). This explains why all nations, especially the advanced ones, are trying to appropriate the Internet and assert their power in the global economy and politics through it.

However, with the rise of transnational corporations and civil society, the international regime emerging around the Internet is gradually becoming a “negotiated order” due to economic reasons. Regional and international organizations such as the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) are playing “a major role in facilitating the growth of the regime for the commercial aspects of the Internet on a global basis” (p. 32).

Of what benefit will this new regime and governance at the international level be to the developing countries? Could this emerging regime minimize inequalities? If the
approximately 94 countries under review in this book “are experiencing the use of the Internet by elite minorities representing a fairly narrow spectrum of political discourse relative to local context” (p. 235), who is representing the public interest of citizens in this international negotiated space? Could the voice of these “marginalized” countries be heard in the decision-making process on issues that could indirectly or directly affect their space in the information highway? These are some of the questions Franda fails to answer or deal with in his brief examination of Internet regulation and governance within the boundaries of nation-states. Despite this shortcoming, Franda’s book is well written and researched, with a useful list of notes and bibliographical references at the end. Effective integration of the case studies into the analysis and survey of the essential literature on the politics of globalization and modernization makes Franda’s analysis compelling and captivating.

References

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