

Making Room for the Third World in the Second Superpower

Ethan Zuckerman, 2/27/04

In the rise to prominence of weblogs and other social software, Jim Moore and Joi Ito see a fundamental transformation in how people act, interact and make decisions. In essays first published in 2003 – Jim Moore’s The Second Superpower Rears Its Beautiful Head¹ and Joi Ito’s Emergent Democracy² – they paint hopeful, if sometimes vague, pictures of how Internet communities can show us techniques and tactics that could radically change real-world politics.

Where I'm uncomfortable with both essays is the fact that they extrapolate from the behavior of the people currently using the Internet to make generalizations about how a larger world might use these tools. My work for the past few years, helping spread information technology in developing nations, has convinced me that technology transfer is much more complicated than bringing tools to people who previously lacked them. I think it's worth taking a close look at what happens when we try to include the developing world in the models Ito and Moore put forward - in other words, “Is there room for the third world in the second superpower?”

Moore’s Second Superpower suggests that a group of people are changing democracy by using a three-part model for social engagement - collect information, comment and debate, then act. These three steps are all being transformed by new technologies. While we continue to be informed by mass media, we're also getting information from alternative media, published cheaply on the Net, and from personal accounts in weblogs. We're debating and commenting in entirely new ways, enabled by weblogs, discussion groups, instant messaging and mailing lists. And we're discovering that these tools also make some forms of action more efficient: fundraising, protesting, and organizing face to face “meetups”.

Ito’s Emergent Democracy focuses on the third, “action” phase, and

¹ <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/people/jmoore/secondsuperpower.html>, accessed 2/27/2004. [Edit: refer to essay in book]

² <http://joi.ito.com/static/emergentdemocracy.html>, accessed 2/27/2004.

suggests that forms of decision-making emerging from the world of weblogs might lead to a viable form of direct democracy. In the way that ideas percolate from personal networks, to social networks, to large, political networks, reinforced by positive feedback loops, Joi sees a possible path for decision-making to move from individual thinking to group action.

While Moore and Ito have justifiable enthusiasm about the phenomena we're seeing emerge from interconnected communities - the growth of weblogs as an alternative to "mainstream" media, the success of grassroots campaigning in the United States - this enthusiasm needs to be tempered by some skepticism about who is currently using social software, and who has potential to use it. While these tools, in theory, have the potential to increase citizen involvement in collection, debate and action, in practice, they're being used by a small, elite group.

Late in 2002, Nua Internet Surveys estimated there were 650 million Internet users worldwide, concentrated in North America, Western Europe and the wealthier nations of Asia³. This estimate suggests that fewer than one percent of Africa's 800 million people are Internet users, in contrast to nearly 50 percent of North Americans. The number of participants in the weblog community is likely to be a small fraction of those 650 million worldwide users. The Perseus Blog Survey estimated the existence of 4.12 million blogs, only 1.4 million of which were regularly maintained.⁴ The NITLE weblog census, using a different methodology, estimates 1.7 million "likely" weblogs, 1.1 million of which are estimated to be active.⁵ If we accept either set of numbers at face value, bloggers seem to represent a small fraction of Internet users, perhaps a quarter of a percent. The NITLE statistics go on to suggest that 62 percent of weblogs are in English⁶, implying that many of these weblogs are maintained by North Americans (with substantial blogging populations in Iran, Brazil and Poland.)

The small size of this community is not a reason to dismiss it. All new technologies get used first by a band of early adopters before reaching the mainstream. If these early adopters realize they're not representative of the wider world and work to bring others into the fray, there's a chance these

³ http://www.nua.ie/surveys/how_many_online/index.html, accessed 2/27/2004.

⁴ <http://www.perseus.com/blogsurvey/thebloggingiceberg.html>, accessed 2/27/2004.

⁵ <http://www.blogcensus.net/>, accessed 2/27/2004

⁶ <http://www.blogcensus.net/?page=lang>, accessed 2/27/2004.

technologies will evolve in a way that's inclusive. If that group forgets that they're outliers in terms of larger society and fails to include others in the shaping of these technologies, it's unlikely that these tools will be useful to the wider world and that the larger transformations Ito and Moore envision will take hold. Given Moore and Ito's prediction that these tools, and the patterns of behavior that accompany them, will change how we gather news and take political action, it seems critical to ensure these tools are as usable in the developing world as they are in the developed world.

Marketers refer to the challenge of selling products popular within a technical elite to the mainstream as "crossing the chasm", phrase coined by Geoffrey Moore in a book of the same name⁷. While marketers have a vested financial interest in ensuring that the mainstream uses products the technorati embrace, it's unclear whether webloggers have a similar incentive to open their community to the wider world. Indeed, the willingness of the first generation of tool builders and users to open their community may be the key determinant in deciding whether these transformations affect only the technical elite or the whole world.

It's my intent in this essay to explore the challenges we face in ensuring that the community growing around online newsgathering, deliberation and action includes the entire world, especially the developing world. I hope to flag situations where techniques and behaviors appropriate for the communities currently served by these tools will likely fail in developing nations. And I attempt to recognize efforts to ensure that these tools have as broad applicability as possible, as well as efforts in the developing world that parallel developments in the online community space. (The absurdity of a white male technologist from Massachusetts giving the "developing world perspective" on these issues is not lost on me – I think of my authorship of this essay as an object lesson in the need for more participants in the digital democracy movement from the developing world.)

As Ito notes in his essay, for a citizen to function in a democracy, a free, engaged and critical press is essential. From a developing world perspective, the mass media in the United States and Europe is badly broken. Corporate consolidation of media, the blurring of the line between media and entertainment and the unspoken bias towards U.S. government interests have combined to create a mass media that pays almost no attention to

⁷ [Crossing the Chasm](#), Geoffrey Moore. HarperBusiness, 2002.

most of the developing world. My research on media attention and foreign news suggests that Africa, with almost a fifth of the world's population and more than a third of the world's active armed conflicts generally represents less than five percent of the foreign news stories reported by major media outlets.⁸ Similar patterns are true for Central Asia, Eastern Europe and parts of Southeast Asia and Latin America. U.S. and European media sources systematically over-cover wealthy nations and under-cover poor ones.

Alternative media is of limited help in this situation. Weblogs have proven their value more as filters than as sources of original reporting. The career-destroying comment by Trent Lott regarding Strom Thurmond, repeated and amplified by Joshua Micah Marshall in his blog, Talking Points Memo, was originally reported by the *Washington Post*, buried deep within a news story.⁹ Without a reporter at Thurmond's birthday party to document the comment, bloggers would have been unable to hold Lott accountable for his words. Until webloggers routinely receive journalist credentials and the access that goes with them, webloggers will be dependent on mainstream journalists for their information on many stories.

When journalists don't cover parts of the globe, webloggers are like an amplifier without a guitar¹⁰ – they have no signal to reinforce. There aren't enough bloggers in eastern Congo to give us a sense for what's really going on, nor will there be for many years to come. None but the largest news agencies are able to pay the travel costs and insurance for reporters to cover these stories. Most choose not to cover a conflict that's bloody, dangerous, difficult to summarize in a soundbite and unknown to most of their readers or viewers. The net result - we simply don't have information about many parts of the globe relevant to world debate.

Even when we do have some information about under-covered parts of the world, we have another problem, what Ito terms "the caring problem".¹¹ People pay attention to subjects they care about. They tend to ignore subjects they know little about. Media, trying to serve its customers in a free market, responds by giving them more information on subjects

⁸ <http://h2odev.law.harvard.edu/ezuckerman/>, published 8/26/2003.

⁹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/usa/story/0,12271,864036,00.html>. Dated 12/21/2002, accessed 2/27/2004.

¹⁰ This analogy shamelessly stolen from Joi Ito:
http://joi.ito.com/archives/2004/01/17/inequality_and_the_role_of_fitness_in_power_laws.html, accessed 2/27/2004.

¹¹ http://joi.ito.com/archives/2004/02/15/communities_and_echo_chambers.html, accessed 2/27/2004.

they've demonstrated an interest in and ignoring other subjects. As a result, consumers don't get interested in new topics, as they're not exposed to them. So even if people blog or report about situations in the Congo, readers don't pay attention to these reports and the noosphere, the realm of thought and culture, remains weak in those areas.

To make the data collection phase of Moore's model work for discussions of global issues, we need a media capable of covering the entire globe. That media will look a great deal different than CNN - it's going to be built of citizen reporters reporting local events and travelers with sharp eyes and interesting perspectives reporting on more closed societies.

Rebecca MacKinnon, a former bureau chief for CNN in Beijing, has recently launched a weblog titled NKZone¹² which attempts to cover North Korea from afar by asking journalists, businesspeople and tourists to write about current affairs in North Korea. Using her editorial skills and subject knowledge to filter the inputs of a diverse group of contributors, the site does something most mainstream news sources are incapable of – it provides complex, nuanced pictures of a country usually displayed in black and white.

The leaders in the field of citizen journalism are the reporters and editors at OhMynews¹³, an influential South Korean daily Web news site and weekly paper magazine. The site mixes “straight” news with commentary, and editors filter incoming reports from over 25,000 “citizen reporters”¹⁴. Subang Jaya e-news in Malaysia has taken a similar approach, announcing on its homepage that it is “Not funded by government grants. Independent, Neutral, Responsible.”¹⁵ These new models are not limited to highly wired nations. Ghanaweb, founded by a Ghanaian living in Finland, aggregates headlines from the Ghanaian press (primarily for the benefit of Ghanaians living abroad) with lively opinion and commentary from people inside and outside the country¹⁶.

To address Ito's caring problem— i.e., the difficulty of paying attention to

¹² <http://www.nkzone.org>, accessed 2/27/2004.

¹³ www.ohmynews.com, accessed 2/27/2004.

¹⁴ Dan Gillmor, “A New Brand of Journalism is Taking Root in South Korea”, <http://www.siliconvalley.com/mld/siliconvalley/business/columnists/5889390.htm>, dated 5/18/2003, accessed 2/27/2004.

¹⁵ <http://www.usj.com.my/>, accessed 2/27/2004.

¹⁶ <http://www.ghanaWeb.com/>, accessed 2/27/2004.

news you have no personal connection to a citizen news network will need to go beyond reporting breaking news. It will also need give readers insights into the daily lives of people in other nations, much as blogger Salam Pax gave readers of his blog¹⁷ an insight into Iraq preparing for, and under, attack. It's worth noting that Salam Pax was not an average Iraqi. Educated in Europe, a fan many of the same books and musicians as his readers, Salam was highly accessible to his American and European audience¹⁸. He was a 'bridge builder', a person with one foot in Iraq and another foot in the world inhabited by his weblog readers.

Solving the caring problem will require a focus on bridge builders: expatriates writing about their adopted nations for their countrymen at home; Peace Corps, Britain's Voluntary Service Organization and other volunteers blogging about their countries of service; exchange students; non-governmental organization workers. These people are well positioned to tell us about events in other nations in terms we can understand, or to tell their countrymen about Europe and the United States. One of the most productive steps the weblog community could take to ensure its inclusiveness is to arm people living outside their home country with weblog tools.

The emergence of an Iranian blogger community is an encouraging example of bridge building. Two years ago, Hossein Derakhshan (better known as "Hoder"¹⁹) posted a Web page with instructions on blogging in Farsi called "How to build a Persian weblog"²⁰. NITLE now reports 62,901 Farsi weblogs²¹, making Farsi the third most popular weblog language. As the Iranian blogger community grew, Hoder and others, including Pedram Moallemian of The Eyeranian²² began blogging in Farsi and English, and encouraging others to do likewise, so that non-Farsi speakers could understand the current political and cultural situation in Iran²³. Sites like IranFilter²⁴ now allow English speakers to understand the concerns of an Iranian community that's reaching out to the wider world.

¹⁷ http://dear_raed.blogspot.com/, accessed 2/27/2004.

¹⁸ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Iraq/Story/0,2763,966819,00.html>. Dated 3/30/2003, accessed 2/27/2004.

¹⁹ <http://www.hoder.com/weblog/>, accessed 2/27/2004.

²⁰ <http://mailpages.scripting.com/2002/05/21>, accessed 2/27/2004.

²¹ <http://www.blogcensus.net/?page=lang>, accessed 2/27/2004.

²² <http://www.eyeranian.net/>, accessed 2/27/2004.

²³ From personal conversation with Pedram Moallemian, 2/10/2004.

²⁴ <http://www.iranfilter.com/>, accessed 2/27/2004.

BlogAfrica²⁵ is one of several projects underway designed to build bridges between bloggers in Africa and the rest of the world. The BlogAfrica site hosts a catalog of blogs written by Africans or Afrophiles and aggregates these blogs into an African blog RSS feed. Working with volunteers working in Africa with Peace Corps or Geekcorps and visitors traveling to Africa, BlogAfrica is running public workshops in Internet cafes and universities to introduce weblogging to a new population. In future trips, BlogAfrica plans to bring prominent webloggers to Africa to teach workshops, encourage local bloggers and share their perceptions of Africa with their blog readers. Early participants in the workshops include Adam Chambas, whose Accra Crisis blog²⁶ provides a first-person view of the 2004 Ghanaian presidential campaign.

While communities outside of the United States and Europe are beginning to use weblogs, it's unclear whether the conversations occurring in blogspace cut across communities or only involve the members of a single community. Moore and Ito both point out the value of Internet-based community tools for enabling intelligent dialogue, even dialogue between people with radically opposing viewpoints. It's worth asking whom this dialogue is open to.

My sense is that these discussions are open only to people with the access to the Internet (which cuts out people in countries who censor, people in underserved rural areas, as well as people who don't have money to spend time online); primarily open to people who speak and write English well; primarily open to people who can afford to spend time online engaging in these dialogues (cutting out many people whose jobs don't afford them the luxury of working in front of a CRT.)

What happens to a blog discussion when the participants are interacting with the medium in radically different ways? When one has always-on broadband access and the ability to Google for arguments, while the other is writing entries offline and typing them in during a limited window at a cybercafe? When one is writing in English as a third or fourth language, debating a native speaker? Do the dynamics of weblogs favor better arguments, or just the more articulate speaker? Or perhaps just the

²⁵ <http://www.blogafrica.com/index.html>, accessed 2/27/2004.

²⁶ <http://accracrisis.blogspot.com/>, accessed 2/27/2004.

speaker who has more cultural commonality with his or her audience?

Clay Shirky observes that the popularity of weblogs follows a Pareto²⁷ or “power law” distribution²⁸. This means that the most popular weblog is exponentially more popular, in terms of inbound links, than the 10th, the 10th an order of magnitude more popular than the 100th and so in. In other words, the vast majority of weblogs are read by only a few individuals, while a few are read by thousands of readers. These popular weblogs are “powerful”, in the sense that they can direct a great deal of reader attention to a website or an issue. The authors of these weblogs – sometimes referred to as “the A-List”²⁹ – have, to some extent, the ability to set the agenda for the conversation that takes place in blogspace. If A-List authors link disproportionately to stories about emerging technology and American politics, dialogue will center around those topics to the exclusion of other topics.

Shirky argues that the power law is both inevitable and “fair”, in the sense that it reflects the aggregation of choices freely made by individuals into a collective will. It is, he argues, a meritocracy, where bloggers are forced to maintain a high level of quality or risk losing their audience. All this is true, but it points to a fundamental constraint within the blog universe: for an idea to gain currency, it needs a pre-existing audience. Discussions regarding intellectual property, U.S. politics, social software or peer-to-peer filesharing all can take advantage of a large audience that (Ito theorizes) amplifies good ideas and filters poor ones – a meme will succeed in this space if it is on-topic, interesting and well articulated, i.e., if it crosses a quality barrier.

Ideas on topics not well understood by a large community of bloggers have two barriers to cross: the quality barrier and a second relevancy barrier. A brilliant commentary on Nigerian politics is unlikely to be amplified by bloggers with no understanding of or interest in the region. Without an understanding of the comment in context, it’s difficult for a blogger to understand whether a comment is of high quality or not; if a blogger is not interested in the topic at hand, she is unlikely to encounter the comment in the first place, and would be hard pressed to link to the comment in a way

²⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pareto_distribution, accessed 2/27/2004.

²⁸ http://www.shirky.com/writings/powerlaw_weblog.html, dated 2/8/2003, accessed 2/27/2004.

²⁹ http://www.shirky.com/writings/powerlaw_weblog.html, accessed 2/27/2004. Shirky uses this term while denying existence of the A-List.

that wasn't confusing to her readers, who expect her to write on American, not Nigerian, politics.

If the commentary is in Hausa³⁰, spoken as a primary language in Niger and Northern Nigeria, and as a second language throughout West Africa, it will be incomprehensible to the vast majority of the prominent bloggers. While companies like Systran provide online translation for 35 language pairs, available languages cover some of the Americas, Western Europe, Asia and the Arabic-speaking world, but not Africa, Central or South Asia.³¹ Early experiments, based at Albion College, in machine translation of African languages cover Xhosa and Pulaar³², but only provide simple sentence translation. Add to this the fact that Hausa requires special character sets for Unicode characters and either specialized keyboard software³³ or hand coding of Unicode decimal codes in HTML³⁴, and it's unlikely that Hausa bloggers will emerge without the help of a West African "Hoder".

Ultimately, the solution for a blogger who wants to share a new idea with a large population may be to build her own audience, as Iranian bloggers did. While this may increase the currency of an idea within that community, and improve its prominence in search engines, it does not ensure that the larger weblog community will adopt the idea. Instead, it's more likely that these communities are self-contained and insular.

For example: balmasque.blogspot.com, a Persian language blog, is the fourth most prominent blog tracked by Technorati, with 4,741 blogs linking to it. Of the twenty most prominent blogs that link to Balmasque, seventeen are in Persian³⁵. Of the three English language blogs in the top twenty, one is Technorati's top 100 list itself, and another is a commentary by Kevin Marks, where he notes his incomprehension of the site:

...I look at blogs like this and feel like Ginger in Gary Larson's classic What Dogs Hear. 'squiggle squiggle squiggle Blog squiggle

³⁰ Wikipedia reports that it is spoken by 25 million people as a primary language, and an additional 14 million as a secondary language (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hausa_language, accessed 2/27/2004).

³¹ <http://www.systransoft.com/LP.html>, accessed 2/27/2004.

³² <http://mokennon2.albion.edu/language.htm>, accessed 2/27/2004.

³³ <http://www.quicktopic.com/8/H/JxKHyg9ccPUVB>, accessed 2/27/2004.

³⁴ <http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Hausa>, accessed 2/27/2004.

³⁵ http://www.technorati.com/cosmos/search.html?rank=links&url=http_percent3A_percent2Fpercent2Fbalmasque.blogspot.com&start=, accessed 2/27/2004.

*squiggle squiggle Permalink*³⁶

Balmasque's popularity is not due to its adoption by the larger weblog community, but by a smaller subset of Persian-language bloggers. The problem persists when correcting for the language factor – only 2 of Technorati's top 100 bloggers (Dan Gillmor and Jeff Jarvis) link to IranFilter, the site explicitly created to share content from Iranian blogs in English.³⁷

How do we ensure that the dialogues sparked on weblogs are open to all languages and cultures? Successful approaches need to address issues of translation and appropriate toolsets as well as cultural issues.

Blogalization is a new project that attempts to address the translation issue, by combining the efforts of multilingual bloggers into a single site. The logic behind the site: “if I have languages A and B and you have languages B and C, we can share memes across barriers of mutual incomprehension.”³⁸ Blogalization participants index dozens of multilingual blog³⁹ and wiki⁴⁰ catalogs in the hopes of giving contributors raw material for translating key posts for a global audience. They make a point of selecting posts with key ideas that they think have currency for their international audience, “memes” likely to be adopted and transmitted by their readership. Another site, Living on the Planet takes a similar tack, though unidirectionally, from various languages into English. With sites focused on China, Latin America and India, bloggers summarize local media for an English-language audience. The project plans expansion into Europe, Central Asia and Africa, as well as an agency to represent the commercial interests of photographers, bloggers and writers, selling to U.S. and European markets.⁴¹

Open Knowledge Network (OKN) is less concerned with transmitting information about the developing world to the developed world, and more focused on getting people in developing nations to share knowledge with one another. It's stated focus is on “local content, local people, local languages”⁴². OKN tries to leverage existing content creators, and the

³⁶ http://epeus.blogspot.com/2003_12_01_epeus_archive.html#107027277456428651, accessed 2/27/2004.

³⁷ [http://www.technorati.com/cosmos/search.html?rank=links&url=http percent3A percent2F percent2Fwww.iranfilter.com&start=](http://www.technorati.com/cosmos/search.html?rank=links&url=http%2Fwww.iranfilter.com&start=), accessed 2/27/2004.

³⁸ <http://www.blogalization.info/reorganization/>, accessed 2/27/2004.

³⁹ <http://blogalization.org/conspiracy/NonEnglishOnlyBlogIndexes>, accessed 2/27/2004.

⁴⁰ <http://www.blogalization.info/conspiracy/NonEnglishOnlyWikis>, accessed 2/27/2004.

⁴¹ <http://www.livingontheplanet.com/about.html>, accessed 2/27/2004.

⁴² <http://www.openknowledge.Net/>, accessed 2/27/2004.

network of cybercafes and community access centers emerging throughout the developing world. It tags content using the Extensible Markup Language for inclusion in international databases, which makes the data accessible to the widest variety of application software, and is developing open content licenses appropriate for indigenous knowledge. Importantly, OKN realizes that collection of knowledge in developing nations requires different tools than those designed for social interaction in developed nations – the network maintains offline-accessible “newsheets” at Internet access points, periodically updated when Net connectivity is available. They have also realized that computers far less common in developing nations than cellphones, and are piloting a set of short messaging system (SMS)-based services in Nairobi.

Bisharat.net, a project of African civil society portal Kabissa.org, gives an excellent overview of the challenges associated with making tools, including social software, accessible in local languages. Focused specifically on the challenge of the “africanization” (A12N) of software, Bisharat maintains an extensive catalog⁴³ of links to Unicode-compliant fonts, keyboard layouts, machine translation services and other tools designed to make the Internet usable by speakers of African languages. Without these tools, languages that use characters outside of the Roman alphabet can’t be accurately represented on webpages or in online discussions. Even with these tools, it’s a challenge for African language users to publish online, as certain characters in the alphabet require multiple keystrokes, as they’re not directly associated with keys on QWERTY keyboards.

What’s clear from a cursory view of Bisharat is that it’s a non-trivial task for speakers of African languages to create native-language Internet content. While some toolbuilders have gone to great lengths to make social software accessible to English speakers, few software creators have made such efforts to ensure that Africans can blog in Hausa or Xhosa. Africans who want to participate in these communities have to take on the added load of ensuring that their content will be supported. People in developing nations – who already face a challenge in gaining affordable access to the Internet – face another set of technical hoops to jump through, an added barrier to their participation in online communities.

If the social software community cares about ensuring global use of their

⁴³ <http://www.bisharat.Net/A12N/>, accessed 2/27/2004.

tools and global participation in discussions, we need to take a close look at the usability of our tools by people in other nations. For example, many popular blog hosting services are modestly priced, but require payment online via credit card. This creates an insurmountable barrier for the majority of people in developing nations, who while they may have the means to pay a \$5 per month hosting fee (comparable to the costs associated with a few hours access to a cybercafe), but lack the method to make the payment, as credit cards are largely unavailable throughout Africa and much of Central and South Asia. Designers of social software who hope to have a global audience for their products need to start designing those products in conjunction with that global audience.

The most exciting implication of Ito and Moore's papers is the idea that social software may change the nature of political action. Moore observes that this action is fundamentally different from political power as we know it – it's power from below, rather than from above:

That is, it is the strength of the U.S. government that it can centrally collect taxes, and then spend, for example, \$1.2 billion on 1,200 cruise missiles in the first day of the war against Iraq. By contrast, it is the strength of the second superpower that it could mobilize hundreds of small groups of activists to shut down city centers across the United States on that same first day of the war. And that millions of citizens worldwide would take to their streets to rally.⁴⁴

Recent political events in the United States have demonstrated the power of the grassroots. Despite Howard Dean's failure to become the Democratic presidential candidate, his campaign demonstrated that grassroots organizing over the Internet could organize massive, real-world rallies, raise huge amounts of money through small donations and raise a candidate seen originally as a fringe non-entity to the status of front-runner, at least temporarily. It seems likely that future political campaigns in the United States will attempt to use similar tools and strategies to motivate voters.

It's not obvious, however, that the form of grassroots organizing and action celebrated by Ito and Moore will gain traction in the developing world. In many developed nations, especially the United States, the greatest enemy of

⁴⁴ Moore, cited above.

activism is apathy. Grassroots activism may turn out to be a powerful weapon to fight apathy and encourage engagement. One of the characteristics of the Dean campaign was an awareness of friends and acquaintances supporting the campaign. Through email lists, Linkster-like tools, and Meet Up invitations, Net users were constantly reminded how many of their friends were supporting the Dean campaign. The overwhelming cumulative message was, “It’s important to be involved with this – your friends think it’s important, and you should too.” This social reinforcement encouraged many individuals who hadn’t been previously politically active to overcome apathy, make a donation, go to a rally or otherwise get involved.

Apathy is *not* the primary problem in many other nations. In nations with a high degree of political repression, the enemy of activism may be threats to personal safety. In these situations, transparent public debate leading to action is likely an unwise path to political change. Can we expect democracy to emerge from Internet communities in countries where political activity is constrained and the Internet is censored? Or are we assuming that these democratizing technologies are only applicable in places where democracy and accompanying rights of free expression are already well protected? While there is no guarantee that these tools will be used for democratization in closed societies, we have the power to ensure – technically – that they are unusable to help create more open societies.

One possibility is that the Internet will emerge as a tool to address political problems other than apathy. One obvious candidate is censorship. When The Daily News of Zimbabwe, the country’s sole independent newspaper, was shut down by the Mugabe government in September 2003, it responded by moving some key staff to South Africa⁴⁵ and publishing in an online form.⁴⁶ It’s worth noting that the Independent didn’t consider this an adequate solution, and that the paper resumed publishing in print form within Zimbabwe as soon as it was able because so many more Zimbabweans are able to access the Daily News in paper form than on the Internet.⁴⁷

Another possible application is the use of the Internet for anti-corruption

⁴⁵ “Daily News Reporters Disgruntled”, *The Herald*, Harare, Zimbabwe, October 8, 2003. Downloaded from <http://allafrica.com/stories/200310080262.html>, accessed 2/27/2004. (Page is available to subscribers only.)

⁴⁶ <http://www.daily-news.co.za/>, accessed 2/27/2004.

⁴⁷ <http://allafrica.com/stories/200402230001.html>

activities. The Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism points to a number of Internet-based anti-corruption activities in Latin America⁴⁸, largely centered around the publication of the fiscal assets of elected officials. The most radical of the sites, the Dominican Alliance Against Corruption⁴⁹, has published bank account numbers, home addresses and national identity numbers of public officials to help citizens report corrupt behavior. One can imagine the value of a system that would allow citizens to report instances where they were asked for a bribe anonymously, using a cellphone, creating an online database that could be reviewed by the press, donor governments and other anti-corruption investigators.

Generally speaking, though, in most developing nations, the Net is not the obvious place to look for political change. So few citizens are online, and those who are generally are atypically wealthy and powerful that the Internet is a poor way to reach the grassroots. Instead, it's useful to think about what media are analogous to the Internet in developing nations. One likely parallel is talk radio.

The Internet is a fruitful space for political organizing in the U.S. and Europe because it is low cost, in comparison to buying radio or TV time, and is an open, bidirectional platform largely free of content controls. In nations like Ghana which have liberalized radio broadcast laws and allowed numerous private radio stations to open, talk radio fulfills some of the same functions. In a country where many voters have low levels of literacy and few have computers, calling into a radio program is a more realistic path for political expression than publishing a weblog.

Chris Lydon, a prominent U.S. talk radio host in the traveled to Ghana in March 2002 and spent two weeks running a nightly talk show on Choice FM, one of Accra's most popular political talk stations. He observes:

It was talk radio, by some accounts, that crystallized Ghana's weariness with Jerry Rawlings and elected President John Kufour a little more than a year ago. It is a yeasty element in a reviving democracy.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ <http://www.pcij.org/imag/latest/anti-corrupt2.html>, accessed 2/27/2004.

⁴⁹ <http://www.contracorrupcion.com/>, the official Website for DAAC, is currently inaccessible. An archived version from May 16, 2001 is available through the Internet Archive at <http://Web.archive.org/Web/20010516223127/http://www.contracorrupcion.com/>.

⁵⁰ <http://www.transom.org/guests/review/200204.review.lydon.html>, accessed 2/27/2004.

Talk radio was a key ingredient in one of the most interesting examples of technically-enabled democracy in Africa. During the 2000 Ghanaian presidential elections, citizen observers stationed themselves at polling places throughout the country. Armed with cellphones, they called talk radio stations when they saw evidence of vote fraud or obstruction occurring at polling places. Because these reports were broadcast over the radio to hundreds of thousands of listeners, the police were forced to deploy to polling sites and ensure open access to the ballot box.⁵¹ A similar situation occurred in Senegal's 2000 presidential election. Perhaps not coincidentally, both elections brought opposition, reformist politicians to power.

Given the challenges of involving the developing world in the world of online reporting, discussion and activism, it's worth asking whether it's reasonable to try to make room for the Third World in the second superpower. Are technologists in developed economies being absurdly arrogant in speculating that a set of tools and behaviors used by less than one percent of the world's population – a disproportionately wealthy and powerful group of people – can help change the political lives of people around the world?

My strong suspicion is that the answer to this question depends a great deal on the actions of the people using and developing these tools in the First World. In designing the tools to enable communities, are we thinking about the full spectrum of people we'd like to use these tools? Are we helping people join our dialogues, or are we content to keep them out? If we are committed to the long, hard project of ensuring that the whole world has a chance to participate in our conversation, there's a chance that emergent democracy can be a force in emerging democracies. If not, we help ensure that the community phenomena that have developed around social software won't extend to the people who could be most positively affected by this technology.

⁵¹ From a personal conversation with Patrick Awuah, 1/14/2004. Confirmed by Gamal Nkrumah, "Overturning the idols of inertia", Al-Ahram, Cairo, 1/3/2001, accessed from <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2000/514/fo2.htm> on 2/27/2004.