

new works from older works) will be. Throw into these complications the gigantic 'copying machine' possibilities of the internet, the equally powerful possibilities for improved 'digital locks' through rights management software and the additional issues raised by the economics of 'shrink wrap' contracts over cyberspace and one can begin to understand the truth of Hayek's argument that:

As far as the great field of the law of property and contract are concerned . . . we must above all beware of the errors that the formulas 'private property' and 'freedom of contract' solve our problems . . . Our problems begin when we ask what ought to be the content of property rights, what contracts should be enforceable, and how contracts should be interpreted.

Needless to say, this anthology doesn't solve any of these problems and one wouldn't expect it to, but it does make a noteworthy contribution to the discussions yet to come.

Reviewed by Jason Soon

***Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide***

Pippa Norris

Cambridge University Press,  
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THE NOTION that some people have less access to the internet than others is almost always guaranteed to cause concern amongst those for whom equality of access to any

resource is a priority. Even those who are generally sympathetic towards letting markets, rather than governments, decide on the allocation of manufactured resources often express sympathy for reducing the gap between the digital haves and have-nots.

Pippa Norris, of Harvard University, has authored a well-written and surprisingly easy-to-read book, unlike many academic texts, on the subject of the 'digital divide'. Norris begins by setting out the different diffusion theory arguments. Namely, how will new technology spread within societies? Will technology be a 'leveller' or will it merely reinforce existing social and economic divides?

Norris then, through significant empirical studies, examines the divide within nation-states and among nation-states before going onto discuss the effects of digital takeup by governments, political activists and the use of digital technology by the general public as a means of political and social discourse and activity.

Norris' findings are, on one level, not surprising. The internet, like most new technologies of their day (such as the telephone, radio and television), has initially been the preserve of those who can afford such luxuries. However, diffusion of new technologies over time has become quicker, at least among wealthier countries.

Norris' book, *Digital Divide, Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide* tends to focus on the gap between nation-states and reaches the view that serious gaps between the

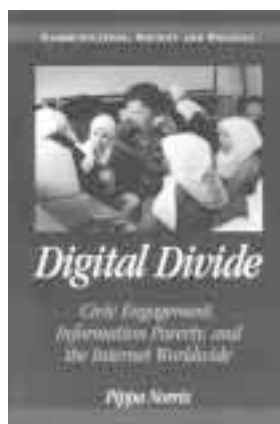
richest and poorest nation-states remain and are unlikely to narrow in the medium-term. Norris seems to sympathise with those who see this information gap as being a bar to development of poorer countries. After all, since so much information is found on, and commerce takes place via, online-communications systems, those without access will find themselves excluded from

the brave new digital world of education, commerce and civic participation.

One of the problems in this otherwise excellent 'state-of-play' text is that Norris is a little too uncritical of the popular 'the information gap exacerbates poverty' argument. She seems to agree with James

Wolfensohn of the World Bank, who she quotes as saying 'The digital divide is one of the greatest impediments to [economic] development.' This view, which Norris does not challenge, is an exaggeration.

The lack of digital resources in poorer countries is a symptom of lack of infrastructure, poverty and general underdevelopment caused by corrupt governments and bad economic and regulatory policies. In many of these countries, the key to development is government reform of basket-case economies, reduction of corruption, implementation of transparent pricing regimes and the removal of barriers to foreign investment. Without these reforms, communications infrastructure, along with other basic building blocks of a comfortable society, such as electricity, gas and water grids are unlikely ever to be built and maintained for any significant



length of time. But given that even some of the world's least democratic regimes and nastiest one-party states have websites, what role does the internet play within vastly different political systems?

Norris has undertaken a thorough scoping study of parliaments, governments and political party and movement websites worldwide. As expected, democratic governments tend to have a greater quantity and quality of sites. The Australian Parliament's website is singled out for special mention as a site of excellence. As many in the legal community will vouch, it is often easier to source free comprehensive consolidated Australian legislation than it is for many European countries (including the UK for example). This has even led to complaints by Australian governments that Australian lawyers are amongst the heaviest uses of Government legal websites, but contribute little financially to their upkeep.

The author also surveys political parties on the web. Interestingly, she focuses more on the internet's effect on party-electorate relations (while politics in a general sense is a key interest for many internet users, it is mainly political activists who make use of political party and extra-parliamentary, such as anti-globalisation, political sites). The key informational role of political institutions online (such as websites and email notification lists) has been to inform, not so much the general electorate directly, but rather indirectly via the press—the traditional communicators of political information from the executive and legislature to the public.

Not surprisingly, another of Norris's findings is that well-established parties are less likely to

use the internet for internal political organisation, than are extra-parliamentary political movements—particularly as the latter often tend to be a loose affiliation of fringe groups with no formal leadership structures.

Norris also briefly examines the political attitudes of those who are online. While admittedly she says that comprehensive conclusions are hard to draw given the lack of international correlative studies on internet use and political opinions, existing research does tend to show a particular 'cyber-culture' amongst US internet users.

Libertarians and classical liberals will take heart. American cyber-culture is secular rather than religious and favours laissez-faire approaches to social and economic regulation rather than state intervention. According to research by the Pew Centre, examined by Norris, there is a small, but discernable bias of US internet users towards favouring the Republican Party over the Democrats. While the GOP is a broad church, it is generally perceived to be the party of free enterprise and limited government.

While there are plenty examples of extremist groups using the internet for their fringe activities, it is heartening to see that limited studies show that there is at least a small correlation between internet use and laissez-faire small-government values. The big question is whether this trend will extend to developing countries and assorted authoritarian states where it is more difficult to take accurate opinion polls?

So how useful is the internet in promoting and extending democratic participation, apart from permitting the emailing of politicians and payment of parking fines online? Norris outlines the main competing theories between the cyber-optimists, who see the Internet as a vehicle for mobilisation, facilitating political

and social activism, and the cyber-pessimists who view the online world as merely another medium for entrenching existing attitudes and power differentials.

While it is true that to express an online opinion you first need online access, the 'instant publishing house', that is the internet, has sufficiently concerned authoritarian regimes to move them to filter and block websites and extend punitive sanctions against those who express dissent using any online medium. However, even the harshest regime cannot hope to block all websites all of the time, which will mean that some dissenting discourse will inevitably get through.

This is not to say, that the online population in fragile quasi-democracies, military dictatorships, and one-party states will be any more interested in online political activity or information than the rest of us. Visiting political and government websites ranks relatively low on surveys of online activity cited by Norris. But then these surveys don't seem to have asked questions of respondents as to whether they engaged in activities which consistently account for very high levels of internet network traffic, namely downloading pornography and pirated music files, often via file-sharing programmes such as *Napster*—which is precisely the programme Norris and her research assistants forgot to close before they took the screenshots subsequently printed on page 178 of their book.

**Reviewed by Andre Stein**