Y490 Politics of the Internet

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Definitions of Power

- Capabilities-based power
- Relational power
- Structural power
Capabilities-based power

- Examples of types of capabilities
  - Size
  - Wealth
  - Informational advantages
- Assumption that capabilities can be converted into actual power (over others)
- If $x$ has more capabilities than $y$, then $x$ is more powerful than $y$. 
Relational power

- Definition: A has power over B if A can get B to act against his/her preferences but according to A’s preferences.
- Relational power can be coercive or non-coercive.
- If A can persuade B to change his/her preferences to be more like A’s, then A has influenced B without using coercion.
Structural Power

- **Definition:** the ability to control outcomes that derives from the ability to shape the rules of the system.

- **Example:** the ability of the health insurance companies to prevent the adoption of healthcare reform that goes against their interests.
Questions for Us

- How does the diffusion of information and communications technologies (ICTs) affect the distribution of power?
- Who are the winners and losers?
- Can the losers catch up or be compensated for their losses?
- How can the winners be prevented from becoming too powerful?
Concepts discussed by Chadwick

- Technological determinism vs. Social shaping of technology
- Decentralization/Disintermediation
- Participation/Apathy in Politics
- Community building vs. Online echo chambers
- Globalization
Technological Determinism

- The view that technologies have an inherent character that cannot be altered or denied and that determine how they will be used and how they affect society.

Examples of authors who believe this:
  - Jacque Ellul, *The Technological Society*
  - Tom Friedman, *The World is Flat*
  - Raymond Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near*
Social Shaping of Technology

- Belief that society shapes technology rather than the reverse
- Sometimes associated with the “Irvine School” (University of California, Irvine)
- Authors include:
  - Langdon Winner
  - Bruno Latour
  - Steven Woolgar
  - Rob Kling
Code is Law

- Code includes software and hardware (architecture)
- Determines what people can do with the Internet
Four Themes in Code Version 2.0 by Larry Lessig

- Regulability (cyberspace can be regulated)
- Regulation by code (code itself becomes the regulator)
- There are latent ambiguities in free speech rights, intellectual property rights, etc.
- Competing sovereigns (the law embodied in the Internet’s code competes with the law established by Congress, the bureaucracy, and the courts)
John Perry Barlow’s Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace

- Former lyricist for the Grateful Dead
- Essay written in response to the passage of the Communications Decency Act of 1996 (part of the Telecommunications Act of 1996)
- “Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather.”
Anarchy vs. Control

- Cyberspace libertarian view:
  - Government cannot regulate cyberspace
  - Cyberspace is self-ordered
  - No government can survive without it
  - The state will wither away as a result

- Lessig: architecture of the Internet is fully compatible with extensive regulation and top-down control
Examples of Control: China

- **Big mama** monitors Internet cafes and web bulletin boards
- No **anonymity** of web sites or email addresses
- Public expressions of dissent via Internet are strictly controlled

Jingling and Chacha -- Internet police in China
One possible impact of the Internet is to permit the bypassing of intermediaries, allowing individuals direct access to people and institutions they care about.

Examples:
- Online trading vs. the use of stock brokers
- Web news vs. the purchase of newspapers
- Email vs. regular mail
Disintermediation and Re-intermediation

- It is possible that old intermediaries are being replaced by new ones.
- For example:
  - Newspapers are replaced by blogs
  - Record companies are replaced by iTunes
  - Bookstores are replaced by Amazon and other online book stores
Participation and Apathy in Democratic Political Systems

- Some democratic systems, like the US system, have experienced a decline in political participation and a rise in political apathy.
- Can the diffusion of ICTs change this trend?
- If so, would that be a good thing?
Online Echo Chambers

- Idea put forward by Cass Sunstein in his book, Republic.com
- He argues that people tend to seek out views that are compatible with their own and that the Internet allows them to do this more than the early news media (newspapers and TV)
Globalization

- The Internet “builds upon the effects of previously new technologies—mass air transport or television are good examples.”
- The inherently global nature of the Internet makes it unlike those earlier technologies.

Source: Chadwick, p. 27.