

Undemocratic Aspects of Publishing on the Internet

Prof. Jack Meadows

Loughborough University, UK
A.J.Meadows@lboro.ac.uk

There seems to be a general belief among Internet users that it is a particularly democratic kind of activity. How true is this, more especially in terms of electronic publishing? The problem in seeking an answer is that 'democracy' means different things to different people. Its meaning not only varies from country to country, but even within a single country it can have different flavours. For example, a summary of the definition given in the *Oxford English Dictionary* might be: 'that form of government in which power resides in the people as a whole and is exercised either directly by them, or by officers elected by them. It is often used more vaguely to denote a social state in which all have equal rights, without arbitrary differences due to rank or privilege'. Other sources put it rather differently. For example, the Fontana *Dictionary of Modern Thought* says, in summary: 'Democracy is the right of all to decide what are matters of general concern. A further criterion is the extent to which basic rights (e.g. freedom of speech) are guaranteed'.

For the present purpose of looking at electronic publishing, the various interpretations of democracy can be put into four categories:

- The running of any system should ultimately be in the hands of its users.
- Users should decide what important new developments are to be pursued.
- Everybody should have equal access and opportunity for using the system.
- Everybody should be allowed to use the system for their own purposes.

The running of the system

In principle, no one runs the Internet. In practice, a loose federation of (primarily) US individuals, committees and agencies guides its activities. This approach derives, of course, from the early days of the Internet, when it basically linked government-supported networks, first in the USA, then elsewhere. This is not a democratic system of governance, rather it is oligarchic. From the viewpoint of electronic publishing, such a system can impose limitations. For example, in the early days of the Internet, the providers of funding for the networks banned commercial users and advertising. I remember then working with a university press on the use of the Internet for providing information electronically from the publisher to academic staff. I had to plan the project in such a way that it clearly would not be advertising the publications of the press to the academic audience, which proved quite difficult.

More recently, the growing privatisation and commercialisation of the Internet has considerably changed the situation. Though the old oligarchy remains, it is being complemented and, in some ways, supplanted by a new commercially-oriented oligarchy based primarily on providers of information and software. From the viewpoint of Internet users of electronic publications,

this type of oligarchy may prove less helpful than the old. The original idea of the Internet was that it should be 'free' in terms of access and usage. The word is in quotation marks because it actually applied only to a user group comprising mainly academics and government-subsidised researchers. In electronic publishing, such freedom encouraged the rapid growth of free electronic journals, newsletters, full-text databases, etc. The move towards a more commercial dominance implies, inevitably, a transition towards a fee-paying approach to Internet usage. The original user group, being highly articulate, is challenging such a move strongly. The likely result, however, will be privileges for specific users, rather than for all. Again this can hardly be labelled a democratic result.

Users should decide what is important

To some extent, this does, of course, occur. Thus it was user pressure that led to the growth of electronic mail facilities on the Internet. The same is true of the rapid growth of Web-based facilities. However, in the early days, most people involved in networking had a reasonable level of computer competence. Now, an increasing number of users are limited to choosing between the options available, rather than developing their own approaches. At the same time, increasing commercial dominance of the Internet means that the facilities provided are more and more determined by competition between suppliers. This might seem, at first sight, to be to the advantage of the user, and so, to that extent, more democratic. This is, unfortunately, not always true. Where a firm can establish a near monopoly position, for example, it can actually limit the choice available to users. For example, it is good in terms of standardisation, if electronic publishers concentrated on a limited range of software. Yet, by doing so, they risk paying more for the software, as its developers try to extract a maximum financial return. It also means that such activities as widespread training in the use of such software may become prohibitively expensive.

Even where there is a proper competitive choice available to users, the pressures of the marketplace may lead to results that are not necessarily wanted by users. For example, software manufacturers often find it easier to demand more computer power than to write their programs more efficiently. Consequently, keeping up with the latest developments typically entails purchasing new hardware. Another factor is that commercial providers must continually ensure that their name is before the users. This leads to a variety of marketing activities, ranging from targetting search engines, on the one hand, to insisting on special password access, on the other. These activities may be sensible from the publishers' viewpoint, but would probably not be the first preference of most users.

Equal access

This heading raises a basic question concerning the Internet as an internationally democratic institution. For example, comparison of the number of Web sites in different countries shows that there are many more in the United States than in all the developing countries together. Since the developing countries are usually defined in terms of the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots', there is nothing surprising about this. However, the factors involved are worth exploring further.

In principle, access to the Internet offers even greater potential for users in developing countries - in view of their difficulties in obtaining information via traditional media - than for those in developed countries. The basic limitation on access for developing countries is, of course, financial. The major difficulty is not simply that the communication infrastructure is inadequate, but that the requirements regarding hardware, software and network bandwidth are continually

changing. The slower rate of change possible in developing countries means that access problems therefore continue despite the advances they make. For example, much information on the Internet is now becoming Web-based. This is occurring whilst many users in developing countries are still struggling to move past the simple electronic mail stage. Even when users in developing countries have adequate technical resources, they are faced with other financial problems. Thus, the cost of electronic communication is often inversely proportional to the per capita income of a country. In other words, it can cost much more to access the Internet from poorer countries than from Western Europe or North America.

It is true that such financial difficulties are not specific to electronic publishing, but there are features of the Internet which emphasize the publishing gap. For example, much information provision on the Internet presumes that users have state-of-the-art access: it makes limited allowance for users with technologically less sophisticated access. At a more general level, a move towards a more commercialised Internet means that new financial obstacles will appear for poorer users, whether in developing or developed countries.

Even given adequate access to the Internet, users may encounter imbalances in the information provided. One obvious example relates to language. Information on the Internet is primarily in English, to a much greater extent than is true for the output of printed literature in the world. Correspondingly, the information content emphasises particularly the informational interests of the Western world. Even where these are of world-wide interest – as, for example, in science – they are threatened by the move towards commercialisation of the Internet. For example, information generated or sponsored by governments is increasingly being seen as a source of income, rather than as something to be made available at minimum charge. This trend affects access by all users, not only by those in developing countries. Similarly, the difficulty of archiving electronic information is likely to affect users generally. Because of the continually changing computer environment, long-term storage of electronic information is both expensive and time-consuming. On the one hand, this means that the archiving of electronic information will have to be selective, which inevitably raises the question – who will do the selection? On the other hand, the cost of such archiving increases the likelihood that there will be charging for the use of back-files. Hence, financial barriers may affect access to past, as well as current information.

Uninhibited use of the system

Commercialisation is connected with another factor that can affect access – the control of copyright. Because electrocopying is easier than photocopying, information providers on the Internet have been pressing for copyright legislation which is more stringent than that applied to printed information. If this is granted, the copyright protection will cover not only newly generated information, but also existing information gathered from other sources. In addition, with the type of legislation which is being envisaged, copyright in a database could, in principle, be protected for ever. It follows that database producers might ultimately be in a position to charge for much of the useful information available on the Web.

This is not the only legal problem facing electronic publishing on the Internet. Censorship in some guise is another. It is no surprise that a number of countries want to restrict access to particular types of political information. (Where external electronic data links are limited, some control of transborder data flow is feasible.) But all countries wish to impose certain kinds of restriction – for example, on defamatory statements or publication of confidential information. Current legislation varies from country to country, and it is often unclear who should be responsible, or what legal redress there is. Though individuals may blithely publish

illegal material, large information providers may become ultra-cautious in what they mount on the Internet.

Conclusion

Criticisms of democracy typically come in two forms. The first opposes it on the grounds that it is inefficient, not least because it must take everyone's views into account. The second argues that societies, as currently organised are not democratic enough: greater power should be devolved to all members. In Internet terms, the first viewpoint is more like that of commercial information providers, while the latter is closer to the view of long-term Internet users. As demonstrated in previous sections, the Internet has never been an entirely democratic institution. It may become even less so in the future if the trend towards greater commercialisation continues. But perhaps that is the fate of any activity that is highly successful.