

How Democratic are the New Telecommunication Technologies?*

Benjamin R. Barber

Abstract

In this article, Professor Benjamin Barber analyses, firstly, those characteristics of the Internet that are coherent with democracy (horizontal communication, participation, interaction, diversification, heterogeneity) and, secondly, those configurative elements of the Internet (too fast, space and information not measured or filtered, information overload, limited access, fragmented spaces, monopolistic market) that go against what is required of a democratic system. On balance, the disruptive elements seem to have more weight and be more numerous. Therefore, professor Barber warns that the requirements and

functions of democracy must be taken into account when designing the development and uses of the Internet. Therefore, rather than leaving the Internet in the hands of corporations, there should be a greater role for politicians and civil society in its design and development.

Keywords

democracy, Internet, caveats, deliberation, monopoly, consumerism

Topic

Democracy and ICTs.

There has been little useful interplay between democratic theory, the technicians who unfold the Information and Communication Technologies and the common users. In fact, two conversations are taking place at the same time. One conversation is about democracy, in general, and then is applied, badly, to technology, by people who do not understand technology. And the second conversation, by people who understand the technology very well, and then try to generalise, very badly, about democracy. The result is that these two conversations do not intersect. And what I would like to do in this article is to try to bring those two conversations together. I know a little bit about democracy and I know something about technology, so I hope I can play a useful role.

Let me start with some caveats, that are reservations about the discussion of technology in general. These will be familiar to many readers, but they are very important, because they stand as a background. So let us begin with the old warning *Caveat emptor*. "Beware, the buyer!" Here then are some **basic caveats about technology**. First, and most basic of all, technology is always a **tool**, an **instrument**. Something that we use for something else. It has no inherent end. It has no *telos*; it has no teleology. It can be employed in many distinct ways. Gunpowder has been an instrument of war and an instrument of construction, used to build empires and used to build cities. It can be used both ways since it has no inherent *telos*. The new technology has no inherent *telos* either: it is not

* The text has been edited by Rosa Borge, Political Science Lecturer at the Open University of Catalonia (UOC).

democratic, it is not anti-democratic. It is simply one more tool. That's the first caveat.

The second caveat is that, because technology is a tool, it tends to **reflect and mirror the society** in which it finds itself. It is more a reflection of the society than a determinant. We often talk about the new digital age, the new electronic information age, as if its mere existence will transform the world. "Now we live in a new technological age; the technology will change everything," we think. On the contrary, I want to suggest that the new technology will tend to look like the society that produces it. With respect to this technology, that means that technology will not be a magic bullet, a magic solution to all our problems. "Before, democracy did not work. Now, we have technology and the Internet. Now democracy will work." But what we can not produce without technology or before a specific new technology – what we fail to achieve in our values or in our system of democracy (say tolerance or freedom), we will not produce with technology. The technology will not produce those virtues, those social goods, those civic, public goods that we have otherwise failed to produce with our institutions as they already exist.

In fact, as we have seen, despite the many potentials of the new technology, and despite the technology's novel and in many ways democratic architecture (about which I will speak later in this article), the new digital technology does in truth basically reflect the culture that we have today – that is to say, a radically commercial market culture. Above all, the Internet appears as an electronic mall for buying and selling. One third, approximately –from the beginning until now–, one third of the hits on the Net are for pornography. That's not a surprise, but it doesn't suggest that the technology is exactly changing humankind's oldest habits. So while we like to anticipate that this new technology is going to create some novel form of

democracy, it is more likely simply to mirror and reproduce and reinforce the commercial culture we already have. And when we go onto the Web, we know we will be inundated by the pop-up ads and the scrolling advertisements and the millions of sites where commodities are sold. And whether we are talking about Amazon, or Barnes & Noble, or about the auction sites such as E-bay, we are talking about a technology that has been put to the use of the primary focus of our age: consumerism. And it should not surprise us, therefore, that for the public (not perhaps the experts or specialists), the Internet has become more than anything else just one more tool of consumerism, one more instrument of commerce, and little else.

It may seem to do new things, but generally it only does old things in new ways. E-mail and instant messaging replicate hard mail (snail mail) and telephone; Google reproduces the library search; political webchat and party sites do online what they did previously in person – fundraising, mobilization, information. New bottles for old wines. Yet I know from my experience in the United States when I worked on Howard Dean's Presidential campaign (and Howard Dean was the "electronic candidate" who used the Internet more effectively than anyone before him!), that it did little to change the character of American politics. It did not help him win a lead in the early going. He raised more money on the Internet than any candidate has, and many candidates will now imitate him a try to do major internet fund-raising. But raising money is not something new for politics in the United States – unfortunately. So, until now, the Internet has mainly been used to do old things in new ways, rather than to do things that are genuinely new. There are of course some new uses: virtual communities and multi-player video games, for example. Electronic auctions that engage global participants. Governor Dean's "Meet-Ups" created virtual communities horizontally that seemed to

represent new forms of political recruitment and organization. Yet even these uses imitate traditional ways. Ebay is novel, but it is still a new form of an old genre of commerce; Amazon is simply on-line consumption. Where are the new forms of civil society or radical distinctive new forms of politics?

The third caveat about technology is about **temporality and rapid change**: it is very hard to generalise about the technology because the technology is changing so quickly. The moment we make a generalisation, the technology evolves and the generalization is mooted. Let me offer a crucial example from my own experience. The early Internet, because it was narrow-band, was a word-based medium. And some people, including me, said, "Oh, the Internet is good for literacy and democracy: it brings us back to reading. People use words again, because to use the Internet, to use the Web, you have to type in words. Democracy is all about the rule of words rather than brute force." To be sure, with instant messaging and e-mail much of what happens on the web remains word-based. But even as I was expressing this optimism about literacy, broadband was evolving. And with broadband, the Internet becomes another medium for pictures and for movies, rather than for words. So at the very minute I was suggesting that the web was an ideal medium for thinking and deliberation and words, it was turning into another pictorial medium, looking more like Hollywood than like the library.

A fourth caveat related to the rapid pace of technological change, is the fact that technology tends to evolve in a leapfrog style, where a stage achieved in one culture (putting it ahead of the pack) is overleaped by another culture (which puts it ahead). Call this **technological leapfrog**. One society hardwires its society, leaving "primitive" cultures behind. Until the "primitive" culture, having missed the hardwire stage, progresses directly to

wireless, leaving the hardwired culture behind. Africa was backwards with respect to telephone and cable. But because it was never wired, it was open to wireless, and the result is that Africa will become the first wireless continent, leapfrogging over the wired societies who long ran ahead. As the technologies change, there is a chance for those who are behind to jump over and take the lead. This has an important equalizing impact, since technological development is not linear, but a series of jumps. Countries and corporations pass and repass one another, the ones that lag behind today taking the lead tomorrow! (The United States gained its superiority in technological miniaturization during the Cold War when it failed to match the big Soviet rockets and had therefore to reduce the size of its payloads. This miniaturization was occasioned by technological weakness in rocketry, but led to superiority over the Soviet Union in miniaturization.)

The fifth caveat touches on another **temporal** issue, raising one is perhaps one of the most important reservations about technological change – although it is one few seem to have much thought about. Call it the "**Generational Fallacy**."

By this I mean to focus on the fact that those who create new technologies come from a generation that knows the old technologies. Quite naturally they make assumptions about new technologies and how they will be used based on their experience and use of the old technologies. But the next generation that uses the new technologies has no knowledge of the old technologies, and is likely not only to see the new technology very differently, but to use it in ways the generation that created it cannot anticipate.

Let me give you an example from my own experience. I grew up in a world of hard page research, in libraries, with books and journals and index files, with open stacks. Then came the Internet and Google, and instant access to

information. For me, growing up in that old research environment gave me a powerful edge and was a considerable virtue. I know how to do research. I know the difference between good and bad information. I know how to differentiate serious sources from gossip and lies, and so I can go on the Internet and do a lot of work very quickly, bringing all that I have learned about standards, about research method, with me. But my students and my children, to whom libraries may seem foreign, who have never learned much about authoritative standards or editorial judgment, go on the web with very different baggage. When they go on-line they confront an endless world of information and knowledge and facts, woven together with a world of lies and gossip and myths, all bound together, all equally accessible to indiscriminating eyes. To them, it may all look the same, every source may seem to have the same authority (or lack thereof) How can they do research on the Net when they have no basis for distinguishing lies and truths, facts and the gossip, mere information and trusted knowledge? Nor is there any way to learn to make such distinctions on the web because its greatest virtue is precisely that it is a mass of information with no editing, with no standards, with no authority – a lateral, point-to-point medium where we talk to one another rather than rely on “authorities”. Its virtue is that it has no authority, which however is also its vice. Anything goes.

The same issue is evident in the idea, popular among fans of the web, of so-called “virtual community.” Yet for those who have known real community, while it is possible to extend and grow a virtual community based on a real community, it is far more difficult if not impossible to create a virtual community *ex nihilo*. If you know nothing of community in the real world, you cannot create it on the Internet. Those who do not have and

know communities cannot create them virtually. Those who play multiplayer web games often speak of themselves as members of a virtual community, and in their common devotion to a game, perhaps they are. But to establish a global, civic community on the Web, in the absence of concrete real, international political and civic communities is far less feasible. To think it is possible is another exemplar of the Generational Fallacy.

Finally, the last caveat –and this is very familiar, so familiar that it is easy to forget– is the **digital divide**: the economic reality that new digital technologies cost money and educational resources and can only be accessed by those with such resources. It is not just money; it is education, which is another form of wealth. Because many people think the answer to the digital divide is the hundred-dollar computer, we must remind them that literacy is also a prerequisite to technological access. I have heard corporate managers announce: “It’s over. The digital divide is finished. We will soon have hundred-dollar, or fifty-dollar, or fifty euro computers, maybe twenty-five euro computers. Give them to everybody.” Fair enough: to buy a computer may cost twenty-five euros. But to buy fifteen years of education in order to be able to use a computer sensibly costs a lifetime of wealth. That divide, the real divide of north and south, of rich and poor, continues to separate users and non-users.

With these caveats in the back of our minds, let me address **the actual architecture of the Internet**. How democratic is it? To answer this question means responding to eight features of the Net that are related to the requirements of democracy. Some are coherent with what democracy requires and others are not. I have listed these technical features in the following grid.

TABLE 1. Democracy requirements and the Internet features

Democracy needs:	The Internet is:
Civic Interaction "Lateral/horizontal communication"	Point-to-Point (Like telephone, not like TV)
Bottom-up citizen participation	Interactive/Participatory (Not passive spectatorship)
Pluralism/Politics of differences	Diversified/Heterogeneous (Infinite sites, blogs, etc.)
but!	
Democracy also needs:	The Internet is (however):
Deliberation/Slowness Prudent judgment	Fast! Impulsive/rushed judgment
Mediation/Selection Wisdom	Unmediated Unselective, endless "knowledge" leading to information overload
Universal access Equality	Limited access "Digital divide"; inequality
Public/Common ground "Our space"	Private/Segmented "My space"
Popular control	Monopoly (Privately controlled portals: e.g. Google, MS Explorer)

Source: own work

Now back in the early nineteen-nineties, many of those working in the early days of the Internet talked about a new electronic democracy. They saw themselves as democratic pioneers, and they saw the technology as deeply democratic. We might call them techno-zealots or techno-enthusiasts. They loved the idea. John Perry Barlow, for example, who wrote lyrics for the Grateful Dead, but was also a computer expert, took up the cause of electronic democracy. As did Esther Dyson. Or the people who founded the Electronic Frontier Foundation, the people who write today for *Wired* magazine. The people whose eyes are spinning in awe of the democratic possibilities of the Net, who talk about "netizens" rather than citizens. Certainly there is a basis for these hopes in the actual architecture of the Net. Following this line of reasoning, the first three characteristics I will examine,

describe characteristics that are **consistent** with a democratic way of running society and doing politics.

1. Horizontal and point-to-point

The most important single feature of the Internet is that it looks, in its architecture, like the telephone, and not like radio and television. It is a horizontal medium, not a vertical medium. By means of television and radio, a single source broadcasts down and out to the many – a useful way to top-down government control. Control the radio station, control the television station and you control public opinion, along with the public itself. In Serbia, Milosevic created a civil war; and in Uganda and Rwanda they created genocide, using radio broadcasts and state

propaganda. The one speaking to the many, inspiring insurrection, hatred or even genocide. But the Internet is less prone to such usage, being a point-to-point medium like the telephone. It does not hook us up to a leader or an editor or a broadcaster. It links us to one another. And that, of course, is deeply democratic.

The essential democratic relationship is not between leaders and citizens but between citizens and citizens. Because we prefer representative model of democracy, we tend to think, "If I talk to the Mayor, if I talk to the President, if I talk to the King, then I am in a democratic relationship where I can influence government." But real democracies are defined by our capacity and competence to talk to one another. And one of the reasons our modern democracies, by the way, are not doing very well is that we do not have many opportunities to talk to one another. In our politics, we talk to the newspaper editors, we talk to the candidates, we talk to the political parties. But we rarely are able to speak to one another. The Internet is an opportunity to do that. That it is a lateral or a horizontal vehicle of communication is one of its greatest strengths. In Howard Dean's 2004 Presidential campaign, the most successful new use of the Internet was for what he called "Meet-Ups." Getting people together with one another, not to talk with Howard Dean, not to talk with his staff but to talk with one another about American problems, to inspire one another; to motivate one another to work.

2. Interactive, participatory

This points to the second democratic feature of the Internet's architecture: that it is interactive, participatory. Again, compare it to television. The television spectator is deadened to the world, passive and lethargic, watching. But on the internet, people are active, engaged. One reads, writes, thinks, reacts. That interactivity is crucial to the political process of democracy as well. Indeed, it is a vice of modern democracy that it has become a spectator sport. Something we watch on television like a soccer

game (football) game. People say without irony, "Oh, I'm very political, I watch television all the time." A very odd thing to say. Political junkies are television addicts not action addicts! Web interactivity counters this passivity. As a participatory medium, and a bottom-up medium, it combats the hierarchical tendencies of a society in which broadcast television or representative politics, or corporate management, all function top-down. Another way to say this is to say the web is a pull medium, not a push medium. Corporate advertising and corporate marketing are push media: they shove things at us, like it or not. The Internet is a pull medium; it allows us to draw what we want from it. If you do not want it, you go somewhere else. You choose. It is the demand side, not the supply side, that is crucial to the Internet – at least in its architecture (although there are new push sides to the net via advertising and marketing).

3. Pluralistic, heterogeneous

The third feature of the Internet that is deeply democratic is its infinite pluralism, its truly heterogeneous character. For this lends itself to representing many differences. The Internet is averse to uniformity and homogeneity. It is not all the same. You can find anything, any point of view – politically, aesthetically, religiously, culturally. And if you look and cannot find the variety you seek, you open your own site; initiate your own blog; create what is missing. If you come to New York and you do not like the television being offered to you, you can hardly start your own television station. But if you do not like the blogs you read, you can start your own, and even get a group of people like you to start a group blog. So heterogeneity and political differences are very well-represented on the architecture of the Internet.

There are at least these three significant democratic virtues. I used to put the word-based character of the Internet as a fourth virtue, but as I wrote before, broadband has changed that. So it is not so easy to talk about the

Internet as a word-based medium anymore because, more and more, it is becoming pictorial.

Yet even though it has these three very powerful democratic architectural characteristics, it has other characteristics that are **less consonant with democracy**; that do not represent and embrace democratic tendencies so well.

4. Fast

The most important of those problematic characteristics for democracy is, in fact, what most people regard as its greatest virtue: its speed. Above all, communication on the Internet is fast. It moves, quite literally, at the speed of light, the speed of energy. In that sense, it is instantaneous. Not always, when you go online and you try to work, but, in theory. Electronic communication is instantaneous. (Except when it becomes, in practice the world-wide-wait when you are downloading via a telephone wire!)

But I want to suggest to you that this seeming virtue is, from the point of view of democracy, a vice. Because democracy is a process based on deliberateness. It is about slow and prudent movement. We say, "He moved at a deliberate speed." That means a slow, calculated, thoughtful speed. And that is the way democracy is supposed to move. In the British Parliament, to pass a bill, you have not one vote and reading, not two votes and readings, but three votes and readings. The idea is to vote, think about it: "Was that a good idea?" And vote again. Then you talk some more and vote a third time. And only the third time around is it a law. Democracy is not just about collective decision making. It is about deliberate collective decision making. Deliberation is absolutely essential. The difference between the tyranny of the majority and real democracy is deliberation. The difference between a government where you just count votes, and a government that makes wise decisions, is deliberation. Deliberation means a slow even glacial pace. The Internet means fast. In that sense, the Internet

is a bad medium for democracy, because it's about making choices in a hurry, while democracy is about making choices slowly and deliberately.

Therefore, from the point of view of a democrat, like me, one of the projects we face is how to put "electronic speed bumps" in the electronic highway. Little bumps that slow you down when you drive too fast. Engineers and technical people may protest, insisting that speed is the virtue. Not in politics. Not for democracy. Maybe this means we should not always do our decision making on the Internet. Imagine a Supreme Court, our highest court, where the members simply sit at home and type in their decisions rather than listening to evidence, deliberating, thinking, arguing, exchanging opinions with one another (which is the essence of the judicial process). The word *judicious*, meaning prudent, comes from what judges do. The Internet is clearly not a judicious medium in the speed with which it operates.

5. Unmediated

The second feature of the Internet's architecture that is problematic for democracy is that it is unmediated. A classroom is mediated by a teacher, a newspaper by an editor, a church, or synagogue or mosque, by a priest or rabbi or imam. Now on first glance, as I noted before, we may think of the unmediated character of the Internet as a virtue because it features lateral communication. But in another respect, it is a problem. It is a problem because of "information overload". Engineers boast, over and over again, "We can bring you all the knowledge in the world, all the facts, everything we know and everything we do not know, all in a second." And they believe that is a good thing. While a typical web user may be thinking, "When I read a newspaper, I can rely on good reporters and editors, when I read a book there is the author's authority and there are reviews. But when I go online, I'm on my own – it's all there, but how am I to judge it?" With access to all of the facts, all of the lies, all of

the knowledge in the world, how can users make prudent judgments?

The problem of democracy is not just getting knowledge. It is finding a way to judge that knowledge. Philosophers once spoke of wisdom as something more than mere knowledge, an accumulation of data. To make sense out of the facts –to know what is a fact and what is not a fact– that demands wisdom, experience, judgment. And these are the qualities that democracy demands as well. We talk about civic judgements, civic capacity, civic competence. The endless infinite knowledge of the Internet does not help give us civic judgment. It may provide a raw knowledge; but yields little or no wisdom. Indeed, it may actually make wisdom more difficult.

As with speed, endless accumulation of facts turns out to be less of a virtue for democracy than we might anticipate. So maybe the question we need to ask the engineers is, “How can you give us less knowledge but more wisdom? How can you give us filters to sort out facts from gossip, truth from lies?” Education is a filter that allows us to distinguish truth and fiction. How can the Internet be a very prudent educational medium when it remains unfiltered, and while being unfiltered is construed as a good thing?

6. Limited access

The third democratic defect of the Internet's architecture goes back to the digital divide which I referred to in my introduction. The fact is, the Internet is a technical medium that requires both machinery (hardware) programs (software) and most importantly, education, to utilise it and to acquire it. That means that, as it becomes crucial to democracy, democracy becomes less egalitarian, not more egalitarian. Technology actually threatens to make us less democratic than we were because, while everybody can open their mouth and talk, everybody can listen, everybody can raise a hand and vote, there are bil-

ions of people who have no access to the Internet, and no capacity –even if you gave them access– to make sense of the software programs and infinite content. Until that problem is licked, the technology tends to increase rather than diminish inequality.

7. Private, segmented

The fourth characteristic of the Net's architecture that may be a problem for democracy is that it is a private medium – more about me than about us. It affords us “my shopping,” my preferred networks, “my space.” My Space is one of the more popular i-messaging programs, and is typical of the web in its appeal to discrete individuals. The Net sometimes appear as narcissism unmitigated, a mirror that you look into to yourself and your preferences reflected. Each person his own space, her own blog, his own favourites. The world segmented (as Cass Sunstein has written about in his book Republic.com) into sectors where we encounter people and ideas like our own. If you are a Catholic, gay, salmon fisherman, you will find a site to talk to other Catholic, gay, salmon fishermen. And if you are an American, Protestant, fascist, you will find a way to talk to other Protestant fascists around the world. And if you are an Islamic man who knits, you will find the space to talk to other Islamic men who knit. Cozy as this is, democracy is not about encountering and dealing with clones but encountering and dealing with strangers. It requires that we face differences rather than just enjoy commonalities.

Rousseau once said if everyone was just like us and had the same values, we would not need politics. Politics is about difference. And the trouble is, although the Net has many different spaces, it does not require that we go on those spaces. So we each use the Net for private reasons: to buy the books we want, to join the groups we want, to talk to the people like us, to develop my space, my blog, my shopping cart at Amazon or E-Bay. It's all my, my, me, me, MY space over all space. But politics is

still necessarily about Us, Our space, common space, *gemeinwesen*. And the Internet is not very good at that. It doesn't compel that. Because it is a pull medium, not a push medium, it has no way to do that. So, in fact, it is not a very useful political space. Even the political parties about whom were just here speaking, they each talk about *their* space. "If you're a Social Democrat, come to my space. If you're a Christian Democrat, go somewhere else." I want a space where Christian Democrats have to talk to Social Democrats. But their web are not designed to do this: on the contrary, their sites try to do the opposite. But democratic space must be about a space where difference and conflict are confronted and treated.

8. Monopolised

And finally the last feature I will examine has to do with the difficult question of who *owns* cyberspace? to whom does the Internet belong? In theory, of course, the Internet belongs to all of us. It is nominally a public good, a public commodity. But, in practice, the hardware and the software and the programs and those who control the points of access are private: owned by private corporations, private companies, private capital. We have seen recently, for example, in China, how Google and others have used their control of keywords to allow the state to, in effect, censor the information highway. Not just to allow it, but to give the state the tools to do it. Those who control the platforms and technologies ultimately control the space.

I worked with President Clinton in the nineteen-nineties. He made many good decisions and good policies, but among the worst thing he did was, in 1996, to authorize a new Federal Communications Act that privatised the new technologies, and left their oversight and regulation to the market. President Clinton perhaps thought he was yielding the communications realm to civil society. In Europe, of course, once thinks of power and monopoly in

terms of the state (that is the *étatiste* tradition.) As contrasted with the individual, private sector. But there is a third player. It is not just state and individual. It is state, the individual in civil society and the private economic corporation. I would argue that the more dangerous threat to privacy, to individuality and democracy comes not from a state but from private money, private corporations, private control. So that the 1996 FCA disempowered the state but empowered in its place a private monopoly sector more dangerous still to liberty and pluralism.

Microsoft offers an example: while it got out of the battle it had in the United States about bundling (forcing hardware computer companies to "bundle" its software into the retail sales package, creating an effective monopoly). It got away with this in the US (though not yet in Europe), but, in fact, bundling ends up compelling people to use one, rather than another, platform, and that platform has consequences, and the engineer who build it knows it. So, though the Internet, in theory, is open, in practice it is subject to the same private corporate monopolies that dominate the marketplace and its decision-making. Obviously a fundamental problem.

Well, there are other features we could examine, but the ones already analysed will indicate that the architecture of the Internet has its own entailments, its own implications, and its own consequences that we have to grapple with. And while there are ways in which we can create our space, public space, on the Internet, its tendency is to create My space and Your space. While there are ways to make it an open medium, the fact is, it is subject to monopoly control by the corporations who control content, platform, and hardware. The fact is, while it represents many different people, it has a hard time putting those different people in contact with one another in the way that we want democracy to do. The fact is, it is fast, and not slow, and this impair democratic deliberation. So if we want the new technology to serve democracy, then we must make a political argument for that. The technology

will not make the politics democratic. It is for politics first, to fight to make a democratic technology, not allowing technology to do what it may be naturally inclined to do. The real struggle, as always, is for the struggle for democracy through politics; technology will follow.

Let me end by recalling the story of Marconi, the inventor of wireless, who was in New York when he first set up the system that would permit wireless transmission from New York to Florida. Marconi was in a New York laboratory, his assistant was with the transmitter, in the next room. Two

long years of experimentation had resulted in this great moment: the assistant ran to Marconi and said, "Mr. Marconi, Mr. Marconi! We have Florida on the line. We can talk to Florida from here in New York!" And Marconi first smiled, and then stopped and, as a furrow crossed his brow, said, "Yes, but do we have anything to *say* to Florida?" And that, to me, is the essence of the problem we face with our new technology. We must first determine what we want to say and how, whether we wish to be democratic, and in which ways; then we can turn to technology as a tool of our aspirations. Not before.

Recommended reference

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Benjamin R. Barber

He is the Kekst Professor of Civil Society and Distinguished University Professor at Maryland University. Professor Barber, a renowned theorist on democracy and author of numerous publications, is currently analyzing the relationship between democracy and the new Information and Communication Technologies. He revolutionised Political Science in the 1980's through his book entitled "Strong Democracy. Participatory Politics for a New Age". In this book, as in the vast majority of his writing, Professor Barber criticises liberal thinking and liberal political institutions while defending the extension of political participation. In addition, one of his main concerns has been to carry out his ideas and values, which has led him to both conduct and participate in citizen initiatives beyond the academic world, such as his recent involvement in "The Democracy Collaborative", a project aimed at developing participation and citizenship based on the democratic use of ICTs.