



CHAPTER ONE

The Conventional Wisdom: What Lies Beneath?

Technology will make it increasingly difficult for the state to control the information its people receive. . . . The Goliath of totalitarianism will be brought down by the David of the microchip.

—Ronald Reagan, speech at London’s Guildhall,
June 14, 1989

The world has changed a great deal since Ronald Reagan spoke these words in 1989. To many, subsequent events have borne witness to the truth of his prediction: authoritarian regimes have fallen around the world, while the power of the microchip has risen. The connection between these two phenomena has taken on a powerful, implicit veracity, even when it has not been explicitly detailed.

A link between technological advance and democratization remains a powerful assumption in popular thinking, even amid a decline in the general “information age” optimism that characterized much of the 1990s. Specifically, there is now a widespread belief in the policy world that the Internet poses an insurmountable threat to authoritarian rule. Political leaders often espouse this notion: President George W. Bush has asserted that the Internet will bring freedom to China, while Secretary of State Colin Powell has stated that “the rise of democracy and the power of the information revolution combine to leverage each other.”¹ President Bill Clinton was also a prolific proponent of the idea that the Internet is inherently a force for democracy.² Business leaders and media commentators generally concur: former Citicorp chair Walter Wriston has argued in *Foreign Affairs* that “the virus of freedom . . . is spread by electronic networks to the four corners of the earth,” and journalist Robert Wright claims that “in all probability, resistance to the Internet’s political logic will plainly be futile within a decade or two.”³

This conventional wisdom on the Internet and democracy has deeper roots than the ebullient pronouncements of recent politicians and pundits. In part, it draws upon the strong libertarian culture that prevailed among the Internet's early users—a sentiment epitomized by cyberguru John Perry Barlow's "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace."⁴ In this statement, delivered at the World Economic Forum in 1996, he declared "the global social space we are building to be naturally independent of the tyrannies [governments] seek to impose on us."⁵ A faith in technology's potential to challenge authoritarian rule also emerged out of a particular reading of the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, where the Soviet Union's inability to control the flow of electronic information was seen as crucial to its demise. Ronald Reagan's 1989 statement was typical of early sentiments about the democratizing potential of computer-based communications. As the diffusion of the Internet increasingly facilitates the globalization of communication, culture, and capital, there is a clear desire among the proponents of the process that all good things (including democracy) should go together.

As is often the case with conventional wisdom, this view has several problems. First, it often imputes a political character to the Internet itself, rather than focusing on specific uses of the technology. The Internet, however, is only a set of connections between computers (or a set of protocols allowing computers to exchange information); it can have no impact apart from its use by human beings. The conventional wisdom also tends to be based on a series of "black-box" assertions that obscure the ways in which the use of technology might truly produce a political outcome. Proponents see the Internet as leading to the downfall of authoritarian regimes, but the mechanisms through which this might occur are rarely specified. Instead, popular assumptions often rest on anecdotal evidence, drawing primarily on isolated examples of Internet-facilitated political protest. Subsequent assertions about the technology's political effects are usually made without consideration of the full national context in which the Internet operates in any given country. Hence, they fail to weigh politically challenging uses of the Internet against others that might reinforce authoritarian rule. Last, the conventional wisdom assumes a relatively static Internet whose early control-frustrating characteristics are replicated as it diffuses around the world.

In this study we seek to critically examine the impact of the Internet in authoritarian regimes, adopting an approach that avoids the pitfalls of the conventional wisdom. First and foremost, we aim to break down and ana-

lyze Internet use, taking a comprehensive look at how the Internet is employed by a broad range of political, economic, and social actors. So as not to contribute to the rash of black-box explanations, we examine the causal mechanisms that might connect these forms of Internet use with political impact. We also situate the potential effects of Internet use in their full national context, repeating this process for a diverse sample of authoritarian regimes. Such an approach avoids the problem of making inappropriate generalizations from isolated pieces of anecdotal evidence. Finally, we acknowledge that the Internet is not inherently free from government control, especially in those countries where governments have been in charge of its development since the beginning. As Lawrence Lessig has convincingly argued, governments (democratic and authoritarian alike) can most certainly regulate the Internet, both by controlling its underlying code and by shaping the legal environment in which it operates.⁶

Based on a systematic examination of evidence from eight cases—China, Cuba, Singapore, Vietnam, Burma, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt—we argue that the Internet is not necessarily a threat to authoritarian regimes. Certain types of Internet use do indeed pose political challenges to authoritarian governments, and such use may contribute to political change in the future. Still, other uses of the Internet reinforce authoritarian rule, and many authoritarian regimes are proactively promoting the development of an Internet that serves state-defined interests rather than challenging them. We do not seek to prove definitively that the Internet will not help to undermine authoritarian regimes, nor do we argue that the medium is merely a tool of repressive governments. Rather, we set forth a framework that allows for methodical thinking about limited evidence, and we consider what this evidence suggests in the short to medium term. As the Internet develops further in authoritarian regimes and more evidence accumulates in the future, we hope this framework will prove useful in assessing more long-term political impacts.

Existing Studies

Despite the prevalence of popular punditry on the Internet's democratizing effects, little attention has been paid to the issue in academia. Most of the scholarly literature on democratization does not explore the role of the Internet or even the information and communication technologies (ICTs) that predate it. Modernization theorists of the 1950s and 1960s considered the role of the mass media in promoting political and economic

development, but the media and ICTs have generally received much less attention in more recent works.⁷ Several democratization scholars have given brief mentions to the influence of ICTs on authoritarian rule, mostly in reference to the role of television in the “demonstration effect” in Eastern European transitions.⁸ A few studies (mostly region-specific) have addressed more centrally the question of the media and democracy or democratization.⁹ Few studies of democratization, however, have considered the potential role of the Internet and related technologies. As Daniel Lynch has argued, “On the question of telecommunications, the silence of the transitions literature is deafening.”¹⁰

A growing literature has begun to examine the role of the Internet in the politics of advanced industrial democracies. Many of these studies have examined such issues as Internet use in party competition, the potential for online voting and “direct democracy,” and the use of the Internet for political activism.¹¹ Another set of arguments revolves around the question of online social capital, whether virtual communities contribute to civic engagement in a manner that invigorates and strengthens democracy, or whether they promote social fragmentation and weaken associational life.¹² A number of scholars have also weighed in on the new policy issues and political debates surrounding such issues as online privacy, intellectual property, electronic commerce, Internet taxation, and competition policy.¹³ Each of these strains of literature explores issues that are increasingly important to the politics of advanced industrial democracies. As Internet use becomes more common in the new democracies of the developing world, these questions will matter there as well. Yet the ideas advanced in this literature are much less relevant to the political dynamics of authoritarian regimes.

A few large-scale comparative works have begun to plug holes in the scholarly literature by examining the issue of the Internet in authoritarian regimes. Several of these involve the statistical analysis of democracy and Internet diffusion, but none has produced convincing evidence of a causal relation between these two factors.¹⁴ Moreover, consistent and reliable data for such studies are hard to come by. A few important works engage in comparative case studies of the Internet across a variety of developing countries, including many authoritarian regimes.¹⁵ Such studies are invaluable for examining the determinants (political or otherwise) of Internet diffusion in the developing world, but they pay less attention to the question of the political impact of Internet use. Several cross-national surveys by Human Rights Watch, Freedom House, and Reporters sans Frontières

have examined restrictions on the Internet in authoritarian regimes, but these likewise engage in little comparative analysis of the medium's political impact.¹⁶

Finally, a number of individual case studies and news reports have examined Internet use in authoritarian regimes around the world. The best of these are balanced and well-informed studies, providing an essential foundation for the comparative work that we have undertaken in this book.¹⁷ Many more, however, are impressionistic and anecdotal, falling prey to the pitfalls of the conventional wisdom.

In presenting a systematic, cross-regional comparative study of the impact of Internet use in authoritarian regimes, we seek to fill the gaps in the existing literature. While this is not an academic study per se, we seek to contribute to scholarly debates as well as to policy discourse on the Internet in authoritarian regimes.

The Framework of This Study

This study's framework for analysis provides a blueprint for examining a comprehensive range of Internet uses, specifying the ways in which those uses might produce political impact and situating such impacts within the full national context of each country. Within each case study, Internet use is divided into categories, but we do not interweave evidence from a number of cases in a general discussion of, for instance, the impact of e-commerce. Such an approach ensures that isolated examples of particular types of Internet use are not taken out of context, and it allows each case to stand on its own in addition to supporting the study's general argument.

While focusing on the use of the Internet, we consider state Internet policy as an important factor influencing Internet use. Obviously the role of the state is extensive in authoritarian regimes, and in many cases this is particularly true with respect to the media and ICTs. In such countries early experimentation with the Internet usually occurs in the scientific or academic sector, but the central government is generally the major player in any Internet development beyond the experimental level. Like their counterparts in advanced industrial democracies, many authoritarian governments have instituted ICT development plans, created special Internet governance committees, or reorganized bureaucracies to deal most effectively with the Internet. Furthermore, state Internet policies and governance structures are often outgrowths of older regulatory regimes for the mass media and traditional telecommunications, and a consideration of

these historical roots is often valuable in understanding current Internet policy. As in any country (and especially where the role of the state is stronger), state policy will have an important influence on the myriad ways in which the Internet is actually used.¹⁸

Furthermore, in assessing the political impact of the Internet in any country, one must consider the full national context in which that impact occurs. For this reason, we survey the basic political, economic, and social dynamics of each country, considering such factors as the strength of the authoritarian regime; the major roots of its stability; the nature of the economy and the state's role in economic growth; the presence and strength of political opposition forces; the demographic characteristics of the population; and the importance of foreign relations and geopolitical concerns in domestic politics. Only with such contextual factors in mind can one proceed to analyze the actual political impact of Internet use in each case.

To gain a broad and balanced picture of the Internet's impact in each country, we examine Internet use in four comprehensive categories: civil society, politics and the state, the economy, and the international sphere. In each of the categories, one should presume no particular impact on authoritarian rule; a combination of both challenging and reinforcing uses of the Internet likely exists, though the balance may well tilt in one direction or another.

Civil Society

Internet use in the sphere of civil society includes use by the public and by civil society organizations (CSOs). Although the Internet is far from being a mass medium in many of the cases we examine, analyzing the impact of public Internet use (and how that impact may evolve with increased access) is still an important task. Here we consider, for example, whether public access to information on the Internet contributes in any way to a gradual liberalization of the public sphere.¹⁹ Alternatively, the government may channel computer networking through such closed systems as national intranets, allowing for much greater state control over content. Even with unrestrained access to the Internet, users' choices of the information they consume (for instance, entertainment versus international news) will largely determine whether the mass public's Internet use has any political impact. Where relevant, we also consider public participation in online chat rooms, looking at whether such discourse is liberal and civic, nationalist and jingoistic, critical or supportive of the regime, or some combination of these characteristics.

In examining Internet use by CSOs, we adopt a loose definition of the term “civil society,” looking generally at organizations in the public sphere that operate at least semi-autonomously of the state. This does not mean that they are entirely free from state influence in their activities or the positions they take on public policy issues. Nor should one assume the presence of a vibrant civil society in the country in question; in many of our cases precisely the opposite is true. We do examine the Internet use of prominent organizations in society, considering how they employ the medium to coordinate activities, network with other CSOs, and communicate with the domestic and international public. One should note that CSOs may support the regime as well as oppose it, or that they may take an essentially neutral political stance. Furthermore, Internet use may not actually make a difference in the political impact of CSOs. We also include in this category Internet use by political dissidents, both in groups and as individuals.

Politics and the State

In this category we examine Internet use by political parties (where relevant) and by the government. In most of our cases, legal opposition parties do not exist. Where they do, we consider the use of web sites for communication with voters, as well as web and e-mail use for logistic coordination by party activists. Much more common are state uses of the Internet, which can be divided into two main categories: e-government and propaganda. In many cases, e-government measures are likely to work to the benefit of the regime since they increase the state’s capacity to provide citizen services effectively, thus increasing public satisfaction with the government. E-government may also increase transparency, which can expose corruption; this could cause a crisis of legitimacy for the regime (especially if corruption is widespread), but it might also bolster the regime’s legitimacy if an honest central government is seen to be rooting out endemic corruption. State uses of the Internet for propaganda may be directed primarily at a national or international audience; both are likely to work to the benefit of the regime.

The Economy

In the economic sphere, we consider Internet use by domestic entrepreneurs, state promotion of Internet-driven economic development, and the

issue of foreign investment in the Internet industry. The Internet may present significant opportunities for entrepreneurship in a developing economy, possibly leading to the invigoration of an independent private sector or the emergence of a new domestic business elite. Where that is the case, the political preferences and political influence of this group of entrepreneurs may be either favorable or opposed to the regime in power. Further, the state promotion of Internet-driven economic development in general may have a variety of different impacts. If government-promoted Internet use helps deliver economic development, it could benefit the regime by increasing popular satisfaction. Promoting Internet development in certain key industries may bolster the state's intake of hard currency or contribute to economic diversification, both of which are likely to improve the regime's stability. In the long term, however, the rise of a middle class associated with Internet-driven economic growth may pose challenges for authoritarian rule. Finally, the dynamics of foreign investment in a country's Internet industry may result in either pressure for political reform or investors' cooperation with the government on its own terms.

The International Sphere

The international sphere includes Internet usage that is outside the regime's immediate purview but still relevant for its political stability. A major component of this category is Internet use by transnational advocacy networks that are pushing a political agenda regarding the country in question.²⁰ Such advocacy networks generally have an impact by influencing the actions of others (such as consumers, corporations, foreign governments, and international organizations), and the success of their efforts depends in part on nontechnological factors. Just as with domestic CSOs, transnational advocacy networks do not necessarily oppose the regime in question; their agendas may actually support the regime in certain ways. In addition to transnational advocacy networks, we consider Internet use by diasporas, those members of a nation who are living abroad and who may be engaged in discourse with people in their home countries.²¹ Here (as with domestic participation in Internet chat rooms) we examine the nature and potential political impact of that online discourse.

Case Selection

Since we aim to investigate the impact of Internet use on authoritarian rule, the majority of the cases we examine are full-fledged authoritarian

regimes, where the leadership of the country is unelected and there are no legal opposition parties. When elections and legal opposition parties are present but elections are rigged, rules are manipulated, or power is wielded so that there is no real competition for elected office, the political regime is best described as semi-authoritarian.²² Two semi-authoritarian regimes are included among the cases in this study, partly for variation on the type of regime and partly because each is an important case of Internet development in its respective region.

This study's framework for analysis was built around the cases of China and Cuba, which are presented in chapters 2 and 3, respectively. The analysis of those cases is based on a combination of in-country interviews, secondary literature, and an examination of such online material as laws, Internet development plans, and transcripts of chat room discourse. We chose to present China and Cuba as central case studies partly because of our personal knowledge of these cases and our experience in analyzing them.²³

In addition to their offering the practical advantage of expanding upon previous research, China and Cuba are useful as framing cases for this study because they represent two different types of authoritarian regime, both seeking to manage the political ramifications of Internet use but doing so in very different ways. China is a massive country in both size and population, with a rapidly growing economy and increasing ties to the rest of the world. Cuba is much smaller, less economically dynamic, and less engaged with the global economy, partly by its own choice and partly because of the current U.S. embargo. Although both share a communist history and maintain strict authoritarian political regimes, China is much more committed to economic liberalization and to the development of a market economy, while Cuba clings to socialism in ways China has abandoned. China's approach to the Internet has involved the promotion of rapid, market-driven technology diffusion while controlling Internet use through content filtering, monitoring, and deterrence and by encouraging self-censorship. Cuba, on the other hand, has eschewed a market-led model of Internet development, viewing the technology as a limited resource to be centrally allocated, and it has carefully controlled the public's access to the Internet.

In chapters 4 and 5, we extend the framework for China and Cuba to examine six other cases: Singapore, Vietnam, Burma, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. An analysis of these cases is based upon secondary literature and country-specific resources available on the

Internet. We have taken a regional approach to the selection of these cases, choosing three each from Southeast Asia and the Middle East. In adopting this approach, and in presenting the cases from each region in a separate chapter, we do not presume to generalize about the region as a whole. Too much has already been written about the Internet in the Middle East and Asia without acknowledging the variation that exists within each region or appreciating the national context of individual countries.

Rather, a regional approach to case selection is advantageous for both practical and substantive reasons. Much of the secondary literature on the Internet in authoritarian regimes, upon which these cases studies rely, is organized regionally. In addition, regional institutions (such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN) and region-specific geopolitical concerns matter in government approaches to Internet regulation and the impact of the technology in each country. Our choice of specific regions was influenced by the availability of data and the extent of Internet diffusion and use. The other regions with a large concentration of authoritarian regimes are Africa and Central Asia; in general, Internet development in those regions is sparse, and less secondary literature covers them. As more data become available in the future, we hope that others will take up the task of examining cases in Africa, Central Asia, and elsewhere.

We chose cases within each region so as to provide variation in size, wealth, the nature of the economy, and the approach to dealing with the Internet. The Southeast Asian cases are quite different on each of those measures. Singapore, a semi-authoritarian regime, is small, extremely wealthy, and highly interconnected with the global economy. It has been a leader in Internet development in ways that many other authoritarian (and some democratic) regimes have sought to emulate. Vietnam is a much poorer and more authoritarian country, with a communist history and an ambivalent relationship with the West. However, its population is young and relatively literate, and its government has shown an interest in leveraging ICTs for development. Burma is governed by a strict military regime; it is poor, economically stagnant, and more isolated than any other country in the region. It has taken the most reluctant stance toward the Internet, and little diffusion of the technology has occurred thus far.

The cases in the Middle East exhibit similar variation. The United Arab Emirates is comparable to Singapore in many ways—it is a small, wealthy country that serves as a regional financial center, has extensive ties to the global economy, and has enthusiastically promoted ICT development. Oil is also extremely important to the economy of the United Arab Emirates,

and its overwhelming foreign national population creates a distinct political dynamic. Saudi Arabia is a large but sparsely populated country governed by a traditional monarchy. The political consequences of its extensive oil wealth and the strong influence of Islam in its politics are both important factors that mediate the impact of the Internet. Saudi Arabia has taken a cautious approach to Internet development thus far. Egypt is a large, highly populous, and poorer country governed by a semi-authoritarian regime. Officially, it is a secular state, but Islam is an important factor in its politics. Egypt is unique among our cases in that it has placed no real restrictions on the Internet.

Our focus on current authoritarian regimes means that we have not selected known historical cases where certain uses of the Internet may have facilitated political challenges. We have chosen, for example, not to look at e-mail use in Russia during the 1991 coup attempt, at Internet use by supporters of the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Mexico, or at the use of e-mail by students coordinating the protests that contributed to the 1998 fall of Suharto in Indonesia. These cases are frequently offered as anecdotal evidence of the Internet's threat to authoritarian regimes (even though analysts have had difficulty drawing a direct causal link between Internet use and eventual political change in each case).²⁴ We avoided these and similar cases for two reasons: we were wary of selecting cases based on anecdotes, and we wished to focus on current authoritarian regimes rather than cases of transition in the past. Had we taken a more historical approach to case selection, we would not have been able to examine a full range of Internet use in each country. The Internet is a new phenomenon throughout the developing world, and it was only a nascent technology in Indonesia, Mexico, and Russia at the time of the events in question.

The issue of the Internet's impact on authoritarian regimes is a subset of the larger question of ICT use in developing country politics. Thus, we do not consider many cases that fall only within the latter category, such as the use of the Internet for environmental activism with regard to the Brazilian rainforest or the use of mobile text messaging to coordinate political demonstrations in the Philippines before the ouster of the Estrada government in January 2001. Some analysts have suggested that Internet use may have a greater political impact in new or weak democracies such as these, a point we do not dispute.²⁵ We feel, however, that conventional wisdom on the Internet in authoritarian regimes is prevalent enough to justify our more narrow focus in this study.

Policy Implications

We hope that one of the main impacts of this study will be to challenge conventional wisdom on the Internet's impact on authoritarian regimes and to provide a framework for systematic thinking about this issue. Conventional wisdom is most prevalent at the level of high rhetoric. Admittedly, democracy promoters at such organizations as the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have a more realistic view of what contributes to the downfall of authoritarian regimes. Conventional wisdom, however, forms part of the gestalt in which policy is formulated, and a better understanding of the Internet's political effects should lead to better policy. Beliefs about the Internet's inevitable challenge to authoritarian rule imply that policy makers can simply encourage free trade and promote technological development, letting the positive political consequences flow naturally from those actions. The analysis that we present in this study suggests that such thinking is oversimplified. In reality, specific concrete actions are most important for the promotion of democracy, in both the technological and nontechnological spheres.

Therefore, in addition to challenging the conventional wisdom about the Internet's political impact, we call for increased attention to how the different uses of the Internet are likely to affect authoritarian regimes. To the extent that policy makers *can* encourage particular uses of the Internet in authoritarian countries, they may wish to do so. We believe, however, that it is not always in the interest of the United States to demand immediate change from authoritarian regimes. As Catharin Dalpino has argued, openness in authoritarian regimes is a good thing in and of itself, and insisting on rapid change rather than gradual liberalization can be counterproductive.²⁶ It may be important to support some uses of the Internet—such as e-government measures that increase transparency and reduce governmental corruption—even if they pose no challenge to authoritarian rule in the short to medium term. Our study should help policy makers to think about how the Internet can best be used to support political changes that are in the interest of both the United States and the citizens of existing authoritarian regimes.