Welfare Advocacy and Empowerment in Informational Society: Highlighting the Dimensions of (Tele)Democratic Governance

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Given the demise of the welfare state through post-welfare capitalism under pro-market reforms, the important question for activists is: How should the structure of public governance be reinvented using information and communication technologies (ICT) enhancements for better health and welfare? Highlighting the differential impacts of new democratic praxis on social agencies and the redistributive policy outcomes, this paper critically analyzes the growing production and supply-side bias in the use of ICT. It further argues that for the betterment of welfare projects, political and administrative institutions, actors, and citizens at large should develop the communicative will for social learning in the integrated, multimodal ICT networking of the teledemocracy (TD) regime, be it online or in real time. The first section of this paper addresses to the last two decades' twin developments of the crisis of welfare capitalism and the shift toward "digital capitalism," paying special attention to the resulting problems of social inequality and the inadequacy of public governance over social development. Then, it examines the emerging governance structure: the supply-side bias in the use of ICT in service of health care reform. The subsequent sections discuss the alternative reform agenda and governance structure that are compatible with TD praxis and that can facilitate both advocacy and social learning processes. The paper ends with remarks on the issues and prospects of this project of reinvention.

Key Words : Advocacy, Empowerment, Informational Society, Teledemocracy, Welfare State

FROM WELFARE CAPITALISM TO DIGITAL CAPITALISM

Welfare capitalism is a predominant form of socio-polity in the twentieth century. Its history has shown how the state promotes collective welfare in the interest of economic growth with minimal labor conflicts. Welfare-state benefits are mostly bound with labor market status, such as unemployment allowances and social insurance or, at minimum, the enhancement of the individual's performance in production sector by strengthening the occupational welfare and social supports (Castells 1977; Castles and Mitchell 1990; Esping-Andersen 1990; Titmuss 1987).Yet all these welfare provisions and (more importantly) the related decision-making processes are mostly beyond the influence of citizens in general and of the service recipients in particular. More specifically, even under the so-called "representative democracy" system, the nonparticipatory welfare governance structure (under professional domination and party politics) is more than obvious.

Bismarck's prototype of insurance-cum-welfare policy and the United Kingdom's Beveridge Report tend to support an economic pragmatic approach in ensuring wealth generation and social stability: The welfare state has the function of keeping the citizens loyal but lacking in any sense of self-actualization, as a direct consequence of having no decision-making power (Mommsen 1981). This set of collective value orientation, indirectly coupled with the more directly created welfare state polity, has been challenged by critics with totally different worldviews (Taylor-Gooby 1991). Two major aspects that have been structurally

and historically associated with the welfare state are problematic:

1. The welfare state has failed to achieve its repeatedly stated Utopian goals and its formerly agreed-upon objectives (such as full employment) in terms of social equality, equity, justice, and human rights.
2. The welfare state has, in different ways, created socially undesirable and unjust conditions for society and citizens at large: Minority groups, the underclass, the unemployed, and women have been discriminated against not only because of their given social status but also ironically through their relationship to the welfare state, and through the hegemonic professionalism (Bryson 1992).

The failure of welfare capitalism has been criticized from both the political (New) Left and (New) Right: from the Right, about its lack of efficiency in generating wealth and the related creation of inefficient and ineffective (against market principle) bureaucracy and redundancy; from the Left, about the state's control of individuals' livelihoods in the interest of further capital accumulation. These criticisms have, paradoxically, put the state through waves of collective protest movements on the one hand, and emerging fiscal crisis on the other. Hence, the structural crisis of the welfare state mirrors the regressive policy outcomes, and in actuality is a direct reflection of non-participatory governance and of contradictions in the sociopolitical constitution of welfare capitalism. The success of welfare-state governance has, paradoxically, undermined its own legitimacy: As new lifestyles for individual self-realization and spontaneity are generated, supported by welfare provision in all aspects of life cycle of its citizens, they finally *exceed* the capacities of the medium of power—state politics. It follows that the "crisis of crisis management" and "ungovernability" are embedded in welfare state governance (Habermas 1989; Offe 1984), paralleling its regressive nature of the welfare state (Baldwin 1990)

Retrospectively, the welfare-state project is an unsustainable one, both economically and politically. In response to global competitiveness, most of welfare states begin to adopt policy measures that favor supply-side economics, including lowering taxes on personal and corporate income; imposing labor discipline, lowering labor costs, and removing labor rigidities; and removing regulatory rigidities, e.g., reducing budgetary commitment on welfare issues vis-à-vis considerations of entrepreneurial-cum-consumption freedom (Falkner 1998; Hine and Kassim 1998). In other words, the new global economic conditions have "diminished the effectiveness of the old welfare state arrangements even without any budget cuts or other restrictive measures" (Pfaller, Gough, Therborn, and Therborn 1991, 280f). The consequence is a common trend in *social dualism*: widespread poverty within affluent societies, in line with a set of deregulatory policy initiatives that favor privatization.

WELFARE NEGLECTS IN TECHNOPOLIS

Times change, technology changes, and we move inexorably into the twenty-first century. We live in a new economy of global capitalism that is both informational and networked. Juxtaposed against the decline of welfare capitalism that results from welfare-state reforms, the new, ICT-based governance structure of the so-called information society is emerging (Castells 2000; McChesney, Wood, and Foster 1998). The role of ICT in global capitalism (what Dan Schiller refers to as *digital capitalism*—the condition in which ICT networks directly generalize the social and cultural range of the capitalist economy) is greater than ever before. For instance, a U.S. Department of Commerce report reveals, among other things, that information technology (IT) accounts for half or more of the improvement in productivity growth since 1995; that IT is lowering inflation; and that, between 1994 and 1998, employment in IT industries expanded by 30 percent, from 4.0 million to 5.2 million jobs. In addition, these jobs average $58,000 a year, 85 percent higher than the average for the private sector (U.S. Department of Commerce [DOC] 2000). Although the idea of digital capitalism is predominantly for the developed world, the assertion that the corporate-led market system has been somewhat globally transcended is very important:

What is historically new is a change in the sweep of corporate rule. For the first time since its emergence in the early twentieth century, the corporate-led market system no longer confronts a significant socialist adversary anywhere on the planet. Digital capitalism also is free to physically transcend territorial boundaries and, more important, to take economic advantage of the sudden absence of geopolitical constraints on its development. Not coincidentally, the corporate political economy is also diffusing more generally across the social field. (Schiller 1999, 205)

Responding to trends in globalization, the state's planned development of a "Technopolis" becomes the iconography for futuristic high-tech society,

particularly the ICT-enhanced and -intensive mode of production in the next millennium (Castells and Hall 1994. These projects are for national economy competitiveness, mostly being initiated by the strong states in the East (China, Japan, and Singapore) and the West (the European Union and the United States). The creation of "technopoles" is no longer divided across political (Left and Right) ideologies. Some questionably "Asiatic democratic systems" have invested heavily for decades in upgrading their technologies and their selective utilization in society— the Singaporean and socialist Chinese states represent such an endeavour (Singapore Government 2000; Olds 1997).

Social life in the emerging ICT-based Technopolis will be different judging from the present high-tech system. First, productivity enhancement of both firms and individuals is one of the major achievements of integrating ICT into the production domain—although its contributions to quality of life may be dubious because the individuals must cope with, among other things, incoming messages from other time zones during night-time sleeping hours. Second, the division between working and leisure times, and between the domestic and the official, will become more blurred. More specifically, information networking per se will likely become the only mechanism of defining one's own identity and entitlements, because most of the gate-keeping functions of policy design will anchor upon the database and information-processing systems (Katz 1997).

Third, sophisticated network systems originating in the Technopolis will comprise the essential infrastructure for engorged transnational corporations that pursue export-oriented and regionally (or even globally) integrated production and marketing strategies. Corresponding to the ongoing build-up of transnational production and financial chains, therefore, are powerful, pan-corporate, international financial institutions (such as the International Monetary Fund [IMF] and the World Bank) whose aim is to subject global social development to neo-liberal regulatory norms (Schiller 1999, 40).

Fourth (and most important of all), welfare neglect will become more than obvious, with the juxtaposition of poverty and social exclusion against bourgeoning e-commerce in the global cities such as New York and London. The capitalist state's investments are (or will be) more on ICT and future technologies than on social investments for the protection of the socioeconomically vulnerable, disadvantaged, and underprivileged— particularly when economic crisis (such as the recent Asian financial crisis) occurs. More specifically, "The Internet is contributing to an ever-widening gap

between rich and poor which has now reached 'grotesque' proportions" (UNDP 1999b,p.1; UNDP 1999a). Here, the critical issue is not only that of further development of ICTs, but also of equity and equality, and of redistributive justice in the transformation of global systems in general, particularly involving a shift from welfare capitalism to digital capitalism.

Last, but not least, the behavioral repertoire of individuals is being shaped in accordance with the information available on-time, real-time, just-in-time, and across former geographically bound time-zone differences. In actuality, the foremost development of the information age in every aspect of society and economy can be represented by the global, round-the-clock regime of production, communication, and exchange (Castells 1989, 1997). This trend is being reinforced by a global regime of capital financing, supported by ICT and its integration with the emergence of the so-called "informatic or telematic city" (Graham and Marvin 1996; Leyshon and Thrift 1997; Fathy 1991). More challenging is the new demand for individuals and communities to react, with good interpretive power and judgment, to real-time global events as mediated by ICT with massive loads of information and representation.

HEALTH CARE REFORM:
THE SUPPLY-SIDE RE-ENGINEERING

The dynamics and logic of welfare-state reform, as well as the specific role of ICT, can be epitomized in health care reform. Containment of health care costs, along with the swing of the health-services pendulum from hospital care toward primary health and wellness promotion, and from acute illness treatment to chronic illness prevention. Furthermore, the commodification of health services by brining-in the market force (say, purchaser-provider split model) becomes a globally accepted recipe for health care reform. The context of health reform is that there are high technology, labor, and capital costs for health services and the advancement of medical knowledge allows the global population to live longer than before (see OECD 1990, 1992, 1994). Backed up by ICT, information science, and medical informatics in particular, the reform agency has been successful in uncoupling or blocking some professional influences from policy making. Yet, the information science and ICT applications are in the hands of the privileged group (powerful elites and the state), and mostly benefit the supply side rather than the underprivileged and end-users.

Under the new managerial regime and the full-scale "invasion" of ICT into the medical and health care

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sectors, global health care reform has three key targets:

1. The principle of cost-cutting, value for the dollar, bringing in the business, and creating a market for health care services, backed by ICT-based information science.
2. The shift from valuing clinical judgment to valuing clinical efficiency, usually backed by a new health informatics regime—say, using different Diagnosis-Related Groups or Unit Cost categories to monitor health treatment (Wiley 1994).
3. The movement toward some form of collective insurance and copayment—again, supported by information (insurance, financial, actuarial) science and ICT.

Yet, not many of the cost containment strategies (such as a cost-effectiveness or recovery approach) in health care reform actually have an optimal policy outcome, either because they wrongly target pricing on health products and services or they exacerbate the already inequitable distribution of resources in the public sector—or because market failures exist in the health-insurance system (Chernichovsky 1995; Hammer and Berman 1995). More problematic, the outcome of health care reform can be neither prescribed nor accounted for by information science or by a microeconomic managerial approach to better health care. To recapitulate, the global strategies for health care reform, as well as the reinvention of the welfare state, are backed mostly by a new regime of informational governance: The main instrument is clearly defined by the *supply-side biased ICT application.*

Conversely, the underutilization of ICT on the demand (human) side of welfare and the health care sector is due to a combination of the following reasons:

*   The information services do not meet the needs of indigenous people;
*   Governmental support is lacking;
*   Funds for high-cost ICT infrastructures are insufficient;
*   Information technology is inadequate and inappropriate; and, more fundamentally,
*   Governments do not recognize the role of ICT in political goodwill-building as an important part of socioeconomic development (Boon 1990).

Furthermore, as in the United States (where 65 percent of households have at least one computer and 43 percent of all households are connected to the Internet), the Internet today is a giant public library with a decidedly commercial tilt (Nie and Erbring 2000). More specifically, the penetration of ICT into different

socioeconomic arenas generally follows a trickle-down: first (and most heavily) into the entertainment and economic (profit-making) arenas, then into educational and health-related ICT applications, and finally into the "unproductive sector" of social welfare (Khosrowpour and Loch 1993; Kraemer, Gurbaxani, and King 1992).

More often than not, ICT is considered to be the growth engine only for productivity and the generation of wealth, rather than for social development; for economic growth rather than for the progressive welfare of the people (especially the less privileged). To recapitulate, the impact of ICT is substantial and global, differential, unequal, and inequitable — yet there is potential for social development via the synergy of ICT and the welfare regime of governance.

TELEDEMOCRACY FOR REINVENTING THE WELFARE GOVERNANCE

Despite regional differences in the degree of ICT interconnectivity (Moss and Townsend 2000), the creation of cyberspace through the heavy integration of ICT both locally and globally has been extending the ways, modes, and forms of communicating, doing business, and setting policy, and hence the development of new and distinct (cyber) culture, (virtual) communities, and (virtual) reality (Arnonowitz, Martinsons, and Menser 1996; Featherstone and Burrows 1995). These developments, in turn, are shaping both social processes and political culture (Rash 1997).

There is no doubt that the ICT-based flexible production regime generates more wealth and global economic activity. Yet, far from developing an equitable and better society, our ICT-driven post-material society has produced more social calamity than existed before: the digital divide and the formation of an almost permanent underclass, for whom high unemployment and early retirement / redundancies (even in the forties) are common.

Critiques of the information society highlight the contradictions of our "new world"—a world generally mediated by ICT under global corporate governance (Luke 2000; Menzies 1996; NTIA 1999; see also [http://www.digitaldivide.org]). The dominance of ICT in our work and social (i.e., virtual) encounters has reinforced a division of society in which the ICT-rich minority stands above those being controlled by the ICT. This is the so-called *dual city* phenomenon—the information-based formal economy, when juxtaposed against a down-graded, labor-based informal economy, results in a spatial structure: a city that combines

segregation, diversity, and hierarchy (Castells 1989). Obviously, a call for a normative development agenda for the humanization of ICT is urgently needed—and this is the project of teledemocracy: equity, participation, and social justice in the system of global/local governance.

Empowering the Underprivileged

Equitable ICT distribution cannot be achieved exclusively through the market. In the future, it should be the goal of governments, non-governmental organizations, and private firms to ensure universal access to ICT (Patterson and Wilson 2000). If and when the government can promote ICT at the demand side for the empowerment of end users of health and welfare services, the social lives of the underprivileged may finally change; home-bound pursuits may be linked to the global network, with a higher and better quality of life as a result.

First, the availability of touch (-screen, -plate, or -tablet) and remote sensing devices can and should enable the maximum possible level of communication for the underprivileged via networks. In other words, ICT and its products, if effectively used by and accessible to the underprivileged, will likely shift our world-view of the value and strength of their performance, so that their contributions will finally be recognized as beneficial to the community at large.

Many discussion lists and hyperlinks, for example, have been serving multifunctional and multidimensional activities: policy advocacy, informational exchanges, and consultation. These have been changing the ways in which the underprivileged participate in sociopolitical life—locally, regionally, and globally (G. R. Simpson, "The Web's Final Frontier: City Hall," *Wall Street Journal,* 17 May 2000; E. Wax, "Immigrants Use Internet As a Link with Past," *Washington Post*, 3 February 2000.

Second, the underprivileged and disadvantaged are, in most cases, less mobile than their counterparts, and thus must anchor upon the communities in which they live. The physical constraints on these groups also limit their access to information and contacts with outside world. To remove the environmental barriers, ICT and the information to which it gives access can enable them to live and work in their limited places (domestic settings) yet with similar, if not equal, and equitable life chance.

Last but not least, *Net activism* has revolutionized the mode of interaction for advocacy and empowerment, power relationships between providers and users, and the structure of governance in the health and welfare sector (Walch 1999). The key issues here

are interactivity, active participation, and the progressive agenda-setting of activists upon their respective policy systems. Virtual political communities could be the opportunity for individuals to become instrumental in policy making.

Thanks to the digitization of information and its multiple representations (text, audiovisual, and others), we are in a new era of digital economy, polity, and society (Tapscott 1996; U.S. DOC 2000). Participatory politics and teledemocracy with emphasis on the social could be enhanced if the new and alternative modes of communication are designed to incorporate one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-one, and many-to-many true communications in Habermasian sense. Perhaps this is the real offering, and challenge, of the Internet, which is evolving around different (cable, wireless, and satellite) modes of communication that represent both micro- and mass-media functions (Morris and Ogan 1996). Strategically, the new, alternative, and teledemocratic modes of communication can, at least in theory, enable online, real-time, and full participation of citizens in governing their societies.

Enhancing the Formation of Political Will

Lately, many U.S. citizens have begun to be able pay their local property taxes and parking tickets on commercial sites such [http://www.govworks.com] or [http://www.ezgov.com]. This indicates that e-commerce is more flexible and advanced than e-politics or e-policy. Undoubtedly, ICT has a differential impact, be it positive or negative, on governance and politics. Most of the empirical studies at present are mixed, but they tend in general to reflect positively on the impact of ICT on public administration and politics (Andersen 1995; Andersen and Danziger 1995; Margetts 1999). The influence of ICT on actual administrative and political settings (i.e., "soft" systems, involving political will and dynamics) is complex and multifaceted, although the impact of improved system capabilities (i.e., "hard" systems, especially as they affect administrative efficiency) is more than obvious. More specifically, information quality for government and political activities are enhanced, although it is perhaps not surprising that negative consequences are underreported. From this observation, it is clear that the quality of information can be improved with an appropriate ICT-based regime in place to substantiate the policy-making process.

Yet, ICT is used more to enhance *data quality* for the politico-administrative processes of government than *policy-making quality*, and the benefits of using ICT accrue mostly to the elite, powerful, selected few among the governing bodies. Again, this reflects the

predominantly production- and supply-side bias of ICT use in public policy governance (Margetts 1999).

In other words, the overall performance of ICT on soft, fluid data—the most critical and controversial aspects of government—is far from satisfactory. In many instances the consequences of ICT use on individual privacy, empowerment, and legal rights are obvious and unfavorable (Bennett and Grant 1999). Although the impacts on personal or societal values have not been overwhelmingly negative, this trend does raise a serious question about the role of ICT in the most important dimensions of society and politics, namely, the ethnical, sociocultural, and moral dimensions. Hence, ICT cannot replace real-life politicking—making politically binding choices in various circumstances, either at the individual level or in society-at-large (Alexander and Pal 1998.

Because the current use of ICT applies more to the processing of hard data information than to enhancing decision-making process, critics identify the positive impacts of ICT far more frequently than the negative. Up until now, ICT has not provided enough leverage to those who stand outside the formal, elitist systems of politicking and who would use different critical standards (and whose criticisms would thus be more negative). This is parallel to the state of ICT use in the areas of health care and welfare development: again, a production- and supply-side bias.

SYNERGY FOR (TELE)DEMOCRACY AND WELFARE ADVOCACY

The Internet and ICT in general have much to offer in the way of facilitating the reinvention of participatory politics, safeguarding health, and furthering welfare rights. For obvious reasons, in order that the Internet be fully realized as a new form of democracy, we must overcome a number of problems—not least of which is the need for public ownership of and access to airwaves and the information superhighway (Barnett 1997; McChesney, Wood, and Foster 1998; and R. Wright, "Hyper Democracy," *Time*, 23 January 1995). For this to happen, we must be aware of two major areas of conflict: differing individual "information personalities," and differing world cultures.

Engaging Information Personality and Alternative Networks in Cyberspace

Information personality is the individual's personal style of communication and information exchange when engaging in political articulation for democracy,

whether in the real or the virtual community. For instance, one person may have better public-speaking skills, whereas another may have a better knack for critical, information-based reasoning. Such diversity of skills and creativity should flourish in teledemocracy. The information personalities, enhanced by the diversity and power of alternative networks, create progressive, socio-civic forces to oppose the dominant, one-brand mode of media engagement that state and corporate influences promote (Castells 2000; Luke 2000; Walch 1999). It is important to continue to enhance the powerful force of the information personality (both within and outside cyberspace) to further the social democracy project—indeed, to enhance that force as far as the diversity of social systems and the emancipating forces of social development can be extended and developed.

There is a future for social change toward a better world via the praxis of teledemocracy, provided we can continuously develop alternative, action-oriented media and networks beyond the dominant, mainstream one, and to strengthen the alternative participatory networks. These are built around alternative projects, such as environmentalism, feminism, and the human rights movement, that compete, from network to network, to build links to other local and global networks using communications media.

In sharp contrast to the present mainstream development toward commercializing and depoliticizing ICT under state and corporate governance, we need an overhaul of the "doing" of politics in both real and virtual settings. Power relationships and networking should be renegotiated—or, alternatively, citizens should take back their power from the representative democracy system and their autonomy from the market mechanism, which no longer work procedurally, substantially, or sustainably. At this historical juncture, the issues of e-equity and justice, and of social inclusion and integration (as well as bio-diversity) should be articulated in TD praxis.

Cultural, Ethnic, and Moral Mismatches

The indeterminacy of ICT on the democracy project should be overcome (Tehranian 1990). Individuals should be empowered and mobilized, in and beyond the mass media and virtual reality, to critically challenge the given order and the hierarchy of power relationships—between the haves and have-nots, between the informed and the uninformed. In short, the present agenda for change is to bring the Net back into the public domain and hence the control of the people, rather than being captured by global capitalism (Rheingold 1995; Barnett 1997;

McChesney, Wood, and Foster 1998).

A key issue is the compatibility of ICT with human society. In praxis terms, it is the denial of the network logic through the affirmation of values and norms that cannot be processed in any network, but may only be obeyed and followed—in Manual Castells' terminology, *cultural communes* (such as those with religious, national, territorial, and ethnic specificity), which are not necessarily linked to fundamentalism but which always center around their own self-contained meanings (Castells 2000, 22–23). Such groups make it necessary in, say, the sociocultural arena, to safeguard the development of ICT against possible cultural domination or imperialism. Information provided via channels of communication represents *ideas*—neither passive data nor a commodity to be bought or sold in the marketplace, but rather, images or information conveying the powerful meanings that influence and persuade the minds and orientations of the receivers (Horton 1992; Stover 1984, 50–52). The development of ICT depends upon the global organization and division of technology; hence, developing economies are bound to devise their own instruments for research and development to foster the growth of locally compatible modes of application—in other words, to "indigenize" technology' (Stover 1984, 63–84).

To conclude, ICT in and of itself, without the human element, can do little for the project of democracy and the empowerment of individuals to change the world. Unfortunately, worse might be the case if ICT is captured by the state and by the relentless profit motive of global capitalism; the trend to date indicates just such a worry-some development (Stallabrass 1995). On the other hand, it is possible to change the dominant logic and structure of governance by challenging the existing networks, affirming cultural-communal power and autonomy, and strengthening and continuously developing progressive civic forces and alternative networks.

Advocacy for Inclusive Society and E-Equity

Three interrelated issues are of importance if there is to be synergy of social development and teledemocracy. First and foremost, as with welfare rights, we should *promote the basic rights of ICT users*. The legal and political infrastructures must be such that users can participate in and be empowered by the political processes, and enjoy similar (if not the exact same) levels of rights of access to and rights to use ICT. In short, the rights to own, use, or have access to ICT should be incorporated into the social rights of citizens. Supportive aids following principles of justice

and equity should be provided when and where appropriate. Some forms of social rights and security for the needy are already in place globally; ICT rights should be considered an extension of the existing provisions of social rights.

This basic and necessary provision in legal and political infrastructures will be influential in empowering the underprivileged groups beyond the welfare and health care arenas. In short, ICT-based empowerment is for all citizens in general and for the needy in particular. Only by enacting legislation that both promotes the health and welfare of individuals and guarantees their access to ICT is it possible to develop a sustainable society.

Citizen participation is a basic principle of these efforts. The primary step in promoting the health and welfare of the underprivileged is to help them gain access to technology (particularly ICT) with the support of facilitators—namely, significant others, parents, spouses, or friends in their daily milieu. The state's enabling, via cash payment, of the provision of facilitators or ICT hardware and software could be developed along these lines.

The second issue is *the building of a supportive community among alternative networks and cultural communes*. Extensions of social and network groups, the informational support provided in both virtual and real worlds is crucial in helping individuals make the right decisions when faced with sociopolitical dilemmas. Hence, we can envision the further networking of—and for—the locally underprivileged and those who are global-network enabled, by the ever-increasing use of ICT.

Networking via ICT may result in subsequent direct, personal contacts in the community, thus enhancing the users' sense of belonging and neighborhood. Major effects of increased networking may also include the enlargement of the individual's personal knowledge base and the diversification of his or her outlook, attitude, and lifestyle within the global culture. That is, the world will become smaller—which, in some instances, may actually prevent normal, face-to-face encounters in the traditional community setting (Nie and Norman 2000).

The most important aspect of human community is its lively participatory dynamic, namely, that individuals can communicate with one another without barrier or hindrance. In this respect, ICT and its networking effects can increase the level and intensity of communal participation and, in time, the development of a better informed and caring community in which the underprivileged can benefit from ever-evolving mutual and self-help behaviors. Thus, the extent to which nation state and civil society

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should guide or even assume control of the development of ICT and media networks (e.g., encouraging private or public ownership, legislating for centralized or decentralized control) is and will remain a major sociopolitical issue (Truman and Lopez 1993; Takahashi 1990).

The last but not least issue is that *the development of people-centered welfare governance* should be part of our future (Davenport 1994). The advantage of ICT in promoting health and welfare is its promise of individually adapted and tailored systems to help professional advocates and activists better serve the underprivileged. This should be an achievable goal even in the short term.

A Last Reminder: Risks of the Information Society

The known benefits of ICT may be smaller than its unrecognized or unknown consequences for different sectors of society—for instance, it is doubtful whether the sophisticated processing of an increasing volume of information by electronic media can sufficiently reduce the extent and risks of wrong decision making. How will individuals react to the round-the-clock operation of the information society, with direct, online, real-time ICT set up to access and be accessed by anyone, in any part of the world? More troublesome than the answer to that question are the emerging concerns about system failures and malfunctions, as a result of both mistakes by end users and intentional misuse by experts. Computer hacking, fraud, sabotage via computer viruses such as the recent "Love Bug," and inadvertent system failures remind us of our new social vulnerability, particularly where personal identity, privacy, and intellectual property rights are concerned (Brooks 1990; Forester 1992; Whittle 1997; Wersig 1993).

To cope with the one-dimensional development that is taking place, we need to develop both our own *sensitivity* regarding ICT applications in sociocultural arenas, and the built-in system's *self-reflectivity* on teledemocracy. Hence, participation of the users (broadly defined) in ICT development is the Golden Rule. The further strengthening of users' and producers' groups, alternative movements, networks, and cultural communes for the sustainable development of global society and local communities should be encouraged. Without these, there is little chance of success for a better world with equitable welfare governance.

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