Internet (handwritten annotation, top left)

The Internet will revolu

By Jonathan Freedland

The web could yet bypass government and existing political communities, and either expand democracy in the process - or stifle it

SO the Washington journalist who warned me 10 years ago that the Internet was doomed, that it would collapse under the weight of all those pages, was wrong. The Internet is here and changing everything, the way we work, shop, communicate, even fall in love. But what of society itself? The industrial revolution changed politics completely, leading to universal suffrage, as well as modern socialism, communism and fascism. What will the Internet revolution do for the politics of our own age?

Last week the revolutionaries were in town, as Google's high command came to London for a major think-in, led by the CEO, Eric Schmidt. He had to fend off accusations that Google poses a threat to

society, storing up information on everyone who uses it. He was hardly reassuring when he said the company's ambition is to know so much about us all, it will be able to answer the question: "What should I do tomorrow?"

He had yet gloomier news for politicians. First, they will have to be even more guarded than they are already. Thanks to Google-owned YouTube, any careless remark will now be caught on camera (probably built into a phone) and distributed round the world in minutes. That did for Republican senator George Allen last year, when he used a racial slur at a rally and promptly found himself an Internet TV star.

Nor is your past any longer the past. David Cameron and George Bush should give thanks they were students before the age of Facebook; otherwise the wild excesses of their youth would have been thoroughly documented, available for all to see years later. Thanks to the Internet and easy search, we live in a permanent now, when any mistake, any reckless remark, even some past teenage ramblings on MySpace, are just a click away.

The politician of the Internet age has to admit all errors in full and early: they'll only emerge anyway. Factual slips are forbidden, too. Bloggers will find you out and, if they don't, Google hopes its own algorithms will soon be sophisticated enough to detect "falsehoods". No wonder Schmidt says, smiling: "Google's

going to drive these politicians crazy."

There's a bright side. Current technology gives politicians campaigning tools they never had before: witness the 62,000 Barack Obama supporters gathered on Facebook without the candidate lifting a finger. Meanwhile, a website offers a way to reach limitless numbers of voters with an unfiltered message at virtually no cost. What's more, the Internet can provide detailed knowledge of the electorate. If Amazon can rank the top-

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selling books every hour, then why not the five most important issues on voters' minds, constantly updated?

There is potential for people as well as politicians. Organising is swifter and easier: electronic mobilisation is said to have swung elections in Spain, South Korea and the Philippines. In the US, the Howard Dean presidential campaign of 2004 saw the birth of "netroots" activism, collecting enough donations from

individuals to match the megabucks of big corporate givers and lobby groups.

No less important, the Internet has facilitated collective action locally - down to the residents' association able to communicate through a website rather than constant meetings - and globally, with campaigning organisations such as Avaaz or the Genocide Intervention Network, which focuses on Darfur and began with a student site.

It's noticeable how far ahead the US

greater change than that?

Eric Schmidt says no; the old structures of representative democracy will endure. "They survived world war two and they will survive this." Besides, he says, no one wants mob rule, even if direct democracy was possible - say through regular electronic voting.

I'm not convinced. I can't quite believe that the Internet will transform the mechanics of politics but leave politics itself untouched. Something

taking part, and good for freedom because it allows people to express themselves.

The result could be a much more dramatic shift in political culture than most anticipate. Governments speak of consultation, but these are usually top-down exercises whose outcomes are tightly managed. If Wikipedia can assemble nearly 6m entries in 100 languages with just five employees, why would it not be possible to draft "wikipolicy" through a similar process, one that would then be voted on by elected representatives?

Technology could make the bypassing of traditional government institutions look very appealing. Witness the rapid action of MoveOn.org, which put together 30,000 evacuees from Hurricane Katrina and 10,000 volunteers ready to give them a bed. Or check out Kiva.org, which matches people with cash in the rich world to entrepreneurs in developing countries who need a loan. What these groups illustrate is not only a frustration with traditional government, but a way the Internet can bypass government altogether.

I wonder too about the very units in which we now participate. Currently, geography matters a lot: we vote in the areas we physically inhabit. But if millions of people are linked by MySpace, why is that not a political community? I can foresee a future in which national diasporas, for example, operate the way territorial societies do

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is in all this, and how much British politics lags behind: WebCameron does not a revolution make. It's even more striking that much of this activity is about finding new ways of putting pressure on, or getting people elected to, old institutions. The technology is cool and fast, but it still tends to be about sending men to sit in wood-panelled parliaments and marble-floored senates. Does the Internet really promise no

bigger is afoot here. At this week's Hay festival, Charles Leadbeater, currently writing a book on the Internet's transformation of creativity, explained how we are moving from the passive consumers of the 20th century to the active participants of the 21st. That had to be good for democracy, he said, because it would give more people a voice, good for equality, because it lowers the barriers that once excluded all but the elite from

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now. If ever there is a peace agreement to ratify, perhaps the entire Palestinian people, dispersed across the world, would take part in a referendum. The current iron link between democracy and territoriality might grow weaker.

Put pessimistically, the Internet could be reducing the very idea of a collective society. The web connects people with shared interests, even very narrow ones. So those with an enthusiasm for, say, caravanning in Finland can now find kindred spirits. But that risks shattering what was once a collective mass into a thousand shards, not a society at all but a bunch of niches. That could undermine a crucial aspect of politics, the power of people to act as a counterweight to governments and big corporations. If we're all broken into small units - "parties of one," as a web guru puts it - we will lose that combined strength.

In other words, the changes now in train could go either way, expanding democracy or contracting it. The same is true of the impact the Internet is having on capitalism, handing mega-billion profits to the likes of Google and Microsoft even as open-source technology encourages highly un-capitalistic behaviour such as collaboration and the sharing of knowledge for free. Such a mixed blessing is hardly new either. Lest we forget, the industrial revolution gave us the steam engine - but also the dark satanic mill.