The Internet – Uncharted Territory for Development Policy?

By Heiner Janus &
Sebastian Paulo,
German Development Institute /
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)

The Current Column

of 30 September 2013

The Internet – Uncharted Territory for Development Policy?

Bonn, 30 September 2013. "The Internet is 'Neuland' (uncharted territory) for all of us": This much-quoted statement recently made Angela Merkel the subject of ridicule and scorn. After all, the Internet has been a major part of our daily lives for over 20 years. Yet, the German Chancellor's statement in reaction to the NSA scandal reveals the prevailing uncertainty in dealing with changes caused by the Internet. In development policy, too, the Internet is by no means uncharted territory. However, the debate regarding the significance of the Internet for development policy is strongly polarised: While "cyber-utopians" already hail the Internet as a panacea for all kinds of development challenges, "cyber-sceptics" warn against exaggerated expectations. Four misconceptions and their clarification provide a more comprehensive view of the relationship between the Internet and development policy.

The Internet is only used in rich countries

As a development issue, the Internet took centre stage at the UN World Summits on the Information Society in Geneva (2003) and Tunis (2005). The agreed goal was to step up international efforts to close the global "digital divide" between rich and poor countries. Ten years on, calls for fairer access to information and communication technology are still relevant. Close to a third of the population in developing and emerging countries has access to the Internet. This remains far behind respective figures for developed countries where more than three quarters of the population use the Internet. In the poorest countries over 90% of the population have no access to the Internet. At the same time, the division of the world into a poor part that is offline and a rich part that is online seems more and more obsolete. The Internet is spreading rapidly around the world: 65% of all Internet users today come from developing or emerging countries, where Internet access via mobile phones, in particular, is booming.

The Internet is an engine for development

Recently Google and Facebook announced campaigns to provide more people in developing countries with Internet access. In addition, organisations hand out laptops to school children in developing countries in order to promote education. But such initiatives often ignore underlying structural and social problems – for instance a lack of trained teachers or an unstable energy supply. Information technology rather acts as an amplifier of existing skills and socio-economic conditions. Technology by itself is no magic bullet for solving economic, social and ecological problems. Unfortunately, blind enthusiasm for technology often causes neglect of more urgent problems such as inadequate healthcare and lack of infrastructure. Moreover, studies that point to a positive correlation between Internet access and economic growth are highly controversial. The Internet can have a positive effect on development processes in poorer countries – but only to a limited extent. Especially the growing exchange of information between individuals and organisations bears potential for addressing development challenges. For example, the Global Pulse initiative of the United Nations explores innovations in the field of data management and real-time analysis. Among other things, this initiative allows to spread early warnings against outbreaks of diseases, natural disasters or food shortages.

The Internet promotes democracy

The demonstration and protest movements during the "Arab Spring" were often labelled Twitter or Facebook revolutions in the media. The Internet, as a tool for communication, undoubtedly helped the opposition movements to organise protests. Information about possible human rights violations and abuses of power quickly became public through the Internet. Yet, lasting political change ultimately depends on longstanding political and social institutions. In addition, it is increasingly apparent that authoritarian regimes can use the Internet for propaganda and surveillance purposes. Authoritarian governments regulate access to information by blocking websites or specific social networks. However, the NSA scandal shows that democratic governments also

abuse the Internet for large-scale spying operations. Using the Internet in this manner limits fundamental democratic rights and the freedom of Internet users. A positive influence of the Internet on democratisation as such is therefore questionable.

Developing countries threaten Internet freedom

Developing and emerging countries consider their interests inadequately represented in the existing model of Internet governance. Private institutions based in the USA are currently responsible for the technical management of the Internet. These "multi-stakeholder networks" make the Internet a truly global medium in the first place by developing Internet standards and overseeing the addressing system. However, developing and emerging countries advocate a greater role for governments within the framework of the United Nations. Critics warn this would be a dangerous step towards nationalisation of the Internet. Such a fear is justified when considering the positions of governments such as Russia, China and Iran. But many countries also recognise the advantages of

the established multi-stakeholder model and are willing to discuss reforms on this basis. For example, countries such as India and Brazil have recently distanced themselves from their originally state-centric ideas for the Internet. The debate on the future of the Internet governance is in full swing. The Internet Governance Forum, which meets in Bali on 22 October, offers an important platform for dialogue.

Although the Internet is no longer uncharted territory for development policy, many questions remain unanswered: What qualitative differences exist between rich and poor countries regarding the use of the Internet? Which development initiatives could support the productive use of the Internet in developing countries? How can Internet governance safeguard its fundamental principles and efficiency without neglecting the interests of developing countries? Beyond cyber-utopianism and cyber-scepticism, there is a broad range of findings concerning the relationship between the Internet and development policy. This knowledge now needs to be broadened and deepened. This is the true uncharted territory for development policy.

Heiner Janus
*Deutsches Institut für
Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)*

Sebastian Paulo
*Deutsches Institut für
Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)*