



Culture, technologies and democracy: A cross-national analysis of political development



Marko M. Skoric^a, Yong Jin Park^{b,*}

^a Department of Media and Communication, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

^b School of Communications, SLMC, Howard University, 2400 Sixth Street, NW, Washington, DC 20059, USA

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ABSTRACT

Communication technologies have been hailed as having a potential to promote democracy and freedom, and this paper aims to examine these claims in a comparative, international context. Our analysis focuses on the mediating role of horizontal communication networks (i.e., telephone, mobile telephone and the Internet) in the relationship between culture and political development. Using cultural value indicators of the World Values Survey and the measures of communication technology development, this study tests the mediating path from culture to communication technologies and to political development. The results suggest that cultural values have a role in shaping the structural characteristics of horizontal networks such as accessibility and decentralization, and that these features of horizontal networks are positively related to institutional and effective democracy as well as to economic competitiveness of nations.

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1. Introduction

Since the late 1980s, many scholars and pundits have looked at the potential impact of horizontal media on political life in a comparative or global context reaching rather mixed, although generally optimistic conclusions (e.g., Barlow, 1996; Kalathil and Boas, 2003; Kedzie, 1997; Norris, 2000, 2001). Scholars have cited interactivity, reciprocity and a decentralized nature as key democratic advantages of horizontal media over one-way, top-down traditional media such as television and radio (Kedzie, 1997; Pool, 1983; Sparks, 2001). It was argued that communication technologies represent an important break from the traditional media in terms of favoring individual over state sovereignty (Wriston, 1993). The Internet in particular was heralded as providing new, alternative sources of unfiltered political information to the citizens around the globe (e.g., Kedzie, 1997; Norris, 2000). Furthermore, the Internet could significantly improve individuals' and civic groups' capacities for political organization and mobilization (Bimber, 2003). Still, given the diversity of political systems and cultures around the world, it seem unlikely that a conclusive answer regarding the role of the Internet in the process of democratization will be reached any time soon (Dahlgren, 2005).

The aim of this study is to shed more light on the mediating role of communication technologies in the relationship between informal institutions (i.e., political culture) and formal political institutions. Thus, this paper is an attempt to model the paths of political development in a global context using empirical indicators of cultural values and communication technologies, and examining their political as well as economic correlates. Our focus is on horizontal networks—those that provide direct person-to-person communications among citizens, such as telephone, mobile telephone and the Internet. While many of the Internet's features (i.e., interactivity, multimedia capabilities, open architecture, global reach, etc.) predispose it

* Corresponding author. Address: 3735 Mazewood Lane, Fairfax, VA 22033, USA. Tel./fax: +1 703 657 2181.

E-mail addresses: mskoric@cityu.edu.hk (M.M. Skoric), yongjinp@hotmail.com (Y.J. Park).

for the quintessential technology of freedom title, even more traditional horizontal technologies such as photocopy machines and fixed and mobile telephones may play a vital role in promoting direct, non-hierarchical and unfiltered communication between individuals and groups (see [Dányi, 2006](#); [Hills, 1993](#); [Kalathil and Boas, 2003](#); [Selian, 2002](#)). Instead of focusing on specific affordances of emerging communication technologies and applications, we examine macro, structural characteristics of communication systems and their relationships with cultural, political and economic factors in a comparative, global context.

2. Theorizing technologies and political development

The theoretical model employed in this study views political culture as shaping the structural characteristics of horizontal communication networks, and hence influencing whether and how these networks are put to democratizing and liberating purposes. Rather than simply analyzing the linkages between technologies and political development, this study engages in a systematic examination of the cultural shaping of communication networks, and its economic and political implications. Our study is aimed at building a new theoretical framework for analyzing the relationships between culture, communication technologies and political development, mainly on the foundations of two great works of the yesteryear, the congruence thesis ([Almond and Verba, 1963](#); [Eckstein, 1969](#)) and the technologies of freedom thesis ([Pool, 1983](#)).

On the one hand, the congruence thesis ([Almond and Verba, 1963](#); [Eckstein, 1969](#)) provides an important general theoretical framework linking culture and political institutions, and suggests that the stability of government depends on whether institutions are congruent with mass values. According to the congruence thesis, the relationship between culture and political institutions can be described as the one between institutional supply and mass demand for democracy ([Inglehart and Welzel, 2005](#)). On the other, Ithiel de Sola Pool's technologies of freedom thesis (1983) links communication technologies and political institutions and emphasizes the accessibility and decentralization of new horizontal communication networks as their key liberating and democratizing characteristics. Hence, it potentially offers a set of testable hypotheses regarding the relationship between specific characteristics of new horizontal communication networks and indicators of political development.

One of the key goals of the theoretical approach is to bring together the two rich, but largely unconnected bodies of social science literature, one primarily focusing on communication technologies and their societal implications, and the other one examining the role of cultural factors in the process of political development. To achieve this goal, we will first introduce the culturalists who argue that widely held values and beliefs are among the most important determinants of political development (e.g., [Fukuyama, 1995](#); [Harrison, 1992](#); [Huntington, 1996](#); [Putnam et al., 1993](#); [Inglehart and Welzel, 2005](#)) and discuss the existing literature on cultural determinants of communication technology diffusion and use (e.g., [Beilock and Dimitrova, 2003](#); [Huang et al., 2003](#); [Vishwanath, 2003, 2004](#)). Second, our theorization will bring in the soft technological determinists who suggest that technologies are neither neutral nor inconsequential with regards to socio-political outcomes (e.g., [Pool, 1983](#); [Neuman, 1991](#)). Finally, all these theoretical paths will be integrated into a framework based on the congruence thesis, which becomes a macro theory of culture, communication technologies and political development, where new technologies are seen as promoting the congruence between institutional supply and mass demand for democracy.

2.1. Culture and political development

The religious and historical heritage of a society has been shown to have an impact on the contemporary cultural values that promote the development of democratic institutions and good governance ([Huntington, 1996](#); [Inglehart and Baker, 2000](#); [La Porta et al., 1997](#); [Putnam et al., 1993](#); [Uslaner, 2002](#)). Furthermore, following the tradition of Max Weber's work on Protestant values and the development of capitalism, economic growth has been linked with societal level values and beliefs stemming from religious, ethnic and historical traditions ([Fukuyama, 1995](#); [Harrison, 1992](#)). For instance, societies where religions emphasizing authority, hierarchy and human fallibility are dominant (Catholicism, Islam, Orthodox Christianity) are more likely to suffer from higher levels of corruption (e.g., [La Porta et al., 1999](#)). Low levels of interpersonal trust have been linked with difficulties in conducting commercial transactions and inability to develop large-scale business organizations (e.g., [Fukuyama, 1995](#)).

But what about the cultural shaping of the structure of horizontal communication networks? It can be argued that cultural values, particularly the patterns of authority relations prevalent in a society (see [Eckstein, 1969](#)) are also mirrored in communication patterns, with hierarchical cultures being less supportive of non-hierarchical communication patterns and technologies than the more egalitarian ones. Furthermore, political cultures placing high value on freedom of choice, self-expression and participation create demands for communication technologies that offer greater control over the communication process. This includes greater opportunities for information exchange and information processing, greater organizational and networking capacities, and access to more diverse information sources. Culture has also been shown to affect the competence, efficiency and integrity of government bureaucracy (see [Putnam et al., 1993](#)), which are all of vital importance when it comes to development, modernization and restructuring of large infrastructure systems, including horizontal communications (see [Pittman, 2001](#)).

While there is little doubt that societal values have a direct impact on a democratic institutions and quality of governance, this impact can also be indirect, i.e., mediated by technology-enabled information flows. Culture shapes the structure of

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