The virtual "democracy" of the Internet[*]

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In this era of virtual reality which we live, it was inevitable that the dominant social-liberal ideology would demean even the fundamental concept of democracy. Thus, on top of the other kinds of illusory democracy (representative "democracy", radical "democracy", social "democracy", etc.) we now have discovered the virtual "democracy" of the Internet, celebrated by well-known liberal writers and bloggers, in perfect harmony with supporters of the reformist Left. Such people extol blogs and the Internet in general as the "greatest democratic conquest in History", which brings about a real democratization of the media "from below", given that every person can now become a publisher of him/her self. It is worth noting that this mythology is fully compatible with the present social-liberal ideology of "rights" which, of course, has nothing to do with social self-determination, individual and collective autonomy, and true democracy. No wonder that, "Time" magazine, a well known mouthpiece of the American establishment, pronounced last year the anonymous user of the Internet as "person of the year", while, this year, the transnational elite, which had gathered for its annual informal meeting in Davos, praised enthusiastically internet "democracy"![1] Thus, according to the social-liberal ideology, the Internet has brought about a shift from institutions to individuals, who are said to be emerging as the citizens of the new digital democracy. In reality, however, as the well-known sociologist Slavoj Zizek points out, "the hype of freedom on the web masks both disparities of power and the dangers of blurring real and virtual identities".[2]

At the outset, there is no doubt that the Internet is a quick and relatively inexpensive means of communication that provides the (theoretical) "right" to everybody to be publishers of him/herself. In reality of course, this applies only to about one billion of the 6.5 billion inhabitants of the planet with access to the Internet. And this is not a matter of time to overcome-- despite the growth momentum in the number of users recently-- but a "systemic" one. In other words, as long as there is poverty and economic and social inequality, which are phenomena inherent in a system of market economy and representative "democracy", the illusory democracy of the Internet will be reproduced as well. Thus, economic inequality implies that billions of people on the planet cannot afford the hardware and software, as well as the connection expenses to the Internet. Moreover, there is the equally important social inequality, namely, the various social factors which deter large segments of the population from the Internet (cultural factors, education, etc.). This is why, even in countries like Britain, where the use of the Internet is widespread, some 9 million people refuse to use it - regardless of their economic background. The consequence is that one more social exclusion has been added to the present exclusions: "the digital divide"!

One frequently quoted myth about the supposed democratization of the media brought about by the Internet, is that the blogs have abolished the distinction between producers

and consumers of information, so that today we can all be producers.[3] However, this is another theoretical right and not a reality in the present system. Nowadays, there are tens of millions of blogs in the world, but in fact most of them are inactive (in Greece, for example, out of 9,000 blogs only 300 are regularly renewed). Similarly, there are millions of websites, but, in reality, few muster daily a considerable number of visitors --as it happens also with the blogs. The reason of course is not that these are the only really interesting blogs and Web pages, as alleged by the misleading social-liberal competitive ideology, but also, that the designing and especially the constant renewing of a blog or a website –an indispensable element of attracting many visitors- call for not just some significant expenditure but, above all, plenty of time, which of course in today's society is translated also into cash. A sophisticated and constantly renewable blog or website requires either teams of full-time administrators to run them, or bloggers who can spare the extra time (and therefore the necessary hard cash) to do so –I am not speaking of course about websites and blogs which are run voluntarily by groups of political activists. In other words, the producers of information are actually a very small minority, who, generally, as Glenn Reynolds, author of *An Army of Davids*, which explores the explosion in web punditry, points out, "tend on average to be better off, better educated and, more importantly, employed". Hence, as found in the same study, more than half of the Internet users on the continent are passive and do not contribute to the web at all, while a further 23% only respond when prompted.[4] In Greece, for instance, a recent survey showed that only 2 out of 10 Greeks surf the Internet and 90% of them mainly visit pornographic pages![5]

Another myth is the freedom of access to knowledge, supposedly secured by the free access to the Internet, while others see the medium as an anti-systemic means that could put pressure on power. However, both these functions are, also, illusory. The first is decisively undermined by the anonymity of the medium. The information provided anonymously is frequently unreliable, or even suspicious, as it has amply been demonstrated in the case of the free online encyclopedia Wikipedia, where, interventions by state and secret services have, repeatedly, been made on entries of political and socio-economic content, with the obvious aim of misrepresenting the facts.[6] Concerning the operation of the Internet, as an anti-systemic means, (in the sense that it allows criticism of the rulers --something supposedly justifying anonymity) in reality, as it has been shown, for example, by the Athens Intimidia in the first, mainly, years of their operation, anonymity was being used by various mud-slingers and slanderers (and probably by members of the state or secret services) to defame "eponymous" analysts, i.e. writers using their real names, even if they belonged to the anti-systemic Left themselves!. Naturally, the administrators of blogs or fora may, if they so wish, take measures against such abuse of anonymity (as, it seems is presently the case with Athens indymedia).

In any case, the solution to these problems is obviously not the introduction of some sort of authoritarian controls on the flow of information--an issue that brings us back to the issue of the 'virtual' Internet democracy and the fact that real democracy is only conceivable at the collective level of face-to-face assemblies and not at the level of individual users.

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* This essay is based on an article first published in the fortnightly column of Takis Fotopoulos in the mass circulation Athens daily Eleftherotypia on 12/04/2008

[1] Jackie Ashley, "Beware the powerful when they hail the new democracy", *The Guardian* (29/1/2007).

[2] Slavoj Zizek, "Is this digital democracy, or a new tyranny of cyberspace"? *The Guardian* (30/12/2006).

[3] See e.g Interview with Ioannidis, professor of cybernetics at the University of Athens, *Eleftherotypia (*23/12/2006).

[4] Bobbie Johnson, "Ignore bloggers at your peril, say researchers", *The Guardian* (18/4/2006).

[5] See *Eleftherotypia* (03/02/2007).

[6] Robert Verkaik, "Wikipedia and the art of censorship", *The Independent* (18/08/2007).