Chapter 4
Globalisation, the Internet, and the Nation-State: A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Our world today is in the midst of an historical change. Globalisation and spectacular advances in technology have given us an unprecedented peek into the future: a glimpse into a highly interconnected world governed by new paradigms, where the cost of transmitting and accessing an infinite amount of information is virtually nothing, where physical boundaries no longer limit human action – in short, a world characterised by the breakdown of conventional political, social, and economic institutions and systems previously considered rock-solid; spearheaded by the rise of the Internet and its associated technologies, platforms, and applications. This book chapter attempts a critical analysis of the relationship between Globalisation, the Internet, and the State. In evaluating the arguments that present the Internet as a threat to nation-state sovereignty, the work attempts to challenge accepted wisdom; purporting instead to demonstrate that, in many cases, the Internet, far from posing any threat to the attenuation of political power, actually strengthens the hand of the nation-state.

INTRODUCTION

..the biggest technological juggernaut to have ever rolled.-George Gilder on the Internet

Technology, twentieth century modernists prophesied, would dramatically alter the landscape of world politics. Advances in telecommunications and air travel would create a “global village”, collapsing vast distances of space and time. The nation-state, dependent as it was on geographical boundaries for its very identity, would be eclipsed by non-state actors such as transnational corporations (TNCs), transnational social movements, and international organisations, all of which harnessed new technology to operate efficiently across borders. Today, much of what the modernists predicted has come to pass.

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(Keohane & Nye, 2002). Globalisation – increased global economic integration coupled with increases in cross-border social and cultural exchanges – has collapsed spatial and temporal barriers to economic and social exchange, a process speeded up by rapid advances in science and technology. The fate of the nation-state, however, remains ambiguous and subject to fierce debate.

Though a relatively recent phenomenon, the accelerating pace of globalisation has prompted the emergence of a large amount of scholarly literature, and to-date has generated a number of disparate “islands of theory” that focus on small parts of the larger question of how globalisation affects governance. Three domains of thinking have emerged as the most popular of the theories over the past few years (Legrain, 2002). The first is that of the ‘race to the bottom’; where national governments, locked in fierce competition to keep highly mobile capital within their borders, are forced into lowering labour and environmental regulatory standards and reduce spending on social welfare. Another cluster of literature focuses on the growing importance of non-state actors such as TNCs, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and transnational activist networks; whilst yet other theories focus on the ability of international institutions to provide effective global governance (Drezener, 2002). These different strands of thinking share one basic assumption: globalisation attenuates state power relative to other forces in world politics.

At the same time, many commentators believe that the weakening of the nation state has been accentuated by the deepening of local and global human interactions; a direct result of spectacular innovations in technology (Loader, 1997). The development of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has, in recent decades, revolutionised the organisation and dissemination of information in a way not thought possible before, bringing in its wake a so-called Information Revolution that has not only seen a dramatic fall in the cost of communications hardware (and software), but has also had a profound effect on political, economic, and social interactions globally (Choucri, 2000). The convergence of three trends – globalisation, world-wide electronic connectivity, and emergent knowledge networking practices – has reinforced the importance of the role played by knowledge and information in the global political and economic arenas. Today, we live in information societies poised on the threshold of the Information Age.

THE STATE, GLOBALISATION, AND THE INTERNET: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The influence of the state on the trajectory of human lives is more comprehensive and sustained than that of any other organizational construct. -Michael Zürn and Stephan Liebfried

Chief amongst the new technologies stands the Internet, a vast network of computers and satellites, whose effect on the global political economy has perhaps been more significant than any previous technology revolution. Today, almost anything people can do using conventional communications technology can be done using the Internet (Hill & Hughes, 1998). People meet and maintain friendships with others from different countries, shop online, keep abreast of politics and current affairs, post opinions, and have access to almost limitless information at the click of a button. At the same time, they can use the anonymity of the Internet to dupe and defraud, and to propagate unacceptable or profane ideas (Choucri, 2000). Information and Communication Technology networks such as the Internet thus have the potential to facilitate the deconstruction of national, financial, and cultural boundaries.

Current academic work on the Internet focuses primarily on its ability to transcend ‘all barriers of territorial distances and borders’; a quality that, many scholars conclude, contributes directly to a decline
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