

# Study: Internet erodes democratic protections

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Claims that the internet will "democratize" the global village are not supported by research published in the *International Journal of Electronic Governance*. Instead, non-democratic governments simply exploit the networks to spy on and control their citizens more effectively and efficiently than they did before.

In a post-Snowden NSA revelation world, many pundits have suggested that the age of true democracy is upon us as social lobbyists, citizen advocates and others claw back the agenda from those who rule them. We have witnessed it seems revolution via Twitter and Facebook in many parts of the world, while information and telecommunications technology has given oppressed individuals and groups the power to gradually loosen their shackles. But, as Snowden's whistleblowing regarding the international eavesdropping carried out by the so-called most free of democracies, the United States of America, showed, even those nations in which it is the people that purportedly wield the power, nothing is quite as it seems.

Now, researcher Martin Karlsson of Örebro University in Sweden has trawled the data on e-participation the world over and found that the Internet rather than being the great democratizing "carrot" it is yet another stick with which authoritarian, and supposedly non-authoritarian, governments can beat their [citizens](#) into submission. Among the dozens of nations that lack a formal democratic voting system, availability of the internet to the populace, he says, is at best an inconvenience in the quest to control but more worryingly from the

individual's point of view it provides the means to exact the opposite of democracy again and again from Egypt to Uzbekistan and from China to Saudi Arabia by way of Cuba, Ethiopia, Syria, Vietnam, Iran and many other authoritarian nations.

Moreover, Karlsson has found that the non-democratic nations make the internet not merely a stick but a double-edged sword, to mix a metaphor. They offer their citizens superficially free, uncensored access, although the simplest of unveilings generally reveals this to be a mere façade while at the same time using this access to monitor their citizens and to control behavior in the most insidious way.

"The most pressing question relating to the development of e-participation in the non-democratic world is not if the internet fosters democratization but rather how the democratic world will react to this dual strategy of internet governance characteristics of those non-democratic countries that engage in e-participation," says Karlsson. He is hopeful that ultimately the non-democratic nations will succumb to international pressure and to the urgency with which their oppressed citizens find alternative routes to otherwise censored information and blocked ICT tools.

**More information:** "Carrots and sticks: Internet governance in non-democratic regimes." Martin Karlsson. Int. J. of Electronic Governance, 2013 Vol.6, No.3, pp.179 - 186. [DOI: 10.1504/IJEG.2013.058405](https://doi.org/10.1504/IJEG.2013.058405)

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