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
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