



The Three Faces of Government in the Age of the Internet and the future of Activism within a condition of shared weakness

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This paper argues that within the wide milieu of the network society the relation between those who use power and those who are affected by that power changes radically. Following a three faces framework, the paper demonstrates that the technological revolution of the last decade has significantly altered the balance between government and subjects. The transformation of government into e-government is not simply a means to increase efficiency and economic gains; it is also an element of power. Therefore, it can be approached from three different perspectives, three descriptive modes of relating itself with power: 1) as a new form of governmentality attempting to create a favourable environment where, behind the benevolent façade of the perfect service provider, it hides a subtle system of control; 2) As a quintessential Big Brother of the Internet age, where technology serves as a strong amplifier of pre-existing patterns of domination, it gives the State extra power to see everything and control everybody; 3) lastly, the e-government revolution can be seen as carrying within it the seeds of the future of democracy. In fact, embedded within it, there is an element of weakness that in the long term can produce a series of cracks in the existing structure of domination, that is to say a better balance among the agents actively involved in the democratic process

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Introduction: The Three Faces Framework

We live in a society whose social structure is the result of the interaction of a complex web of networks (Wellman, 2001)¹ that, powered by a variety of

¹ This structure 'is most easily perceived in the new, global economy' remarks Manuel Castells, and is 'characterized by the dominance of interdependent global financial markets, operated by electronic networks processing information at high speed, handling huge volumes of transactions in a pattern of extraordinary complexity.' (Castells, 2004: XXIX)

communications technologies, constantly pass, exchange, and process data between the myriad of nodes attached to the system². Through these networks, individuals can extend the boundaries of their bodies and minds by connecting one another.

It is my opinion that inasmuch as *the network* has become the "dominant form of social organization" (Wellman, 2001), and therefore a strong component of the public realm - a space where subjects can develop thick and durable relations with other subjects - the *network* has steadily become an important source of power. Whereas in the earlier stages of the Internet revolution, *being digital* was a synonym for *outsider* - the term would have indicated someone living in a sort of haven or hideout for an exclusive elite, namely *computer geeks* - in recent times, *being digital* has become the ontological condition, the sine qua non of existence for anyone living within the realm of the network society³: *who is in* is in a more advantageous (or powerful) position than *who is out*⁴.

While, overall, *being digital* highlights a new condition of power, the true nature of this *power* still seems rather unclear. In the following pages of this paper, I shall try to describe how the concept of power evolves within the context of the rising Network Society. Put it simply, in a highly advanced technological society, the problem is to understand - regardless of the political system in place, be it democratic or not - whether or not power becomes more accessible and political activism possible. In other words, is resistance *thinkable in action* within (and because of) the Network? Or shall we argue that the entire bulk of new communication technologies have no democratic effect over society as a whole, and that they simply reinforce pre-existing patterns of domination?

It is my opinion that to find the answer to those questions we must look closer at the technological revolution that in the last decade has spurred a radical transformation in the concepts and matrix of government and governance worldwide. The meaning of this radical transformation is encapsulated in a hyphenated, highly debated, and already very popular word: e-government. That hyphen can itself either be seen in a positive light - at least from a neo-liberal perspective - as the symbolic link between the past and the future of government institutions, or in a negative one, as simply the mark of an impossible hybrid.

² More specifically, within the context of this paper, with the term 'nodes' I am not simply referring to the machines physically connected to the network, but more precisely to the subjects that are granted access to the whole network through those machines.

³ Nicholas Negroponte, founding chairman of MIT's Media Laboratory, in his 1995 best selling book, *Being Digital*, remarked that digital technology is a natural force that can change people's lives for ever. In his book, Negroponte speaks of a world where every sphere of the social realm becomes more and more interwoven with digital technologies, and he sees in "the empowering nature of being digital" the key element for creating a world of unprecedented opportunities. (Negroponte, 1995: 230-231)

⁴ "If you are outside the network," Manuel Castells remarked in an interview with *Wired Magazine*, "you don't even exist". In fact, more precisely, those who are left out inhabit what Castells calls the black holes of informational capitalism. With the term "black holes" Castells refers to those "areas of social exclusion" whose role within the system is rather marginal. They are good neither as producers nor as consumers; they are so worthless that "in fact, if they would disappear, the logic of the overall system would improve". (Castells, 1998)

Technically speaking, *e-Government* or *electronic government* is often simply defined as the use of information technology's unique characteristics⁵ in matters of governance to enhance and provide a better, more sophisticated, fast and smooth delivery of service to citizens and businesses (US General Accounting Office, 2002: 4; United Nations, 2003: 1; Graafland-Essers and Ettedgui, 2003: 5). However, on a larger scale, rooted in a long-standing neo-liberal tradition of technological determinism (Gore, 1994; Gates, 1995; Negroponte, 1995;), e-Government is perceived - or advertised - not only as an opportunity for governments worldwide drastically to cut the cost of bureaucracy, and increase its efficiency, but is also regarded as an invaluable *tool* for bridging the gap between citizens and the executive and legislative powers. One of the pillars of the ongoing process of reinventing and enhancing democracy in the 21st century is represented by the difficult goal of re-establishing contact - that is to say trust and dialogue - between the state and its citizens; within that context, e-government is understood as the key step in achieving such a goal⁶.

However, contrary to what most of the official reports focus on, the concept of e-Government does not only signify *efficiency gains* and *economical benefits* - for both the government and its subjects. More distinctively, it underpins the changing and thickening relation between government and power in the age of the Internet, which, in my opinion, is the most striking, yet complex element embedded in this transformation.

In this paper, I argue that, potentially, the e-government revolution carries with it two different outcomes. On the one hand, in the long run, the overall e-government project, broadly understood as a product of the neo-liberal discourse of technology and the contemporary development of pan-capitalism⁷, could represent a greater and long-lasting threat to citizens' life and freedom. On the other hand, taking advantage of the peculiar structure of the network society, it could be an unrepeatable opportunity to find a suitable answer for an old, yet unanswered question: can human beings find durable ways to seize, balance and control power?

⁵ According to Helen Margetts, Professor of Society and the Internet at the Oxford Internet Institute, the most important characteristics of Information Technologies are 1) '[t]he ability to store huge amounts of information'; 2 'the ability to transfer that information within and across organisational units and thereby link them up'; and 3) 'the ability to perform complex calculations on that information.' (Margetts, 2003)

⁶ In fact, as some scholars remark, the marriage of government with Information Technologies will allow the government not only to do "things that [it] has always done differently [but also to do] new things that it did not do before" (Margetts, 2003: 13). In the long run, it might bring with it a rich dowry of "multiple [positive] consequences for different aspects of Democracy", for example "strengthening transparency by publishing official information about regulations, policies and procedures [...]" or "[...] stimulating civic activism through public consultation or providing opportunities for citizens to cast an electronic ballot." (Norris, 2003a: 3)

⁷ "Contemporary neoliberalism is the pan-capitalist theory and practice of explicitly technologized, or "telematic", societies [...] principally concerned with legitimating the political and cultural control of individuals, groups, and new social movements through the material and ideological production, promotion, distribution, and consumption of self-styled "virtual" technologies like virtual reality [...] and cyberspace" (Armitage J. 1999)

In short, my argument here is that within the wide milieu of a highly advanced technological society, whose backbone is represented by a 24/7 online network of nodes exchanging an unlimited quantity of data, the means of holding and using power are radically altered as relations change between those who use power and those who are affected by that power. Therefore, using a *three faces framework*, I will demonstrate that e-government is not simply the technical enhancement of a government's ordinary business, a multiple stage process to achieve the highest quality of service delivery. Instead, from the perspective of power and the network society, it is something more complex than that: once the final stage of this long process is reached, that is to say once the *virtual government* - as I call this stage - is fully operational, we will end up dealing with a more sophisticated - if not an entirely brand-new - political creature. A *creature* with three different faces, that is to say three different ways of relating itself with power. To make it clear at the outset, these three faces - one could say *modi* - must be regarded as ideal typical situations of power relations within the framework of a network society, whereas in reality it is often easier to find intricate hybrids of these three types of ideal. Moreover, the relation between e-government and its subject is to be seen both as a broad clarifying example of how power relations change and evolve within the context of the network society and, at the same time, it must be taken as a *hint* of the extraordinary effects that the development of such relation might have on the complex mechanisms of democratic and non-democratic states.

In the first part of this paper, giving a broad overview on how the passage to e-government is understood and/or advertised, I describe its political perspective and expectations: promises, hopes and problems. In the second part, I illustrate what I refer to as the three faces of government in the age of the Internet. In sum, 1) the first face is the one that sees *e-Government* as *Service Provider*. In this section, I analyze the passage from the old bureaucratic state to a new form of virtual government, which, as a fully digitalized, flexible, truly reliable and accessible *service provider*, creates a more friendly relationship between the government and its *subjects*. My argument is that, by doing so, Governments are, in reality, and in a seemingly inoffensive way, laying down the foundations for a new environment and a new mechanism of securing the *compliance of willing subjects*. To clarify at the outset, I am not here stating that *that* is the hidden agenda of governments worldwide starting the digitalization of their operations. Nonetheless, pointing out with Steven Lukes that "the exercise of power does not require being *intelligent* and *intentional*" (2005: 136 - *emphasis added*), it is my opinion that the *unexpected* outcomes of such a revolution can potentially shape that kind of control society (Deleuze, 1992). 2) The second face is the one that considers *e-Government* as the quintessential *Digital Big Brother*. In this section, I will argue that the *e-government revolution* reinforces a state's power over its subjects by providing the government with better tools of surveillance. In other words, the Internet is seen as a strong amplifier of already existing patterns of

authoritarian power. To depict this, I will focus my attention on the case of the People's Republic of China. 3) The third face is the one that sees *e-Government* as *One-among-Many*. To be more precise, the global network that serves as the infrastructure for the e-government project is owned by no one. Within this context, a government is just one of the many users - by no means the owner - of that infrastructure. Being part of such a network spawns what I call a *condition of shared weakness* among its users. Focusing my attention on the work of political activist groups (such as *DynaWeb*, and *Reporters without Borders*) fighting against China's authoritarian policy, I will show that this *condition of shared weakness* can eventually undermine a government's power by making it vulnerable to intrusion and more open to accountability.

1. e-Government from a political perspective

1.1. What is e-government?

After more than a decade of trials and errors, it has already become clear that the passage from Government to e-Government, from the old well-known unsatisfactory bureaucratic service provider to the brand-new perfect form of *seamless government*, cannot simply be reduced to a matter of numbers and statistics regarding computers penetration rates and Internet usage. Indeed it is not just a matter of putting a website online (Pardo, 2000) and/or enabling an online tax payment system (United Nations, 2002). It is a long-term project, an extraordinary financial investment, that, rooted in a set of core principles⁸ widely shared by many e-government projects around the world - regardless of their geographical, economical, or political background - requires, first of all, *a strong political will and commitment* - especially from political leaders - in order to efficiently deal with the sometimes "disruptive change" that such transformation carries with it. It needs the will and commitment to persist "when benefits take time to emerge, to respond when things go wrong, and to establish visions and plans for the future" (OECD, 2003: 3). Furthermore, a successful e-government project crucially requires what the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) calls *common frameworks* among government agencies. In fact, agencies must work together in cooperation "to ensure interoperability, maximise implementation efficiency and avoid duplication" (OECD, *ibid.*). All in all, it is a rather complex and compelling process that involves many interconnected - often overlapping - development stages: for example at the social, political, economical, and educational level. The whole e-government

⁸ Namely, that an e-government project must be: 1) Citizen-centred, thus to increase citizens' satisfaction, services must be build around citizens' choices; 2) Result-oriented, that is to say it must produce measurable and tangible improvements for citizens; 3) Market-based, that is actively promoting innovation; Furthermore it must: 4) Make government and its services more accessible; 5) Facilitate social inclusion; 6) Provide information responsibly; 7) Use government resources effectively and efficiently. (Office of the President of the United States, 2003; OEDC, 2003a.)

process of transformation can be summarised using a five-stage model⁹: 1) *Basic Electronic Commitment*: rudimentary governmental websites with essential information and documents (i.e. description of its work, duties and services). 2) *Increased online presence*: more dynamic and functional websites with regularly updated news, contacts (few) and inter-agency web links easily available; forms and official documents or legislations can be downloaded and printed. 3) *Interactive Government*: the agencies' websites boost their interaction with citizens, providing extensive email contact lists, tailored news feeds, specialised and customizable search engines and databases; forms and requests can be submitted online. 4) *Transactional Government*: website is a single entry portal, which functions as a gateway to each and every government agency website, front and back office are fully linked, the intranet is the indispensable backbone for the daily working routine of government staff; yet, during this stage, agencies are not *interoperational*, that is to say that they do not communicate with each other. 5) *Virtual Government*: all agencies and services, information, and transactions are available online and channelled through a single entry point portal¹⁰. At any time and from anywhere in the network, citizens can log on and initiate a process of full interaction with the government as a whole: the government in its entire multipart complex structure is *virtually* one click away. Through this virtual *seamless government* (UN, 2002: 10), the intricate, hidden and often incomprehensible chaotic net, that for citizens was once a synonym for governmental bureaucracy, becomes ordered, a synonym for accessibility.

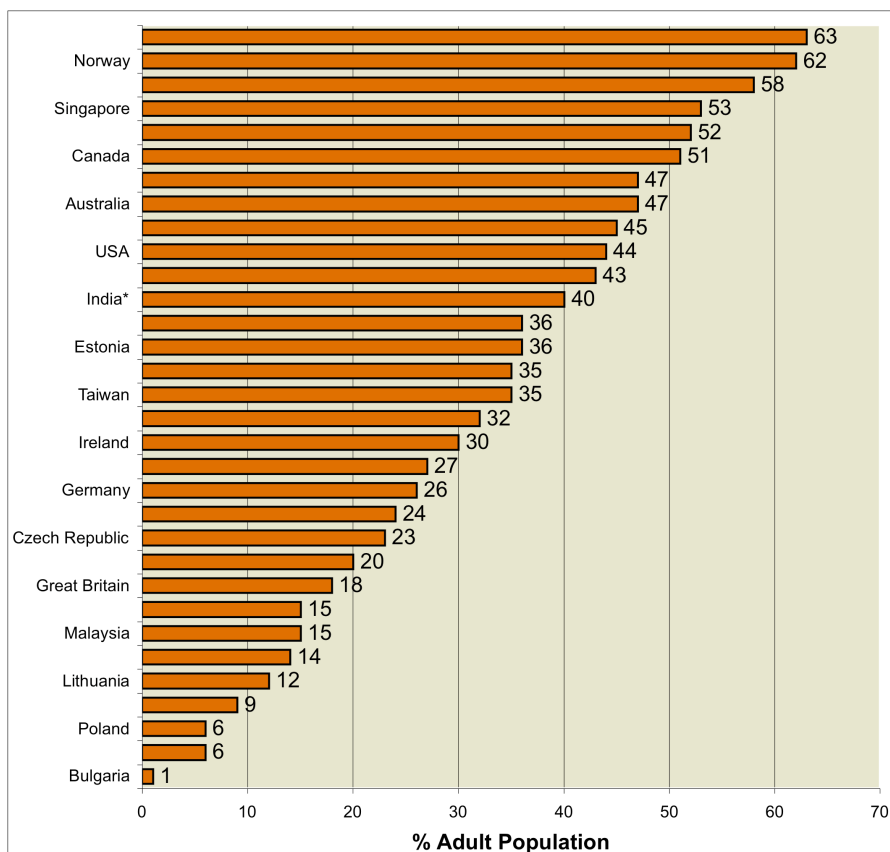
1.2. The state of things: political promises, hopes and problems

Government websites are already "the most important public face of the Internet" (Norris, 2003: 115), and yet no administration has achieved the final stage of *virtual government*. According to figures published by Taylor Nelson Sofres (TNS), by the end of 2003, on average, only 30% of the worldwide adult population had used online government services (see table below¹¹)

⁹ This model is drawn from several authoritative sources: Deloitte Research, 2000: 21-4; United Nations 2002: 10; UK National Audit Office, 2002: 11; World Bank, 2002: 3-5.

¹⁰ According to some reports, only for a few countries does this stage represent an achievable - although yet futuristic - ultimate goal; for the majority of governments worldwide it is rather a mere chimera (UN Report, 2002: 20-21).

¹¹ Source: Taylor Nelson Sofres (2003) - Government Online Study 2003, see <http://www.tns-global.com>



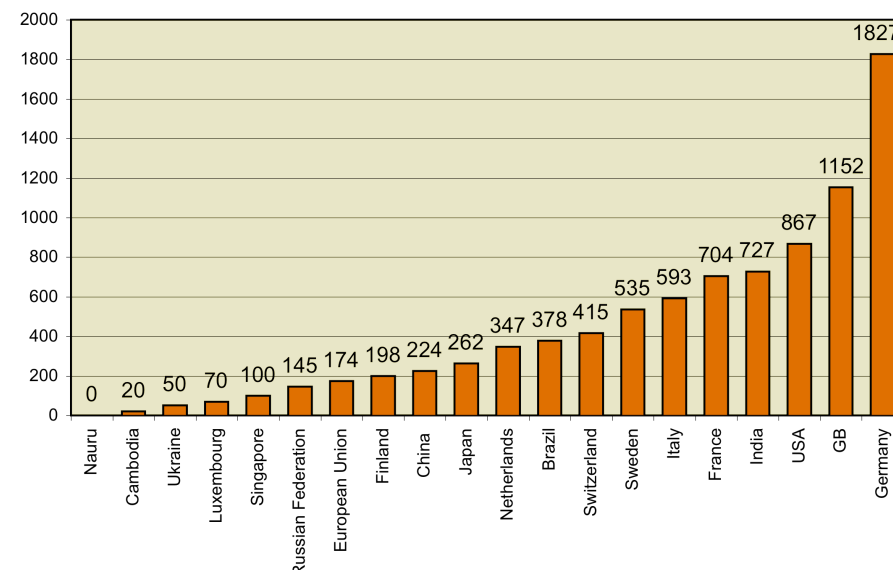
Percentage of population using Government Online services in 2003

In the TNS report, the top of the list is occupied by the Nordic countries, especially Denmark (63%) and Norway (62%), closely followed by Singapore (53%) and Canada (51%). The US, Germany, the UK, and all the other major industrialized countries are instead well below the threshold of 50% usage.

What these figures underline is “the long way even the most committed and determined governments have [yet] to go in reforming services and delivering them online” (Moran, 2004: 6). Nevertheless, many in the public and private sector firmly believe that the final target is not that far away, and it is only a matter of time before this radical transformation reaches its definitive apex, most likely in the near future.

In the United Kingdom, for instance, Prime Minister Tony Blair announced in 2000 that *all Government services* delivered to citizens and businesses will be available electronically by the end of 2005¹². On a larger scale, in 2002, during the Seville European Council (21/22 June), and in accordance with the *Lisbon strategy’s* main goal (March 2000) “to make the European Union the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy with improved employment and social cohesion by 2010” (Lisbon European Council: 2000)¹³, the European Commission set out the target that by 2004 all Member States’ e-government projects should be at least at stage 3, that of *interactive government*, ensuring “that basic public services are interactive, where relevant, and accessible for all” (Communication from the Commission to the Council, 2002: 11-12).

Beyond this political neo-liberal rhetoric, there is no certainty about meeting these targets; however, figures clearly show that e-Government has become a widespread phenomenon (see table below¹⁴).



Number of government websites per country

¹² In that occasion, Mr. Blair remarked that “[t]he whole shape of our economy will be changed by this new technology, that’s why UK Online is so vital” (BBC, 2000)

¹³ In precise terms, as described by the Information Society Directorate-General of the European Commission, the Lisbon Strategy, laid down in March 2000, is primarily thought to help the acceleration of Europe’s transition ‘to a competitive and dynamic knowledge economy capable of sustainable growth, with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion. This requires the wider adoption and broader availability of [Information Society Technologies] applications and services in the public and private sectors, and in society as a whole. Information Society Technologies allow easier and more efficient knowledge creation, sharing and exploitation.’ (Information Society Directorate-General of the European Commission, 2003:11)

¹⁴ The graph is a sample of the 232 countries surveyed by Governments on the WWW (2002)

The numbers of countries worldwide initiating a project of e-government has rapidly increased: in 2001 there were a total of 179 countries involved in e-government projects at different levels, generating an overall total of 14,484 government websites (Norris, 2003: 117)¹⁵, in 2002 the number of countries had increased to 232, while the website count had reached 17,929 (Governments on the WWW: 2002).

These figures certainly provide substantial evidence that e-Government is one of the major priorities on the agenda of many countries, yet scepticism often arises from e-Government talks: the unjustified hopes spurred by the emperor's new clothes could easily prove themselves to be a hoax (United Nations, 2003: 101). As we have just entered the digital age, stats and evaluations criteria are often based on fragile hypotheses and on not entirely reliable sources. On this matter, Pippa Norris correctly remarks that "the rhetorical promises for the revolutionary powers of new technologies to reinvent government are often exaggerated by industry-sponsored reports seeking to market commercial products to the public sector" (2003a: 9). Based on the facts, the truth is that in the next decades, information technology might equally turn out to be a precious resource for the democratic enhancement of society or the black hole of public budgets¹⁶.

Nevertheless, if on the one hand it seems unquestionably true that the complex process of the digitalization of governments plays a key role in creating new applications and ways of interaction between public service providers and citizens (European Union, 2003), on the other hand, considering the whole process within the wider framework of the network society, what seems to me remarkable it is not the strong relationship between economy and information technology, which seems quite clear, but, in greater depth, what is in need of clarification is the yet unfathomable hidden nature of the creature produced by the union between technology and society. We need to shed precise light on the long-term effects produced by the link between the government and the network. The burning question is not simply to find out *Who gets what, when, and how?* That question should be rephrased, and the verb *get* exchanged with the verb *control*. In my opinion, the answer to the question *Who gets what, when, and how?* depends on the answer to the question, *Who controls what, when, and how?*

¹⁵ Norris' data are drawn from the statistics reported by Governments on the WWW (2002); however her data only go up to the year 2001.

¹⁶ From a historical and economic perspective, the last fifty years - which is to say since the first mainframe computer became part of the machinery of government - are "littered with disasters" (Margetts, 2003: 14). Helen Margetts reminds us that in the past decades a series of "projects that have run over time, [and] over budget" (2003: 14) have wasted millions of pounds of public funds and have at the end produced nothing but disappointing results. With particular reference to the UK Government experience, among the many examples, one may quote the 2002 "£50 million and 6 months over budget" project for the £200 million computer system of the Child Support Agency and the disastrous ICL Pathway (now Fujitsu Services) project that "aimed to create a Windows NT-based network to automate retail sales at 19,000 Post Offices and to create a system to authenticate benefits claimants using swipe cards". The ICL project was instead cancelled in May 1999, and the Post Office was left with no choice but to pay out of its budget the sum of £800m pounds to buy the retail network (Computing, 1999).

To answer such a question in the following pages, I will approach the problem from three different perspectives. I will describe what I call the three faces of government in the age of the Internet. By doing so, I argue that although it is in fact a clear attempt to take full control of the network by governments worldwide, this attempt is never (and will never be) fully successful. To unfold my argument I will refer to Michel Foucault's, Max Weber's, and Hannah Arendt's notions of power. It is my opinion that these three different notions of power have crucial characteristics that can help us outline both the philosophy of control (through governmentality or through a polity of authority) which hides behind the digital restyling of a government's activities, and the philosophy of resistance to power that is fostered by the understanding of the peculiar and complex structure of the network society.

2. The Three Faces of Government in the Age of the Internet

2.1. e-Government as a Service Provider

The modern conceptualizations of power relations and state structures have been strongly influenced by the work of the German sociologist Max Weber. For Weber, domination in modern states is *bureaucratic*. That is to say, in the words of Hannah Arendt, that domination rests upon the fact of being 'the rule of an intricate system of bureaus in which no men, neither one nor the best, neither the few nor the many, can be held responsible, and which could be properly called *rule by Nobody*' (Arendt, 1969: 38 - *emphasis added*). To be more precise, for Weber, administrative functions in modern states are organized according to a set of fixed principles: jurisdictional areas are regulated by "laws and administrative rules"; official duties and activities are "distributed in a fixed way" as it is the authority officials are given to "discharge duties"; officers' selection is based on skills and qualifications criteria required by the appointment. Bureaus are organized hierarchically from top to bottom. The office's administration and procedures are strictly regulated by "written documents ('the files'), which are preserved in their original or draught form. There is, therefore, a staff of subaltern officials and scribes of all sorts. The body of officials actively engaged in a *public* office, along with the respective apparatus of material implements and the files, make up a *bureau*. In private enterprise, *the bureau* is often called *the office*." (Weber, 1991: 196-7, *emphasis added*).

Within the five stage process I earlier described as the path to e-government, the last stage, the one I called *virtual government*, marks the ultimate passage from an organizational milieu based on the complex bureaucracy described by Weber - now regarded as *passé* - to a new mechanism structured around a more flexible and automated virtuality¹⁷. Within the technological framework of *virtual*

¹⁷ Yet, to be precise, one must remark that virtual government is by no means the end or the death of bureaucracy. In fact, in many ways, the new environment is rather similar and often more complicated than the old one. Broadly speaking, information technologies do not wipe out bureaucracy tout court - neither in

bureaucracies, on the one hand, important decisions are still taken at the top of the hierarchy, agencies still play a fundamental role in the management of a country, and *jurisdictional areas* are still strictly regulated (Lipnack and Stams, 1994). On the other hand, coordination and interaction between agencies, allocation of duties, supervision and control *mechanisms* change radically. For example, most of the duties concerned with control and monitoring, together with data processing and cross-checking procedures, are automated and carried out in a faster and more reliable way; in the long term they may be instantaneous. The “files” are in electronic form, easy to transmit, share and maintain¹⁸. Overall, Information Technology applied to governments’ business improves officialdom by making the system faster and by significantly diminishing the number of its historical, embedded flaws. *Nuisances* such as slowness and bad quality of service, chaos and inefficiency, with which bureaucracy is often identified - at least from a user’s perspective - are reduced to a minimum or completely overcome (Fountain, *op. cit.*: 56; 62-63).

This last aspect - *the reduction of nuisances* - is, in my opinion, one of the most important features to spring out of the whole process of the electronic reorganization of government administration. In fact, embedded within it there is an element of openness and reliability, together with *something else*. Whereas in Weber’s ideal typical model of bureaucracy is entrenched an element of secrecy and exclusion¹⁹, the virtual government is rather the opposite: at first glance, one has the impression that the whole anti-bureaucratic restyling is guided by what I call the *government will to please its customers*, that is to say to reach the goal of becoming the impeccable *service provider*.

“One of the greatest problems for anyone who has dealings with government,” writes Rachel Silcock, “is its sheer complexity. The average government has between 50 and 70 different departments and agencies. Even for relatively simple matters like registering the birth of a child, a number of different agencies may be involved, requiring a multitude of different forms. Rather than being prepared to communicate with each other, they expect users to communicate with each of them in turn” (Silcock, 2001: 89). It is at the stage of *Virtual Government* that *nuisance* is set to become history, a laughable and primitive aspect of the past: in the US President’s Management Agenda, published in July 2001, it is clearly stated that the e-government project “is designed to make better use of information technology [...] investments to eliminate billions of dollars of wasteful federal

the private, nor in the public sector - as often advertised by politicians and scholars while promoting innovation in government, but rather they have settled within it: to be clear, the original hierarchical and composite structure of decision-making which, according to Weber, was the only and indispensable mode of rationalization of modern states complexity, is still in place, but it has grown thinner (Fountain, 2001: 49).

¹⁸ For a fuller and more comprehensive comparison between the Weberian and Virtual Bureaucracies see Fountain, 2001, chapters 4 and 5, and for a schematic comparison see pp. 60-63.

¹⁹ ‘Every bureaucracy,’ remarked Weber, ‘seeks to increase the superiority of the professionally informed by keeping their knowledge and intention secret. Bureaucratic administration always tends to be an administration of secret sessions: in so far as it can, it hides its knowledge and action from criticism.’ (Weber, 1991: 233)

spending, reduce government’s paperwork burden on citizens and businesses, *and improve government response time to citizens - from weeks down to minutes*. A key goal is for citizens to be able to access government services and information within *three “clicks”* when using the Internet” (Office of the President of the United States, 2003: 7 - *emphasis added*).

Undoubtedly, it is hard to imagine how one could dare to complain about this kind of government: a government that satisfies its *subjects’* request *within minutes* must be every citizen’s dream. Nonetheless it is my opinion that, in assessing the e-government project, simply concentrating on the promises of the increased quality of service delivery would be rather short-sighted. In fact, if on the one hand the digitalization of government apparently creates the perfect service provider, on the other hand, empowered by the network, it reinforces the government’s control over its subjects. While gathering valuable data concerning its users through its websites, officially for quality services purposes, the government accumulates in its database unique priceless knowledge on the lives of its subjects. This knowledge, coupled with the powerful technology that serves the process, is a unique means to help shape a new social environment where everybody is easily accessible and controllable.

To comprehend this new environment we must rely on Michel Foucault’s notion of Governmentality (1991). It is my opinion that the long-term project of virtual government is something more than just better and faster service delivery: it represents the contemporary architecture of a new *strategy of power*.

With the term *governmentality*, Foucault indicates the complex tactics, procedures and apparatuses that attempt to control and influence the conduct of individuals by using truth, knowledge, and political economy rather than violence: in other words, the art of governing by fostering willing compliance in subjects rather than achieving legitimacy through brute force. Governmentality is an invisible and stronger albeit decentralised form of power that induces people to comply with subjugation from within themselves. Within the context of governmentality, complying, apparently, becomes voluntary; in fact, individuals believe themselves to be free and act upon their will, whereas, in reality, they are responding accordingly to a series of inputs or guidelines coming from a governing power, that is to say from one of the many institutions that form society as a whole: family, state, prison, school, health system (Foucault, 1991: 102-3).

This new social environment, where people are always online, or actively wired, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, where everything and everyone, networked through computers, becomes *available*, therefore *accessible*, is the perfect realm for a new form of digital governmentality. In fact, while our daily involvement with government becomes increasingly technology-dependent, slowly the government, originally a feared Leviathan, (apparently) reinvents itself as a trusted servant whose only goal is to improve the quality of its customers’ lives. While being offered unprecedented opportunities to choose from a wide array of

impressive and new efficient digital government services, citizens are governmentalized, they learn to comply with the requests and the soft *diktats* of the new environment. They are giving up their right to privacy: they give out data and allow the government to retain these data because they have learned - especially from their experience as consumers of goods - that this is perfectly normal.²⁰ In fact, they are unaware subjects of a power that, as Steven Lukes remarks, is indeed “at its most effective when it is least observable” (Lukes, 2005: 1). Within such an environment, as subjects always connected to the system, they are always controllable. They become data shared on a computer; their *position* and *identity* is always known (Deleuze, 1992). To make things clear, in this new environment the government - in its whole complexity of multiple agencies and agents - is not merely granted the permission, that is the power, to ask any citizen at any given moment of any given day questions such as, *Who are you? Where are you? What are you doing?* But, more dangerously, it has the power (which is to say the means) to know the answers to those questions in advance, regardless of the citizen’s will to share this kind of knowledge (Fountain, 2001)²¹. That is why, from this point of view, *e-government* understood as a *perfect service provider* becomes the winning strategy for holding power.

2.2. e-Government as Digital Big Brother

Max Weber defines power (*Match*) as “the probability that an actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests” (1947: 152). That *actor* can be a individual, or a number of individuals seeking “to realize their own will in communal action” (1991b: 180). Its power is the result not simply of its economic condition - as wrongly claimed by Marx - but in greater depth it is rooted in the social order that actor is part of. A perfect *instrument* of power is the *State*, which Weber defines as “a human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory” (1946: 78). In other words, “the state is the sole source of the ‘right’ to use violence” (*ibidem*).

Although in any given power relation the threat of violence is often the ultimate resource to discipline individuals and retain power, it is important to understand that to maintain and protect power governments can usually rely on other and more sophisticated techniques.

In the seventies, through his study of disciplinary power - considered the trademark of modern societies since the early nineteenth century - Michel Foucault (1995) drew scholars’ attention to the mechanisms and means that help

²⁰ In the private sector it has already happened. Using online services, making payment, sharing personal data is already part of our daily *modus operandi*.

²¹ Furthermore one must remark that, with this form of control, ‘even those without access to the Internet and the web are likely to be monitored by them: databases used in law enforcement, welfare, and other entitlement programs collect and integrate information about citizens.’ (Fountain, 2001: 205)

in the disciplining of individuals. In fact, disciplinary power aims to produce an army of *docile people* whose role is to strengthen the social system and to help it run effortlessly (Foucault, 1980). In the institution of the prison, especially in Jeremy Bentham’s 1791 innovative model of the penitentiary called *Panopticon*²² (Bentham, 1995), Foucault saw the “architectural figure” of disciplinary society.

In Bentham’s project, the Panopticon (or Inspection House) is a circular building, where the prisoners are accommodated in cells located in the circumference. The inspector instead lives in a cabin positioned at the centre of the building. Between the *inspector’s lodge* and the prisoners’ cells there is a vacant space. By reorganizing the space of detention - and to a certain extent that of living - the Panopticon’ structural design makes continuous control possible: it allows the inspector “to see constantly and to recognize immediately” (Foucault, 1995:200). Inside the Panopticon, *visibility* becomes a trap²³. At the highest and perverted apex of this system of surveillance, the inspector’s lodge might theoretically be empty, and yet the inmates would feel controlled. Overall, the Panopticon spawns a form of power whose “actual exercise [is] unnecessary” (*idem*: 201)²⁴.

Since the proliferation of the Internet in the mid-nineties, privacy concerns have increased exponentially. Cyberspace has often been equated to Bentham’s penitentiary, or to a new, digital version of George Orwell’s Big Brother, capable of seeing and controlling everything and everyone. This rather dystopian vision has rightly generated fear and distrust of the web. Recently, the thickening bonds between authorities and Internet companies and the development of the net for political control have given new foundations to those fears. The rapidly evolving situation in China not only shows, as recently observed by Isabel Hilton on *openDemocracy* (2005), that those fears rest upon solid ground, it also provides a remarkably clear picture of what I call the second face of government in the age of the Internet: *e-Government as Digital Big Brother*.

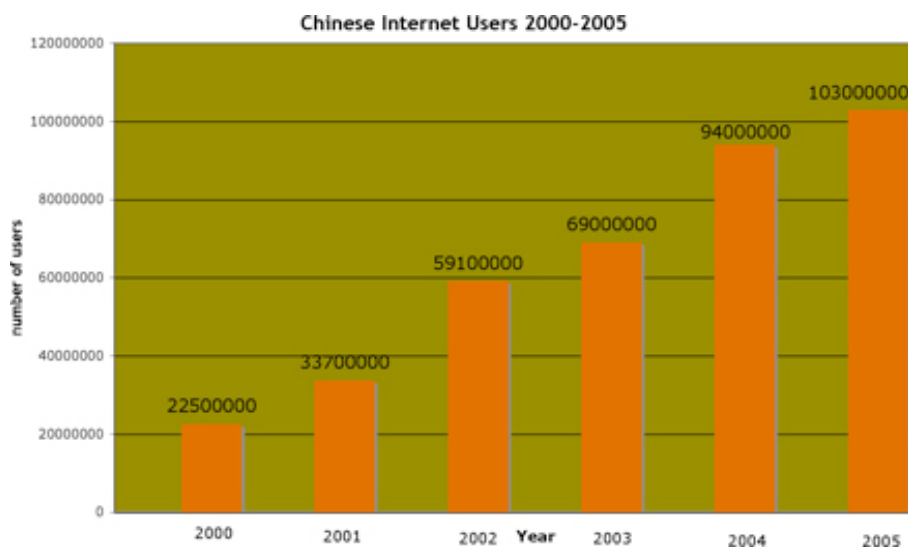
2.2.1. The case of China

With an estimated number of total users that in 2005 has crossed the threshold of 100 million (BBC, 2005), and notwithstanding the assumption that these numbers will continue to rise rapidly, China has already become a dominant presence in the Internet world, second only to the United States of America (see graph below).

²² *Panopticon* is from ancient Greek *pan optikos*, literally: *all-seeing*

²³ In fact, of the three fundamental functions that defined a prison (to enclose, to deprive of light, to hide) the last two do not any longer exist within the Panopticon, with only the first one (to enclose) preserved (*ibid.*). “Full lighting,” comments Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, “and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected.” (1995:200)

²⁴ It is here important to remark that the prisoners’ awareness of being in a status of permanent surveillance, although “discontinuous in its action,” according to Foucault, “assures the automatic functioning of power.” (1995:200)



Source: China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC)

Overall, the impressive growth of the Chinese Internet is rooted in a long-term, state-driven project aiming, with the help of information technology, for the complete renewal of the economy and bureaucracy. It is also a clear attempt to give the government of Beijing a better infrastructure for controlling the administrative processes of both near and distant provinces (Kalathil and Boas, 2001; Cartledge, and Lovelock, 1999). But the harnessing of information technology, and especially the Internet, represents more for the party leadership than a simple economic booster. The web has become an important medium for propaganda and censorship, a powerful ally that helps the party to gain greater and steadier support from the Chinese people. Websites such as www.xinhuanet.com (the governmental news agency), and www.chinadaily.com.cn (the online version of China Daily), which serve millions of users every day, are perfect examples of how the Chinese authorities use the net for propaganda purposes: the content of these websites is entirely controlled by the Communist Party (Reporters Without Borders, 2004).

However, according to Kalathil and Boas (*op. cit.*), for the Chinese government, rising user figures mean “even greater challenges in balancing economic potential and political control”. To defend itself from the democratic and dangerous effects of the Internet - namely openness and uncensored information - China has been developing a complex system of electronic surveillance called the *Golden Shield*. The system is intended to be a state of the art online database combined with a

unique and complex surveillance network that incorporates the whole realm of digital technology, from speech and face recognition, to credit card records, CCTV, as well as advanced Internet filtering technologies (Walton, 2001).

Although the Golden Shield is still a work in progress, the government can already count on an estimated force of 40,000 agents allocated to its notorious Internet police, and with the task of patrolling and polishing the web, day and night. The Chinese Government seems to have acquired the power to control, oversee, and filter information flow running over the entire communications network.²⁵

In September 2002, Chinese Internet users had their first taste of this control: for a whole week access to the Google search engine was blocked entirely (Guardian, 2002). As a direct result of the government’s new policy and increased efforts to censor the Internet, free, anonymous proxy servers that help users to break through the national firewall have now an average lifespan of just 30 minutes.

As only a small percentage of the Chinese has a private connection to the Internet at home, Internet cafés have been at the centre of the Internet revolution, and therefore they have become one of the favourite targets of government repression²⁶. Recently, the censorship belt on the Internet cafés has tightened. Swipe cards, for example, have been linked to users’ ID Cards. “One café manager,” wrote Paul Mooney of the International Herald Tribune, “showed me a back room where a police-linked computer, connected to four spy cameras, monitored users” (*op. cit.*).

In the past decade many real, or often simply suspected, dissidents have been caught in the web of the Internet police. Their crimes, some of which carry the death penalty, range from circulating emails with alleged top secret information to posting messages on web forums that criticise Beijing’s policy, from viewing forbidden websites to using the web to advocate the need for a more open and democratic society.

In short, the Internet boom is increasingly transforming China into a digital version of Orwell’s Big Brother.

2.2.2. The Price of the Chinese cake

In recent years, the fast growth of its Internet market - and of its overall economy in general²⁷ - has turned China into the new promised land for most Internet

²⁵ To be precise, by network I am referring here to the whole bulk of digital communication media, therefore not simply to the Internet, which is still at a low rate of penetration, but also mobile telephones. ‘Mobile phone usage’ for instance ‘is also on the rise, gaining about 60 million new users each year. There are now 358 million mobile phone users in China and it makes up 44.6% of China’s telecom business.’ (BBC, 2005)

²⁶ On 15th November 2002, the Government issued a law that made cybercafés’ owners accountable for their customers’ web traffic (Reporters Without Borders, 2003). If owners do not comply with the party’s directives and any of their customers breaks through the firewall, they risk losing their whole business.

²⁷ In a recent survey, the OECD announced that with the current pace of its economic growth (at 9% yearly) China could by 2010 become the largest exporter in the world and overtake the US and Germany. (OECD, 2005; OECD, 2005a)

giants. Companies such as Yahoo!, Google, MSN, and eBay are rapidly increasing their presence in the Chinese market: Yahoo is reported already to have spent more than \$1 billion; Google - with a \$7 billion bag full of cash from its 2005 summer sale of stock - is not willing to leave the whole of the Chinese cake up for grabs for its rivals. Meg Whitman, the CEO of the world's leading Internet auction company, eBay, said to Business Week: "Whoever wins China, will win the world" (Einhorn, 2005).

For watchdog organizations such as Reporters Without Borders, this poses the worrying question of how far those companies will go in complying with Beijing for the benefit of their investments (2005b). Last year, the case of Mr. Shi Tao, a journalist of the daily Dangdai Shang Bao (Contemporary Trade News) in Hong Kong, surely set a frightening precedent.

With the compliance of Yahoo! Holdings, which provided the indispensable information²⁸, Mr. Shi was sentenced to ten years in prison when he was found guilty of spreading censored material through the Internet. The alleged top-secret material was a message from the Beijing government warning journalists of the "risks resulting from the return of certain dissidents on the 15th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre" (Reporters Without Borders, 2005b). In other words, it was a request for every journalist to keep a low-key tone - if not remain totally silent - on the topic of Tiananmen.

More recently, a well known Chinese blogger, Zhao Jing, has seen his blog shut down and removed from Microsoft web-hosting service MSN Space. Zhao Jing was guilty of openly discussing on his blog the strike of 100 journalists from of the Beijing News. The strike was in response to the unfair dismissal of the newspaper's top editor. In an interview with the New York Times, Mr. Zhao protested against Microsoft's decision to delete his blog without even a warning. "I didn't even say I supported the strike," he said. "This action by Microsoft infringed upon my freedom of speech. They even deleted my blog and gave me no chance to back up my files without any warning" (Barboza and Zeller Jr., 2006).

The latest addition to the growing list of Western-based companies to follow Beijing's diktats in order to safeguard their business is the eBay-owned Internet Telephony service company Skype, which use the revolutionary technology of Voice over Internet Protocol to allow its reported six millions users worldwide to call landline numbers using their Internet connection at incredibly competitive rates. Actively seeking to expand its lucrative business in mainland China, Skype has partnered with TOM Online, a leading Beijing-based mobile Internet company. To avoid any trouble with the Government, as reported by Business Week (Elgin and Einhorn, 2006), despite some early rather mild resistance, the company has

²⁸ The Internet Company provided to the Chinese prosecutors the account details of the email address (huoyan-1989@yahoo.com.cn) responsible for posting the forbidden information on a foreign website, and the IP address linked to both that email account and Shi Tao's computer. Without such helpful compliance from Yahoo, it would have been impossible for the Chinese government to convict Shi Tao (Reporters Without Borders, 2005b)

now agreed to censor forbidden phrases from its users' telephone conversations. In other words, Skype's users in China will not be allowed to hear or utter phrases such as "Falun Gong" and "Dalai Lama". As in television with bad language, those kinds of words or phrases will presumably be bleeped out.

For many commentators, these recurrent cases of compliant censorship represent the rising price Western companies are learning (and willing) to pay to increase their portion of the highly desirable Chinese cake (Ginsberg, 2005).

2.2.3. Cracks in the system

Given certain conditions - namely threats and authoritarian regimes - we might be tempted to conclude that the Internet is nothing but a strong amplifier of pre-existing patterns of domination that has turned government in an even more powerful digital Big Brother. Corroborating evidence comes from the censorship regimes of other authoritarian governments such as Burma (OpenNet Initiative, 2005). From this standpoint, the network can be seen as a new infrastructure of power, rather than the handmaiden of a more democratic future.

Yet, upon more careful examination, the reality appears to be rather different. As Hannah Arendt remarked in her 1969 essay *On Violence*, when a government starts losing control, this is the proof that legitimacy (people's support) has vanished (1969: 87). An outburst of violence or an attempt (even a successful one) further to tighten the web of censorship signals a crack in the structure of power. The eleven commandments for the *perfect Internet user* announced at the end of 2005 "with a fanfare by the official media" might be one of these cracks in the fortress of power of the government of Beijing²⁹. There is nothing really new in those rules, commented Reporters Without Borders: "[they] are certainly more intended to frighten Internet-users than to codify the use of the Net." However, the watchdog organization added, "[t]hese moves to filter the Internet are a sign that the Internet frightens those in power, in particular during a period of ever greater social unrest. It's noticeable that the only new elements in the text relate to banning the calling of strikes or gatherings through the Net" (2005).

Reporters Without Borders has certainly stressed an important point. In fact, overall, while geographical boundaries grow thinner and fade, the growing number of Internet users, the sheer complexity of the global network, the intrusion of

²⁹ There are 11 golden rules (commandments) that guide the users for the appropriate use of the web without incurring any felony: 1) violates the basic principles of the Chinese constitution; 2) endangers national security, leaks national secrets, seeks to overthrow the government, endangers the unification of the country; 3) destroys the country's reputation and benefits; 4) arouses national feelings of hatred, racism, and endangers racial unification; 5) violates national policies on religion, promotes the propaganda of sects and superstition; 6) diffuses rumours, endangers public order and creates social uncertainty; 7) diffuses information that is pornographic, violent, terrorist or linked to gambling; 8) libels or harms people's reputation, violates people's legal rights; 9) includes illegal information bounded by law and administrative rules; 10) It is forbidden to encourage illegal gatherings, strikes, etc. to create public disorder. 11) It is forbidden to organise activities under illegal social associations or organizations. (Report Without Borders, 2005)

external actors and the development of new software and technology all pose a major threat to the future of any digital Big Brother.

The true problem, however, is to understand how to multiply the quantity of those *cracks* in the systems.

2.3.e-Government as One Among Many and the condition of shared weakness

As a network of networks, the Internet is highly resilient to any attempt of control; in fact, within the network, no one is ever in a condition of entire superiority towards the others. This is what I refer to as the *condition of shared weakness*. This condition produces what I call an *essentially flawed power relation* among the network' users. To be clear, any network user - that is to say not only an individual but also a State - is *only and always one among many*, a part and not the totality of the network. And therefore any power relation taking place within it is always unstable, essentially flawed, because no one can ever gain a position of absolute power. Within a condition of shared weakness two actors involved in an ideal or typical power relation situation continuously exchange roles, or, better, are *power holders* and *power subjects*, both at the same time.

The condition of shared weakness is not simply a normative category, but in greater depth is a descriptive type of a new form of power based upon weakness rather than strength. In short, this form of power can be seen as the reverse of Max Weber's classical formula. For Weber, power is what in a social relation gives an actor *A* the strength to make another actor *B* do something regardless of *B*'s will or *B*'s resistance. *A* is in a condition of absolute strength (power) in relation to *B*. *B* becomes powerless (weak) because *B* is conscious of the strength of *A*.

In a network society this relation is reversed: power is rooted not in strength but in weakness. Power springs from the consciousness of the weakness of the position of *A*: the understanding that *A* is not in a position of absolute power, that is to say of absolute control of the networks, gives *B* the possibility of carrying out his own will, not *despite A's will*, but because of *A's weakness*. In other words, within such a context resistance becomes possible because *A is never* in a position "to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests" (Weber, 1947: 152).

In order to clarify the importance of *the condition of shared weakness* as a descriptive type of a new form of power based upon weakness rather than strength, let me describe some examples of political activism through the web. For reasons of space and convenience, I will here focus only on the example of China, but it is important to note that a similar discourse can be applied to both developing and developed countries, both to the west and to the east of the world.

2.3.1. Political Activism: Davids vs. Goliath

In the case of the single-party state of the People's Republic of China we clearly see the strong will of a government trying to exploit the Internet as a system of total control and censorship. However, that network itself becomes a system - an unprecedented opportunity - for breaking through control.

In fact, the Chinese government's strong policy of protecting its network from external intrusion, by using firewalls and e-police to patrol it, coupled with the growing compliance of IT companies, still cannot cope with the increased volume of Internet traffic (Walton, *op. cit.*) and with the interference of external actors.

Thanks to groundbreaking software such as Ultrareach Internet's *Roaming without Borders*³⁰ - easily available even on the Chinese Internet - and proxy networks such as DynaWeb³¹ that allow users to bypass government censorship and to have secure and full access to the world wide web, China's great firewall has started losing strength. It has become hackable. For instance, with the help of *Roaming Without Borders*, millions of emails are delivered unfiltered to users in censored areas. Moreover, since 2002, when DynaWeb started operating as a free web portal for Chinese users, each day more than 20,000 unique web surfers have gained regular, unblocked access to the Internet.

Reporters Without Borders recently published a handbook for bloggers in countries with heavy censorship such as China. In it, they point out that "bloggers are often the only real journalists in countries where the mainstream media is censored or under pressure". The idea behind the handbook was to give them "handy tips and technical advice on how to remain anonymous and to get round censorship, by choosing the most suitable method for each situation" (2005a).

These advanced technologies let new forms of political activism find ways to swim through the net of Chinese censorship. "I can get any information I want," a political dissident told the International Herald Tribune, smiling broadly. "A few months ago, he said, he was unable to access sensitive sites, relying on foreign friends to give him news about China" (Mooney, *op. it.*).

The work of UltraReach Internet, DynaWeb, and Reporters Without Borders represents only a fraction of the support available to political activism on the Internet.

Taken one by one, these efforts could pessimistically be seen as a no-contest battle between the mighty force of the Chinese state and a microscopic, insignificant resistance. But if placed within the context of a growing network

³⁰ *Roaming without Borders* is a technology created by a company called UltraReach Internet whose mission is "providing technologies and service for people to exchange information on Internet freely and safely", which is immune to the national Internet censorship in China. (See <http://www.ultrareach.com>)

³¹ Launched on March 12, 2002, DynaWeb is a proxy network that fights Internet censorship in China by providing users with full free access to the Internet. DynaWeb functions as an information web portal that continuously changes IP address and escapes the meshes of China's censorship, allowing users to navigate through it to all other websites. Website: <http://www.dit-inc.us>

society, the perspective radically changes. One might finally see in the web a new battlefield where a giant Goliath faces a rising army of brave and bold Davids. The outcome of such a battle is everything but certain.

3. Conclusion

In this paper I have shown that the technological revolution of the last decade has significantly altered the balance between government and subjects. The transformation of government in e-government is not simply a means to increase efficiency and economic gains; it is also an element of power. Therefore, it can be approached from three different perspectives, three descriptive *modi* relating to power: 1) as a new form of governmentality attempting to create a favourable environment where, behind the benevolent façade of the perfect service provider, it hides a subtle system of control; 2) As a quintessential Big Brother of the Internet age, where the technology serves as a strong amplifier of pre-existing patterns of domination, it gives the State extra power *to see everything and control everybody*; 3) lastly, the e-government revolution can be seen as carrying within it the seeds of the future of democracy. In fact, embedded within it, there is an element of weakness that in the long term can produce a series of cracks in the existing structure of domination, that is to say a better balance among the agents actively involved in the political process.

In conclusion, as a vade-mecum for political activists in the age of the Internet for the battles to come, I would like to remember Hanna Arendt's notion of power. In fact, it is her theory of the power of a public acting in concert that I have in mind when addressing what I called the third face of e-government.

Briefly, Hannah Arendt defines power as 'the human ability not just to act but to act in concert' (1969: 44). She also remarked that although power springs up whenever men act together, it 'vanishes the moment they disperse' (Arendt, 1958: 200). It is *that* original action of *getting together* that legitimises it as *power*. We should remember that, for Arendt, the true *human condition* is defined by the *vita activa*. To live a *vita activa*, to act (and to speak) is specifically human: 'action is the exclusive prerogative of man; neither a beast nor a god is capable of it, and only action is entirely dependent upon the constant presence of others' (Arendt, 1958: 22-23). To act indicates the ability to begin something *unexpected* 'from whatever may have happened before [...] unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings and in all origins' (*ibidem*: 177-8).

Some of Arendt's philosophical cornerstones - her constant and strict distinction between the public and the private realm, and her recurring remarking of proximity as a *sine qua non* for generating power, together with the idea of the city as the perfect locus for *acting in concert* - would probably crack under the overwhelming pressure of the intricate reality made of *bits* and *bricks* in which we move nowadays. They would become limitations; they would not fit well with the essence of a network society, namely a place, or society, without physical

boundaries, where proximity is *non-essential* for action, a place where the private is continuously blurred with the public.

With the third face of power, I try to overcome these limitations by adding to Arendt's notion of power the notion of *a shared weakness among the subjects of a network*. Moreover, within the context of the network, action is not fleeting but constant. In fact, in the *network society* individuals act in concert but can never disperse, for physical nearness is no longer relevant and their public realm has become the network.

Being part of the network society has its price: everyone must pay it. That price is a lack of total control; it carries with it an embedded condition of weakness or openness to attack. In fact this rule applies even to a government - regardless of its powerful army and notorious e-police. Once it has fully entered the network it becomes one among many; in other words, a user of the network which is exposed or hackable. This condition of weakness or openness to attack is the most important characteristic of the technological revolution of the last decade, and it represents the growing strength and the future of political activism.

It is surely an expensive price to pay for any authoritarian regime, but indeed a welcome fee for the many supporters of democracy worldwide.

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