Vulnerabilities of the State and the New World Information and Communication Order

Since the 1970s there has been talk of the increased vulnerability of the State due to the use of new information technologies. Many types of actual or potential vulnerabilities have been identified, and national policies are increasingly developed in direct response.

It is also since the 1970s that the State has returned to the centre of political science attention, a shift stimulated by visible changes in nation-states and the realisation conviction that existing theories were inadequate in today’s environment. A review of the literature leads to the conclusion that there is no ‘ideal’ form, but many different types of nation-states, distinguishable along dimensions that include level and type of dependency and of informatisation as well as of industrialisation, ideology, economic structure and political form.

Recent State-making activity across the new Europe and elsewhere, as well as theoretical developments, have multiplied available theories and models of the State. Since policy-makers work from assumptions about the nature of the State, the type of State envisioned and experienced is critical. For those with development concerns and proponents of the New World Information Order, this is particularly pertinent. As Carnoy noted in The State and Political Theory in 1984: ‘These differences among and between broad groupings of State theory . . . are the basis for understanding different political-economic strategies for social change and control in advanced capitalist societies and the Third World. Theories of the State are therefore theories of politics,’ (pp.4-5).

Niklas Luhmann, a German political theorist who views States from the perspective of systems theory, reminds us that conceptualisations of the State play a role in policy-making by expanding or clarifying values, goals, and processes.

In this article, characteristics of the State in today’s environment, along with their vulnerabilities, are explored, focusing on the impact of State vulnerabilities on New World Information Order-type issues.

Characteristics of the State
Four characteristics of the contemporary State differentiate it from the State of the past. These intertwined characteristics create the environment in which the State is said to be vulnerable:

• Both the form of today’s State and the ways in which it can exercise power are extremely complex. Organisational complexity refers to the growing size and elaboration of bureaucratic structures. Administrative agencies multiply procedures, collect and process information, and manage information flows. What may seem on the surface to be a dispersal may actually be a re-routing of power through paths not obvious on the surface or through traditional lenses. Growth of bureaucratic structures contributes to a rise in the autonomy of the State vis-à-vis civil society. More complex organisational forms than ever before are both possible and emerging. One result is additional dependence of the State on the transnational corporations that build, manage, and maintain the infrastructure and provide services.

• Domestically, society is more deeply penetrated by the State in all areas of life than ever before. Beginning with the rise of the welfare State in the 1930s, collection of information has become increasingly intimate (now including blood samples and urine) and ubiquitous (college students use their social security numbers to buy hamburgers and computer time). Cross-matching of computerised databases developed by different agencies removes veils of secrecy just as much as the use of electronic surveillance equipment destroys the cover of the jungle for Central American guerrillas. Among the vulnerabilities here are destruction of the morale and moral atmosphere of society, and of relations between the State and civil society.

• In turn, the State itself is highly penetrated by both State and non-State entities in the international environment. Transnational corporations have been better able than nation-states to take advantage of new information technologies; as a result, they have been evolving as organisational forms and growing in power vis-à-vis the State. Other States and now regional blocs must also be taken into account, as well as international movements. The role of the private sector should not be underestimated; it was a private not-for-profit environmental organisation, the US-based Natural Resources Defence Council, which was responsible for joining with Soviets acting as private citizens to set up the first mutual seismic monitoring programme for nuclear testing. The effects of such penetration are felt directly within the economy, media content, etc. and indirectly, by influence on decisions and decision-making processes.

• There is a wider range of State experiences, conceptualisations, and theories available than before. New and successful forms of the State, e.g. Singapore, have been emerging, expanding the range of positive models. Some traditional forms are showing themselves newly successful, as for example the fundamentalist Islamic model. Experimentation continues as numerous States around the world go through renewed self-determination processes. Some former concepts have fallen by the way because they had little descriptive or predictive utility, and some because the processes they once accurately described have themselves changed. Models of the State that view it as static, or in equilibrium, are of little use in an environment in which there clearly is no equilibrium and processes are so dynamic that they verge on chaotic. At the same time, theoretical and empirical developments in other fields – in some cases, such as in chaos theory, introducing radically new paradigms – have become available. New models, therefore, are being developed.

Vulnerabilities of the State
There are several different ways of categorising these various types of vulnerabilities: as lost capacity, as inability
to exercise a form of power, and as loci of vulnerability. Each is briefly discussed here.

Vulnerabilities as lost capacity. A traditional way of viewing forms of State power is in terms of State capacity, meaning resources, managerial skill, infrastructure and political will required to implement any policy successfully. Each of these may respond differently to the use of new information technologies. What is a loss of resources for one country may be a gain for another, though the transaction isn’t necessarily zero-sum.

Vulnerability as inability to exercise a form of power. Lukes categorises power into three types. Instrumental power is the direct exercise of force, as in the use of weapons. Examples of types of instrumental power of the State that may be said to be vulnerable because of the use of new information technologies includes the obsolescing of weapons, strategies, and even borders; the vulnerability of the telecommunications and computer network; and surveillance. The gap between developed and developing nations is quite wide here.

Lukes’ structural power refers to those forces that shape social, political, economic and cultural interactions and, to some degree, developments by shaping the range of choices and information flows available. Digitising of government records offers federal agencies new forms of structural power. By claiming that open records laws and the Freedom of Information Act refer only to paper records, keeping much data solely in electronic form, and designing software that makes access more difficult restricts citizen access to the information required for the informed decision-making of a participatory democracy. This can be perceived as a vulnerability of the State.

What Lukes calls consensual power refers to the ability to so affect the fundamental worldview and perceptions of people that certain questions never even arise. The US commitment to the free flow of information is commonly offered as an example of the exercise of consensual power. A State is made vulnerable when, for example, national controls over broadcast content are made irrelevant through reception of trans-border satellite broadcasts.

Loci of vulnerability. A third way of categorising the types of vulnerabilities of the State that derive from the use of new information technologies is to look at what aspects of State activity are affected. There are six loci of vulnerability: infrastructure, information, culture, the State apparatus, non-state entities, and the international environment.

Infrastructure vulnerabilities grow as the global telecommunications network and the services offered grow in ubiquity, complexity, intelligence, and capacity. This affects the State apparatus – but all other players as well. At the same time, it increases the dependence of all players on the transnational corporations that build, maintain, and manage the infrastructure, the services offered through it, and the equipment the user can plug into.

Information vulnerabilities refer to the content of information collection and processing efforts, and of information flows ranging from intra-corporate exchanges of files to broadcast television to the education system. The vast increase in quantity affects the exposure and survival rate of any particular content. Diversity is potential universally broadened as access to other cultures and to production capabilities becomes more universal, and capacity continues to expand. Problems of authentication of digitised information and ease of alteration or falsification are critical vulnerabilities that have only tentatively begun to be addressed by the law.

Cultural vulnerabilities appear in various examples above. Cultures that differ ontologically and epistemologically from the dominant culture in which particular organisational forms originated may find participation in elaborate State bureaucracies in and of itself a cultural attack. The growth in the size, number, and intrusiveness of bureaucracies also challenges the nature of society, endangering traditional culture. The question of cultural integrity is further complicated by the non-homogeneity of cultural groupings with political boundaries. As cultural sensitivities rise, the State’s vulnerability does as well.

State apparatus vulnerabilities include potential weaknesses of the organisational structure of the government. It also includes the inability to implement laws meaningfully; in the realm of information policy this can range from lack of funds to support universal education in computer programming in grade schools to lack of control over the flows of money over national borders and the uses and effects of its use while within national borders. Global 24-hour markets permit organisations to keep money moving in a way that minimises tax and other types of costs on its gain and use, to the detriment of national tax bases and fiscal and economic policies. Transnational corporations lack commitment to non-economic goals of nation-states; thus denial of economic benefits to the State for activities carried out within its borders, involving its citizens, or using its resources can be made without concern for loss of jobs, or impact on social welfare system of defence budget.

There are numerous significant non-State entities in addition to transnational corporations. Churches, for example, maintain their power while aware of tensions between national and ecumenical visions. International movements – often issues oriented – increasingly have an impact. Peacenet, a computer service which permits private persons interested in public issues all over the world to communicate by computer network quite cheaply, is growing at the rate of 10% a month.

The growth of importance of the international arena has actually led some to argue that the ‘constitutional locus’ – the centre of constitutional, or State-making, activity – should be moved from the nation-state level to the international. It has been noted that the penetration of international forces into national environments reduces the ability of national governments to effectively exercise their sovereignty domestically, which can be seen in the financial and cross-border broadcasting examples above. Some go so far as to argue that there is no longer any meaningful difference between national and international policy making.

Vulnerabilities and the New World Information Order

The vulnerabilities of the State contribute to changes in the international environment that have several consequences for New World Information Order-type concerns, including determining which among many contending decision-making arenas will be the most critical, multiplying the number of players, and shifting the grounds of argument.

Today, for example, key New World Information Order-type issues are being debated in the international trade arena, within the context of discussion about inclusion of trade in services (international information flows) under the General Agreement of Tariffs and Trade (GATT), a post-1945 multilateral arrangement regulating the international flow of physical goods. Developing country arguments must be crafted differently for this environment than they were for Unesco in terms of operational definitions, value hierarchies, and modes of argument. Since resolution of issues within the trade arena is likely to set a precedent for treatment of other global information policy issues, adapting is critical.

There are also new decision-making arenas, such as the realm of confidence- and security-building measures. Over the last few years, arms control agreements have come to comprise 85-95% of measures mandating specific types of information collection, processing, flows, and use rather than weapons and military activities themselves. Many of these information policy tools, here used to serve foreign policy and defence goals, rely upon the use of sophisticated new information technologies. Agreements have to date been largely regional, but there is much discussion of the need for a global system, that could perhaps concurrently serve environmental needs.

It is important that developing countries, and those concerned with New World Information Order-type issues, become involved in planning for such a global system at an early stage. They should seek to ensure sensitivity to particular needs of developing countries throughout the system’s planning, with particular attention to ensuring truly universal access to the information gathered as well as to decision-making processes concerning its collection,
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Communication and the State in the Middle East

The discourse on the nation-state in the Western industrialised world deals almost exclusively with the evolution of a particular kind of State that had its origin and development in Western Europe over the past 200 years in predominantly Christian and capitalist countries. In the Islamic countries of the Middle East, the conception of the State, however, historically offers a radically different version of the relationship of governing bodies to society. Over the last 14 centuries the notion of the State in an Islamic context has undergone the process of articulating its unique identity in the contemporary world. The division of different geographical, linguistic, and nationalities in this part of the world into a modern nation-state system has created a unique picture and a cultural ecology which now requires close scrutiny. This article explores the conception of the State and communication as practised in Islamic countries of the Middle East with an emphasis upon features that distinguish the Islamic State from the common conception of the State.

The relationship between communication and the nation-state has been an uneasy one in the Islamic countries of the Middle East for the modern State system has played a major role in only two distinct directions: (1) the institutions of communication and especially modern technologies have been used to promote 'modernisation' and development as the State sees fit; (2) communication also has been utilised indiscriminately to preserve and legitimise the State entity and authority over the community at large. Thus, a process of contradiction and the crisis of legitimacy have been engulphed within the region and within these countries, especially in the sphere of communication and the State.

These contradictions and in some cases paradoxes are a result of a number of historical, philosophical, and cultural factors, both internal and external to the region. To understand the relationships between communication and the State in Islamic countries of the Middle East, one needs briefly to consider the following historical dimensions:

- the concept of the State in Islam and its relations to ummah (Islamic community);
- the concept of communication and its meaning as it is perceived by the community at large;
- the development of the nation-state system in the Islamic countries of the region;
- the impact of the West and colonialism;
- the Islamic reform movements in contemporary history;

In many current analyses, great confusion arises from the failure to make a distinction between a nation-state and an Islamic State.

It should be emphasised that while the nation-state is a political State, the Islamic State is a muttahi or religio-political, 'God fearing' State. The foundation of the Islamic State is based on the Quran, the sunnah (tradition), and shari'ah (Islamic canonical Law). Whereas in a secular nation-state system the sovereignty rests in the people, in an Islamic order the sovereignty of the State rests in God and not in thrones, individuals, or other groups of people.

Where the State does not acknowledge the sovereignty of God, religion becomes a private affair for the citizens. In Islam, religion is not a private affair, it is a public affair. The spiritual and temporal powers are not separated but are united. When Islam appeared as a world power in the seventh century AD, the concepts of the nation and State as we know them today did not exist.

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