

# Technology: Challenges for democratic institutions & good governance

---

*By Shanker V Rao*

***World population is approximately 6.8 billion***

***There are approximately 5.0 billion mobile phone subscriptions world-wide ITU 2010***

***There were approximately 6.1 trillion text messages sent (SMS) in 2010 ITU 2010***

Parliamentarians have the greatest opportunity in history to make governance more reflective by using technology to effortlessly engage constituents for feedback.

Purpose of this document is to discuss developments with technologies over the recent past that have had a significant influence on society, and examine the impact of developments and challenges presented to democratic institutions and governance.

A close examination of developments that have had an important impact in the recent past exposes the broader domain of communication - technology and services. Approximately 3 decades ago, personal computers started penetrating the consumer market, and 2 decades ago it was the internet followed by mobile phone services. Each one enjoyed a more rapid growth than the previous. Each of these has permeated our lives.

The mobile phone coverage and quality improved significantly in the last 15 years, to a point where today they have become a single point of access to voice, internet, and streaming media. Mobile phones provide access to many other services; those most significant to this discussion are SMS and twitter (short message with 140 characters limit).

***Approximately 200,000 text messages sent every second. ITU 2010***

***Approximately 140 million tweets sent every day. Twitter***

There are noteworthy benefits that can be attributed to the advent of some of these technologies and services. Some of the benefits include the ability to reach rural and remote populations, and provide them with access to information and easier communication with people in other parts of the country and the world.

Recent events in Egypt demonstrate how spontaneous use of new technologies like twitter and other social media helped the people communicate with each other, plan, and organize activities leading to the overthrow of the Government and progress towards a democratic movement. It should be emphasized that such use of technology was, in part, effective because it was neither anticipated nor controlled by the Government.

## Technology: Challenges for democratic institutions & good governance

---

The public nature of usage of SMS, tweets, or other social media technologies can be monitored by many, including Governments to serve one of three major purposes: 1. suppress legitimate public expression; 2. as an effective tool to gather information on disruptive elements to public security; or 3. provide a conduit to communicate with the citizens.

We can see the benefits of communication technologies to legitimate governments and enterprises, but it clearly presents a challenge. The experience in Egypt underlines the need for governments to develop policies and regulations that will establish parameters and guidelines on the monitoring and usage of such technologies for legitimate security purposes, without violating the rights of their citizens to privacy and freedom of expression. It is also important to recognize that in order to ensure that the legitimate rights of citizens are not violated; governments will have to develop protocols that will establish a common set of guidelines for all governments around the world.

Another challenge faced by parliamentarians and managers of good governance where technologies present an opportunity is education. While international rankings declare nations like Canada and USA have literacy levels of 99%, over 20 years ago these nations recognized a serious challenge with adult, as well as functional illiteracy.

***Adult illiteracy in USA & Canada (ability to read at an 8<sup>th</sup> grade level) is over 50%***  
***Functional illiteracy in USA & Canada is over 20%***  
***Costs of illiteracy to society in the USA - reduced productivity, health care, justice system, etc. is over \$240 Billion***

The correlation between illiteracy and health costs, life expectancy, crime, and unemployment to name a few social costs, is well researched and documented. As educators have often noted and articulated, skills that have deteriorated over decades include basic language skills. Some of the contributors to the adult and functional illiteracy rates are loss of skills such as spelling and lowered attention spans. While newer communication services like SMS and twitter may appear to suit people with low levels of literacy, their growth suggests an opportunity to redirect literacy programs and policies to design initiatives that utilize these services to better reach and engage their target audience.

New technologies could become an important tool in public consultation process, especially with regard to passage of legislation. This will enfranchise citizens, engage them in, and provide access to the democratic process with no regard to economic status or literacy level. Such communications provide parliamentarians

## Technology:

### Challenges for democratic institutions & good governance

with a feedback mechanism to rapidly poll exchanges with constituents, and embody their interests better.

This document suggests parliamentarians to aggressively utilize appropriate technologies to communicate with constituents and engage them more in public consultation towards shaping legislation and policies, including literacy and national security, thereby promoting representational governance.