

## Defining “Civil Societies” in the Information Age: Myths and Realities in the West and the Rest

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The primary characteristics of communication have in the last three decades been determined by and (in a very real way) through the international information networks and the global Mass Media. At the dawn of the new millennium, the Internet had been optimistically hailed as “the new frontier” and it indeed brought about radical changes in the cultural life of millions of people in the affluent societies of the West. It has also accelerated political subversions in several developing countries, the recent example being the demonstrations and mass riots in northern Africa and the Middle East during the “Arab Spring”, and thus is closely connected with the emergence of new social movements. However, the rigid hierarchical structures of the world economy remain in place, powerful media moguls and companies control and filter what is newsworthy, and the narrowly defined economic interests of each nation guide its foreign policy and its alliances. In this landscape, is there any social space for local “civil societies” to flourish—and what are its limits? What are the goals that civil societies must set in order to play a substantial role in shaping and sustaining modern democracies? Our presentation seeks to answer these and similar questions, based on the assumption that popularized terms such as “informational network economy” are more myth than reality. Societies cannot be democratized simply through the “transformative” impetus of the Internet, if their social institutions are failing and their legal system is immature, especially if they lack the constitutional tradition for the respect of the rights of ethnic, religious and other minorities. Therefore, the citizen of the West has no reason to be idle and apathetic, because of the certainty that social networking possesses the inherent dynamics to “resolve” grave social problems such as inequality, discrimination, and abuse of power. The Law remains the main vehicle of social change for human societies. This realization should inform and provide the moral framing for the agenda of civil societies.