

The Information Revolution and American Soft Power

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The explosion of information in the last decade has had more of a decentralizing than a centralizing effect on society, says Joseph S. Nye Jr., Don K. Price Professor of Public Policy and Dean of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. In the following article, Nye examines the possible effects of the information revolution on the domestic and foreign policies of governments, in particular the impact on soft power—the power of persuasion through ideas, cultures, and policies. Foreign policy will no longer be the sole province of governments as the centrality and functions of the sovereign state will change and political institutions will need to adapt to this brave new world. Nye concludes that the US has an edge in the current era of globalization but it should be careful not to negate the positive values of its soft power by acting unilaterally or arrogantly.

The world is still at an early stage of the current information revolution, and its effects on economics and politics are uneven. As with steam in the late eighteenth century and electricity in the late nineteenth, productivity growth lagged as society had to learn to fully utilize the new technologies.¹ Social institutions change more slowly than technology. For example, the electric motor was invented in 1881, but it was nearly four decades before Henry Ford pioneered the reorganization of factories to take full advantage of electric power. Computers today account for 2 percent of America's total capital stock, but "add in all the equipment used for gathering, processing and transmitting information, and the total accounts for 12 percent of America's capital stock, exactly the same as the railways at the peak of their development in the late nineteenth century. Three-quarters of all computers are used in the service sector such as finance and health where output is notoriously hard to measure."² The increase in productivity of the US economy began to show up only as recently as the mid-1990s.³

The advent of truly mass communications and broadcasting a century ago, which was facilitated by newly cheap electricity, provides some lessons about possible social and political effects today. It ushered in the age of mass popular culture.⁴ The effects of mass communication and broadcasting, though not the

telephone, tended to have a centralizing political effect. While information was more widespread, it was more centrally influenced even in democratic countries than in the age of the local press. President Roosevelt's use of radio in the 1930s worked a dramatic shift in American politics. These effects were particularly pronounced in countries where they were combined with the rise of totalitarian governments, which were able to suppress competing sources of information. Indeed, some scholars believe that totalitarianism could not have been possible without the mass communications that accompanied the second industrial revolution.⁵

In the middle of the twentieth century, people feared that the computers and communications of the current information revolution would create the central governmental control dramatized in George Orwell's vision of *1984*. Mainframe computers seemed set to enhance central planning and increase the surveillance powers of those at the top of a pyramid of control. Government television would dominate the news. Through central databases, computers can make government identification and surveillance easier, and commercialization has already altered the early libertarian culture and code of the Internet.⁶ Nonetheless, the technology of encryption is evolving, and programs such as Gnutella and Freenet enable users to trade digital information anonymously.⁷ They promise greater space for individuals than the early pessimists envisioned, and the Internet is more difficult for governments to control than the technology of the second information revolution was. On balance, the communication theorist Ithiel de Sola Pool was correct in his characterization of "technologies of freedom."⁸

As computing power has decreased in cost and computers have shrunk in size and become more widely distributed, their decentralizing effects have outweighed their centralizing effects. The Internet creates a system in which power over information is much more widely distributed. Compared with radio, television, and newspapers, controlled by editors and broadcasters, the Internet creates unlimited communication one-to-one (via e-mail), one-to-many (via a personal home page or electronic conference), many-to-one (via electronic broadcast), and, perhaps most important, many-to-many (online chat room). "Internet messages have the capacity to flow farther, faster, and with fewer intermediaries."⁹ Central surveillance is possible, but governments that aspire to control information flows through control of the Internet face high costs and ultimate frustration. Rather than reinforcing centralization and bureaucracy, the new information technologies have tended to foster network organizations, new types of community, and demands for different roles for government.¹⁰

What this means is that foreign policy will not be the sole province of governments. Both individuals and private organizations, here and abroad, will be empowered to play direct roles in world politics. The spread of information will mean that power will be more widely distributed and informal networks will undercut the monopoly of traditional bureaucracy. The speed of Internet time means that all governments, both here and overseas, will have less control of their agendas. Political

leaders will enjoy fewer degrees of freedom before they must respond to events, and then will have to share the stage with more actors. Privatization and public-private partnerships will increase. As the United States shapes its foreign policy in the information age, it will have to avoid being mesmerized by terms such as *unipolarity* or *hegemony* and by measures of strength that compare only the hard power of states run by centralized governments. The old images of sovereign states balancing and bouncing off each other like billiard balls will blind us to the new complexity of world politics.

A new world politics

The effects on central governments of the third industrial revolution are still in their early stages. Management expert Peter Drucker and the futurists Heidi Toffler and Alvin Toffler argue that the information revolution is bringing an end to the hierarchical bureaucratic organizations that typified the age of the first two industrial revolutions.¹¹ In civil societies, as decentralized organizations and virtual communities develop on the Internet, they cut across territorial jurisdictions and develop their own patterns of governance. Internet guru Esther Dyson refers to the “disintermediation of government” and portrays a global society of the connected being overlaid on traditional local geographical communities.¹²

If these prophets are right, the result would be a new cyber-feudalism, with overlapping communities and jurisdictions laying claims to multiple layers of citizens’ identities and loyalties. In short, these transformations suggest the reversal of the modern centralized state that has dominated world politics for the past three and a half centuries. A medieval European might have owed equal loyalty to a local lord, a duke, a king, and the Pope. A future European might owe loyalty to Brittany, Paris, and Brussels, as well as to several cyber-communities concerned with religion, work, and various hobbies.

While the system of sovereign states is still the dominant pattern in international relations, one can begin to discern a pattern of crosscutting communities and governance that bears some resemblance to the situation before the Peace of Westphalia formalized the state system in 1648. Transnational contacts across political borders were typical in the feudal era but gradually became constrained by the rise of centralized nation-states. Now sovereignty is changing. Three decades ago, transnational contacts were already growing, but they involved relatively small numbers of élites involved in multinational corporations, scientific groups, and academic institutions.¹³ Now the Internet, because of its low costs, is opening transnational communications to many millions of people.

The issue of sovereignty is hotly contested in American foreign policy today. The sovereigntists, closely allied with the new unilateralists, resist anything that seems to diminish American autonomy.¹⁴ They worry about the political role of the United Nations in limiting the use of force, the economic decisions handed down by the World Trade Organization, and efforts to develop environmental institutions

and treaties. In their eyes, the notion of an international community of opinion is illusory.

Even excluding the fringe groups that believe the United Nations has black helicopters ready to swoop into American territory, the debate over the fate of the sovereign state has been poorly framed. As a former UN official put it, "There is an extraordinarily impoverished mind-set at work here, one that is able to visualize long-term challenges to the system of states only in terms of entities that are institutionally substitutable for the state."¹⁵ A better historical analogy is the development of markets and town life in the early feudal period. Medieval trade fairs were not substitutes for the institutions of feudal authority. They did not tear down the castle walls or remove the local lord, but they did bring new wealth, new coalitions, and new attitudes summarized by the maxim "Town air brings freedom."

Medieval merchants developed the *lex mercatoria*, which governed their relations, largely as a private set of rules for conducting business.¹⁶ Similarly today, a range of individuals and entities, from hackers to large corporations, are developing the code and norms of the Internet partly outside the control of formal political institutions. The development of transnational corporate intranets behind firewalls and encryption "represent private appropriations of a public space."¹⁷ Private systems, such as corporate intranets or worldwide newsgroups devoted to specific issues like the environment, do not frontally challenge the governments of sovereign states; they simply add a layer of relations that sovereign states do not effectively control. Americans will participate in transnational Internet communities without ceasing to be loyal Americans, but their perspectives will be broader than those of typical, loyal Americans before the Internet came into existence.

Or consider the shape of the world economy, in which a nation's strength is usually measured by its imports and exports from other sovereign nations. Such trade flows and balances still matter, but the decisions on what to produce and whether to produce it at home or overseas are increasingly made within the domains of transnational corporations. Some American companies, such as Nike, produce virtually none of their products inside the US, although intangible (and valuable) design and marketing work is completed there. In the 1990s, declining information and telecommunications costs allowed firms to broaden the geographic dispersion of their operations. Thus, imports and exports provide a very incomplete picture of global economic linkages. For example, overseas production by American transnational corporations was more than twice the value of American exports; sales by foreign-owned companies inside the United States were nearly twice the value of imports.¹⁸ Microeconomic links "have created a non-territorial 'region' in the world economy—a decentered yet integrated space-of-flows, operating in real time, which exists alongside the spaces-of-places that we call national economies."¹⁹ If we restrict our images to billiard ball states, we miss this layer of reality.

Even in the age of the Internet, the changing role of political institutions is likely to be a gradual process. After the rise of the territorial state, other successors

to medieval rule such as the Italian city-states and the Hanseatic League persisted as viable alternatives, able to tax and fight for nearly two centuries.²⁰ Today, the Internet rests on servers located in specific nations, and various governments' laws affect access providers. The real issue is not the continued existence of the sovereign state, but how its centrality and functions are being altered. "The reach of the state has increased in some areas but contracted in others. Rulers have recognized that their effective control can be enhanced by walking away from some issues they cannot resolve."²¹ All countries, including the United States, are facing a growing list of problems that are difficult to control within sovereign boundaries—financial flows, drug trade, climate change, AIDS, refugees, terrorism, cultural intrusions—to name a few. Complicating the task of national governance is not the same as undermining sovereignty. Governments adapt. In the process of adaptation, however, they change the meaning of sovereign jurisdiction, control, and the role of private actors.

Take, for example, the problems of controlling US borders. In one year, 475 million people, 125 million vehicles, and 21 million import shipments come into the country at 3700 terminals in 301 ports of entry. It takes five hours to inspect a fully loaded forty-foot shipping container, and more than 5 million enter each year. In addition, more than 2.7 million undocumented immigrants have simply walked or ridden across the Mexican and Canadian borders in recent years. A terrorist could easily slip in, and it is easier to bring in a few pounds of a deadly biological or chemical agent than to smuggle in the tons of illegal heroin and cocaine that arrive annually. The only way for the Customs Service and the Immigration and Naturalization Service to cope with such flows is to reach beyond the national borders through intelligence and cooperation inside the jurisdiction of other states, and to rely on private corporations to develop transparent systems for tracking international commercial flows so that enforcement officials can conduct virtual audits of inbound shipments before they arrive. Thus, customs officers work throughout Latin America to assist businesses in the implementation of security programs that reduce the risk of being exploited by drug smugglers, and cooperative international mechanisms are being developed for policing trade flows.²² The sovereign state adapts, but in doing so it transforms the meaning and exclusivity of governmental jurisdiction. Legal borders do not change, but they blur in practice.

National security—the absence of threat to a country's major values—is changing. Damage done by climate change or imported viruses can be larger in terms of money or lives lost than the effects of some wars. Even if one frames the definition of national security more narrowly, the nature of military security is changing. As the US Commission on National Security in the Twenty-first Century pointed out, the country has not been invaded by foreign armies since 1814, and the military is designed to project force and fight wars far from our shores. But the military is not well equipped to protect us against an attack on our homeland by terrorists wielding weapons of mass destruction or mass disruption or even hijacked

civil aircraft.²³ Thus in July 2001, the secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld, dropped from the Pentagon's planning priorities the ability to fight two major regional conflicts and elevated homeland defense to a higher priority. As the US discovered only a few months later, however, military measures are not a sufficient solution to its vulnerabilities.

Today, attackers may be governments, groups, individuals, or some combination. They may be anonymous and not even come near the country. In 1998, when Washington complained about seven Moscow Internet addresses involved in the theft of Pentagon and NASA secrets, the Russian government replied that phone numbers from which the attacks originated were inoperative. The US had no way of knowing whether the government had been involved or not. More than 30 nations have developed aggressive computer-warfare programs, but as anyone with a computer knows, any individual can also enter the game. With a few keystrokes, an anonymous source anywhere in the world might break into and disrupt the (private) power grids of American cities or the (public) emergency response systems.²⁴ US government firewalls are not enough. Every night American software companies send work electronically to India, where software engineers can work while Americans sleep and send it back the next morning. Someone outside our borders could also embed trapdoors deep in computer code for use at a later date. Nuclear deterrence, border patrols, and stationing troops overseas to shape regional power balances will continue to matter in the information age, but they will not be sufficient to provide national security.

Competing interpretations of sovereignty arise even in the domain of law. Since 1945, human rights provisions have coexisted in the charter of the United Nations alongside provisions that protect the sovereignty of states. Article 2.7 says that nothing shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters within domestic jurisdictions. Yet the development of a global norm of antiracism and repugnance at the South African practice of apartheid led large majorities at the UN to abridge this principle. More recently, the NATO intervention in Kosovo was the subject of hot debate among international lawyers, with some claiming it was illegal because it was not explicitly authorized by the UN Security Council and others arguing that it was legal under the evolving body of international humanitarian law.²⁵ The 1998 detention of General Augusto Pinochet in the United Kingdom in response to a Spanish request for extradition based on human rights violations and crimes committed while he was president of Chile is another example of this complexity. In 2001, a magistrate in Paris tried to summon former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger to testify in a trial related to Chile.

Information technology, particularly the Internet, has eased the tasks of coordination and strengthened the hand of human rights activists, but political leaders, particularly in formerly colonized countries, cling to the protections that legal sovereignty provides against outside interventions. The world is likely to see these two partly contradictory bodies of international law continue to coexist for

years to come, and Americans will have to wrestle with these contradictions as we decide how to promote human rights and when to intervene in conflicts for humanitarian reasons.

For many people, the national state provides a source of political identity that is important to them. People are capable of multiple identities—family, village, ethnic group, religion, nationality, cosmopolitan—and which predominates often depends on the context.²⁶ In many preindustrial countries, subnational identities (tribe or clan) prevail. In some postindustrial countries, including the United States, cosmopolitan identities such as “global citizen” or “custodian of planet Earth” are beginning to emerge. Since large identities (such as nationalism) are not directly experienced, they are “imagined communities” that depend very much on the effects of communication.²⁷ It is still too early to understand the full effects of the Internet, but the shaping of identities can move in contradictory directions at the same time—up to Brussels, down to Brittany, or fixed on Paris—as circumstances dictate.

The result may be greater volatility rather than consistent movement in any one direction. The many-to-many and one-to-many characteristics of the Internet seem “highly conducive to the irreverent, egalitarian, and libertarian character of the cyber-culture.” One effect is “flash movements”—sudden surges of protest—triggered by particular issues or events, such as antiglobalization protests or the sudden rise of the anti-fuel tax coalition that captured European politics in the autumn of 2000.²⁸ Politics becomes more theatrical and aimed at global audiences. The Zapatista rebels in Mexico’s Chiapas state relied less on bullets than on transnational publicity, much of it coordinated on the Internet, to pressure the Mexican government. The political scientist James Rosenau has tried to summarize such trends by inventing a new word, *fragmegration*, to express the idea that both integration toward larger identities and fragmentation into smaller communities can occur at the same time. One does not need to alter the English language to realize that apparently contradictory movements can occur simultaneously. They do not spell the end of the sovereign state, but they do make its politics more volatile and less self-contained within national shells.

Private organizations also increasingly cross national boundaries. Transnational religious organizations opposed to slavery date back to 1775, and the nineteenth century saw the founding of the Socialist International, the Red Cross, peace movements, women’s suffrage organizations, and the International Law Association, among others. Before World War I, there were 176 international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In 1956, they numbered nearly a thousand; in 1970, nearly two thousand. More recently, there has been an explosion in the number of NGOs, increasing to approximately 26,000 during the 1990s alone. Furthermore, the numbers do not tell the full story, because they represent only formally constituted organizations.²⁹ Many claim to act as a “global conscience” representing broad public interests beyond the purview of individual states, or interests that states are wont to ignore. They develop new norms by directly pressing governments and

business leaders to change policies, and indirectly by altering public perceptions of what governments and firms should be doing. In terms of power resources, these new groups rarely possess much hard coercive power, but the information revolution has greatly enhanced their *soft power*—the power of attraction that is associated with ideas, cultures, and policies.

Not only is there a great increase in the number of transnational and governmental contacts, but there has also been a change in type. Earlier transnational flows were heavily controlled by large bureaucratic organizations such as multinational corporations or the Catholic Church that could profit from economies of scale. Such organizations remain important, but the lower costs of communication in the Internet era have opened the field to loosely structured network organizations with little headquarters staff, and even individuals. These nongovernmental organizations and networks are particularly effective in penetrating states without regard to borders. Because they often involve citizens who are well placed in the domestic politics of several countries, they are able to focus the attention of the media and governments on their preferred issues. The treaty banning land mines was the result of an interesting coalition of Internet-based organizations working with middle-power governments, such as Canada, and some individual politicians and celebrities, including the late Princess Diana. Environmental issues are another example. The role of NGOs was important as a channel of communication across delegations in the global warming discussions at Kyoto in 1997. Industry, unions, and NGOs competed in Kyoto for the attention of media from major countries in a transnational struggle over the agenda of world politics. Sometimes, NGOs compete with each other for media attention. The World Economic Forum, an NGO that invites top government and business leaders to Davos, Switzerland, each winter, included some NGOs in its 2001 programs, but that did not prevent other NGOs from staging local demonstrations and yet others from holding a counterforum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, designed to garner global attention.

A different type of transnational community, the scientific community of like-minded experts, is also becoming more prominent. By framing issues such as ozone depletion or global climate change, where scientific information is important, such “epistemic communities” create knowledge and consensus that provide the basis for effective cooperation.³⁰ The Montreal Convention on ozone was in part the product of such work. While not entirely new, these scientific communities have also grown as a result of the lowered costs of communications.

Geographical communities and sovereign states will continue to play a major role in world politics for a long time to come, but they will be less self-contained and more porous. They will have to share the stage with actors who can use information to enhance their soft power and press governments directly, or indirectly by mobilizing their publics. Governments that want to see rapid development will find that they have to give up some of the barriers to information flow that historically protected officials from outside scrutiny. No longer will governments that want

high levels of development be able to afford the comfort of keeping their financial and political situations inside a black box, as Burma and North Korea have done. That form of sovereignty proves too expensive. Even large countries with hard power, such as the US, find themselves sharing the stage with new actors and having more trouble controlling their borders. Cyberspace will not replace geographical space and will not abolish state sovereignty, but like the town markets in feudal times, it will coexist with them and greatly complicate what it means to be a sovereign state or a powerful country. Americans shaping foreign policy in the global information age will have to become more aware of the importance of the ways that the Internet creates new communications, empowers individuals and non-state actors, and increases the role of soft power.

Three dimensions of information

In understanding the relation of information to power in world politics, it helps if one distinguishes three different dimensions of information that are sometimes lumped together.³¹ The first dimension is flows of data such as news or statistics. There has been a tremendous and measurable increase in the amount of information flowing across international borders. The average cost of that information has been declining, and the points of access have been increasing. Declining costs and added points of access help small states and non-state actors. On the other hand, the vast scale of the flows puts a premium on the capacities of editors and systems integrators, which is a benefit to the large and powerful.

A second dimension is information that is used for advantage in competitive situations. With competitive information, the most important effects are often at the margin. In this instance going first matters most, and that usually favors the more powerful. Much competitive information is associated with commerce, but, the effect of information on military power can also be thought of as a subset of competitive information.

The third dimension is strategic information—knowledge of your competitor's game plan. There is nothing new about strategic information. It is as old as espionage. Any country or group can hire spies, and to the extent that commercial technologies and market research provide technical capabilities that were previously available only at the cost of large investment, there is an equalizing effect. But to the extent that large investments in intelligence gathering produce more and better strategic information, the large and powerful will benefit. While it is true that fewer of the interesting intelligence questions in a post-Cold War world are secrets (which can be stolen) than mysteries (to which no one knows the answer), large intelligence collection capabilities still provide important strategic advantages.

One of the most interesting aspects of power in relation to increasing flows of information is the "paradox of plenty."³² A plenitude of information leads to a poverty of attention. When we are overwhelmed with the volume of information confronting us, it is hard to know what to focus on. Attention rather than information

becomes the scarce resource, and those who can distinguish valuable signals from white noise gain power. Editors, filters, and cue givers become more in demand, and this is a source of power for those who can tell us where to focus our attention. Power does not necessarily flow to those who can produce or withhold information. Unlike asymmetrical interdependence in trade, where power goes to those who can afford to hold back or break trade ties, power in information flows goes to those who can edit and authoritatively validate information, sorting out what is both correct and important. Because of its free press, this generally benefits the United States.

Among editors and cue givers, credibility is the crucial resource and an important source of soft power. Reputation becomes even more important than in the past, and political struggles occur over the creation and destruction of credibility. Communities tend to cluster around credible cue givers, and, in turn, perceived credibility tends to reinforce communities. Internet users tend to frequent Web sites that provide information they find both interesting and credible. Governments compete for credibility not only with other governments but with a broad range of alternatives including news media, corporations, NGOs, intergovernmental organizations, and networks of scientific communities.

Thinking counterfactually, Iraq might have found it easier to have won acceptance for its view of the invasion of Kuwait as a postcolonial vindication, analogous to India's 1975 capture of Goa, if CNN had framed the issue from Baghdad rather than from Atlanta (from which Saddam was portrayed as analogous to Hitler in the 1930s). Soft power allowed the United States to frame the issue. Nongovernmental organizations can mount public relations campaigns that impose significant costs and alter the decisions of large corporations, as Greenpeace did in the case of Royal Dutch Shell's disposal of its Brentspar drilling rig. The sequel is equally illustrative, for Greenpeace lost credibility when it later had to admit that some of its factual statements had been inaccurate.

Politics then becomes a contest of competitive credibility. Governments compete with each other and with other organizations to enhance their own credibility and weaken that of their opponents—witness the struggle between Serbia and NATO to frame the interpretation of events in Kosovo in 1999. Reputation has always mattered in world politics, but the role of credibility becomes an even more important power resource because of the deluge of free information and the “paradox of plenty” in an information age. The BBC, for example, was an important soft power resource for the UK in Eastern Europe during the Cold War. Now it (and other government broadcasts) has more competitors, but to the extent that it maintains credibility in an era of white noise, its value as a power resource may increase.

Soft power in the global information age

One implication of the increasing importance of editors and cue givers in this global information age is that the relative importance of soft power—cultural and ideological appeal—will also increase, because soft power rests on credibility.

Countries that are well placed in terms of soft power do better.³³ The countries that are likely to gain soft power in an information age are:

1. Those whose dominant culture and ideas are closer to prevailing global norms (which now emphasize liberalism, pluralism, and autonomy);
2. Those with the most access to multiple channels of communication and thus more influence over how issues are framed; and
3. Those whose credibility is enhanced by their domestic and international performance. These dimensions of power in an information age suggest the growing importance of soft power in the mix of power resources, and a strong advantage to the United States.

Of course, soft power is not brand-new, nor was the US the first government to try to utilize its culture to create soft power. After its defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, the French government sought to repair the nation's shattered prestige by promoting its language and literature through the Alliance Française, created in 1883. "The projection of French culture abroad thus became a significant component of French diplomacy."³⁴ Italy, Germany, and others soon followed suit. The advent of radio in the 1920s led many governments into the area of foreign language broadcasting, and in the 1930s, Nazi Germany perfected the propaganda film. The US government was a latecomer to the idea of using American culture for the purposes of diplomacy. It established a Committee on Public Information during World War I but abolished it with the return of peace. By the late 1930s, the Roosevelt administration became convinced that "America's security depended on its ability to speak to and to win the support of people in other countries." With World War II and the Cold War, the government became more active, with official efforts such as the United States Information Agency, the Voice of America, the Fulbright program, American libraries, lectures, and other programs. But much soft power arises from societal forces outside government control. Even before the Cold War, "American corporate and advertising executives, as well as the heads of Hollywood studios, were selling not only their products but also America's culture and values, the secrets of its success, to the rest of the world."³⁵ Soft power is created partly by governments and partly in spite of them.

A decade ago some observers thought the close collaboration of government and industry in Japan would give it a lead in soft power in the information age. Japan could develop an ability to manipulate perceptions worldwide instantaneously and "destroy those that impede Japanese economic prosperity and cultural acceptance."³⁶ When Matsushita purchased MCA, its president said that movies critical of Japan would not be produced.³⁷ Japanese media tried to break into world markets, and the government-owned NHK network began satellite broadcasts in English. The venture failed, however, as NHK's reports seemed to lag behind those of commercial news organizations, and the network had to rely on CNN and ABC.³⁸

This does not mean that Japan lacks soft power. On the contrary, its pop culture has great appeal to teenagers in Asia.³⁹ But Japan's culture remains much more inward-oriented than that of the United States, and its government's unwillingness to deal frankly with the history of the 1930s undercuts its soft power.

To be sure, there are areas, such as the Middle East, where ambivalence about American culture limits its soft power. All television in the Arab world used to be state-run until tiny Qatar allowed a new station, Al-Jazeera, to broadcast freely, and it proved wildly popular in the Middle East.⁴⁰ Its uncensored images have had a powerful political influence, for example, on American efforts to mediate the Arab-Israeli conflict and the US campaign in Afghanistan. As an Arab journalist described the situation in November 2000, "Al-Jazeera has been for this intifada what CNN was to the Gulf War."⁴¹ Even in Iran, where the government outlawed a video trade it saw as "the means by which America is trying to kill our revolution," pirated videos were widely available, and the ban "has only enhanced the lure of both the best and the worst of Western secular culture."⁴²

There are, of course, tensions even within Western secular culture that limit American soft power. In the mid-1990s, 61 percent of French, 45 percent of Germans, and 32 percent of Italians perceived American culture as a threat to their own. Majorities in Spain, France, Germany, and Italy thought there were too many American-made films and television programs on national TV.⁴³ Both Canada and the European Union place restrictions on the amount of American content that can be shown.

In reality, such attitudes reflect ambivalence rather than rejection. In the 1920s, the Germans were the pacesetters of cinematography, as were the French and the Italians in the 1950s and 1960s. India produces many more films than does Hollywood, but all the distribution channels in the world couldn't turn Indian movies into global blockbusters. In the eyes of German journalist Josef Joffe, the explanation is obvious: "America has the world's most open culture, and therefore the world is most open to it."⁴⁴ Or as a perceptive French critic notes, "Nothing symbolizes more the triumph of American culture than the quintessential art form of the twentieth century: the cinema... This triumph of the individual motivated by compassion or a noble ambition is universal... the message is based on the openness of America and the continuing success of its multicultural society." But he also notes that "the more the French embrace America, the more they resent it."⁴⁵ Or as a Norwegian observed, "American culture is becoming everyone's *second* culture. It doesn't necessarily supplant local traditions, but it does activate a certain cultural bilingualism."⁴⁶ Like many second languages, it is spoken with imperfections and different meanings. The wonder, however, is that it is spoken at all.

Of course, Serbs wearing Levi's and eating at McDonald's not only supported repression in Kosovo, but also used a Hollywood film, *Wag the Dog*, to mock the United States during the war. Child soldiers in Sierra Leone committed atrocities such as lopping off the hands of civilians while wearing American sports team T-

shirts. Nevertheless, as cultural historian Neal Rosendorf has argued, throughout the twentieth century popular culture has made the United States seem to others “exciting, exotic, rich, powerful, trend-setting—the cutting edge of modernity and innovation.”⁴⁷ Despite the vulgarity, sex, and violence, “our pictures and music exalt icons of freedom, celebrating a society conducive to upward mobility, informality, egalitarian irreverence, and vital life-force. This exaltation has its appeals in an age when people want to partake of the good life American style, even if as political citizens, they are aware of the downside for ecology, community, and equality.”⁴⁸ For example, in explaining a new movement toward using lawsuits to assert rights in China, a young Chinese activist explained, “We’ve seen a lot of Hollywood movies—they feature weddings, funerals and going to court. So now we think it’s only natural to go to court a few times in your life.”⁴⁹ At the same time, such images of a liberal society can create a backlash among conservative fundamentalists.

Ambivalence sets limits on popular culture as a source of American soft power, and marketing by US corporations can create both attraction and resistance. As historian Walter LaFeber puts it, transnational corporations “not only change buying habits in a society, but modify the composition of the society itself. For the society that receives it, soft power can have hard effects.”⁵⁰ Protest is often directed at McDonald’s and Coca-Cola. For better or worse, there is not much the US government can do about these negative effects of American cultural exports. Efforts to balance the scene by supporting exports of American high culture—libraries and art exhibits—are at best a useful palliative. Many aspects of soft power are more a by-product of American society than of deliberate government actions, and they may increase or decrease government power. The background attraction (and repulsion) of American popular culture in different regions and among different groups may make it easier or more difficult for American officials to promote their policies. In some cases, such as Iran, American culture may produce rejection (at least for ruling élites); in others, including China, the attraction and rejection among different groups may cancel each other. In still other cases, such as Argentina, American human rights policies that were rejected by the military government of the 1970s produced considerable soft power for the United States two decades later when those who were earlier imprisoned subsequently came to power.

The Argentine example reminds us not to exaggerate the role of popular culture and that soft power is more than just cultural power. Soft power rests on agenda setting as well as attraction, and popular culture is only one aspect of attraction (and not always that). The high cultural ideas that the United States exports in the minds of the half a million foreign students who study every year in American universities, or in the minds of the Asian entrepreneurs who return home after succeeding in Silicon Valley, are more closely related to élites with power. Most of China’s leaders have a son or daughter educated in the United States who portray a realistic view of the US that is often at odds with the caricatures in official Chinese propaganda.

Government polices at home and abroad can enhance or curtail soft power. For example, in the 1950s, racial segregation at home undercut American soft power in Africa, and today, capital punishment and weak gun control laws undercut our soft power in Europe. Similarly, foreign policies strongly affect US soft power. Jimmy Carter's human rights policies are a case in point, but so also are government efforts to promote democracy in the Reagan and Clinton administrations. Conversely, foreign policies that appear arrogant and unilateral in the eyes of others diminish American soft power.

The soft power that is becoming more important in the information age is in part a social and economic by-product rather than solely a result of official government action. NGOs with soft power of their own can complicate and obstruct government efforts to obtain the outcomes it wants, and purveyors of popular culture sometimes hinder government agents in achieving their objectives. But the larger long-term trends are in America's favor. To the extent that official policies at home and abroad are consistent with democracy, human rights, openness, and respect for the opinions of others, the United States will benefit from the trends of this global information age, even though pockets of reaction and fundamentalism will persist and resist in some countries. There is a danger, however, that the US may obscure the deeper message of its values through arrogance and unilateralism. US culture, high and popular, helps produce soft power in an information age, but government actions also matter—not only through programs such as the Voice of America and Fulbright scholarships but, even more important, when American policies avoid arrogance and stand for values that others admire. The trends of the information age are in America's favor, but only if it avoids stepping on its own message.

Notes

- * This article draws upon the book by Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Paradox of American Power: why the world's only superpower can't go it alone* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- 1. Douglass North, *Structure and Change in Economic History* (New York: W. W. Norton), pp. 163–64. See also Paul A. David, “Understanding Digital Technology’s Evolution and the Path of Measured Productivity Growth: Present and Future in the Mirror of the Past,” in Erik Brynjolfsson and Brian Kahin, eds., *Understanding the Digital Economy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 50–92.
- 2. “Productivity: Lost in Cyberspace,” *The Economist*, 13 September 1997, p. 72.
- 3. U.S. Department of Commerce, “Digital Economy 2000,” <<http://www.esa.doc.gov/de2000.pdf>>.
- 4. Peter F. Drucker, “The Next Information Revolution,” *Forbes*, 24 August 1998, pp. 46–58.
- 5. Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (New York: Praeger, 1965). On the other hand, as films, cassettes, and faxes spread, the later technologies of the second information revolution helped to undermine

- governmental efforts at information autarky—witness the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The overall effects were not always democratizing. In some cases, such as Iran, the technologies of the second information revolution merely changed the nature of the autocracy.
6. Lawrence Lessig, *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).
 7. For example, Ian Clarke, the youthful Irish inventor of Freenet, says he is a free-speech absolutist who makes no exception for child pornography or terrorism. “My point of view is not held by most people, but the technology has given me the ability to do what I think is right without having to convince anyone.” “Entertainment Industry Vows to Fight Against Online Piracy,” *Boston Globe*, 31 May 2000, p. 1.
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 9. Pippa Norris, *The Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty and, the Internet Worldwide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 232.
 10. For speculation on how the Internet will affect government, see Elaine Kamarck and Joseph S. Nye Jr., eds., *Democracy.com?* (Hollis, NH: Hollis Publishing, 1999), Chapter 1.
 11. See Alvin Toffler and Heidi Toffler, *Creating a New Civilization: The Politics of the Third Wave* (Kansas City, Mo.: Turner Publishing, 1995); Drucker, “The Next Information Revolution.”
 12. Esther Dyson, *Release 2.1: A Design for Living in the Digital Age* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998).
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28. Norris, *The Digital Divide*, p. 191.
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31. I owe these distinctions to Robert O. Keohane. See Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye Jr., "Power and Interdependence in the Information Age," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 77, No. 5, (September/October 1998), pp. 81–94.
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