To paraphrase John Dewey, Democracy’s sister is Education. He would also have agreed with the statement that law schools, like other schools, have a duty to prepare students for active citizenship and help them achieve what he called self-realization, that is, understanding the world and its connection to the self.

Why did Dewey think that Education is so important in a Democracy? Because Democracy is about making informed choices. While making choices is about having options, Democracy is also about knowing and accepting that others will defend other options. It is about listening to and understanding available options.

Then the question is: will Technology make Democracy better? Some would say yes, and they have empirical data to support their claim. First, distance education is making it possible to share educational resources without geographic constraints (or physical presence requirements). Second, the Internet has shown that it can pierce the shield of censorship. Access by sight-impaired Internet users is another.

Another great democratic empowerment that can be attributed to the Internet is the ability to mobilize. People can be targeted and reached at no cost via email, newsletters, listservs, etc. The sheer size of manifestations in Seattle and Quebec City was in no small part due to the Internet. The Internet is the ultimate democratization of the mass media.

But one should avoid excessive techno-optimism, because technology’s impact on democracy and education is not all positive. Why? Isn’t true that there is no shortage of information out there? Yes, but Education is not just about knowledge and access to information, it is about acquiring a set of tools to analyse and criticize information. It is fair to ask whether, in the end, the Internet will prove to be as beneficial for Education simply because it is such a great source of information.

The Internet suffers from two problems in that regard, in particular in industrialized countries: information overload (there are 20,000 sites dealing with information overload!), and enormous variations in quality and trustworthiness. It is very hard to know which information is reliable. Some information providers benefit from and are able to export their brick-and-mortar credibility to the Internet (e.g., the New York Times online). And some pure Internet plays (ezines) were able to develop a good level of credibility (e.g., Salon.com). But otherwise, information flows are immense and much too big for any human mind.

So we have to resort to filters, portals, search agents and, soon, bots. These filters are not neutral. Some portals (Yahoo! comes to mind) charge for positioning. Others have been
known to tweak results to reflect certain biases (e.g., the Google/MSN controversy). But more importantly, these information agents are user-guided. People subscribe to lists that interest them. They use keyword-activated or other types of filters to receive the data they want. The personalize their start page the same way. This is where the risk lies.

I do not have data on the current “market share” of the generalist media in the information providing “market,” or about its evolution but it seems fair to assume that it is shrinking. And here I am not just talking about the Internet. There are other information channels cannibalizing the mass media: cable and satellite technology allow viewers to watch only what they “prefer,” even if that means watching golf games 24 hours a day.

You will say that he same is true for all information sources, and in part I agree. While traditional mass media may have a certain bias (if one were to compare, say, the Globe and Mail and the National Post), I would call that bias light compared to what certain channels are now offering on cable and satellite television.

Let us take an example at random: The War in Iraq. (Of course the extreme nature of the example may invalidate it to a certain extent, but still). I invite you to compare the coverage of the war on right and left-wing Canadian newspapers, but also in newspapers published in Arab countries and available on the Internet Times, or in Le Monde, or The Guardian. It is not the same war. Remember that we do NOT know what is going on the field. I am not sure the generals themselves know. What we do know, and that which informs our own opinion, is only what we read and see, and that depends on the source to a certain extent.

With the Internet, this phenomenon is greatly amplified. Ten years ago, most people here would not have been made the effort to find foreign newspapers. Now, there is no difference between the Ottawa Citizen and the Straits Times (Singapore) or El Observador (Uruguay).

In this information world, filters govern. If you decide to access your information from sources favorable to war, that is all you will hear. While even the most ideologically inclined mass media generally tend to give at least some space to the opposing views, that is not true of many targeted information vectors on the Internet. Information can now be sold to market segments of one, you. You can see only what you want to see.

Filters prevent us from seeing other viewpoints (or they will be distorted and made fun of). Debate becomes impossible, and democracy, as Dewey defined it, no longer works. Instead, it becomes a war of factions lobbying for power. The “other” is no longer a citizen, a community member. She is absent, the enemy in the dark. This is the world of Kagan.

And this is why Education as Dewey defined it is so crucial. We must strive to maintain and give others the desire to be citizens. To accept and even want to learn more than the...
mere reinforcement of their own point of view. To accept debate, discussion and democratic decisions.

To sum up, technology is a double-edged sword: it greatly increase access to and availability of information, and makes available simple, inexpensive tools to promote cooperation, joint action but also consensus building. But by the same token the overabundance of information makes it harder to know when to rely on information and forces to use information agents and filters, which in turn can produce a tunnel vision effect and replace discussion and debate with tactics to discredit the other.

Technology empowers democracy, but can also threaten its course. It all depends, in the end, on us, whether we as the users of technology decide to use wisely. The question is not whether we are informed, but rather how.