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The Internet and Civil Society

Peter Levine

Civil society is moving to the Internet. All kinds of organizations use Web pages for recruitment, public relations, fundraising, and communication among their members. Citizens get their news from Web pages and deliberate about public affairs via email. Parishioners send electronic condolences to bereaved members of their congregations. Hobbyists exchange advice and treasured objects on specialized Internet sites.

But as civil society moves online, some worrying trends are beginning to emerge. This article examines five main grounds for concern.

Equity

The first (and most widely recognized) reason to worry about the effect of the Internet on civic life is that people cannot use computers effectively unless they have money, skills, and access to high-speed connections. The cost of computing power is decreasing, but at the same time the standard equipment used on the Internet is growing more complicated every day. Consequently, for many the cost of a functional Internet connection remains too expensive. In the U.S., more than half the population is thought to be online, yet income, race, education, and age still predict whether people use computers and computer networks. Problems of access are far worse in poorer countries. According to the United Nations Development Programme, the industrial nations are home to 15% of the global population and 88% of Internet users. In Africa, by contrast, only half of one

percent of the population is online. A quarter of all the world's countries have less than one telephone for every 100 people, which makes widespread Internet access look hopeless in the near run.

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Although the wealthy may find that civil society becomes more exciting and inviting as it exploits the power of computer networks, poorer and less educated people have no alternative but to use old-fashioned, face-to-face, local modes of association. Worse, groups that used to include a broad range of people may adopt the Internet and shed their poorer members.

Ideally, the Internet would allow everyone to become a producer of news, advice, and public opinion—not just a consumer. However, producing Web pages and software is much more expensive than surfing the Web or sending email. These costs might fall as the number of designers grows, software becomes easier to use, and service providers proliferate. As usage soars, however, connections are becoming painfully slow. Today it is impossible to publish complex material with an ordinary computer and dial-up Internet access. Although faster home service is available via cable lines, American cable companies now limit the amount of material that their customers can transmit, choosing to leave their lines free for other users to receive data quickly. In short, companies with millions of customers inevitably take precedence over private citizens with personal Web pages. But if ordinary citizens for the most part download corporate material, rather than create content of their own, then the Internet will begin to look like satellite television instead of a revolutionary, *interactive* medium.

Thin Social Bonds

The Internet has risks even for those who can use it fully. For one thing, it may replace robust, durable, and emotionally satisfying social bonds with superficial and contingent ones. When we communicate using a computer, we can withhold practically all information about ourselves, including our names and locations; we can break off contact at will; we can adopt multiple personalities and identities; and we can shield ourselves from the consequences of what we say. Thus, it is hard to imagine that people will develop strong bonds of trust and mutual obligation if computers become their main means of communication. Communication may be easier than ever, but if we find ourselves in need, there may be no one to turn to.

This is only a guess about the likely effect of the Internet on human relationships. As my colleague William Galston has argued in these pages, speculating about the social impact of the Internet in 2001 is like predicting the effects of television from the perspective of 1952. At that early date, analysts of TV “might have noted how neighbors crowded into a living room to watch the only set on the block,” and they might have drawn conclusions about television’s “community-reinforcing tendencies that would have seemed antique only a few years later.”

Still, it is worth surveying the available evidence. The 1996 National Election Study in the U.S. revealed that Internet users had more offline or real-world memberships than other people had, and that they were more trusting. These generalizations held true even if one compared only people of similar education and income. Similarly, a survey conducted by UCLA in 2000 found that people who used the Internet spent slightly more time participating in clubs and organizations than people who had never used computer networks; Internet users were also less likely to describe themselves as “lonely.” A likely explanation is that individuals who are active in civil society are so generally energetic and interested that they take to the Internet early and avidly.

Less encouraging results, however, emerge from two studies that examine the effects of Internet use on random populations *over time*. The 1998 Carnegie Mellon HomeNet study found that people who were given Internet access began to communicate less with other members of their own households, and their social networks narrowed. The HomeNet researchers hypothesized that the “time that people devote to using the Internet might substitute for time that they had previously spent engaged in social activities” and that “people are substituting poorer quality social relationships [on the Internet] for better relationships, that is, substituting weak ties for strong ones.” Participants also reported an increase in depression as they used the Internet.

The Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society analyzed the results of 35,000 people given the simple Internet link, “Web-TV,” for the first time. They

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found that new Internet users began spending less time with family and friends, they also began attending fewer social events and also devoted less time to the newspaper.

Combining these four sets of data, a tentative hypothesis emerges. People who use the Internet at any date will be more socially connected than those who do not, yet over time a whole society will grow more disengaged or atomistic as a result of increasing Internet use.

But it would be wrong to jump to the conclusion that such disengagement is a bad thing. On one hand, the weak ties that are evident online allow people to interact without accepting responsibility. Anonymity, difficulty punishing antisocial behavior, the absence of



"Trust me Mort—no electronic-communications superhighway, no matter how vast and sophisticated, will ever replace the art of the schmooze."

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social cues, and the use of temporary, alternative personalities—all weaken social inhibitions and encourage offensive or hostile behavior. (An example is "flaming," or responding to another's communication with extravagant harshness and abuse.)

On the other hand, the ability to withhold information about oneself at times allows one to operate in a race-and gender-blind arena, safe from discrimination. For instance, the city of Santa Monica, California, gives citizens access to a local email network called PEN, with free terminals in public spaces. As a result, homeless residents—previously scorned—have become active participants in creating the city's homelessness policy. On their advice, Santa Monica now provides free showers, washers, and lockers. One citizen, Donald Paschal, has written:

I am homeless. . . . We without shelter are looked on with disdain, fear, loathing, pity, and hatred. This difference makes 'normal' contact with other humans almost impossible. Not only might we be dirty, or perhaps smell bad, we are different. In the minds of many, people who are different must be avoided. This is why Santa Monica's PEN system is so special to me. No one on PEN knew that I was homeless until I told them. After I told them, I was still treated like a human being.

To me, the most remarkable thing about the PEN community is that a city council member and a pauper can coexist, albeit not always in perfect harmony, but on an equal basis. I have met, become friends with, or perhaps adversaries with, people I would otherwise not know of.

This inspiring story requires a caveat: Donald Paschal is evidently a skilled writer, so he must be educated (or successfully self-educated). Differences in education, native language, dialect, and sometimes gender remain palpable—even online.

Still, the hope of partial anonymity may cultivate community by encouraging candor and personal disclosure, especially of shared stigmas. The HomeNet and Stanford Studies conclude that citizens generally become more isolated as a result of Internet use, but one also can identify important exceptions. Information Systems Professor Jenny Preece finds that people who share medical problems, for instance, create "empathic communities" online, sharing information and emotional support. Sometimes communities are deeper when we choose our partners, rather than simply accept the local networks of our birth. Since it offers such choice, the Internet can provide welcome

relief from (to quote feminist Marilyn Friedman) "the repressive world of what some sociologists call communities of 'place,' the world of family, neighborhood, school, and church."

Political scientist Bruce Bimber's distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' communities is relevant here. People join "thin" communities because they already possess common beliefs, values, or ends, and they think that collaboration brings benefits. I may sign up for an email list-serve, for instance, because I believe that the benefits (information about a specific subject) outweigh the costs (a cluttered inbox). Later, out of a sense of obligation, I might also contribute information. But I will quit as soon as I decide that the overall costs of participating outweigh the benefits. Thus, if we can call the list-serve a "community," it is a highly instrumental one. It requires some mutual trust, but trust of a conditional and limited type. In a "thick" community, by contrast, members appreciate the inherent

Sometimes communities are deeper when we choose our partners, rather than simply accept the local networks of our birth.

value of the group, its participants, and the goals achieved by collective decision making. Religions, neighborhoods, and families are often "thick," but it is rare for "thick" communities to form online without any presence in the real world. To be sure, committed participants in email, bulletin boards, and online role-playing games insist that they have created online "communities." But since participants may lack experience in "thicker" groups, their testimonials cannot be accepted at face value.

Citizens in liberal societies have a right to escape from private associations—such as unions, political parties, churches, fraternal organizations, and even their families. Ease of exit promotes individual freedom and, all things being equal, is preferable to the oppression arising within organizations that attempt to control their members by preventing defections. But in a healthy civil society, the liberal right of exit coexists with an array of strong, disciplined, "thick" associations. For instance, one can quit a traditional labor union or family, but only at a cost. And admission to such groups requires the agreement to contribute and conform to specified norms. The threat of exclusion or expulsion gives organizations power over individuals—even in a liberal state.

Disciplined organizations may discriminate against outsiders and oppress those at the bottom of their internal hierarchies. But they also require their members' general assent and in return offer political power

and paths for advancement. Thus, for instance, a white, working-class American man of the nineteen-fifties could count on fairly loyal service from the Democratic Party, the Catholic Church, and labor unions. He could also imagine rising to be a party elder, a Cardinal, or a union president. All of these associations have lost membership and political importance, partly as a result of reforms designed to ease entry and exit. For the most part, today's disciplined and powerful organizations are corporations, which offer little to those without skills or wealth. While the voluntary sector has become less discriminatory since the 1950s, it has also grown weaker as a whole, leaving working-class citizens without an important source of power.

The Internet is likely to exacerbate this trend. To join a newsgroup or an email list or to frequent a Web site, one usually types a few commands; to quit is just as simple. Internet consultant Elizabeth Reid observes that "users who engage in disruptive behavior on-line can be subjected to public rituals intended to humiliate and punish them." But these sanctions are surely weaker online than in the "real world." Since Internet groups—with their easy admission and penalty-free exit—cannot effectively discipline their members, they cannot overcome collective-action problems. They lack the means to compel people to serve one another, to deliberate about a common good, or to make sacrifices for that good. Since they cannot harness the resources of individual members, Internet groups can acquire little power in the broader society.

Some enthusiasts believe that network technology itself allows people to overcome collective-action problems. We no longer need either authority or markets to achieve common ends, these proponents argue, because we have entered the era of SPINs—"segmented, polycentric, ideologically integrated networks." SPINs include the women's movement of the 1970s, the Zapatistas' supporters in Mexico, the international network of neo-Nazis, and the anti-globalization movement. SPINs need neither money nor enforceable rules; instead, technology minimizes transaction costs and shared values motivate members. SPINs have indeed protested and disrupted other institutions, but I doubt that they can devise (let alone implement) positive programs. For instance, the anti-globalization movement has put protesters on the street, but it seems incapable of creating a new system of international trade.

Enthusiasts also assume that software that allows the free exchange of text, pictures, or music is likely to create virtual communities and build an ethos of sharing on the Internet. But the reality is more sobering. One study has found rampant free riding on the music-sharing network called Gnutella. More than 70% of all participants take music without offering anything in

return. In the end, such networks will be useless, since individuals will give nothing, but only take.

This is evidence against those who claim that the Internet (seen as inherently "distributed" and "empowering") will naturally generate deep and satisfying social bonds. Although it is too early to reach the opposite conclusion—that the Internet will destroy genuine communities—the warning signs merit further scrutiny and the development of proposals for reform.

Threats to Public Deliberation Online

Apart from human bonds and trust, another good that people expect from civil society is public deliberation. Popular opinion is supposed to guide—or at least constrain—democratic governments. But people do not automatically possess conscious views and opinions about major public issues. Citizens develop their opinions by participation in or observation of discussions. Their opinions can prove wise or foolish, selfish or altruistic. But deliberation is the most democratic way to *improve* citizens' views, since individuals are forced to defend their proposals in the face of those with different interests, backgrounds, and information. As a consequence, overtly selfish or foolish ideas tend to drop out. Deliberation is also an essential means of communication between the public and the government. Decision makers cannot use election results alone to ascertain what the public wants, because what

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a vote communicates is always ambiguous. Only by listening and talking can leaders learn their constituents' values and priorities.

Because rulers will always be tempted to favor their own interests, no government or politician can be trusted to monopolize the management of public debates. Economic markets also provide few mechanisms for egalitarian, open-ended, and impartial discussion—especially about the proper limits of the market itself. Therefore, independent non-profit associations and ad hoc groups are the best arenas for hosting public deliberation.

There is plenty of political talk available on the Internet, but its quality may worsen over time as individuals *filter* Internet communication. Traditional news media limit the control one has over the ideas one encounters. A person who subscribes to a newspaper because, for instance, he wants specialized information

relevant to his own career will likely stumble across novel ideas, alien perspectives, and upsetting information—*despite* his strong disinterest. Internet users, however, can search for only the information and ideas they want, remaining safely in the company of those with similar views and interests.

Information scholars Marshall van Alstyne and Erik Brynjolfsson have devised an elegant proof for the proposition that "connectivity"—the ability to communicate quickly and cheaply with many people—encourages "balkanization," defined as a proliferation of separate communities or conversations that are not in mutual contact. If individuals have a finite capacity to absorb information, if they can choose their partners freely from among larger populations, and if most people have at least mild preferences for specific types of ideas and facts, then balkanization is sure to result. A similar logic suggests that the Internet may increase intellectual *stratification*, as experts talk only among themselves and refuse contacts with laypeople.

Studies demonstrate that when groups consisting of dissimilar people deliberate, they move toward compromise positions, and sometimes reach consensus. When ideologically similar people deliberate, however, they drift toward their own ideology's extreme limits. Since the Internet encourages citizens to select discussion partners from across the country or around the world, one can expect to see islands of committed believers isolating themselves from conversation with those of differing views. Such groups will likely come before our national institutions with firm demands, but without having learned to compromise or to respect other people's views.

Another reason to worry about online public deliberation arises from the contrast between "voice" and "exit" proposed by Albert O. Hirschman, now a social scientist at the Institute for Advanced Study. Except in highly coercive organizations (such as some military units and authoritarian states), those who are not fully satisfied with their groups commonly choose between two strategies. Exercising their "voice," they may complain, seek change, and cultivate support among fellow members. Alternatively, they can leave the association, perhaps to join a different one. People typically follow the path of least resistance. For example, if the only way to exit a democratic state is to emigrate, but speech is constitutionally protected, then citizens typically use voice. On the other hand, if firms in a competitive labor market do not respond to employees' complaints, then disgruntled workers tend to exit.

Both voice and exit promise social benefits. By exiting, group members reduce the size of their own organizations and enlarge other, more desirable ones. Voice works more directly, as group members deliberate about how to improve their associations. On the Internet exit prevails over voice, since leaving any

Internet-based group is easy but changing its prevailing norms is difficult. The likely result is a decrease in public deliberation—especially about ends and values. We might hope that opposing groups would debate one another, but this may not happen on the Internet, because individuals can filter out anything that they don't want to hear. There is no common space, mass audience, or means of addressing people who don't seek out the speaker.

Consumer Choice

If the Internet offers any benefit, it is a dramatic increase in consumer choice. Daily, the business section of any American newspaper informs readers that computer networks help consumers find goods more quickly and cheaply than previously imaginable. Likewise, one can easily find the religious community, support group, or political lobby that most closely fits one's preferences.

Although consumer choice is preferable to despotism, any civic-minded person would worry about rampant consumerism. For one thing, consumption is less dignified and valuable than production and creativity. The Catholic Church teaches that "work is a good thing for man—a good thing for his humanity—because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed in a sense becomes 'more a human being'." Similarly, philosopher Hannah Arendt argued for the fundamental importance of creative activity that produces lasting objects of value—"work"—and also deliberation and cooperation among human beings: "action." When we describe activities as "civic," or as the proper tasks of citizens, we usually have Arendt's "work" in mind.

The initial promise of the Internet was its capacity to transform everyone into a publisher, an artist, or a software engineer. Yet the percentage of Internet users who create material has surely fallen dramatically since the early days of the Web. The Stanford researchers find that, for the most part, "the Internet today is a giant public library with a decidedly commercial tilt." If the Internet encourages consumption while discouraging creation, then civil society is harmed.

A second concern is the easy confusion between *consumer choice* and *freedom*. Choosing what one wants to buy is not evidence of autonomy, since one's preferences may have been formed without reflection or an awareness of alternatives. The person who spends his Sunday at the shopping mall buying whatever he wants is not free if no one has ever made a serious case that he ought to spend his time in a church, a forest, or working on a political campaign. The Internet's potential for filtering reduces the chance that our Sunday shopper will be exposed to such arguments.

Some enthusiasts imagine a near future in which all of our communications devices—our television sets and car radios, as well as our computers—will be attached to the Internet through wireless connections. Whenever we choose to watch, hear, or buy something, computers will record this information in order to determine our preferences. We will then receive advertising tailored specifically to those "preference profiles." Proponents argue that advertisers will save money, because they will no longer have to deliver ads to people who lack interest in their products. Consumers will also benefit from targeted advertising, since they will receive only information that is timely and relevant.

If targeting works, then we will desire almost *everything* that we see advertised, rather than a small fraction of it. All of our unfulfilled needs and wants will be recorded, sorted, and articulated by computer, with the result that we will find ourselves walking on an endless treadmill of unfulfilled desire—slaves to our own past preferences. Furthermore, no one will send targeted messages asking consumers to be more active in their communities, more concerned about future generations, more charitable, or better informed about

The roles of consumers, voters, workers, and companions are different, requiring distinct sets of skills and attitudes.

public affairs. Already, as the Internet expert Andrew Shapiro notes, there exist "endless newsgroups, email lists, and other online information sources dedicated to the most specific interests, but you'd be hard pressed to find a [group] committed to the General Common Good."

The Internet's ethos of pure consumer choice can also harm *freedom of expression*, understood as the ability to address chosen audiences with uncensored messages. This freedom must always be limited, or else an individual could monopolize public spaces, take over private forums, or harass other citizens with unwanted and persistent messages. But in a regime of pure consumer choice, the right to address others vanishes entirely, since each person may freely choose what messages to receive. The structure of today's Internet turns communications into consumer goods, received only if the recipient wants them. Traditionally, citizens can hand out leaflets at a street corner or picket a company's headquarters, but they cannot address people who surf past a Web site.

Another danger caused by rampant consumer choice is a weakening of other forms of reason and decision-making. Besides selecting commodities in the market,

we also choose occupations, friends, companions, and political leaders. The logic of these other choices is formally different from that of consumer behavior. For instance, when I support a policy or ideology by casting a vote, I hope that my decision will bind everyone, whereas when I choose a product in the supermarket, I express only my personal inclination. When I choose a companion, I make a moral commitment that would be inappropriate when I shop for sneakers. The roles of consumers, voters, workers, and companions are different, requiring distinct sets of skills and attitudes. In a culture of rampant consumerism, we could lose our capacity to make these other choices wisely.

Finally, consumer choice is incompatible with alternative cultural norms and values. For instance, Islam is not viewed by its adherents as a choice which happens to fit some individuals' preferences and, if not, may be modified to accommodate one's taste. Literally meaning "submission," Islam demands obedience to the authority of God.

Certainly, people anywhere in the world can now "discover Islam" through www.islamonline.net and myriad other Moslem websites. One can download translations of the Koran, search databases of *fatwas*, and receive instructions from Islamic "cybercounselors." For those already committed to Islam, computer networks may prove useful. But inevitably the Internet makes Islam look like a choice, something that one can opt to do instead of (or in addition to) pursuing an interest in an athletic team, for instance, or looking at naked models. The "islamonline" site is just a few clicks away from each of these alternatives. In a wired world, Islam will have to compete directly for individuals' attention, unable to rely on tradition or authority alone to steer believers to the right sites and the right beliefs.

One study supports the thesis that the Internet is already transforming religious belief into another consumer preference. A survey of Americans who visited selected Christian Web sites found that "organizational loyalty" and the desire for connection do not motivate people to search for information about religion on the Internet. For the most part, individuals seek thoughts, advice, and stories that they find appealing and that they can put together to make a congenial religious package of their own devising. Thus Americans use the Internet to treat religions as they would consumer goods.

The conflict between private consumer choice and deep cultural or spiritual commitments is not easy to resolve. If pressed, I would favor consumer choice, but not without regretting the inevitable losses. Apart from anything else, the Internet may decrease the *pluralism* of civil society, even though it is often touted as a source of diversity. After all, some cultures are incompatible with free individual consumption.

Privacy

Civil society requires a measure of privacy. Public institutions such as courts and legislatures are required to conduct their business openly. In intimate matters such as health, sexuality, and parenthood, privacy is the norm. But in civil society, citizens make selective disclosures of personal information within groups. For instance, members of civic associations exchange opinions about social issues without necessarily disclosing these views to outsiders. Neighbors observe one another shopping and gardening, but do not know how the people next door behave in their bedrooms or in the voting booth.

The Internet changes the nature and limits of privacy. On one hand, it allows us to conceal facts about our appearance, gender, age, and race from other individuals with whom we communicate. This potential

Citizens who lose the effective right to withhold information will become weaker compared to governments and large organizations.

increase in privacy has its advantages, but it may weaken intimate "horizontal" bonds—i.e., connections among citizens as equals. Meanwhile, the owners of computer networks acquire and sell information about those who use their services. Computers monitor what people say and to whom, what sites they visit online, and what they buy and sell. Further, computers can aggregate this information, turning a mere list of purchases into a consumer profile and then adding information from public records. For instance, a company called Aristotle International has built a database of 150 million Americans which, according to the *New York Times*, draws on state motor vehicle registrations, Postal Service and Census Bureau information, among other sources. The Aristotle databank often includes a person's age, sex, telephone number, party affiliation, estimated income, whether he or she rents or owns a home, has children, and has an ethnic surname. It can provide the make and model of individuals' cars, whether they are campaign donors (and possibly how much they give), their employer and occupation, and how often they vote.

Such databases may not only damage personal happiness and freedom, but they also undermine the importance of *voluntary association* by forcing us to make public what we would prefer to disclose only to fellow members of a group. And since information about people is a source of power, citizens who lose the effective right to withhold information will become weaker compared to governments and large organizations.

Conclusion

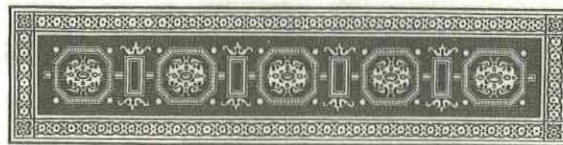
The purpose of this article has not been to issue dire predictions about the probable effects of the Internet on civil society. The Internet may prove beneficial to civil life. Rather, this article identified some potential problems that we can still solve. The Internet need not be left alone to develop haphazardly. Law can protect such values as personal privacy. The contexts in which the Internet is used (especially schools and public libraries) can be managed to assure that computers serve public purposes. Children can be taught to use networks critically and for civic purposes. One especially promising suggestion for reform is the idea of new online public spaces that would be reserved for civic uses and subsidized by the state. In short, the Internet cannot be faulted if civil society is irreparably weakened—we will deserve the blame for our failure to act.

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In general I have benefited from D.C. Seyle, "Dot-com Democracy: Computer-mediated Communication, Community, and Deliberation," which is available from the Kettering Foundation at www.kettering.org (2000).

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