

PHILOSOPHY & PUBLIC POLICY

School of Public Affairs • University of Maryland
College Park, Maryland 20742 • 301-405-4753
<http://www.puaf.umd.edu/ipp>

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.

To make its research readily available to a broad audience, the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy publishes this quarterly journal. Articles are intended to advance philosophically informed debate on current policy choices; the views presented are not necessarily those of the Institute or its sponsors.

In This Issue

THE INTERNET AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Peter Levine.....1

RELIANCE AND RELIABILITY: THE PROBLEM OF INFORMATION ON THE INTERNET

Robert Wachbroit9

STATE SYMBOLS AND MULTICULTURALISM

Jacob T. Levy16

TRUTH COMMISSIONS AND TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

David A. Crocker.....23