

**W**ith this issue, the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy expresses its deep thanks and best wishes to Arthur Evenchik, who began editing this Report in 1992. For seven years, Arthur served as our muse, mentor, and intellectual conscience. Although he rarely wrote under his own name, he co-authored many of the articles that have appeared here. Arthur taught us to be better philosophers and better writers by subjecting our drafts to the most forceful yet gentle criticism—usually by asking us embarrassing questions, which we eventually learned to ask of ourselves. We thank him, too, for helping to bring out the current issue. In working with him, we have been reminded of just how difficult a task he had, and how extraordinarily well he did it. As he takes up new responsibilities at Johns Hopkins University, we wish him the greatest success.

around the television set, and less talking with their neighbors on the street. In turn, the increased atomization of social life had important ripple effects. Spontaneous neighborhood oversight and discipline of children became harder to maintain, and less densely populated streets opened the door for increased criminal activity.

I don't mean to suggest (nor does Ehrenhalt) that television was solely responsible for these changes; the advent of air conditioning also helped depopulate streets by making the indoors far more habitable during summer's dog days, and important cultural changes reduced the influence of various forms of

authority that helped hold neighborhoods and communities together. I do want to suggest, however, that today it is as if it were 1952 for the Internet, and the methodological problems I have just sketched are the ones we must confront in assessing the impact of this new medium.

In the face of such challenges, it is natural, perhaps inevitable, that our thought will prove less flexible and our imagination less capacious than the future we seek to capture. In our mind's eye, we may hold constant what will prove to be most mutable. One of my favorite examples of this principle in the past (there are many) comes from an article published in the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* in 1888:

The time is not far distant when we will have wagons driving around with casks and jars of stored electricity, just as we have milk and bread wagons at present. . . . The arrangements will be of such a character that houses can be supplied with enough stored electricity to last twenty-four hours. All that the man with the cask will have to do will be to drive up to the back door, detach the cask left the day before, replace it with a new one, and then go to the next house and do likewise.

As Carolyn Marvin points out, this vision of the future reflects the assumption of, and hope for, the continuation of the economically and morally self-sufficient household, not beholden to outside forces, and going about its own business—a way of life undermined by the very patterns of distribution and concentration that electrical power helped foster.

I draw two lessons from this cautionary example. First, in speculating about the effects of the Internet on community life, we should be sensitive to the often surprising ways in which market forces can shape emerging technologies to upset entrenched social patterns. (This maxim is particularly important for an era such as ours, in which the market is practically and ideologically ascendant.) Second, we should be as self-conscious as possible about the cultural assumptions and trends that will shape our use of, and response to, new technologies such as the Internet. Contemporary American society, I would argue, is structured by two principal cultural forces: the high value attached to individual choice, and the longing for community.

### Choice and Community

During the past generation, scholars in a range of disciplines have traced the rise of choice as a core value. Daniel Yankelovich suggests that what he calls the "affluence effect"—the psychology of prosperity that emerged as memories of the Depression faded—weakened traditional restraints:

People came to feel that questions of how to live and with whom to live were a matter of individual choice not to be governed by restrictive norms. As a nation, we came to experience the bonds to marriage, family, children, job, community, and country as constraints that were no longer necessary.



*"Honey, please don't talk to Daddy when he's in a chat room."*

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In Ehrenhalt's analysis, the new centrality of choice is a key explanation for the transformation of Chicago's neighborhoods since the 1950s. Lawrence Friedman argues that individual choice is the central norm around which the modern American legal system has been restructured. Alan Wolfe sees individual choice at the heart of the nonjudgmental tolerance that characterizes middle-class morality in contemporary America.

The problem (emphasized by all these authors) is that as individual choice expands, the bonds linking us to others tend to weaken. To the extent that the desire for satisfying human connections is a permanent feature of the human condition, the expansion of choice was bound to trigger an acute sense of loss, now expressed as a longing for community. (The remarkable public response to Robert Putnam's "Bowling Alone" can in part be attributed to this sentiment.) But few Americans are willing to surrender the expansive individual liberty they now enjoy, even in the name of stronger marriages, neighborhoods, or citizenship.

This tension constitutes what many Americans experience as the central dilemma of our age: as Wolfe puts it, "how to be an autonomous person and tied together with others at the same time."

I do not believe that this problem can ever be fully solved; to some extent, strong ties are bound to require compromises of autonomy, and vice versa. (This exemplifies Isaiah Berlin's pluralist account of our moral

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condition: the genuine goods of life are diverse and in tension with one another, so that no single good can be given pride of place without sacrificing others.) Still, there is an obvious motivation for reducing this tension as far as possible—that is, for finding ways of liv-

ing that combine individual autonomy and strong social bonds.

This desire gives rise to a concept that I will call "voluntary community." This conception of social ties compatible with autonomy has three defining conditions: low barriers to entry, low barriers to exit, and interpersonal relations shaped by mutual adjustment rather than hierarchical authority or coercion. Part of the excitement surrounding the Internet is what some see as the possibility it offers of facilitating the formation of voluntary communities, so understood. Others doubt that the kinds of social ties likely to develop on the Internet can be adequate substitutes—practically or emotionally—for the traditional ties they purport to replace.

### Are Online Groups "Communities"?

In a prophetic account written thirty years ago, Licklider and Taylor suggested that "life will be happier for the on-line individual because the people with whom one interacts most strongly will be selected more by commonality of interests and goals than by accidents of proximity." Whether Internet users are in fact happier and, if so, because they are users, remains to be seen and may never be known (the problems of research design for that issue boggle the mind). The

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underlying hypothesis—that "accidents of proximity" are on balance a source of unhappiness—seems incomplete at best. But Licklider and Taylor were certainly right to predict that online communication would facilitate the growth of groups with shared interests. Indeed, participation in such groups is now the second most frequent interactive activity (behind email) among Internet users.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that these groups fill a range of significant needs for their participants. For some, the exchange of information and opinions about shared enthusiasms—e.g., rock groups, sports teams—is satisfying as an end in itself. For others, this exchange serves important personal or professional goals. Those suffering from specific diseases can share information about promising doctors, therapies, and treatment centers more widely and rapidly than ever before. A friend of mine who works as the lone archivist in a city library system tells me that participating in the online group of archivists from around the country mitigates her otherwise intense sense of personal and professional isolation. In this regard,

computer-mediated communication can be understood as raising to a higher power the kinds of non-place-based relationships and associations that have existed for centuries in industrialized societies.

But are these shared activities "communities"? What is at stake in this question? J. Snyder, a commentator skeptical of the claims of technocommunitarian enthusiasts, argues as follows:

A community is more than a bunch of people distributed in all 24 time zones, sitting in their dens and pounding away on keyboards about the latest news in alt.music.indigo-girls. That's not a community; it's a fan club. Newsgroups, mailing lists, chat rooms—call them what you will—the Internet's virtual communities are not communities in almost any sense of the word. A community is people who have greater things in common than a fascination with a narrowly defined topic.

Note that this objection revolves around the substance of what members of groups have in common, not the nature of the communication among them. By this standard, stamp clubs meeting face to face would not qualify as communities. Conversely, Jews in the diaspora would constitute a community, even if the majority never meet one another face to face, because what they have in common is a sacred text as an authoritative guide to the totality of temporal and spiritual existence.

To assess these claims, we may begin with Thomas Bender's classic definition of community:

A community involves a limited number of people in a somewhat restricted social space or network held together by shared understandings and a sense of obligation. Relationships are close, often intimate, and usually face to face. Individuals are bound together by affective or emotional ties rather than by a perception of individual self-interest. There is a "we-ness" in a community; one is a *member*.

Upper-middle-class American professionals tend to dismiss this picture of community as the idealization of a past that never was. But Bender insists that it offers a tolerably accurate picture of town life in America prior to the twentieth century:

The town was the most important container for the social lives of men and women, and community was found within it. . . . The geographic place seems to have provided a supportive human surround that can be visualized in the image of concentric circles. . . . The innermost ring encompassed kin, while the second represented friends who were treated as kin. Here was the core experience of community. Beyond these rings were two others: those with whom one dealt regularly and thus knew, and, finally, those people who were recognized as members of the town but who were not necessarily known.

A recent personal experience has convinced me that community, so understood, is not simply part of a vanished past. On a recent trip to Portugal, my family stopped for the night at the small town of Condeixa, about ten miles south of the medieval university of Coimbra. After dinner I went to the village square, where I spent one of the most remarkable evenings of my life. Children frolicked on playground equipment

set up in the square. Parents occupied some of the benches positioned under symmetrical rows of trees; on others, old men sat and talked animatedly. At one point a group of middle-aged men, some carrying portfolios of papers, converged on the square and discussed what seemed to be some business or local matter. The square was ringed by modest cafés and restaurants, some catering to teenagers and young adults, others to parents and families. From time to time a squabble would break out among the children playing in the square; a parent would leave a café table, smooth over the conflict, and return to the adult

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conversation. As I was walking around the perimeter of the square, I heard some singing. Following the sound, I peered into the small Catholic church on the corner and discovered a young people's choir rehearsing for what a poster on the next block informed me was a forthcoming town festival in honor of St. Peter.

Many aspects of this experience struck me forcibly, particularly the sense of order, tranquility, and human connection based on years of mutual familiarity, stable social patterns, and shared experience. I was not surprised to learn subsequently that about half of all young people born in Portuguese small towns choose to remain there throughout their adult lives—a far higher percentage than for small-town youth in any other nation of western Europe.

Bender's examples of community (and my own) are place-based. But it is important not to build place, or face-to-face relationships, into the definition of community. To do this would be to resolve by fiat, in the negative, the relationship between community and the Internet. Instead, I suggest that we focus on the four key structural features of community implied by Bender's account—limited membership, shared norms, affective ties, and a sense of mutual obligation—and investigate, as empirical questions, their relationship to computer-mediated communication.

### Limited Membership

While technical restrictions do exist and are sometimes employed, a typical feature of online groups is weak control over the admission of new participants. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many founding members of online groups experience the rapid influx of newer members as a loss of intimacy and dilution of the qualities that initially made their corner of cyber-

space attractive. Some break away and start new groups in an effort to recapture the original experience.

Weak control over membership is not confined to electronic groups, of course. Up to the early 1840s, for example, Boston was conspicuous among American cities for the relative stability and homogeneity of its population, which contributed to what outside observers saw as the communitarian intimacy and solidarity of Boston society. And then, in the single year of 1847, more than 37,000 immigrants arrived in a city of less than 115,000. By the mid-1850s, more than one third of its population was Irish. Boston was riven, and the consequences persisted for more than a century.

While many kinds of groups can undergo rapid changes of membership, they may respond differently. In a famous discussion, Albert Hirschman distinguishes between two kinds of responses—exit and voice—to discontent within organizations. "Exit" is the act of shifting membership to new organizations that better meet needs, while "voice" is the effort to alter the character of existing organizations. Exit is, broadly speaking, market-like behavior, while voice is political.

An hypothesis: when barriers to leaving old groups and joining new ones are relatively low, exit will tend to be the preferred option; as these costs rise, the exercise of voice becomes more likely. Because it is a structural feature of most online groups that border-crossings are cheap, exit will be the predominant response to dissatisfaction. If so, it is unlikely that

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online groups will serve as significant training grounds for the exercise of voice—a traditional function of Tocquevillean associations. In Boston, by contrast, because the perceived cost of exit was high, the Brahmins stayed, struggled, and ultimately worked out a modus vivendi with their Irish neighbors—a process that took over a hundred years. The mutual accommodation of the two groups helped develop one of this country's richest political traditions.

In a diverse democratic society, politics requires the ability to deliberate, and compromise, with individuals unlike oneself. When we find ourselves living cheek by jowl with neighbors with whom we differ but whose propinquity we cannot easily escape, we have powerful incentives to develop modes of accommodation. On the other hand, the ready availability of exit tends to produce internally homogeneous groups that may not communicate with other groups and lack incentives to develop shared understandings across their

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differences. One of the great problems of contemporary American society and politics is the proliferation of narrow groups and the weakening of structures that create incentives for accommodation. It is hard to see how the multiplication of online groups will improve this situation.

**Shared Norms**

A different picture emerges when we turn our attention from intergroup communication to the internal life of online groups. Some case studies suggest that online groups can develop complex systems of internalized norms. These norms arise in response to three kinds of imperatives: promoting shared purposes; safeguarding the quality of group discussion; and managing scarce resources in what can be conceptualized as a virtual commons.

As Elinor Ostrom has argued, the problem of regulating a commons for collective advantage can be solved through a wide range of institutional arrangements other than private property rights or coercive central authority. Internet groups rely to an unusual degree on norms that evolve through iteration over

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time and are enforced through moral suasion and group disapproval of conspicuous violators. This suggests that despite the anarcho-libertarianism frequently attributed to Internet users, the medium is capable of promoting a kind of socialization and moral learning through mutual adjustment.

I know of no systematic research exploring these moral effects of group online activities and their consequences (if any) for offline social and political behavior. One obvious hypothesis is that to the extent that young online users come to regard the internal structure of their groups as models for offline social and political groups, they will be drawn to (or demand) more participatory organizations whose norms are enforced consensually and informally. If so, it would be important to determine the extent to which this structure reflects the special imperatives of organizations where barriers to entrance and exit are low. The ideal of voluntary community reinforced by the Internet is likely to run up against the coercive requisites of majoritarian politics.

### Affective Ties

Proponents of computer-mediated communication as the source of new communities focus on the development of affective ties among online group members. Thus, Howard Rheingold, while acknowledging concerns that people interacting online "lack the genuine personal commitments to one another that form the bedrock of genuine community," insists that cyberculture can overcome this limitation. He defines "virtual communities" as "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on . . . public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships."

Here, the crucial empirical question is the relationship between face-to-face communication (or its absence) and the development of affective ties. How

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important are visual and tonal cues? How important is it to have some way of comparing words and deeds? Here's one hypothesis: it is impossible to create ties of depth and significance between A and B without each being able to assess the purposes and dispositions that underlie the other's verbal communications. Is the interlocutor sincere or duplicitous? Does he really care about me, or is he merely manipulating my desire for connection to achieve (unstated) purposes of his own? Is the overall persona an interlocutor presents to me genuine or constructed? We all rely on a range of nonverbal evidence to reduce (if never quite eliminate) our qualms about others' motivations and identities.

Internet enthusiasts respond to these questions by deconstructing the ideal of face-to-face communication. They point out (correctly) that duplicity and manipulation have been enduring facts of human history and that the advent of computer-mediated communication raises at most questions of degree rather than kind. I must confess that I come away unconvinced. Considerable evidence suggests that the Internet facilitates the invention of online personalities at odds with offline realities and that the ability to simulate identities is one of its most attractive features for many users (gender-bending is said to be especially popular). But the playful exercise of the imagination, whatever its intrinsic merits and charms, is not readily compatible with the development of meaningful affective ties. (Devotees of what might be called postmodern psychology, with its emphasis on social construction and *bricolage* and rejection of the distinc-

tion between surface and depth, might want to quarrel with this. So be it. I see no way of discussing affective ties without invoking some distinction between genuine and spurious emotions and identities.)

Another hotly debated issue is the relationship between computer-mediated communication and the tendency to express strong sentiments in antisocial ways. Some researchers have argued that because the absence of visual and tonal cues makes it more difficult to see the pain words can inflict, the Internet reduces restraints on verbal behavior and invites individuals to communicate in impulsive ways. (An analogy would be the asserted desensitizing effects of high-altitude bombing.) Other researchers argue that it is precisely the absence of traditional cues that promotes the formation of social norms for Internet speech and that there is no evidence that this speech is more antisocial on average than is face-to-face communication. Given the fragmentary evidence, I see no way of resolving this debate right now.

### Mutual Obligation

The final dimension of community to be considered here is the development of a sense of mutual obligation among members. Recall John Winthrop's famous depiction of the communal ideal aboard the *Arbella*:

We must entertain each other in brotherly affection, we must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities. . . . We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together.

While this may seem too demanding, at the very least community requires some heightened identification with other members that engenders a willingness to sacrifice on their behalf.

The technology critic Neil Postman argues that whatever may be the case with norms and emotions, there's no evidence that participants in online groups

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develop a meaningful sense of reciprocal responsibility or mutual obligation. Groups formed out of common interests need not develop obligations because by definition the interest of each individual is served by participating in the group. (If that ceases to be the case, it is almost costless to leave the group.) The problem is that bonds created by "interests" (in either sense of the term) provide no basis for the surrender of interests—that is, for sacrifice.