

PHILOSOPHY & PUBLIC POLICY

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Does the Internet Strengthen Community?

Suppose that in the summer of 1952, someone had organized a conference on the social consequences of television. The participants would have faced two crucial problems. First, social reality was moving faster than empirical scholarship. Television was diffusing at an explosive rate, from a relative rarity in the late 1940s to near-ubiquity only a decade later. Scholars in 1952 studying the social effects of television 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 the medium's community-reinforcing tendencies that would have seemed antique only a few years later.

The second problem would have been even more daunting. Reasoning by analogy from, for example, the automobile's effects on sexual morality in the 1920s, the participants might have suspected that television's unintended consequences would turn out to be at least as significant as its directly contemplated purposes. But they would have been hard-pressed to move much beyond this general insight. The emergence of a new communications technology within a complex social system was bound to reconfigure everything from intimate relations to the distribution of public power. But how, exactly?

According to Alan Ehrenhalt, the front stoop was one of the centers of social life in Chicago's blue-collar neighborhoods of the early 1950s. But during that decade, the introduction of television into nearly every home affected not only the dissemination of news and entertainment, but also patterns of social interaction. Families spent more time clustered

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