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War after September 11

Genetic Prospects: Essays on Biotechnology, Ethics, and Public Policy

The Internet in Public Life

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EDITED BY VERNA V. GEHRING

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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, fund-raising, and communication among their members. Citizens get their news from Web pages and deliberate about public affairs via e-mail. 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: inequality, weakened social bonds, diminished public deliberation, rampant consumerism, and the impact of eroding privacy on freedom of association. The purpose of this paper is not to issue dire predictions. The Internet may prove beneficial to civil life—but that does not justify ignoring potential risks.

Equity

The first (and most widely recognized) reason to worry about the effect of the existing Internet on civic life is that people cannot use computers effectively unless they have money and skills and access to high-speed connections. In the United States, income, race, education, and age (but not gender) predict whether people use computers and computer networks.

During the Clinton Administration, this "Digital Divide" was a major focus in Washington. With bipartisan support, Congress passed the E-Rate tax, which subsidizes wiring schools; the Technology Opportunities Program (TOP), which promotes the use of digital technologies in government and the nonprofit sector; and the Community Technology Centers Program, which underwrites programs in poor urban and rural areas. Things changed rapidly with the election of President Bush; the new administration proposed ending the various federal programs that were aimed at bridging the Digital Divide.

The reason for this shift was ideology, but bolstered by eye-catching statistics. As the US Department of Commerce reported, "Between December 1998 and September 2001, Internet use by individuals in the lowest-income households (those earning less than $15,000 a year) increased at a 25 percent annual growth rate." This meant that poor people were adopting the Internet at an accelerating pace, and faster than upper-income people (most of whom were already online). The same was true of people with little education—and the gender gap had completely disappeared. Thus it looked as if market forces were on their way to solving the Digital Divide, as companies competed to offer cheaper and more attractive services to broader markets. Whereas the US Commerce Department's 1999 report on Internet use was called "Falling Through the Net," the 2002 report was entitled "A Nation Online."

But there are several reasons to continue worrying about equity. First, some of the rapid increases reported in 1998–2002 resulted from federal programs, such as the E-Rate, that are now threatened with termination. This becomes clear when we calculate the importance of Internet access via schools and libraries (which are subsidized by the federal government) for low-income people. For example, there is only a 12 percent difference in computer use between the poorest and richest children, but that is because the low-income students are using computers in schools. There is almost a 60 percent gap in the use of *home* computers between the richest and poorest categories of students. Likewise, African Americans of all ages are more likely (by 10 percentage points) than whites to use the Internet in a public library—because they are less likely to have Internet connections at home. If federal subsidies for library and school computers disappear, then the Digital Divide will quickly reopen.

Moreover, using the Internet from a school or library is not fully satisfactory. Users' time may be limited and there may be rules about

what they can do. It is certainly difficult to operate one's own Web site from a library or to learn how software works by playing with the basic settings of a public computer. Internet access from a workplace is often even less satisfactory, since an employer may ban private, social, and political uses outright.

Third, I cannot believe that the rapid rate of Internet adoption among low-income people will continue until the whole population is online. More than 20 percent of American adults are in the lowest literacy category, which means that they cannot enter information on an application for a Social Security card or calculate total costs on an order form. They are not going to be able to make much use of a home computer.

Fourth, the perceived need to get a home computer may be putting severe strains on low-income families. Many parents fear that they will damage their children's prospects if they fail to have an Internet connection at home. In 2001, the *New York Times* reported from a troubled block in Harlem that "some impoverished mothers here, terrified by [the education] gap, have begun leasing computers for their children." This means that poor families are able to overcome the Digital Divide, but only at the cost of other important goals. And they may not be able to keep up.

Finally, wealthy households are much more likely than poor ones to go online via cable lines and other high-speed, "broadband" connections. This gap doesn't matter too much as long as most of the Internet still consists of text and static images. But as broadband becomes more common, more Web sites and even e-mail messages will have elaborate moving pictures. And then low-income people will have to confront a whole new Digital Divide. Indeed, one can see a historical pattern in which new technologies are first adopted by wealthier and better educated people; they become cheaper and more widespread; life without them becomes actively unpleasant because major institutions depend on them; they cease to confer any relative advantages; and then new technologies come along to replace (or at least supplement) them.

None of this necessarily implies that the federal government should directly subsidize home computers and Internet connections until the Digital Divide vanishes. For one thing, such a subsidy would determine the budget priorities for its purported beneficiaries. They would get Internet access instead of (say) car repairs, which they might need more. In my opinion, it is better to expand flexible income

support through mechanisms like the Earned Income Tax Credit than to provide targeted subsidies for goods like Internet access. To be sure, society as a whole would benefit if everyone could go online, because (for example) government agencies could eliminate paper forms. But genuine 100 percent Internet usage might well prove impossible.

Thus I am not arguing for any specific government policy regarding the Digital Divide. I am saying that inequity remains a problem, and it is directly relevant to civil society. Although wealthy people may find that civil society becomes more exciting and inviting as it exploits the power of computer networks, poorer and less educated people will 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.

These problems of equity in industrialized countries are easy compared to the situation in the global South. Perhaps computer networks will ultimately strengthen international civil society as well as the array of independent associations within every nation. But the Internet hardly exists in most parts of the world. According to the United Nations Development Programme, in 1999 the industrial nations are home to 15 percent of global population and 88 percent of Internet users. In Africa, just 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.

Thin Social Bonds

Some observers fear that the Internet replaces robust, durable, and emotionally satisfying social bonds with superficial and contingent ones. People will not generally develop strong bonds of trust and mutual obligation if computers become their main means of communication. They may communicate more than ever, but when they find themselves in need, they may have no one to turn to.

This prediction is not supported by national surveys of Internet users. The 1996 National Election Study in the US revealed that they 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." And a 2001 survey by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that users of the Internet were considerably more likely than nonusers to know their neighbors' names and to belong to various kinds of associations.

In short, people who use the Internet are more active participants in civil society than those who don't go online. But this correlation does not prove that Internet use boosts civic engagement. It could be something else about Internet users that makes them participate in groups: if not their income and education, then their age, their energy, their family status, or their general receptivity to current trends. These people are early adopters of a technology that is still not used by half the population; whatever personal characteristics put them ahead of the line for Internet access may also involve them in offline groups.

It is therefore essential to test the effects of Internet use on a random population over time. In 1998, the Carnegie Mellon HomeNet study found that Pittsburgh residents who were given Internet access began to communicate somewhat 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. This study was widely criticized for (among other reasons) failing to identify a control group of Pittsburgh residents without Internet access. But a subsequent experiment by the Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society generated similar findings. The Institute gave 35,000 people a simple Internet link called "Web-TV" for the first time. They found that new Internet users began spending less time with family and friends and less time attending events outside the home; they also read newspapers less.

If we put these two experiments together with the 1996 data from the National Election Survey, we can generate a tentative hypothesis. People who use the Internet at any date will be more socially con-

nected than those who do not go online—in part because they are better off; in part because their friends in civic and social networks have persuaded them to get connected to the Internet; and in part because they are comparatively active, energetic, and optimistic people who both adopt new technologies and involve themselves in their communities. Yet there is very little civic or social benefit from *Internet use itself.* Indeed, over time a whole society may grow more disengaged or atomistic as a result of using computer networks.

One major reason is anonymity—and the psychological distance, mistrust, and irresponsibility that it often produces. Anonymity is not an inevitable feature of computer networks. I sit at my computer for hours every day. I spend much of this time reading e-mail messages from people I know well, and writing back to them. A company or a government agency can require its clients to disclose their real identities over the Internet, to prove who they are with something like a credit card number, and then to live up to their contractual agreements. What the Internet adds is a new layer of interactions (especially in chat rooms, listservs, and game environments) in which participants withhold practically all information about themselves, including their real names, appearances, demographic characteristics, and locations. They can also break off contact at will, adapt multiple personalities and identities, and shield themselves from the consequences of what they say. Perhaps the same effect could have been achieved one hundred years ago through an elaborate system of anonymous mailboxes, but only at great cost and inconvenience. Widespread anonymity is a new phenomenon, and deeply attractive to at least some of us.

Anonymity, the difficulty of punishing antisocial behavior, the absence of social cues, and the use of temporary, alternative personalities—all these features of typical online interactions weaken social inhibitions and encourage offensive or hostile behavior. (An example is "flaming," or responding to another's communication with extravagant harshness and abuse.)

But it would be wrong to jump to the conclusion that such disengagement is a bad thing. Being able to withhold information about oneself on the Internet sometimes means that one can operate in a race- and gender-blind arena, safe from discrimination. For instance, the city of Santa Monica, California, has given citizens access to a local e-mail 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 has begun providing 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 councilmember 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 is an inspiring story, but it requires a caveat. Donald Paschal is evidently a skilled writer, so he must be educated (even if he is a successful autodidact). Differences in education, native language, dialect, and sometimes gender remain palpable—even online.

Still, the possibility of remaining partially anonymous may cultivate community by encouraging candor and personal disclosure, especially of shared stigmas. The HomeNet and Stanford Studies have suggested that—in general—citizens will become more isolated as a result of Internet use. But there can be important exceptions. The Internet has put people in touch with others who share rare conditions, beliefs, or dilemmas, thereby allowing them to form significant psychological bonds. Information Systems professor Jenny Preece argues that "empathic communities" are created online by people who share medical problems. She finds evidence of information-sharing and a high degree of emotional support. Sometimes communities are deeper when we can choose our partners, rather than being stuck in the local networks of our birth.

Even if online communities are generally weaker than ones in the real world, this can be an advantage. Because it offers choice, the Internet can provide welcome relief from a repressive world of family, neighborhood, school, and church, which is often rife with oppressive politics.

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 they can gain strategic benefits by collaborating. For

instance, I may sign up for an e-mail list because I predict that the benefits (information about a specific subject) will outweigh the costs (a cluttered inbox). Later, out of a sense of obligation, I might also contribute information. But I will probably quit as soon as I decide that the overall costs of participating outweigh the benefits. Thus, if we can call the listserv a "community," it is a highly instrumental one. It does require some mutual trust, but the members' confidence in each other can be conditional and limited. In a "thick" community, by contrast, members are committed to the inherent value of the group, to the other participants as partners, and to the ends or values that they decide on collectively. Religions, neighborhoods, and families are often "thick." It is hard to imagine a "thick" community forming online without any presence in the real world. To be sure, committed participants in e-mail, bulletin boards, and online role-playing games *testify* that communities exist online, and that they belong to them. But their reports should not be accepted at face value, because they may lack experience with "thicker" groups.

In liberal societies, citizens have a right to escape from private associations, such as unions, political parties, churches, fraternal organizations, and even families. Ease of exit promotes individual freedom and is preferable (*ceteris paribus*) to the kind of oppression that arises within organizations that control their members by preventing defections. But the genius of civil society is to combine the liberal right of exit with a diverse array of strong, disciplined, "thick" associations. For instance, one can quit a traditional labor union or family, but only at a cost. And one can only enter such groups if one agrees to contribute and to conform to specified norms. By threatening to exclude or expel members, such organizations gain the power to discipline individuals, even in a liberal state.

Disciplined organizations may discriminate against outsiders and oppress people at the bottom of their internal hierarchies. On the other hand, they require their members' *general* assent, and in return they offer political power and paths for advancement. Thus, for instance, a white, working-class American man of the 1950s 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 people 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 e-mail list or to frequent a Web site, one usually clicks a link or two; and to quit is just as simple. Elizabeth Reid observes that "users who engage in disruptive behavior online can be subjected to public rituals intended to humiliate and punish them." But these sanctions are surely weaker online than they would be 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 think that network technology will allow people to overcome collective-action problems *without* having to subject themselves to hierarchy. They claim that we no longer need either authority or markets to achieve common ends, because we have entered the era of SPINs: "segmented, polycentric, ideologically integrated networks." SPINs are a type of libertarian commons, highly compatible with an open computer network. They include the women's movement of the 1970s, the Zapatistas' supporters in Mexico, the international network of neo-Nazis, and the antiglobalization movement. These networks do not pay or coerce individuals to contribute; instead they use technology to reduce transaction costs and shared values to motivate their members. "The information revolution favors and strengthens networks, while it erodes hierarchies," we are told. But devising and implementing a positive program almost certainly requires collective decision making and discipline. While the antiglobalization movement can put protesters on the street, I doubt that it will create a new system of international trade. And if one of its undisciplined members commits an atrocity, the movement will die.

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 acquire these opinions by participating in or observing discussions, either written or oral. Their opinions can be wise or foolish, selfish or altruistic. But deliberation is the most democratic way to *improve* citizens' views. Without imposing a conclusion on anyone, deliberation forces individuals to defend their proposals before others who may have different interests, backgrounds, and information. As a result, overtly selfish or foolish ideas tend to drop out. Finally, deliberation is an essential means of a communication between the public and the government. Decision-makers cannot use election results alone to ascertain what the public wants, because the meaning of a vote is always ambiguous. Except by listening and talking, leaders will not be able to learn their constituents' values and priorities.

The Internet is home to discussion groups, mailing lists, blogs (Web logs), and chat sessions devoted to every conceivable subject, so the sheer quantity of political talk is likely to increase as a result of its growth. But the *quality* of public discussion may worsen, because the Internet gives users the capacity to filter communication. In traditional media, we have limited control over the ideas that we encounter. Consider, for instance, someone who subscribes to a newspaper because he wants specialized information relevant to his own career, his favorite sports team, or his local community. Or perhaps he enjoys having his views reinforced by congenial editorials. As he leafs through a general-interest newspaper, he cannot help stumbling across novel ideas, alien perspectives, and upsetting information about *other people's* lives. Internet users can avoid all this trouble. They can search for just the information and ideas they want, remaining safely in the company of people with similar views and interests. Even those who subscribe to very unusual ideologies will be able to find others from around the world who have identical beliefs. Selective reading is probably almost as old as writing itself, and is a perfectly reasonable way of dealing with excessive quantities of information. But the search functions available on the Internet make selection too easy and threaten to tip the balance toward hyperspecialization.

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. Balkanization results if individuals can choose their partners freely from among larger populations, if each person has a finite capacity to absorb information, and if most people have at least mild preferences for specific types of ideas and facts. A similar logic suggests that the Internet may increase intellectual *stratification* as experts are able to talk only among themselves and can refuse contacts with laypeople.

The general trend in American culture is away from diverse, multipurpose organizations (such as unions, national churches, and strong geographical communities), toward single-interest associations with narrow niches. Local organizations that used to draw people from different occupations, such as the Masons and the PTA, have lost most of their members, while national organizations for people in particular fields or with particular interests have grown. Between 1972 and 1992, Americans became considerably less likely to belong to groups, attend meetings, read newspapers, or express interest in politics—all measures of their general willingness to interact with those different from themselves.

Two of the basic technologies of the World Wide Web—hypertext and search functions—assist users in filtering what they see and hear. These are supposed to be liberating technologies, because users make their own decisions about what to look at next, which thread to follow, and when to move on. But true freedom means being able to follow *someone else's* train of thought for a while. One can escape from one's own preconceptions only by following a sustained argument, a plot line, a pattern of allusion, or a meticulous interpretation. That is why reading a whole book can be extraordinarily liberating. There are plenty of books online, including the complete works of Plato and Shakespeare. But we cannot experience Platonic arguments or Shakespearean characters by looking for keywords and clicking our way quickly across the World Wide Web.

Private filtering can have harmful social consequences. Imagine if a person is uninterested in environmental issues and generally unwilling to learn about them. But if she had read about the value of recycling in a general-interest newspaper (or seen a national television broadcast on the subject), then she would have recycled. Since today she can obtain her news from the Internet without having to deal with proenvironmental arguments and evidence, she drops her newspaper subscription and never learns the value of recycling. The Internet is partly at fault.

Further, the Internet provides few effective ways for people to put their case to others who are not initially disposed to listen. Journalist and lawyer Andrew Shapiro argues that Web users are unlike visitors to a physical space, because they do "not have to hear the civil rights marcher, take a leaflet from the striking worker, or see the unwashed homeless person. Their world [can] be cleansed of all interactions save those they explicitly [choose]." A similar logic suggests that the Internet may increase intellectual *stratification* as experts are able to talk only among themselves and ignore the rest of the public.

Cass Sunstein, a political and legal theorist who has done much to advance our understanding of deliberation, summarizes the disadvantages of balkanization in his book *Republic.com*. Among other problems, balkanized groups tend to move toward the views of their own most radical members. Members of such groups do not understand other perspectives or learn how to relate to people who are different. Not realizing that some thoughtful citizens disagree with them, they assume that the government is corrupt when it takes contrary positions. And they constantly reinforce their own beliefs—even completely false ones—without ever being challenged. For instance, many people who are opposed to gun control have encountered the following quotation more than once online: "This year will go down in history! For the first time, a civilized nation has full gun registration! Our streets will be safer, our police more efficient, and the world will follow our lead into the future!" On numerous Web sites, this quote is attributed to Adolf Hitler, who is supposed to have extolled gun control in the *Berlin Daily* on April 15, 1935 (page 3, article 2). Everything about this alleged statement is false, including the implication that the Nazi government imposed gun control. But only Second Amendment purists are likely to encounter it, and their faith is never challenged.

Another danger is that "thin" online groups won't foster deliberation as much as "thick" traditional ones have. Recall that people join "thin" groups because they already share ends or values. Dennis Thompson lists some examples that he has found on the Internet: "Hikers to Free our Parks, National Whistleblower Union, Citizens against Daylight Savings Time, Citizens for Finnish-American Power, the US Committee to Support the Revolution in Peru, and the Anarchists Anti-Defamation League." Members of these groups probably spend little time debating their core values or purposes, which are fixed from the beginning. We might hope that opposing "thin" 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.

In a "thick" community, on the other hand, the members' commitment is to the group itself, although its purposes and values may be undecided. Unless the group is authoritarian, its members will have to debate their common ends, thus contributing to public deliberation. But "thick" organizations are rare online.

A related issue is social scientist Albert O. Hirschman's contrast between "voice" and "exit." Except in highly coercive organizations (such as some military units and authoritarian states), people who are not fully satisfied with their groups may 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 can reduce the size of their own organizations and enlarge other, more desirable ones. In short, competition is the means by which exit generates progress. Voice works more directly, as group members deliberate about how to improve their associations. It seems likely that exit prevails over voice—and competition over deliberation—on the Internet. It is very easy to leave any Internet-based group, but it is difficult to change the prevailing norms within such groups, because there is no means of enforcing agreements. The result may be a decrease in the total amount of public deliberation, especially about ends and values.

Consumer Choice

The ethos of the Internet is consumer choice. Daily, the business section of any American newspaper informs readers that computer networks will 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.

Consumer choice has value; it is certainly preferable to despotism. But there are several reasons to worry about rampant consumerism from a civic point of view.

First, consumption is often considered less dignified and valuable than production and creativity. The Catholic Church teaches: "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'." In a similar vein, Hannah Arendt argued for the fundamental importance of creative activity that produced lasting objects of value—"work"—and also deliberation and cooperation among human beings: "action." When people describe activities as "civic," or as the proper tasks of citizens, they usually have Arendt's "work" in mind. Thus, for instance, Harry Boyte wants to push the concepts of civil society and democracy "off the playground." He contends that "democracy is not mainly a set of institutions but rather a work in progress in which people continuously create and recreate public things of many sorts (including public institutions)."

The initial promise of the Internet was its capacity to make everyone into a publisher, an artist, or a software engineer. But the percentage of Internet users who *create* material has fallen dramatically. The Stanford researchers found that, "for the most part, the Internet today is a giant public library with a decidedly commercial tilt. The most widespread use of the Internet today is as an information search utility for products, travel, hobbies, and general information. Virtually all users interviewed responded that they engaged in one or more of these information gathering activities." If the Internet makes consumption easier but does not encourage many people to create goods—and especially not free or public goods—then it will do net harm to civil society.

Second, consumer choice is not the same as freedom. To choose what you want to see or buy based on your own preferences is not evidence of autonomy, because your preferences may have been formed without reflection or an awareness of alternatives. Someone 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 a political campaign. The Internet's potential for filtering reduces the chance that people 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. Every time we choose to watch or hear or buy something, computers will record this information in order to determine our preferences. We will then receive advertising that is tailored specifically to our preference profiles. Advertisers will save money, because they "don't want to pay to deliver ads to people who have no interest in their products." There will also be savings for consumers, who will "receive information that is timely and relevant" and avoid "the clutter of unwanted ads and solicitations." Indeed, if the targeting works, then we will desire almost *everything* that we see advertised, rather than a small fraction of it. We will recognize many unfilled needs and wants that might otherwise have escaped our notice. We will thus find ourselves walking on an endless treadmill of unfulfilled desire. This seems to me a frightening image of heteronomy, since we will be 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 public affairs. Already, as Andrew Shapiro notes, "there are endless newsgroups, e-mail 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 share of time and money that we spend on civic activities may thus fall as a result of more efficient commercial advertising.

A third problem is that consumer choice is a poor way to understand freedom of *expression*. We are free to express ourselves when we can address chosen audiences with uncensored messages. This freedom must always be limited, because otherwise an individual could monopolize public spaces, take over private forums, or harass other citizens with unwanted and persistent messages. There is often a tension between the right to express oneself freely to anyone and the right to decide what one hears and sees. But in a regime of pure consumer choice, the freedom to address others would vanish, since each person would be completely free to choose what messages to receive (messages being viewed as consumer products). This is the general trend on the Internet. In the real world, one can hand out leaflets at a street corner or picket a company's headquarters, but individuals have no means to address people who surf past a given Web site (unless they happen to own it).

More generally, consumer choice is not the only way to express preferences. We select commodities in the market, but 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 can only express a personal inclination. Similarly, when I select a consumer product, I assume none of the obligations that come with initiating a personal relationship. The roles of consumers, voters, workers, and companions are different, and they require distinct sets of skills and attitudes. In a culture of rampant consumerism, we could lose our capacity to make these other choices wisely.

A final problem is the incompatibility of consumer choice with alternative cultural norms and values. To mention just one example, Islam is not viewed by its adherents as a choice that may happen to fit some individuals' preferences and that comes in various flavors for various tastes. It means "submission": obedience to the authority of God. True enough, people anywhere in the world can now "discover Islam" through www.islamonline.net and myriad other Moslem Web sites. They can download translations of the Koran, search databases of *fatwas*, and receive instructions from Islamic "cybercounselors." For people who are 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) reading about environmentalism, following an athletic team, or looking at naked models. The "islamonline" site is just a few clicks away from any of these alternatives. In a wired world, Islam will have to compete directly for individuals' attention, and will not be able to count on tradition or authority to steer believers to the right sites and the right beliefs.

A survey of Americans who visited selected Christian Web sites found that for the most part they were seeking thoughts, advice, and stories that they could put together to make a congenial religious package of their own devising. "Organizational loyalty and connections are not the driving force behind people's interest in getting information about religion from the Internet. Rather [users] want information that will assist them in determining not only how they will respond to institutions but how they will take individual actions." In other words, Americans are using the Internet to treat religions as they would treat 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 I would also regret 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 particular degree and type of privacy. In public institutions such as courts and legislatures, all business is normally supposed to be public and transparent. 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 increase in privacy has its advantages, but it may weaken intimate horizontal bonds: that is, relationships among citizens as equals. On the other hand, the owners of computer networks can acquire and sell information about all the individuals who use their services. Computers can monitor what people say and to whom, what sites they visit online, and what they buy and sell. What's more, 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. According to the *New York Times*,

> Drawing on state motor vehicle registrations, the Postal Service and Census Bureau, among other sources, the Aristotle databank includes a person's age, sex, telephone number, party affiliation and estimated income, whether he or she rents or owns a home, has children, and has an ethnic surname. It also provides the make and model of voters' cars, whether they are campaign donors, their employer and occupation, and how often they vote.

Individuals can be defamed when the information in such databases is false or is portrayed in a misleading light. Even accurate data can be used to discriminate against employees in morally objectionable ways. Databases may also violate property rights, since a person's "profile" arguably belongs to her. An erosion of privacy may prevent people from developing complex personalities, because maturity requires trying out ideas and personas in private. And citizens may simply be made less *happy* as a result of losing their privacy.

Such databases may not only damage personal happiness and freedom, but 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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Sources

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