

Editorial

See no evil - hear no evil - do no evil?

One of the greatest challenges modern society faces is to maintain social order in the face of technological and economic change. As a society we are at a particularly vulnerable point in time. The challenges seem overwhelming and the opportunities fraught with risk. Despite increases in connectivity brought about by the introduction of technology and its advances, society and human communication is under threat. The nature of human involvement has changed - ties tend to be less permanent, less engaged and with smaller groups of people. Increasingly, some individuals are escaping their reality (with its confusions and uncertainties) by transforming themselves into "ideal cyberpeople" within virtual communities. In doing so, they have little or no contact with people in the real world, which gives rise to social issues and a fear of confronting problems through face-to-face communication.

A major impact of the Communication Revolution is that it greatly reduces, or eliminates control over communication by intermediaries that have historically controlled the flow of information to the rest of society. This control is increasingly being shared or passed on to individuals, local organisations and communities. Individuals attain a greater degree of freedom of choice, but also a much higher level of responsibility for creating and managing their own destinies. It is in this possibility that a real challenge is posed to the concept of democracy. New technology is making it easier than ever to receive filtered versions of reality. Chicago University Law Professor Cas Sunstein warns of the dangers of allowing people to design their 'own' news. Internet news readers can set their preferences beforehand, thereby deliberately limiting their focus and screening out ideas. This poses in Sunstein's view a real threat to the future of democracy. According to Sunstein citizens of a democracy have responsibilities that go beyond being mere consumers. Those who watch or listen to a general newscast or browse the general interest periodicals or newspapers are exposed to materials they may not have ordinarily have sought out. By doing so, they become educated in other points of view, other circumstances and occurrences that make them better informed and more aware as citizens.

Sunstein argues that citizens of a democracy have responsibilities that go beyond being mere consumers. The Internet is providing the platform for those with socially unacceptable viewpoints, such as xenophobes, racists or militants, and even those with more socially acceptable viewpoints such as pro-life lobbyists, to create their own 'echo chambers' by filtering out opposing views. Even more disturbing is the fact that when individuals who hold a particular point of view, find themselves in a group of like-minded people, they tend not only to confirm their own biases but to move

toward even more extreme positions having had their views so strongly confirmed.

While close minded people have always been part of society, the Internet facilitates aggressive, specialised filtering above and beyond what can be achieved in real life. It's technology facilitates real life filtering –creating a world in which you see only what you want to see, hear only what you want to hear, and read only what you want to read.

Sustein argues that any solution to the changing landscape of news delivery platforms would have to be extreme. As a solution Sunstein suggests a fairness doctrine for both traditional broadcaster and websites, and even introduces the idea that certain websites should appear automatically without the option of filtering according to personal preference. Clearly there are no easy answers to these pressing issues. Experience has shown that any effort to control the Internet is doomed to failure. Most of the developed world has concluded that restricting access to the Internet at national level is not viable. While we cannot control the growth of interactive communications, we can guide its development so that consideration is given to the needs of local communities, broad access and education is guaranteed, and the assurance is given that it supports rather than undermines our core values as individuals and as a broader society.

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