

Editorial

Private rights in public spheres

Today the entire world is confronted with a wealth of new opportunities and risks created by an even more profound revolution in human communication. Its effects are already widespread and far reaching, and they are accelerating. Interactive communication is transforming society and changing many aspects of people's lives. It offers powerful and timely access to information and to knowledge. More importantly, it inspires engaged participation that empowers every participant to not just consume, but also to become producers of information. The culmination of the implications of interactive communication leads inescapably to one conclusion: the increasing importance and empowerment of individuals - regardless of location, economic status, or political affiliation. Interactive communication blurs the lines of authority that are normally imposed through controls such as hierarchies, geographic borders or clear jurisdiction. The Internet is rapidly redefining notions of government censorship and personal privacy. At its most fundamental, the struggle between the Internet censorship and openness at national level revolves around three main means - controlling the conduits, filtering the flows, and punishing the purveyors.

In much of the developed world the tension between censorship and openness has focussed more on finding means to filter Internet content in cooperation with industry, rather than on constricting the conduits and punishing the purveyors. Most of the developed world has concluded that restricting access to the Internet at national level is not viable. Yet Internet activists around the world shuddered in 1999 when the Australian Parliament passed a Bill that allows the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (the nation's equivalent of the American CIA) to secretly alter the files in private computers it spies on. While these powers were granted by government as a means to fight terrorism and organised crime, online activists saw it as something much more ominous - "a total lack of interest by the government in treating personal privacy with due respect, and setting a dangerous precedent for the whole issue of surveillance". It would appear as if online activists concerns are not entirely unfounded. The Paris-based organisation Reporters Without Borders (RSF) reports that there are 45 countries that restrict their citizen's access to the Internet. In countries such as Burma, Libya, North Korea, Syria and the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus Internet access is either banned or subject to tight government control. In the developed world numerous conferences have been held to address questions over appropriate content, most of which have been aimed primarily at classifying content as a navigation aid for filtering software to be installed at the user- end. E-mail represents one of the thorniest free speech issues in cyberspace because of privacy issues related to personal

communication. Experts agree that in future as the world becomes more connected, proxy servers, private networks, even mobile phones will provide ever new trap doors for the information competent. The end result may well be what Richard Greenfield, a consultant to the Soro Foundations' Open Society Institute, calls a "cyber brain drain " where people don't even leave a country, but just conduct their online activities in a different jurisdiction.

Because of pressing new issues of jurisprudence and public policy, communication scientists will have to rapidly cultivate an understanding of the impact of the Communication Age on communication in the public sphere. We must become knowledgeable of the benefits, issues and threats posed by interactive communication and of its social and economic influence. Without this understanding we will be ill equipped to fulfill our responsibilities. 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. Just as interactive communication influences all facets of community life so does it challenge and test the underpinnings of our society: our economic system, social contracts, public policies and laws. As communication policy is debated vigorously in the public sphere in the next few years, it is important that all communication scholars understand the challenges and that all voices are heard in the debate. The ways in which each of us, individually and collectively influence the outcomes will have a profound effect on the quality of our economic, civic and cultural life well into the next century.

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