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Social Glue and Spreading Information

SOME PEOPLE believe that freedom of speech is a luxury. In their view, poor nations, or nations struggling with social and economic problems, should be trying not to promote democracy, but to ensure material well-being—economic growth, and a chance for everyone to have food, clothing, and shelter. This view is badly misconceived. If we understand what is wrong with it, we will have a much better sense of the social role of communications.

For many countries, the most devastating problem of all consists of famines, defined as widespread denial of access to food and, as a result, mass starvation. In the China famine of the late 1950s, for example, about 30 million people died. Is free speech a luxury for nations concerned about famine prevention? Would it be better for such nations to give a high priority, not to democracy and free speech, but to ensuring economic development? Actually these are foolish questions. Consider the astonishing finding, by the economist Amartya Sen, that in the history of the world, there has *never* been a famine in a system with a democratic press and free elections.¹ Sen's starting point here, which he also demonstrates empirically, is that famines are a social product, not an inevitable product of scarcity of food. Whether there will be a fam-

ine, as opposed to a mere shortage, depends on people's "entitlements," that is, what they are able to get. Even when food is limited, entitlements can be allocated in such a way as to ensure that no one will starve.

But when will a government take the necessary steps to prevent starvation? The answer depends on that government's own incentives. When there is a democratic system with free speech and a free press, the government faces a great deal of pressure to ensure that people generally have access to food. And where officials are thus pressured, they respond. But a system without a democratic press or free elections is likely to enable government to escape public retribution and hence not to respond to famines. Government officials will not be exposed, nor will they be at risk of losing their jobs.

Here, then, is a large lesson about the relationship between a well-functioning system of free expression and citizens' well-being. Free speech and free press are not mere luxuries or tastes of the most educated classes; they increase the likelihood that government will actually be serving people's interests. This lesson suggests some of the virtues, not only for liberty but also for economic development, of having freedom of speech.² And this lesson suggests the immense importance, for liberty and well-being, of the Internet itself, which makes it possible for countless people to learn about social and economic problems and to ask their governments to respond to what they have learned. It is no accident that tyrannical governments have tried to control access to the Internet, partly in order to wall citizens off from knowledge of other systems, partly to insulate their leaders from scrutiny and criticism. Knowledge is the great ally of both freedom and welfare.

But what may be most interesting for present purposes is the fact that once some people have the relevant knowledge—

a famine is actually on the horizon—they confer benefits, in the famine case massive benefits, on others who entirely lack that knowledge. Here cascades can be extremely desirable, and in a well-functioning democracy, the factual reports that actually "stick" turn out to be true. There can be no doubt that many of the people who are protected from starvation and death, as a result of this process, do not themselves choose in advance to learn about famines and related government policies. Many of the beneficiaries of democracy take little if any direct advantage of free media outlets or of democratic elections. But it is not necessary that they do so in order for the system to work. When some people know about the coming shortages, they can speak out. The consequence is that famines are averted. And what is true for famines is true for many other problems, natural disasters, including hurricanes and earthquakes, can be far less devastating if freedom is genuinely protected, simply because freedom can increase accountability. In the United States, the massive harm done in New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina was, in part, a failure of the democratic system, and it is profoundly to be hoped that democratic accountability will make such failures less likely in the future.

Fewer Shared Experiences

Even in a nation of unlimited communications options, some events will inevitably attract widespread attention. On the Internet itself, some sites play an especially prominent role; a degree of centralization remains. But simply as a matter of

numbers, an increasingly diverse communications universe will reduce the level of shared experiences. When there were only three television networks, much of what appeared on television would have the quality of a genuinely common experience. The lead story on the evening news would provide the same reference point for many millions of people. This is decreasingly true. In recent decades, the three major networks have lost tens of millions of viewers. As a result of increased options, the most highly rated show on current network television has far fewer viewers than the fifteenth most highly rated show in a typical year in the 1970s.

To the extent that choices and filtering proliferate, it is inevitable that diverse individuals, and diverse groups, will share fewer reference points. Events that are highly salient to some people will barely register on others' viewcreens. And it is possible that some views and perspectives that seem obvious for many people will, for others, be barely intelligible.

This is far from an unambiguously bad thing. On balance, it is almost certainly good. When people are able to make specific choices, they are likely to enjoy what they are seeing or doing. Of course a degree of diversity, with respect to both topics and points of view, is highly desirable. I am hardly suggesting that everyone should be required to watch the same thing. The question does not involve requirements at all. My only claim is that a common set of frameworks and experiences is valuable for a heterogeneous society, and that a system with limitless options, making for diverse choices, will compromise some important social values. If we think, with Justice Brandeis, that a great menace to freedom is an "inert people," and if we believe that a set of common experiences promotes active citizenship and mutual self-understanding, we will be concerned by any developments that greatly reduce those experiences. The ideal of consumer sovereignty makes

it hard even to understand this concern. But from the standpoint of republican ideals, the concern should lie at the center of any evaluation of the system of communications.

What Consumers Might Do and What Producers Might Do

None of this means that shared experiences are disappearing. Of course people know that such experiences are desirable, and often they cooperate with one another so as to ensure that they will have such experiences. Of course the Internet and email make communication much easier, so that like-minded people can decide, at once, to do or watch the same thing. Collaborative filtering can be effective here. If you know that most "people like you" are going to go see a new movie starring Brad Pitt, you might be more likely to go see that movie. Consumers themselves can band together, across geographical lines, to ensure that they do or watch the same thing. In this way new communications technologies can actually promote shared experiences, even among people who do not know each other or who would not otherwise think of one another as group members. But even with email, collaborative filtering, and discussion groups, it can be harder for large numbers of people to coordinate around a single option, at least when the array of options is itself extremely large. This point is enough to suggest the basis for my general concern.

Producers of information also have strong incentives to get people to coordinate around a shared option. They might themselves emphasize, for example, that most people, or most people like you, will be watching a television show dealing with crime in the area, or with the difficulty of raising children in an urban environment. Or advertisers might

stress the importance, for diverse people, of examining a certain website, in general or at a specific time. In fact an extremely effective way of getting people to engage in certain conduct is to say that most people, or most people like you, are doing exactly that. In this way, ordinary market forces are likely to diminish the problem.

But they will not eliminate it. To the extent that options are limitless, it is inevitable that producers will have some difficulty in getting people to watch something together, even if people would benefit from this activity. It is more likely that diverse groups, defined in demographic, political, or other terms, will occasionally coordinate on agreed-upon alternatives; and this will introduce the various problems associated with fragmentation and group polarization.

Information as a Public Good

Thus far I have dealt with the purposes served by ensuring common experiences, many of them made available via the media. There is a related and equally important point. Information is a "public good" in a technical sense used by economists. When one person knows something, others are likely to be benefited as well. If you learn that a heat wave is coming, or that there is a high risk of criminal assault three blocks away, other people are highly likely to learn these things too. In the terminology of economics, those of us who learn things do not fully "internalize" the benefits of that learning; the benefits amount to "positive externalities" for other people.

In this respect, information has properties in common with environmental protection and national defense. When one person is helped by a program for cleaner air, or by a strong military, other people will necessarily be helped as well. It is

standard to say that in circumstances of this kind—when public goods are involved—it is hazardous to rely entirely on individual choices. Acting on their own, those who litter or otherwise pollute are all too likely not to consider the harms they impose on others. Acting on their own, people are all too likely not to contribute to national defense, hoping that others will pick up the slack.

What is true for pollution and national defense is true as well for information. Made solely with reference to the concerns of the individuals involved, private choices will produce too much pollution and too little in the way of national defense or information. When you learn, or do not learn, about the pattern of crime in your city or about whether climate change is a serious problem, you are usually unlikely to be thinking about the consequences of your learning, or failure to learn, for other people (except perhaps your immediate family). An implication is that an individual's rational choices, made only with reference to individual self-interest, will produce too little knowledge of public affairs. These are the most conventional cases of "market failure"—addressed, in the context of pollution and national defense, by government programs designed to overcome the predictable problems that would come from relying entirely on individual choices.

No one ever planned this, but if they are working well, general-interest intermediaries provide an excellent corrective here. When individuals do not design their communications universe on their own, they will be exposed to a great deal of material from which they may not much benefit as individuals, but from which they will be able to help many others. Perhaps you would not ordinarily seek out material about new asthma treatments for children; but once you learn a little bit about them, you might tell your friends whose son has asthma. Perhaps you are not much interested in environmen-

tal risks; but once you learn about hazards associated with sports utility vehicles, you might be reinforced in your desire not to buy one, and you might tell people you know about the underlying problems, trying to convince them. Every day, in fact, millions of people are beneficiaries of information that they receive only because someone else who has not sought out that information in advance happens to learn it.

This is emphatically not an argument that from the point of view of dissemination of information, it would be better to abolish the Internet and to rely on a system dominated by a few general-interest intermediaries. Nothing could be further from the truth. As we have seen, new technologies dramatically accelerate the spreading of information, true as well as false. General-interest intermediaries have interests and biases of their own, and for sheer practical reasons, they cannot provide exposure to all topics and viewpoints. On balance, the increase in options is likely to produce more and better information. My only suggestion is that insofar as there is a perfect ability to filter, people will sometimes fail to learn things from which they might have ended up benefiting others. Even if an increase in communications options is, with respect to information, a significant gain, this remains a serious loss.

Famine as Metaphor, and a Clarification

Return now to Amartya Sen's finding that famines do not occur in nations with free elections and a democratic press. We should take all this not as an isolated or exotic example limited to poor countries at risk of famine, but as a metaphor for countless situations in which a democratic government averts social problems precisely because political pres-

sure forces it do so. The underlying problems often involve crime, pollution, natural disasters, employment opportunities, health risks, medical advances, political candidates, even corruption

This point shows that there are serious problems if information is seen as an ordinary consumer product. The simple reason is that in a system in which individuals make choices among innumerable options based only on their private interest, they will fail to learn about topics and views from which they may not much benefit, but from which others would gain a great deal

The new technology has great potential on these counts as well. If the press is free, and the Internet is available, information about a potential or actual famine, or any other problem, can be spread to an entire nation, even the entire world. Fragmentation might even help here, at least if relevant information spreads across the fragmented groups; the problem arises if such spreading does not occur. What I am offering is not a complaint about the Internet, but an account of the frequently overlooked importance, for a system of free expression, of shared experiences and the provision of information to people who would not have chosen it in advance

Of Niches and Very Long Tails

In an illuminating and instructive book, Chris Anderson, the editor of *Wired*, celebrates niches and niche marketing, seeing them as an extraordinary development made possible by the Internet.⁵ To make a complex story short, Anderson argues that companies can, and do, make increasing amounts of money by catering to niche markets through a large volume of products (books à la Amazon.com, movies à la Netflix)

Many of these products are bought by very few people. At a bookstore, very little money can be made by the poor sellers, which are at the end of the long tail of the distribution system. At Amazon.com, by contrast, the immense stock of books and the large customer base can ensure that significant aggregate sales come from the long tail.

Anderson sees this as an important and wonderful trend. With the aid of the Internet, and of other modern technologies, it is often nearly costless to sell not just the blockbusters, but also goods that cater to small markets. Indeed, the total profits from doing so may be very high. "Niche" is a key word in Anderson's argument.

Anderson is right to emphasize that the Internet can greatly increase niche marketing, in a way that offers extraordinary economic opportunities from the long tail. He is also right to suggest that communities can form around highly specialized tastes. What is remarkable is his near-complete lack of self-consciousness about what might be wrong with a world of niches. Anderson writes as if the power to choose the particular good that each particular person particularly wants is an unambiguous good—as if there is little to do but to notice and celebrate this process. Anderson's analysis appears implicitly premised on the idea that freedom and the good life are promoted by, and maybe even captured in, the opportunity to choose what is specifically sought on either the large head or the long tail. Of course he is right to celebrate the increase in available options, but from the standpoint of democracy, the assessment is not so simple.

The refusal to raise questions about the proliferation of niches is characteristic of a great deal of thinking about the Internet, even among its most creative and sharpest analysts. Indeed, we might go further. Many of those who know most about the underlying technology and about what is becoming

possible often display a kind of visceral, unreflective libertarianism—a belief that all that matters is that people are allowed to see what they want and to choose what they like. The commitments to free markets and to perfecting them are no less intense than what can be found in the ideas of the Chicago School of economics, most famously captured in the work of Milton Friedman. As a long-time member of the University of Chicago faculty, I confess a great deal of fondness for the Chicago School; in my view, it is mostly right, and certainly more right than wrong. For consumer goods—such as sneakers, cars, soaps, and candy—it provides the right foundation for analysis. But when we are speaking of politics and the democratic domain, it misses a great deal.

What must be engaged is the risk that the proliferation of niches will have adverse effects on aspects of the shared culture and also promote fragmentation, particularly along political lines. It is not enough to rest content with general observations about how many people are curious and how niches include and even create shared cultures of different kinds.

Of Biases and Elites

It is an understatement to say that many people deplore the mass media. Some insist that television networks and large newspapers are biased in one direction or another. Others think that they are hopelessly superficial, even sensationalistic, obsessed with crimes and celebrities and sound bites. Still others think that general-interest intermediaries are inevitably few in number, and hence that they produce a stifling degree of homogeneity. For any of these people, a world with the Internet is infinitely better than a world in which general-

interest intermediaries dominate the scene. In this light, any effort to celebrate those intermediaries and to emphasize the risks of social fragmentation might seem positively quaint at best. Isn't it elitist, or confused, to wish for a world in which people cannot read what they want and are subjected to filters by a self-appointed media elite?

I have not argued that it would be desirable for a few newspapers and broadcasters to dominate the scene. With the Internet, the situation is definitely better, not worse. Nor do I claim that newspapers and broadcasters generally do an excellent or even a good job. Those who think that newspapers and weekly magazines are biased or otherwise inadequate should have no quarrel with the suggestion that unchosen encounters and shared experiences, of one or another sort, are important for democracy.

Of course some of the most popular Internet sites work in a very similar fashion to general-interest intermediaries. Indeed, they *are* general-interest intermediaries, performing the same functions online that they perform on television or on paper; consider ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox News, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and many more. In any case, many popular sites contain links, advertising, and multiple news stories. To the extent that important Internet sites continue to serve the social role of intermediaries, there is less to worry about. But there is nonetheless a difference between an evening program or a newspaper, which set whole stories before your eyes, and an Internet site, which may contain a headline or a quick link to a new topic. It is true and important that the most popular sites contain links, advertising, and multiple news stories. But concerns about self-insulation nonetheless remain.

The Networked Public Sphere?

What do we actually know about use of the Internet? Not nearly enough. But a picture is emerging. In a careful and illuminating analysis, Yochai Benkler describes, and celebrates, the “networked public sphere.”⁶

The idea of the Daily Me points to the risk of social fragmentation. But precisely because time is limited, it is possible to think that the Internet will not make much of a difference—that a few providers will dominate the Internet no less than they dominate television and radio. On the Internet, attention is a scarce commodity, and it is inevitable that many people will congregate around a few major sites, perhaps the sites of those that constitute the mass media in any case. The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* have large circulations and millions of people visit their sites; the *New Republic* and the *National Review* have significant but much smaller circulations, and they are read online in similar proportions; the University of Chicago Law School Faculty Blog (wonderful and endlessly entertaining though it may be) is not likely to have millions of readers, even on its best days. If we emphasize these points, continuing concentration, rather than echo chambers, might seem to be the wave of the future.

But as Benkler shows, this prediction is inconsistent with the emerging reality. To be sure, some sites are exceedingly popular and others are seen by very few people. At the same time, the new model is very different from that of the old mass media. In Benkler’s words, “clusters of moderately read sites provide platforms for vastly greater numbers of speakers than were heard in the mass-media environment.”⁷ Even if your site or your blog has very few readers, one of those readers might draw your words to the attention of someone with

more readers. If that happens, a still more popular site might pick up your words, and eventually you might have a real influence. Something of this kind happens in the blogosphere every day, and it works for smaller websites as well. To be sure, the real Internet does not operate as a system in which “everyone is a pamphleteer.” But it is very different from what preceded it, simply because it has so many more voices, so much more information, and such broader participation.

Like many others, Benkler insists that the networked public sphere is immune from the risks of fragmentation and polarization—that a common discourse remains, in the form of a public sphere that generates shared concerns and public knowledge. Benkler’s interpretation is not exactly wrong, but his own evidence complicates his conclusion. As he suggests, we now know that “sites cluster—in particular, topically and interest-related sites link much more heavily to each other than to other sites.”⁸ Of course this has been precisely my concern here. In the same vein, careful evidence shows that in the blogosphere, liberals link to one another, and so too for conservatives (see chapter 6 for more details). Many people therefore segregate themselves along lines of both topics and point of view. In Benkler’s own words, individuals “cluster around topical, organizational, or other common features,”⁹ and like-minded people “read each other and quote each other much more than the other side,”¹⁰ if only to sort out their internal disagreements.

In 2004, a valuable study explored whether people are, in fact, using the Internet to screen out ideas with which they disagree.¹¹ The study concludes otherwise—that many Americans are learning about competing views, and receiving information that runs counter to their predilections. But here too, the underlying evidence is complicated. It is true that of those

with a position on the two candidates for the presidency in the 2004 election—President Bush and Senator John Kerry—fully 43 percent were aware of arguments for and against both candidates. Another 21 percent were essentially tuned out, and were unaware of arguments relating to either candidate. Note, however, that 29 percent of people (nearly a third!) showed a kind of echo-chamber effect. They were well aware of the arguments in favor of their candidate but knew very little about the arguments in favor of the opposing candidate. In addition, about 25 percent of people candidly acknowledged that they prefer to get their news from sources that conform to their own views. If 25 percent of people acknowledged this point, the actual figure is almost certainly larger (Recall that Republicans prefer Fox News, which Democrats try to avoid.)

It is true that in this study, the echo-chamber effect was not a more serious problem among Internet users than among those who do not use the Internet. On the contrary, people with high-speed home connections were somewhat more likely to know arguments on both sides. But this finding should not be surprising. Other things being equal, those with a high-speed home connection should be expected to be both more educated and more interested in politics. It is not exactly a shock to find that they are more likely to be aware of arguments for and against presidential candidates. But mere knowledge of those arguments is hardly a sufficient safeguard against the risk of fragmentation. You may know that some people think the opposing candidate is good; you may even have a sense of why they like him. But if you have learned all this in a way that casts ridicule and contempt on him and his supporters, you may not have learned much. (I will return to this point in connection with the blogosphere.)

Of course the Daily Me is not a lived reality. (The site by that name is a newspaper covering the state of Maine!) There remains a great deal of centralization on the Internet, if only because of the existence of especially popular sites, but Benkler is right to point to the existence of a networked public sphere. Facts and opinions on liberal sites often migrate to conservative sites, and vice versa. It is also true that even if opinions are clustering, society can ultimately benefit from the wide range of arguments that ultimately make their way to the general public. The current situation is hardly worse than what preceded it; on the contrary, it is much better, if only because of the increase in the number and range of voices. The question is not, however, whether the present is better than the past, but whether we can make the present and the future better still.

Spreading Information

A heterogeneous society benefits from shared experiences, many of them produced by the media. These shared experiences provide a kind of social glue, facilitating efforts to solve shared problems, encouraging people to view one another as fellow citizens, and sometimes helping to ensure responsiveness to genuine problems and needs, even helping to identify them as such. A special virtue of unsought exposures to information is that even if individuals frequently do not gain much from that information, they will tell other people about it, and it is here that the information will prove beneficial.

To the extent that the communications market becomes more personalized, it reduces the range of shared experiences and at the same time fails to confer some of the benefits

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that come when individuals receive information, often more helpful to others than to themselves, that they would not have chosen in advance. If the role of public forums and general-interest intermediaries is diminished, and if good substitutes do not develop, those benefits will be diminished as well, with harmful results for republican ideals.